The Struggle for Ascendancy:

John Ruskin, Albert Smith and the Alpine Aesthetic.

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(signature) ……D. Bevin..........................................................
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Abstract

The thesis explores the work of two disparate figures, John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Albert Smith (1816-1860) who, together, helped transform the way the Alps were perceived in the mid nineteenth century. Both esteemed the Alps in their own way, although Ruskin’s cultural aestheticism contrasting markedly to the popular showmanship of Smith. Nevertheless, both Ruskin’s five-volumed Modern Painters (1843-1860), and Smith’s theatrical shows describing his ascent of Mont Blanc (1852-1858), contributed significantly to the growing popularity of the landscape resulting in the Alpine Club (1857) and the birth of modern tourism in the region.

This work examines in detail the work and interests of both characters. This includes Ruskin’s drawings, art theory (especially in relation to his admiration of Turner), geological interests, religious convictions, and poetry. These reveal his desire to centre ideas of the sublime around his scientific interest in the area and the legacy of his Evangelical upbringing. The thesis investigates the tension between these elements. Smith’s climb of Mont Blanc (1851) and his subsequent shows highlighted his desire to thrill and entertain. For him, presentation of the Alps was a matter of showmanship and the thesis investigates his success, tracing its roots in elements of Victorian popular entertainment. Both Smith’s shows, and works like Of Mountain Beauty (Volume IV of Modern Painters (1856)), inspired many to explore the landscape for themselves. For Ruskin, this led to a decline in his interest in the Alps following the development of the rail network and the expansion of popular tourist sites, including his beloved Chamonix. For Smith, the public’s increasing familiarity
with the region, and the popularity of other stories of Alpine ascents by members of the Alpine Club, led to a decline in interest in his shows by the end of the 1850s.

Due to their interest in the region, the Romantic appreciation of the Alps in the early nineteenth century associated with theories of the sublime became a much more diverse phenomenon illustrating a number of key features of Victorian culture, including: the relationship of ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture; the increasing influence of mass tourism; and the ways in which major figures in Victorian Britain explored and utilised foreign destinations. The thesis will also, from time to time, examine the relationship between cultural and visual forms and key elements in Victorian intellectual controversy, including the relationship of religion and science.
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