AESTHETICS OF NO RETURN: THE WILD AND THE SUBLIME IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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ESTÉTICA DO NÃO RETORNO: O SELVAGEM E O SUBLIME NA CONSTRUÇÃO DO IMAGINÁRIO ECOLÓGICO

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PALÍNDROMO

ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical reading of the sublime as an aesthetic and political category, examining its transformation from Romanticism to the Anthropocene. It aims to understand how the sublime, once associated with spiritual elevation in the face of natural vastness, has become today an experience of ecological consciousness and melancholy in response to environmental crises and the collapse between the natural and the artificial. The methodology combines historiographical and ecocritical analysis, drawing on authors such as Timothy Morton or Amanda Boetzkes, and juxtaposes theoretical texts with artistic practices that have shaped the imagination of wilderness. The findings indicate that the Romantic sublime, by idealising nature as external and pure, reinforced a form of green nostalgia and affective greenwashing, sustaining the separation between human and non-human. In contemporary contexts, this paradigm is replaced by a "techno-ruinous" sublime, characterised by awareness of planetary interdependence and ecological vulnerability. Thus the sublime should be reconceptualised as a critical device, capable of revealing the contradictions within the ecological imagination and promoting a post-natural ethics open to the reconfiguration of relationships between culture, technology, and ecology.

Keywords: Wilderness; Sublime; Anthropocene; Ecology; anti-aesthetics

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RESUMO

Este artigo propõe uma leitura crítica do sublime enquanto categoria estética e política, examinando a sua transformação desde o Romantismo até ao Antropoceno. O objetivo é compreender como o sublime, antes associado à elevação espiritual perante a vastidão natural, se converte hoje numa experiência de consciência ecológica e melancolia diante da crise ambiental e do colapso entre o natural e o artificial. A metodologia articula uma análise historiográfica e ecocrítica, com base em autores como Timothy Morton ou Amanda Boetzkes, confrontando textos teóricos e práticas artísticas que moldaram o imaginário do selvagem. Os resultados apontam que o sublime romântico, ao idealizar a natureza como exterior e puro, reforçou uma nostalgia verde e uma forma de greenwashing afetivo, sustentando a separação entre humano e não humano. No contexto contemporâneo, esse paradigma é substituído por um sublime tecnorruinoso, marcado pela consciência da interdependência planetária e da vulnerabilidade ecológica. Assim, o sublime deve ser repensado como dispositivo crítico, capaz de revelar as contradições do imaginário ecológico e de impulsionar uma ética pós-natural, aberta à reformulação das relações entre cultura, técnica e ecologia.

Palavras-chave: Selvagem; sublime; Antropoceno; ecologia; anti-aesthetics

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone una lectura crítica de lo sublime como categoría estética y política, examinando su transformación desde el Romanticismo hasta el Antropoceno. El objetivo es comprender cómo lo sublime, antes asociado a la elevación espiritual ante la inmensidad natural, se convierte hoy en una experiencia de conciencia ecológica y melancolía frente a la crisis ambiental y al colapso entre lo natural y lo artificial. La metodología articula un análisis historiográfico y ecocrítico, basándose en autores como Timothy Morton o Amanda Boetzkes, confrontando textos teóricos y prácticas artísticas que han configurado el imaginario de lo salvaje. Los resultados muestran que lo sublime romántico, al idealizar la naturaleza como externa y pura, reforzó una nostalgia verde y una forma de greenwashing afectivo, manteniendo la separación entre lo humano y lo no humano. En el contexto contemporáneo, este paradigma se sustituye por un sublime tecnoruinoso, marcado por la conciencia de la interdependencia planetaria y la vulnerabilidad ecológica. De este modo lo sublime debe repensarse como un dispositivo crítico, capaz de revelar las contradicciones del imaginario ecológico e impulsar una ética posnatural, abierta a la reformulación de las relaciones entre cultura, técnica y ecología.

Palabras clave: Salvaje; sublime; Antropoceno; ecología; antiestética

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Introduction

The concept of the sublime has traversed aesthetics since Antiquity, when Pseudo-Longinus, in “On the Sublime”, described it as an experience capable of elevating the human spirit beyond the domains of reason (Longinus, 2015). This sense of boundless ecstasy re-emerged with particular intensity in the eighteenth century through the formulations of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, who placed it at the center of modern reflection on sensibility and aesthetic judgment. The sublime thus came to designate, among its several strands, a relation with the natural world marked by grandeur, incomprehensibility, and distance - an experience of the limit and the unnamed.

At a time when machines and technical devices emerged as counterparts to the natural world, nature ceased to appear as a mere backdrop. It became an agent of revelation - a field of intersection between the sensory, the rational, and the imagistic, where the tension between the human and the transcendent is made visible. As domesticated landscapes proved insufficient to sustain the modern imagination, the wild acquired symbolic status, presenting itself as the territory of the modern spirit, driven by both the desire for transcendence and the Eurocentric and colonial impulse toward domination.

This transmutation found resonance in Romanticism, which amplified within the cultural imagination a nature idealized as a spiritual and moral refuge, consolidating a frontier of progress that conceived the natural as pure and separate. Within this configuration, nature was invested with an alterity that established an affective and reflective relationship with the human, yet also a profound ontological distance that maintained it as a radical “other.”

Since then, the sublime has been reconfigured in multiple directions, assuming in contemporary thought new contours within the fields of ecocriticism and Anthropocene theory, in response to shifting

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perspectives on cataclysm and ecological crisis. What once designated spiritual elevation before natural vastness now manifests as a techno--ruinous sublime, shaped by the experience of ecological collapse, technological entropy, and the dissolution of boundaries between the natural and the artificial. This new sublime no longer leads to transcendence but to a melancholic awareness of a radical interdependence between the human and the ruins of its own world. The sublimity of finitude is thus eroded by the way the Industrial Revolution displaced the locus of the sublime into the magnitude of invisible systems and forces of technology, instituting a form of (dis)enchantment that prepares the ground for new forms of fear and dread - while simultaneously evoking a sense of urgency regarding the effects of erasure that cast the wild as both a symbolic agent of loss and rarity, and as a site of possible redemption.

What the 1970s rendered undeniable - particularly following the publication of “Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson - was the fragility of this glorification of wilderness in the face of technological and ecological transformations of the contemporary world. As the environmental crisis deepens and the notion of a point of no return gains traction, the sublime re-encounters the wild not as an ideal of untouched purity but as a site of friction and interdependence between human and non-human systems. In the context of the Anthropocene, the experience of the sublime shifts from Romantic transcendence to a regime of disillusionment, scepticism, disappointment, and melancholy, marked by an acute awareness of destruction and the urgency of reimagining new relations between culture and nature.

The ecological sublime thus emerges from this paradox: an ambivalent sentiment oscillating between fictive fascination and the fear of collapse, between the transformative potential of the human species and the systemic vulnerability of the planet it inhabits. This ambiguity opens an ethical and aesthetic field of reflection that questions both the status of the wild and the very viability of an environmental ethics within

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a technologically mediated and ecologically depleted world. In this sense, the sublime should cease to operate as a category of Romantic elevation and instead function as a critical device - one capable of exposing the affective and cognitive contradictions that traverse the contemporary ecological imaginary, whether as obstacles to action or as strategies of greenwashing.

Accordingly, this article seeks to understand how the modern sublime has contributed to the prolongation of an idealised nostalgia framed within a "green *phantasiai*"- phenomenological and imagetic horizon that simultaneously denounces and perpetuates separation and inaction through not just perceptions, but also memories and imaginations that generate passions. By reformulating its relevance in the context of the Anthropocene, this research interrogates the metamorphosis of the sublime as an aesthetic and political category, examining its impact on the contemporary environmental imaginary and the hybridisation of decaying concepts that sustain a state of apathy amid processes of visible and invisible decline, while exploring potential forms of subversion that may lead to renewed agency.

The (Dis)enchantment of Idealized Wild Nature

> The virgin forest was not encountered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; it was invented in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For this condition Indian fire practices were largely responsible (Pyne, 2017, p.46).

Stephen J. Pyne identifies that the idea of wilderness as untouched is a social construction, to be discussed within the tension between the nostalgic vision brought from eighteenth-century Europe - pre-fascinated with pastoral landscapes - and what William Denevan describes as the aftermath of Indigenous genocide. The latter resulted from diseases

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introduced by European colonizers, massacres, and large-scale cultural oppression, which led to land abandonment and subsequent spontaneous rewilding. This dynamic gave rise to the fallacy that forests containing trees approximately two hundred years old were to be misinterpreted as primary forests, thus reinforcing the notion that such areas had remained unaltered by human activity (Denevan, 1992). Hence emerged the myth of the virgin land - the wilderness of the New World - as a site of effusive praise and a blind spot in European environmental assessment (Tuan, 1980).

Conversely, as early modern English society moved toward rapid growth and industrial revolution, incompatibility with this pace cultivated an interest in plants, mountains, and unruly nature as a counter-movement to urbanization. Observing nature became a fashionable pastime, in contrast to Enlightenment rationality, which - through colonial intersections - brought both the glorification of evangelizing hierophany and the fascination with a new wilderness: one that had been forgotten or erased from industrialized European narratives. It was, in other words, a nostalgic condition in which "the British Romantics' more sublime versions of pastoral were sharpened into a distinctively New World obsession with wilderness" (Garrard, 2004, p. 49).

In its imperialist form of expansion, narratives about wilderness also embodied escapism - a yearning for a return to the simplicity of pre-industrial life. This fostered an empathetic revaluation of the meaning and moral worth of wilderness, which for so long had been feared and associated with a state of ecophobia[3], only to be newly exalted.

If, on the one hand, the pastoral tradition shaped the nature of the Old World through long processes of domestication and order,

3 The term under discussion was coined by Simon C. Estok and defines the fear, aversion, or terror toward the natural world. Ecophobia, as he names it, has driven "a maladaptive antagonism between humans and their environments, the seriousness of which is evidenced by our human legacy—the Anthropocene" (Estok, 2018, p. IX).

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understanding the wilderness of the New World - as the myth of the virgin land - requires recognizing the transition from a culture that rejected the untamed to one that embraced a form of "green exoticism." This was sustained by an imagination nourished by Romantic paintings and poetry that idealized human presence in such environments as a form of transcendental connection -a "discovery" and commodification of rarity. Wilderness thus became increasingly objectified and publicized as special, precisely as it grew more distinct from the polluted and industrialized surroundings (Krieger, 1973).

This heuristic fusion introduced a new interpretation that, according to Max Oelschlaeger's analysis of Edmund Burke's aesthetics, reflected the progression from medieval thought, in which the separation between the sacred and the profane evolved into a *délà sensibilité* dichotomy - an affective relationship with the natural world divided between the notions of the beautiful and the sublime. It was an attempt to morally and theologically approach and comprehend nature, oscillating between the randomness and irregularity of the wild (the sublime) - from the vastness of mountains, storms, and natural catastrophes that mirrored God's power in a profound, often immeasurable or even threatening feeling - and the disinterested, intelligible, and domesticated pleasure within the bounds of emotional and rational grasp: the caring benevolence of nature (the beautiful) (Oelschlaeger, 1991, p. 111).

The reassessment of wilderness, therefore, exposed the underlying pathologies of Judeo-Christian traditions, rooted in a circumstantial ecophobia, understandable even in the etymology of the word wilderness[4] itself - a term that flourished from both technological and cultural vulnerabilities. However, the reason Romanticism became prominent in

4 The word wilderness, derived from the Anglo-Saxon wilddeoren, refers to deoren or beasts that existed beyond the boundaries of civilization (Garrard, 2004, p. 59–61).

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ecological discourse stems from its ability to introduce topophilia[5] into the cultural imagination of its time through art, such as Thomas Cole's, Frederic Edwin Church's, Albert Bierstadt's, Asher Brown Durand's, Thomas Moran's, Sanford Robinson Gifford's, and John Frederick Kensett's paintings and, consequently, the first indications of "ethical" models of environmental philosophies within a society already anaesthetized by its own anthropocentrism.

Romantic Sublime Paradox

> It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear, and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night (Thoreau, 2009, p. 63).

Thoreau's reflection after climbing Mount Katahdin (USA), much like Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog", captures the hyper-separative paradox addressed here - that increasingly accentuated frontier space, though emotionally drawn closer to the "other". Concretely, while there is a demonstration of aesthetic appreciation that redefines the medieval models which had until then demonized the wild - promoting, for instance, belief in the spiritual

5 "Bachelard's enquiry into human response to space sits alongside discussions of beauty and the sublime that have been central to art theory. He explores what he terms 'topophilia' in relation to human desire for the comfort of familiar spaces, wondering at the subjective processes whereby certain spaces – or images of such spaces – come to reassure." (Wells, 2012)

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power of mountains - the result is merely a maladaptation of the effect of otherness to its own context. This emotional connection generated a profitable sense of identity, visible in the subsequent construction of sanatoriums, hotels, and tourist resorts that ascribed a utilitarian, empathetic, and economic function to these spaces, while simultaneously intersecting the expansion and development of the very capitalist industrial structures that were destroying them - a covert return to domination and consumption, derived from anthropocentrism and speciesism.

This vulnerability lies, in its implications for the “other”, in the approach to an empty affinity of an ecocentric ethics - both because it arises from an environmental defense rooted in aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, and from the pursuit of a comforting relationship that projects divine qualities onto wilderness. It is, therefore, not an approximation of the human to nature, but rather of God to the human - a way of remaking the world in one’s own image.

Within it lies the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s natural theology, aimed at the self-preservation of a religious culture that sacralizes nature, as well as the figure of Thoreau, who combined solitude and contemplation - a kind of empathetic ecological worldview between himself and Walden. Yet what we observe is not a proto-ecology capable of establishing a post-liminal ethic beyond anthropocentrism - one that recognizes other forms of life as equal—but rather an affective bond with these spaces mediated by aesthetics. This relation emerges from exhaustion before the acceleration and artificialization of the modern world and results in the transformation of glorified wilderness into a functional object of capitalism. Thus, nature becomes a reactive stage - an expression of defensive intentionality aimed at preserving the experience of the self within those spaces – a form of escapism.

Figures such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold, along with institutions like the Sierra Club, the Boone and Crockett Club, and The Wilderness Society, exemplify the early ethical models of environmental protection.

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Yet these remained conditioned and confined to locations characterized by experiential attachment, emotional interaction, and sensorial engagement (Critical Art Ensemble, 2018, p. 46). What emerges here is the necessity of an anthropocentric de-hierarchization that includes all forms of life and ecosystems in relations of co-presence, without stratification through human values or interests. This underscores the principle of the intrinsic value of nature and its right to participate in a shared world.

Indissociable from the neglect of spaces deemed functionless, this affective conditioning tends to favor subjectively more useful, aesthetic or sublime landscapes over others. It is precisely upon this inclination that Romanticism deepens as a problem within contemporary ecological thought.

According to Timothy Morton, in his book “Ecology Without Nature”, there is a need to rethink environmental aesthetics around how art and literature produce fictionalized interpretations - particularly during Romanticism - in order to dismantle an ecological imaginary in which parts of nature are placed on a pedestal for admiration. In these utopian narratives, the concept of nature, seen as a form of resistance to industrialization, was interpreted by Morton as a “fake medieval sword made of rubber,” characterized by immersion in a sublime ecomimesis that softened hyperseparation[6] but never eliminated it (Morton, 2007, p. 57).

In this sense, it is important to reflect on how Romantic paintings, such as “The Oxbow”, “The Heart of the Andes”, “Among the Sierra Nevada, California”, “Kindred Spirits” or “The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone”, established a homogeneous standard of Nature aesthetics through its sublime condition and set the desire to dominate and capture the

6 “Hyperseparation means defining the dominant identity emphatically against, or in opposition to, the subordinated identity, by exclusion of their real or supposed qualities. The function of hyper-separation is to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment.” (Demos, 2016, p.54)

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essence of these spaces (the wild as other), under a condition intangible both to the artist who experienced it and to the European spectator, that propagated a form of inaction in the face of the climate changes of our time, through the distanced contemplation of calamity. The pictorial experience of consuming wilderness explores a metaphysics of non-presence - a place turned artifact, alienated from the human world. It is a barrier that subconsciously frames virgin land, rendering invisible the complexity outside its boundaries, ignoring the artificiality of urban reality and, as Morton emphasizes, ironically, the artificiality of nature itself (Morton, 2010, pp. 5–11).

Equally significant is how the increasing trajectory of violence surrounding the protection of wild spaces parallels the intensification of modern synthetic life and contemporary climate concerns. Ignoring this correlation may explain the ethical liminality in which we currently find ourselves - that is, understanding that “The dangers and discomforts of wildness do not disappear when people put the screws to them; they simply move” (Wapner, 2020, p. 30). This points to the consequences of a hyper-proximity between the two opposing forces, resulting in the subversion of the wild as an experiential essence, translated into other forms of expression - whether in industrial structures through technology’s representation of incomprehension and abyssal magnitude, or in the more recent sense of uncontrollable calamity brought by the climate crisis.

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Aesthetics Functions

> Contrary to the principle of overcoming such alienation, Amanda Boetzkes argues that the constraining position of contemporary culture is, in fact, to move beyond this paradigm of false affinity - not by rejecting an ecocentric ethic in which we see ourselves as part of nature, but by removing ourselves from the history that characterizes and projects idyllic images of it. This implies, rather, acknowledging its artificiality as a social construction - a rupture of the aestheticized aura that generates responsibility and action (Boetzkes, 2010, p. 63).

Ecomimesis and the sublime as scenic closure are thus proposed as methodological tools of immersion in a social allegory - one that functions as a distanced, touristic gaze upon “green spaces,” prioritizing living models according to an aesthetic hierarchy. This has proven to be profoundly anthropocentric, as it shapes the attribution of value - between banality and monumentality - to spaces later interpreted as worthy or unworthy of protection and enclosure within a glass dome.

The pictorial rhetoric of wild nature is therefore dependent on what Morton terms ambient poetics - “a way of conjuring up a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world” (Morton, 2007, p. 22). When applied to the fertile ambience of greenwashing strategies, it surprises the viewer with an ideological affinity that seeks to prevent these spaces from being destroyed, either temporarily or contingently, through the perception of an intersubjective, sensible reality. National parks, natural or wildlife reserves trace physical boundaries in the territory with the aim of protecting the wildness of nature from the advance of civilization. Yet this wilderness, in many respects, constitutes the very antithesis of what is truly wild: a human construction, controlled, mediated, and incapable of growing back (Wapner, 2010).

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The poetics of Romanticism are thus articulated through an illusory dynamic of immersion in the intangibility of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. In its sublime manifestation, this experience transports the viewer into an intense emotional state, where fascination merges with terror before the contemplation — at a distance — of something grand, immeasurable, or uncontrollable. In a way, this overwhelming sensation is repeated today in our perception of climate change, producing an analogous sense of awe and powerlessness in the face of the scale of the problem and the limited human capacity to understand or resolve it. If this phenomenon can be understood as a form of techno-ruinous ecophobia sublimated or overshadowed by ambience, then its transmissibility to the present becomes clear - particularly in the models through which art and ecology continue to interact precariously with the world, still carrying representations based on a nostalgic, inert, and paralyzed poetics rather than confronting the forms of decay that are often trivialized, rendered invisible, or forgotten.

Within this framework, one may discuss how incoherent or pragmatically dissociated practices in climate-related art are often confusingly classified within ecological domains - such as Land Art or Earth Art - for incorporating these poetics of ambience and “green supremacy” into their discourse. This creates a slippery distinction between what can be formalized as ecological art or activism, particularly when analyzing works such as Michael Heizer’s “Double Negative”, Olafur Eliasson’s “The Mediated Motion”, or the works of Michael Biberstein. It is in this context that Morton argues for awareness of a political aesthetic that must be countered by an anti-aesthetic[7] (Morton, 2007, p. 51).

7 A term popularized by Hal Foster in the 1980s, it challenges classical and ideological notions of aesthetics — that is, a normative, formalist, and universal conception of art — by critically exposing how aesthetic autonomy is entangled with the social, political, and historical contexts in which it is produced and interpreted (Foster, 1983).

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Following this line of thought, contemporary art becomes empowered with strategies that responsibly engage with the Anthropocene - as seen in Reclamation Art, Ecological Art, or Forensic Architecture - where the aesthetic or contemplative experience of nature becomes secondary and art begins to "operate within political regimes and to acquire political and critical content, as well as to become 'useful'" (Emmelhainz, 2020, p. 10). These practices bring forth new transdisciplinary languages of ecological diligence across all types of spaces and beings, responding to issues numbed by the acceleration and repetition of sublime imagery in the media, or by systemic problems rendered invisible by capitalism and an excessively globalized world. Important contributions have been made in this regard, such as Linda Weintraub's Schematic, which pragmatizes Ecological Art across four parameters: (1) art genres; (2) art strategies; (3) eco approaches; and (4) eco issues - illustrating how contemporary art can address environmental concerns through more contextually aware languages and practices, moving beyond the nostalgic phantasiai of a lost "green irreversibility" (Weintraub, 2012).

Nevertheless, what the sublime reveals is the difficulty of transcending anthropocentric liminality in the contemporary moment — both due to the persistence of a fictitious idyllic image within ecological imaginaries and because ecological art itself still struggles to gain meaningful and autonomous reception within the art world and its institutions. This may be due to the obsolescence of the ambient poetics embedded in the theme, long steeped in Romantic associations and therefore often dismissed as "fantasy," "trend," or "niche." Maja Fowkes describes this dynamic as follows:

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> In the 2012 edition of Documenta, curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev proclaimed 'ecological perspectives' to be among the main 'intentions' of the exhibition; however, the majority of the works that engaged with environment were neatly presented in Ottoneum, the Natural History Museum, relegating them effectively to the appropriate niche of contemporary art, and so risking the segregation of such works from the mainstream of art production (Fowkes, 2015, p. 9).

PostNature Aesthetics

It is within this set of circumstances that the wilderness intersects with contemporaneity as a zeitgeist of Romanticism, which must be restructured with the awareness that it has entered a state of artificial economic transaction and can now only be considered postnature - a point of no return and a reality based on ruins of technology. To discuss the wilderness in decline is to reject its hierarchical status, emphasizing instead the magnitude of the problem - for it is not merely an idyllic matter. This entails building a more conscious framework that acknowledges how anthropic processes have had planetary effects through inter/intra-action with other forms of life, and that the more-than-human has a right to the future. For this reason, Morton's fictional rhetoric assumes mourning over the idyllic as an ontological transition — one that abandons sentimentalism in order to address a Nature radically transformed by what he calls hyperobjects[8] (Morton, 2007).

8 "To refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. (...) A hyperobject could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism. (...) Hyperobjects have already had a significant impact on human social and psychic space. Hyperobjects are directly responsible for what I call the end of the world, rendering both denialism and apocalyptic environ mentalism obsolete." (Morton, 2013, pp. 1-2)

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Of course, abolishing this illusion carries the risk of losing the very motivating object - the symbolic image of movement - that generates emotional connection and triggers, for many, climate action, however precariously, since it is difficult to defend that whose existence can no longer be affirmed or felt. Yet what Morton proposes is a more altruistic, melancholic ethics - dark ecology - a reformulation of the traditional separation between culture and nature that exposes how forms of ambience are symptoms of capitalist alienation (Morton, 2016). This was already evident in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the simultaneity of imperial expansion, extractivism, and the rise of mass monocultures alongside the dissemination of an American moral geography - interwoven with myth and desire within a pragmatic longing for a return to the Garden of Eden. Fundamentally, anti-aesthetics seek to align themselves with a wildness inverted by the Anthropocene, like in Ana Vaz's, Jonas Staal's or the collective Nonhuman-nonsense's works.

First, this entails deconstructing the earthly paradise in which Indigenous peoples - or, in this case, the noble savage - were thought to exist in homeostatic harmony with wild nature, revealing instead the history of a colonized America from which we can critically examine the enduring legacies of displacement, cultural erasure, and the imposition of anthropocentric frameworks upon both human and nonhuman landscapes.

Then, in this process of unveiling suppressed presences and memories, it is equally important to demystify and disarm the predatory and competitive desire for territories and for nature itself - understanding how nature, too, is a product of that fiction, objectified as an ambitious and prestigious goal, always in transformation and never fully attainable. Nature becomes the object of incessant immaterial exploitation, manifested through different practices and imaginaries of conquest: from the resources of late capitalism that materialize the appetite for progress, to concrete cases exemplifying how the sublime continues to be culturally projected over time - such as the appropriation of Antarctica as a

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strategic reserve for the future, the climbing of Mount Everest and its associated environmental contamination from extreme tourism, or advances in genetic engineering. These dynamics correspond to what Vandana Shiva identifies as new waves of colonization - contemporary forms of glorified consumerism adapting to new regimes of discovery and invention of what has not yet been done. Within this logic, the impulse for constant transcendence - in search of a status that exceeds what is already consecrated - inscribes itself within the sublime rhetoric of progress and human expansiveness, with profoundly harmful ecological and social consequences deeply rooted in this green phantasiai (Shiva, 1999).

Finally, without denying the direct connection between Romanticism and the contemporary ecological movement - and the significant impact this has had in driving environmental protection and fostering an active front of concerned collectives and individuals — it is equally necessary to adopt a critical perspective on the moral foundation of the beautiful soul: the construction of a morally pure and superior identity that avoids the ambiguities and complexities of the real world – a sublime version of ethics *per se*. This moralistic framing underlies activism ranging from John Muir's Sierra Club to Julia Butterfly Hill's sequoia activism. In the process of moral hierarchization and assignment of blame, a romantized form of activism emerges, one that requires recognition and acceptance of impurity, hybridity, and complex interrelations, abandoning binary views of a morally superior external observer (Morton, 2007).

> The Puritan-derived idea of wilderness is a form of performing abstinence, including vegetarianism, and other environmentalist lifestyle practices: abstaining from gasoline, television, "technology," and so on. The hale-and-hearty Marxoid version generates guilt over consumerism, a guilt that operates well within the parameters of the beautiful soul (Morton, 2007, p. 181).

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In other words, as Mijo Miquel stated in the seminar “Desperfilar as Artes Visuais, o Objeto Enlouquecedor e o Movimento das Coisas”, regarding forms of activism: “Sometimes we just want to be pure, and do everything right. That’s not possible when you’re dealing with the world” (Miquel, 2024). It is within this awareness that anti-aesthetics intervene, dismantling dichotomous fictions that problematize the ecological crisis and the prospect of an ultimate end. Postnature ethics, or an ecocentrism grounded in the impossibility of return, involves considering the strangeness of nature holistically, acknowledging that the sublime is biased toward negating the banal and incompatible with ethical imperatives once idyllic nature is recognized as non-existent and activists confront anthropocentric ego within themselves - a deterioration of myths and concepts of progress, including biophilic justice over the wild beyond its aesthetic value.

Nonetheless, the preservation of American wilderness or the beautiful soul cannot be dismissed. While this article seeks to deconstruct them, these categories - even when imbued with idealizations and conceptual tensions — play a fundamental role in shaping future horizons. They map imaginative and ethical cartographies that activate possibilities for transformation, reforming the very matrix of the sublime upon which they are based, while simultaneously underscoring the urgency of continuing to protect these natural spaces, which still fragilely maintain the planet’s ecological balance. Thus, their safeguarding is not merely a conservationist gesture but should be reframed as a condition for envisioning alternatives to the prevailing civilizational model and for sustaining projects that acknowledge the consequences of non-return. This entails a reframe of the “other”, problematizing the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, calling attention to an increasingly legible Amazon as an ecological palimpsest, where successive layers of exploitation and symbolic reinscription replace the image of untouched wilderness

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with anthropogenic wildness — a nature remade (uncanny) for which ecophobia must contend. A ruin.

Conclusion

In summary, the analysis of the sublime from Antiquity to the contemporary period reveals a profound transformation in the ways humans relate to the wild and to nature. What was once an experience of spiritual elevation and transcendence — characterized by vastness, terror, and ecstasy — has evolved into a critical consciousness of ecological fragility, the artificiality of the natural, and the interdependence of human and nonhuman systems. Romanticism and colonial discourses established an aesthetic tradition that idealized wilderness and constructed moral and emotional categories, such as the beautiful soul, structuring affective and symbolic relationships with nature while also obscuring the complexity and historicity of these spaces.

In the Anthropocene, the ecological sublime emerges as a critical device, capable of revealing paradoxes and contradictions: fascination and fear coexist, nostalgia and melancholy permeate environmental imaginaries, and the preservation of wild territories assumes simultaneously ethical, aesthetic, and political dimensions. The deconstruction of illusions of purity and untouchability allows for a rethinking of environmental ethics and protection practices, shifting the focus from Romantic contemplation to conscious engagement with processes of ecological degradation and hybridization.

Recognizing the artificiality and historicity of what is understood as wild does not imply rejecting environmental protection; rather, it requires a reformulation of concepts of value and responsibility, promoting a critical ecology that accounts for interdependence between humans and nonhumans, the complexity of natural systems, and the necessity of action in the face of non-return. From this perspective, the sublime ceases to be

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merely an aesthetic experience and becomes an instrument of reflection and transformation, capable of guiding new ways of understanding and intervening in the world, while keeping alive the urgency of rethinking the relationship between culture, nature, and the planetary future.

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