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“BETWEEN REAL PLACE AND MENTAL LANDSCAPE”: THE MODERN SUBLIME IN PETER BOARDMAN’S AND JOE TASKER’S ACCOUNTS OF CLIMBING CHANGABANG

Summary

This article focuses on the accounts of climbing the particularly difficult West Wall of Changabang, a mountain in the Garhwal Himalaya, by a team of two British mountaineers: Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker. Close-reading of these non-fiction narratives is aimed at tracing the echoes of the best-known theories of the sublime developed by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, as well as the modern interpretation of the concept by Jean-François Lyotard. It appears that, though never explicitly referring to the sublime, Boardman’s and Tasker’s portrayals of their Changabang expedition not only contain some of its conventional elements, but also highlight the impossibility of representation and internal contradictions that are now emphasized as its important characteristic features. Based on Tsang Lap Chuen’s theory of the sublime, the article is an example of reclaiming the now mostly art-related concept so that it is more closely linked with real-life experience. In this way, mountain literature can be read as a reflection of the process at the origin of a cultural construct.

Key words: travel literature, sublime, Peter Boardman, Joe Tasker.

While preparing for the 1976 climb of the West Face of Changabang in the Garhwal Himalaya, Peter Boardman happened to reach for Eric Sipton’s *Nanda Devi*, a book that had moved his imagination years earlier. One passage now seemed to strike a chord with Boardman’s sensibility in a particularly powerful way. It compared the thrill experienced by Sipton and Bill Tilman – the first mountaineers to explore the Nanda Devi Sanctuary – to a child’s most cherished dream of embarking on a fairy-tale-like adventure. The reality of discovering for oneself the “glory of Nature,” Sipton wrote, matched the childhood dream itself. Boardman found the excerpt so irresistible that he quoted it later in *The Shining Mountain* (1978), the account of his own Himalayan expedition. As he explained, it was this “subtle relationship between real place and mental landscape” in Sipton’s book that made him “[become] a willing victim of the spell of the Gerhwal” (1995, p. 19). Though the expression itself may sound rather innocuous, the word “victim” is by no means a mere figure of speech in the context of the daring high-mountain exploits undertaken by Peter Boardman and his climbing partner, Joe Tasker. In fact, their own accounts almost never include idealistic or lofty comparisons (unless in sparse quotes from respected mountaineering pioneers, as if this sort of sentimentalism belonged to the past). Instead, they build on the combination of painful physical as well as mental strain on the one hand and the bitter-sweet satisfaction

of overcoming fear and despair on the other; a compound that is staple diet of rock climbing as featured in contemporary mountain literature.

The element of terror and delight in such narrations seems to be an invitation to classify them as representations of the sublime, "a mode of aesthetic experience associated with the emotion felt before nature, the more majestic landscapes in particular" which basically combines horror and admiration, as popularized by Romanticism (Halimi 1992, p. 270). However, this is the sublime with a difference. The Romantic sublimity assumed precisely the relationship "between real place and mental landscape" that Boardman was inspired by – and which he considered lost for the contemporary traveller, who could never again experience this emotion of venturing into the mysterious, unknown land because "[there] are so many ways, so much documentation, that only the mountaineer's inner self remains the uncharted" (1995, p. 19). And indeed, Boardman's and Tasker's recountings of their Changabang climb in *The Shining Mountain* (1978) and *Savage Arena* (1982) respectively do not really focus on their experience of nature. Rather, both of them place the gratifying and terrifying unknown within their experiencing selves, mostly unsure of their own motivation and fully aware that they cannot look to the reader for justification or even a full understanding of their actions; after all, Boardman himself wrote there is no moral or rational justification for what they were doing (1995, p. 109).

The presence of the self-questioning tone in accounts of mountaineering feats is by no means a show of false humility put on by their authors, though it is certainly exacerbated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of prospective readership will have never experienced such heights (both literally and metaphorically speaking). However, most readers do share the socially-endorsed belief in the responsibility one has towards one's nearest and dearest, and in the common-sense truth that the only way one can shoulder this responsibility is, well, staying alive – the requisite that mountaineers challenge most of the time. The resulting inner conflict affects whole families, the point that has been receiving more and more public attention. An important insight into the toll that high mountains take not just on climbers' lives but also on their families' well-being has come from Maria Coffey, who was Joe Tasker's girlfriend at the time of his death. In *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow: The dark side of extreme adventure* (2003), she reveals the level of fear, bereavement and even anger on the part of those left behind, which Tasker, Boardman and other rock climbers certainly could not ignore.

And still, in their apparently outspoken frankness, contemporary narrations of mountaineering spare the nerves of neither the climbers' relatives nor the general public that usually frowns upon what is commonly considered to be taking unnecessary risks and, ultimately, a nonchalant loss of life. The apparent wish to faithfully render the adventures that are often not approved of, and mostly impossible to justify even by the doers themselves, seems to condition adopting the approach common for modern artists, thus captured in the concept of the Post-Romantic, Modern sublime:

Certain radical, abrupt, uncompromising (...) acts might actively refuse to be understood – refuse to fall within known narratives and schemes of meaning – and might thereby confront viewers with their own conceptual limitations. Such avant-gardism could deliver the vitalising mental shock that Kant believed inherent in the experience of natural sublimity – of “threatening rocks,” “thunder clouds” and “the boundless ocean” (Bell 2013, non-paginated).

Of course, in case of non-fiction mountain literature represented by Boardman and Tasker, the experience of shock inflicted on readers appears not to be just an artistic trick. It was first felt by the authors themselves as a result of putting themselves in harsh circumstances of high altitudes, defying conventional life-preservation patterns, and then aggravated by the fact that honest writing about these extreme experiences inevitably led to the wall of what Jean-François Lyotard termed Presenting the Unpresentable – the impossibility of rendering the infinitely great, infinitely powerful of Kant’s sublime. Lyotard’s aporia could thus be applied not only to art but also to mountaineering as the impossibility to depict the extreme conditions as well as internal contradictions and doubts faced practically every day, even at the heart of the scenery that is traditionally considered to bring about the sublime effect. The resulting “avant-gardism” of separating the real place and the mental landscape in their narrations is not so much a literary construct as the core of the experience of the sublime as encountered in real life.

Before we move on, a few things need to be said about Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker themselves. Both born in the middle of the 20th century, they managed to join a slightly older circle of climbers grouped around the legend of British mountaineering, Chris Bonington. This climbing generation is still considered special in that they “made climbing a mountain a more spontaneous and a more creative act – less a mission – than it had been” (Willis 2006, p. XIX). Their ventures into the Himalayas marked a rather short-lived period between the time when mountain climbing was considered part of the race between nations in conquering earth and space (one example would be the first ascent of Annapurna in 1950 by Frenchman Maurice Herzog, later a government minister), and commercial high-mountain guiding services for all people with enough money, strength and stamina (the business which is now booming even though it sometimes results in tragedies such as the 1996 Mount Everest disaster mentioned below). Unlike their Polish contemporaries in the generation of “Freedom Climbers,” who fled the oppression of the Communist regime, Bonington and his friends did not generally associate climbing with values other than personal ones. Apart from the enjoyment and the inevitable element of competition present in any type of sport, Bonington’s circle had no agenda that would dictate their actions. The timing was perfect: in the 1970s the Gerhwal Himalaya was re-opened to foreign expeditions after two decades of the cold war between India and China, and explorers could follow in the footsteps of, among others, Shipton and Tilman – their idols of the 1930s.

Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker brought a new quality to the group who still followed the so-called “siege” style in climbing (organizing expeditions of large teams with complex lo-

gistics of moving people back and forth between well-stocked camps). They decided to climb Himalayan mountains Alpine-style, i.e. as a two-person team, depending purely on their own skills and using the assistance of Sherpas only on the way to and away from the mountain. From the 1976 Changabang expedition, their first climb together, to their untimely death on the North East Ridge of Everest in 1982, they tried to keep to their uncompromising ideals, such as following the legendary Reinhold Messner in not using supplementary oxygen even in the Death Zone. The record of their experiences can be found in the four books they wrote between them, and their legacy remains in the form of the annual Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature.

In many respects, Boardman's and Tasker's accounts of the Changabang climb present a fresh insight into the mind of a young mountaineer who tries to make sense of the terror and enjoyment he experiences in a seemingly futile quest of climbing a mountain. If the mountain sublime really exists, where else would it be depicted more truthfully?

1. Sublimating Sublimity

Before we move on to the discussion of Peter Boardman's *The Shining Mountain* and Joe Tasker's *Savage Arena*, we should examine our “conceptual limitations” that we may be confronted with by means of cultural artefacts, especially the ones that concern mountaineering. The concept of the sublime has been associated with mountains ever since the tours of the Alps made in the early 18th century by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, John Dennis and Joseph Addison. Their writings contributed to making the sublime, a recently revived classical rhetoric concept of the author's captivating style, stand for the impact of external phenomena on the beholder's mind. The experience of high altitudes seems to neatly encompass all major qualities traditionally ascribed to sublimity: the intuition of infinity, the sensation of vastness, and the threat posed by a power that escapes our comprehension, most often symbolized by the barren landscape swept by violent winds and snowstorms. As such, the sublime is distinct from the tame and welcoming Beauty. It overwhelms; it fascinates; it can never be fully defined or measured.

This conception and its later influential developments by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant seem to keep their relevance for contemporary culture consumers, which is evidenced by the critical reception of a recent film production, *Everest* (2015). The film is based on the story of the 1996 Mount Everest disaster that claimed eight lives (the tragedy has also been discussed in first-hand book accounts by actual expedition participants: Jon Krakauer, Anatoli Boukreev and Beck Weathers). In one *Everest* review, a critic praises the film for the fact that “the realism of scenes set on Kathmandu streets, on vertiginous footbridges, blizzard-wracked bluffs and at the very top of the world give this powerful and heart-rending story a touch of the sublime” (Dent 2015, non-paginated). This is clearly a reference to the

sublime as discussed in Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), where a sublime object makes its beholder experience fear and awe by its obscurity, power, privation, vastness, infinity, uniformity, difficulty, magnificence, intense stimulation of senses... All this from a safe watching distance, in the absence of pain that would have resulted from taking actual part in similar events if we wanted to see these sublime-evoking views with our own eyes.

Another review seems to draw in turn on the concept of the dynamic sublime outlined in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). The sublime is here located in the beholder's mind which confronts the fact that it is helpless against a much more powerful force. Being thus precariously posed on the limit of the possible and the impossible, but, again, removed from immediate danger, one tries to transcend oneself by recognizing the situation for what it is as well as one's own involvement in and relation to it. This particular element seems to be lacking in *Everest* as discussed in the following excerpt of another review:

the film seems strangely incurious about what actually drives its characters to haul themselves up to the roof of the world, lungs aching and toes blackening, just for a chance to be there, breathe thin air, and see the view of views. Much like the mountain itself, the story of *Everest* is presented as a brute, uncircumnavigable fact (Collin 2015, non-paginated).

Interestingly, the film does try to tackle the issue of motivation. In one scene characters are asked why they want to climb Mount Everest, and they automatically respond with George Mallory's famous answer to the question: "Because it's there". But then, the reply of one of the future victims of the climb changes the quote into "Because I can," which is further explained as the wish to provide inspiration for others to follow their dream. Another character confesses that climbing seems to ward off depression. The fact that these motives appear inadequate to make the story whole for the critic and at least some of the viewing public means that much more is expected, something that would do justice to "a chance to be there, breathe thin air, and see the view of views".

Indeed, it appears that no answer below a certain register of grandeur is acceptable on occasions when alpinism attracts the public attention, which is usually when real-life tragedy strikes. The reiterated questions of "Why should climbers risk their lives like that?" and "What precisely do they do it for?" seem not worth asking when the reason is mere ambition, fame, or money. From the safe distance of a viewer's or reader's seat, most of us expect to hear much more. Just like the readers of Pseudo-Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* (*Peri hýpsous*) of two millennia ago, we expect to be transported by authors who can communicate their sheer passion to us. Just like those inspired by Burke's and Kant's studies of over two centuries ago, and like readers of Romantic, Gothic and Modernist literary works, we expect to be made to feel overwhelmed and fascinated by something that can never be fully

defined or measured. By some form of the sublime, even though we know the sublime is supposed to be basically formless and unknowable.

Still, the other side of this exchange consists mostly of people who are first and foremost mountaineers, and writers only in the second place. They do share many ideas with an average reader, especially the ones that constitute cultural and social constructs; however, as is the case with non-fiction authors, their main concern is not how to represent the sublime, but what to make of their experience altogether. Optimally, the sublime in their accounts could be considered to be truly rooted in real-life experience, as it was expected to be from the 18th century onwards. Being essentially unexplainable, it triggers a dynamic cognitive process, in which the "mountaineer's uncharted inner self" is filled in with emotion and thought.

The theory of sublimity that appears particularly promising in the context of the above-outlined praxis has been suggested by philosopher Tsang Lap Chuen. In his study *The Sublime: Groundwork Towards a Theory* (1998), he argues that the experience of the sublime is triggered not by the object or by the observer's feeling, but by a so-called limit-situation that allows one for conscious self-realization. There are three limits of this sort: the transcendental one, which brings us to the edge of the unknown; the comfort one, in which we negotiate optimal conditions for a balanced well-being; and the survival one, in which we are fighting for self-preservation. In each limit-situation the subject comes up against an object which elicits reflection as well as action, and thus becomes aware of, and fulfils, himself or herself. In other words, it is not the quality of the object that evokes a sublime experience. What is of utmost importance is the context which makes a person experience something as sublime by triggering associative thinking. In this process, one is trying to find and act on a relation between the object and oneself; or, in this case, between what Boardman called "real place and mental landscape". An outside perspective is required to appreciate certain regularities in this respect, even though there are no two experiences of the sublime that are the same.

The fact that Lap Chuen's theory is particularly apt for mountain climbing is supported by the fact that he discusses climbing Mount Everest as one of the clearest examples of evoking the sublime; he also quotes Doug Scott's statement that reaching the summit is "the limit of what [is] presumed to be physically, physiologically or psychologically possible" (Scott quoted in Lap Chuen 1998, p. 2). Scott was Boardman and Tasker's friend and companion during their successful ascent of Kangchenjunga in 1979, among others, and in their writings they mention that it was Scott's ambition to get to the bottom of his urge to climb. Incidentally, the above quote seems to point not only to the transcendental limit-situation (as used by Lap Chuen). This transcendental limit could be the one of the "psychologically possible"; "physiologically possible" would stand for the limit of self-preservation; and the "physically possible" would be the sense of balance sought in the here-and-now, in this way welcoming the interpretation of mountaineering in all three different modalities of a limit-situation. It is only natural if we think about any moment of rock climbing as simultaneously

overreaching oneself, teetering on the edge of life and death, and negotiating harsh conditions to accommodate oneself as far as possible. Let us now turn to Boardman and Tasker to see how they experienced “a sense of realizing [themselves] on the boundary between the possible and the impossible” which could give them “the feeling of sublime in a realistic human context” (Lap Chuen 1998, p. 2).

2. Sublimity the Cruel Way

When Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker talked about their idea to climb the extremely difficult West Face of Changabang as a team of two, one of their experienced friends commented: “Sounds like cruelty to me” (Boardman 1995, p. 20). It was a typical warning that the two were getting from all sides. Practically all they had to work on when planning the ascent was a photo of Changabang, taken by Tasker during the climb of the adjacent Dunagiri the previous year. In the picture, Changabang’s West Wall looked like sheer vertical rock, with no lines of “weakness” that would facilitate the ascent; and precisely “the concept of climbing a seemingly impossible wall” attracted the climbers’ attention (Tasker 1995, p. 93). No one had done so before, and they did not know what to expect; there was a possibility they would go all the way to the Himalayas just to acknowledge the mountain could not be scaled from this side. What they did was a very Coleridge-like thing to do: they decided to put themselves in the situation of climbing the unknown Changabang and see what would come out of it. In other words, they were asking for the sublime.

Of course, at that time neither of them was thinking about cultural constructs of that sort. They simply wanted to have a try, “rub their noses” against the mountain. However, six years later, when Tasker finally completed Savage Arena, the book that included a chapter on climbing Changabang, it opened with two characteristic sublime motifs: the insufficiency of beauty as an incentive for extreme mountaineering, and the concept of mountains as “a testing ground” for the climber’s capacities that “[makes] him face up to his own motivation, perseverance and resilience when danger, hardship and fatigue all conspire to turn him back from the chosen objective” (Tasker 1995, p. 13). Tasker’s Kantian idea of self-assertion in the face of the “infinitely powerful,” at the limit of existence, can be traced not only in his own book – written already after he gained relative fame and thus had to learn the art of apologetics for his lifestyle – but also in Boardman’s *The Shining Mountain*, which included Tasker’s notes taken in the course of the 1976 expedition. They are evidence of Tasker’s focus on the mind and willpower.

Boardman, on the other hand, appeared more open and inquisitive about his emotions. He was the author of passages that come close to what we might accept as literary representations of the sublime understood in the Burkian, psychological sense of delight taken in

a life-threatening situation but with the pain removed. Let us take a look at his description of some risky abseiling after a particularly tiring day:

The rope that had been my tormentor in the harsh light of early morning awareness, had now become a friend. (...) The consequences of a mistake were forgotten. The emphasis of progress and the numbness induced by the cold, altitude and fatigue had put me in a state of reverie. A fantasy world had grown around me assuming nonsensical names and nationalities. The knots in the rope I called "cows," the pegs became "Americans," the karabiners at my waist all took the names of different girls. I was a big spider scuttling down (Boardman 1995, p. 135).

The passage contains a variety of rhetorical figures and linguistic means listed by Kenneth Holmqvist and Jarosław Pluciennik as textual media to "present the unrepresentable": personification, paradox, hyperbole, the creation of a strange idiom; all of them may point to the sublime, something beyond the climber's imagination (2008, p. 11). The one thing muted here – the danger, the "consequences of a mistake" – looms outside the here-and-now. (In a curious twist of coincidence, it was that very evening on the same rope that Tasker had an accident which almost cost him his life).

The above-sketched contrast between both authors becomes most pronounced in their commentaries on an event that was particularly well suited to evoke the sublime. After summiting and descending the mountain, exhausted but proud and happy with themselves, Tasker and Boardman went down to the base camp only to meet a woman whose husband and three climbing companions had fallen to their deaths three days earlier. Their bodies were still lying on the glacier. Tasker and Boardman volunteered to go up and bury them in a crevasse, the closest to a respectful funeral that one can get at high altitudes. The experience was acutely distressing for both climbers, though the reactions it sparked off were again tellingly different. Tasker perceives it as an intrusion in their newly-earned confidence: the news of death meant that "it was over to [him] to adapt to this terrible fact, to assimilate and comprehend" (Tasker 1995, p. 119). Though "this drama had come upon [them] totally unexpectedly and [he] was unprepared for the role [he] had to play," he soon became "strong and capable, with enough in reserve to go to the assistance of people less fortunate" (Tasker 1995, pp. 120-121). In Boardman's account, Tasker confutes the argument about gruesomeness of handling the bodies with the short "It's just something we've got to do" (1995, p. 164). It was eventually Tasker who found the strength to lower the bodies into a gaping crevasse, overcoming the terror he felt when looking at the corpses that could so easily have been himself and his climbing partner just a few days back.

For Boardman, in turn, the situation provoked another type of sublime experience, in which the magnificent scenery of the death spot was perceived from a new, fresh perspective and associated with transcendence of another kind: "[our] sense of the area fell into a new pattern. The deaths of the four climbers had made us feel alive with every breath. This was

the sensation of life – the sense that we remained. The four climbers were now part of the Rhamani Glacier, and “Rhamani” meant “Beautiful” (...) Surely there could be nothing mean or sordid about death in such a place?” (1995, p. 168). The limit-situation that could be interpreted in line with Lap Chuen’s theory in three different ways (transcendence in performing the burial ritual in a world so remote from human civilization; self-preservation issues in exposing oneself again to the life-threatening dangers of going up the glacier already thought to be safely left behind; and searching for comfort by thinking about life while facing death) is a curiously relevant coda to the Changabang climb. It seems that the real place and the mental landscape in a way came together for Tasker, who had all too often suspected that all his actions were determined by nothing else than mere irrational compulsion, as well as for Boardman, who earlier tried unsuccessfully to retrieve the sense of reality by e.g. juxtaposing work meetings and events he would have attended if he had been in the UK with simultaneous actions carried out on Changabang.

This “duality in oneness” of the authors’ experience suggests a precise and neat vision – and division – of the sublime. Even if resulting from the same limit-situation, it can be found in various forms, elaborated on in the treatises of the most famous theorists on the topic. To a large extent, of course, this was conditioned by the actual difference in Tasker’s and Boardman’s dispositions and their constant rivalry, which has been pinpointed by their friends as the driving force behind the success of their two-man team. Obviously, their complementarity found practical application in the natural division of tasks in the mountains, where their survival depended on the fact that each of them paid attention to things ignored or overlooked by the other. It was particularly useful in the process of reaching a decision on vital steps such as continuing or retreating, in which Tasker and Boardman took opposing sides – personally, for the sake of argument, and tactically, to ensure the choice of the best possible solution.

However, the sublime would lack its distinctive characteristic of formlessness if it was so easy to identify and define, if it could come over everyone at the same time, if it was regular and predictable. Even though the natural human urge is to order and classify, sublimity is conceived specifically to escape such systematization by defying conclusive definitions and oscillating between dichotomous qualities. As mentioned above, high mountains are a particularly apt setting for the experience of the sublime. Boardman proves the point by calling them “the bleak world of strong contrasts, between fear and exultation, danger and security, between life and death” (1995, p. 105), where a ridge can draw “a vertical line across the earth beneath [one’s] feet between light and shade, white and brown, known and unknown, explored and forbidden” while climbers are “hanging at the edge of space” (1995, p. 140). The land of sublimity is the land of liminality as well; however, the threshold is never conclusively crossed, as the required choreography involves oscillating around this line.

This dynamic process can be seen not only in the actions, but also within the “uncharted selves” of the climbers, who tried to fill in their interior maps with the help of dichotomies

present in their partnership. What is striking in Tasker’s and Boardman’s books is how much their personal experience of the climb depended on what they thought the other’s experience actually was, and how they interpreted each other’s words and actions. Setting off for the Changabang expedition, they did not know each other very well, and they had a silent agreement not to get distracted from the ultimate aim of ascending the mountain by trying to make friends, which could bring about unwanted conflict. They did manage to achieve the stage where “[their] combined abilities seemed to have made a third, invisible quality outside [themselves], in which [they] had implicit faith” (Boardman 1995, p. 106), but this confidence was being painfully shattered on numerous occasions where their personalities clashed – the fact repeatedly noted by both of them, often as a shock that the seeming harmony they had achieved could be so easily disrupted even after the apparently bonding experience of the glacier burial described above. Treating each other as the unknown and sometimes even as the unexpected, they kept guessing and interpreting what the other might think. This usually relied on the assumed personality contrasts and involved antithetical reasoning, which brought another dimension to the emotional moments in which such thinking often took place, especially when the qualities felt to be lacking in oneself were ascribed to the companion. The constant element in both narrations is the alteration of enjoyable self-containment and the purifying effect of feeling utterly alone on the one hand, and the necessity of efficient cooperation and the consideration for the other’s needs and expectations on the other. Each book mentions at least once the exhilaration of becoming lost in movement and familiar procedures of climbing so much that a “tug on the rope” from the partner is needed to bring one back to reality, the realization of the unfamiliar that requires undivided attention. Most of the time, the real place and the mental landscape do not seem to overlap, and it is the climbing partner who brings that fact into focus.

On the narrative level, the predicament is highlighted in the difficulty of “presenting the unpresentable” which is the premise of the Modern Sublime. In practical terms, Tasker and Boardman had significantly divergent ways of recording their expedition. Tasker took a lot of photographs to document the here-and-now he would not allow himself to savour while climbing:

the magnificence of our situation, the beauty of the sun setting behind the cloud-wreathed Dunagiri, my old adversary, the deep blue of the sky on a cloudless day and the descend in the rosy glow of evening were all phenomena only partially observed, scarcely appreciated, in a corner of my mind and recorded by photograph for a time when I could view them in comfort (1995, p. 106).

This strategy was at times irritating to Boardman, who got emotionally engaged in situations as they presented themselves and then tried to render them faithfully in extensive diary entries whenever he could afford some resting time. This, in turn, provoked Tasker’s biting comment that he “could not visualize how [Boardman] could do or say anything without the

awareness that he was going to record that action or word” (1995, p. 101). The delay and the projection both highlight the impossibility of getting to the bottom of the actual experience, which consequently becomes a lacuna in the narration.

It is not surprising that this impasse comes to the surface most noticeably in both authors’ descriptions of summiting, the moment conventionally associated with feeling the sublime at its fullest. Boardman expected some sort of exhilarated communion – shaking hands, exchanging comments, sharing emotions – and instead was left to wonder about the reasons for Tasker’s withdrawn reserve as he went through the standard moves of taking a picture and leaving a token of their presence. He managed a brief moment of feeling “omniscient above the world,” but the need to descend interfered soon enough (1995, p. 149). Needless to say, it was Tasker who pressed on leaving. While at the summit, he felt less need to look at the panorama than to plan the return to the place of safety where he could finally savour the achievement. Back in the tent, however, he waited impatiently for Boardman to recollect the experience and talk it through, unwittingly reiterating his photograph strategy of delay. When Boardman, who experienced some major difficulties on descent, finally returned to the tent two hours later, Tasker’s moment for sharing had already passed.

This lack of the traditionally envisaged sublime is specifically linked to the problem of representation, of “chartering” the experience not only within oneself but also the person considered to be one’s own antithesis. The resulting “third quality” is conspicuously missing here for both Boardman and Tasker, and they express the characteristic Modern nostalgia for the moment when the real place and mental landscape of the summit should come together – as they never do. Like in the Modern sublime, the fact that their experience does not provide the authors with what they expect lays bare the contradictions and limitations of human powers of cognition; and it is precisely these contradictions and limitations that the Modern sublime is meant to both highlight and escape. In this way, Peter Boardman’s *The Shining Mountain* and Joe Tasker’s *Savage Arena* can be read as the accounts of a series of climbing limit-situations that point to the sublime: even if they are not strictly speaking its literary representations, they reveal the constituent elements of, and thus decode, the concept.

The inherent dichotomy of the climbing experience continues to allure new generations of mountaineers. This is proved by e.g. Robert MacFarlane, a winner of the Boardman-Tasker Prize For Mountain Literature himself, who, as a child, was an avid reader of travel literature, fascinated by “the parsimony of the landscapes of mountain and pole, with their austere, Manichean colour scheme of black and white (...) Bravery and cowardice, rest and exertion, danger and safety, right and wrong: the unforgiving nature of the environment sorted everything into these neat binaries” (2003, p. 35). The need to put oneself in limit-situations where life boils down to such opposites may be seen as searching for the sublime; but the effect proves more complex. As he was trying to cover a particularly demanding stretch of Changabang, Boardman focused on the contrast of black tourmaline particles against the white granite of the wall and thought that “they emphasised [his] insignificance

– emphasised the fact that [he] was fragile, warm-blooded and living, clinging to the side of this steep, inhospitable world" (1995, p. 76). It is in negotiating one's status against the unfavourable or the antithetical (in the world of nature or even one's climbing partner) that the usually missing sublime can be intuited. Though Boardman and Tasker appear to lean towards the sensibility of Burke and Kant respectively, they do not seem to rewrite the experience as sublime in their books; rather, they try to represent the experience truthfully, and in the process happen to register some premises of the concept.

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„Między miejscem rzeczywistym a pejzażem mentalnym”: Nowoczesna podniosłość w opisach Petera Boardmana i Joe Taskera wchodzenia na Changabang

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem analizy są relacje ze wspinaczki wyjątkowo trudną Ścianą Zachodnią himalajskiej góry Changabang przez dwuosobową wyprawę brytyjską – Petera Boardmana i Joego Taskera. Szczegółowa analiza opisów autentycznych wydarzeń pozwala odnaleźć elementy zarówno najbardziej znanych teorii wzniosłości (sublime) sformułowanych przez Edmunda Burke’a oraz Immanuela Kanta, jak i współczesnej interpretacji tego pojęcia przez Jean-François Lyotarda. Choć sama koncepcja wzniosłości nie jest bezpośrednio przywoływana przez Boardmana i Taskera, ich relacje z wyprawy na Lśniącą Górę zawierają odniesienia do poszczególnych konwencjonalnych motywów, a także uwypuklają niemożność pełnego odzwierciedlenia przeżyć oraz wewnętrzne sprzeczności. Bazując na teorii wzniosłości zaproponowanej przez Tsanga Lap Chuena podjęto próbę odzyskania pojęcia wzniosłości, używanego obecnie głównie w kontekście sztuki, na potrzeby opisu autentycznych doświadczeń i przeżyć. W tym ujęciu literaturę górską można interpretować jako odwzorowanie procesu, który ukształtował sublime jako kulturową konstrukcję myślową.

Słowa kluczowe: literatura podróżnicza, wzniosłość (sublime), Peter Boardman, Joe Tasker.

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