Jennifer Peedom's *Mountain* as a City Symphony

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Abstract

This article explores Jennifer Peedom's film *Mountain* (2017) through the lens of the city symphony in view of structural, aesthetic, and thematic parallels between mountain and city symphony films. Analyzing *Mountain* in the generic context of the city symphony film draws attention to the deep structural links between urban centers and mountains, and their shared technological and urban infrastructures. This appraoch also harnesses the potential of film studies to revise dominant perceptions of mountains and can help viewers understand mountains as places of density and as dense networks that are developed by technological infrastructure and informed by dense technological, social, and cultural networks. By drawing on media ecology, actor-network theory, and media archeology, I will show that, similar to city symphonies, *Mountain* explores collective networks beyond the human realm to shed light on mountains as cultural spaces, geological manifestations, and eco-social realities. In so doing, *Mountain* tries to help humans to come to terms with the deep temporalities of alpine spaces and their technological mediations.

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A mountain stands snow-covered and solitary in the distance. It is guarded by several snowy conifers and situated in a landscape filled with movement: light and shadow, day and night, clouds and stars move around the peak and its surrounding scenery. Instead of a starred sky moving above a single peak, the next scene shows a mountain range. Snowcats move up and down one of the mountains preparing the slopes for the next day, their movement visible only by the shine of their headlights. The scene evokes associations with cars driving on busy night streets. Then, the attention shifts to actual streets, as various infrastructural approaches to mountains are presented: first, through the windshield of a car that follows tracks on a snow-covered highway; second, through a serpentine road, heavily trafficked, winding up the mountain flank. Third, via a parking lot that fills up and clears out between dawn and dusk. A delicately frosted deciduous tree mediates the transition between the streets leading to mountains and the streets that are modelled onto them. Freshly groomed slopes are gradually tracked by numerous skiers who descend like a ballet ensemble and carve turns whose traces in the snow evoke waves. Only identifiable as colorful dots of ski jackets, the skiers move across the slopes. They are joined, in the next scene, by skiers on a chairlift. Finally, the camera's attention moves to the infrastructure on the mountains. Gondolas span slopes, skiers flock to queue at ski lift stations and the lifts themselves turn like Ferris wheels, gradually transporting skier after skier. Cable car poles, pipes, rollers, and anchor points become visible. A flock of birds flies away as trees are cut down to create the space where technology allows people to meet mountains. These scenes, some accelerated, are dramatized by symphonic music and stylized by poetic narration.

This sequence from the film *Mountain* (2017), directed by Jennifer Peedom, evokes aesthetic associations with the city symphony film, which was popular in the 1920s. City symphonies are considered a hybrid between a documentary and avant-garde film: they are avant-garde films that assume "a documentary *attitude* towards film-making" and capture urban life.[1] City symphonies stress the organic nature of the city and the effects of and connections between industrialization, mechanization,

and a pre-industrial society,[2] dealing "with the energy, the patterning, the complexities, and the subtleties of a city."[3] With a tendency to rhythmize human actions versus those of machines and invest in the depiction of masses rather than individuals,[4] they are also characterized by associative and rhythmic montages that forge new meaningful connections through visual and temporal forms.[5]

Early city symphony films frequently express a certain admiration for modern technology, "capturing motion by showing busy street life and powerful machines at work."[6] In celebrating modernity, they play a key role in visualizing collective, technological, and non-human agencies. Time-lapses and accelerated images (which also characterize Peedom's documentary *Mountain*) are often used as part of a visual rhetoric that highlights industrial processes of mechanization typically encountered in urban settings. In this respect, *Mountain* resonates with city symphonies such as *Rien Que Les Heures* (1926) and *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927), as it brings out the industrial apparatus which informs mountains in the same way that Cavalcanti and Ruttmann highlight the urban machinery that vitalized Paris and Berlin.

Although *Mountain* shares a number of these core features with the city symphony and focuses on "both a defined time frame (most often from morning until evening) as well as a carefully articulated geographic space,"[7] its geographic interest is not confined to city walls. Instead, it explores the relationship between the urban and the natural as they connect in alpine spaces. The generic relationship to the symphony film is further intensified on the narrative level: like city symphonies, which, although mostly non-narrative, are often divided into thematically organized segments, and sometimes even follow the structure of a poem (e.g. *Manhatta* [1921]),[8] *Mountain* is structured by a narrative voice that guides the viewer through a series of chapters.

Mountain mediates the alpine rhythm of nature, just like the city symphonies of the 1920s use "the pulse of the city and quite literally translate it into the rhythm of cinema."[9] In the context of the Anthropocene and the exploitation of nature, accelerated in the wake of the past century's industrial and technological developments, the mountain symphony responds to the current ecocrisis.[10] While city symphonies often mirror the effects of World War I, industrialization, and mass mobility and "can be seen as responses to the startling changes that came with this,"[11] *Mountain* belongs to a more recent cinematic trend of films employing aesthetic ecological strategies, such as long shots, slow orchestration, and symphonic music to express non-human agencies. The film also draws attention to the media-archeological dimension of the structural similarities with city symphonies: while the latter mediate "the metropolis as a site of social contrasts, drawing the viewers' attention to overlooked spaces and neglected communities,"[12] mountain symphonies critically

engage with the networks involved in and produced from alpine space.

Loosely based on Robert Mcfarlane's book *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), narrated by Hollywood actor Willem Dafoe, and with a backing soundtrack by the Australian Chamber Orchestra, *Mountain* was compiled from the 2,000-plus-hour archive of film by cinematographer Renan Ozturk and production companies such as Sherpas Cinema. The film takes the viewer through five historic and symphonic chapters and topics of mountain culture: from the beginnings of imperialist mountain cartography, to emerging tourism and first ascents, commercialization of the mountains and mass tourism, and ultimately back to mountains as ecological entities. Peedom combines footage from many existing outdoor films and reframes these in ways that shift the agency from mountaineers to the mountains themselves. In this sense, Peedom's documentary allows the mountain to take the lead, in the same way that cities were the stars of the symphony film. *Mountain* transfers the aesthetics associated with urban spaces to the mountains and renders nature as intimately connected to urbanity. Mountains, Peedom's film demonstrates, are mediated as extensions of the urban sphere, developed by various forms of infrastructure, and expressed through the visual language of the city symphony. Blending expository and poetic modes of documentary film,[13] *Mountain* showcases human–alpine encounters by employing the visual language of the city symphony.

This article explores *Mountain* through the lens of the city symphony and tests the generic potential of a mountain symphony film regarding these parallels due to their numerous structural, aesthetic, and thematic similarities. Analyzing *Mountain* in the generic context of the city symphony film draws attention to the deep structural links between urban centers and mountains, and their shared technological and urban infrastructures. This approach also provides opportunities to utilize the potential of film studies in revisioning dominant perceptions of mountains, helping viewers to understand mountains as places of density and as dense networks that are developed by technological infrastructure and informed by dense technological, social, and cultural networks. Like city symphonies, *Mountain* explores collective networks beyond the human realm and sheds light on mountains as cultural spaces, geological manifestations, and eco-social realities. It helps humans to come to terms with the deep temporalities of alpine spaces and their technological mediations.

The approach of this article is framed by concepts and ideas of media ecology, media archeology and its notion of deep time, landscape studies as well as network aesthetics. Borrowing from network aesthetics, my analysis adopts the notion that humans and non-human entities interact equally in networks, and nature and society are organized as equals. It builds on media ecology's conception of humans, society, and media as agents as much as it rests on the premise that media are ecologically

entangled with nature, and human society and our environment are by no means separate. With regard to media archeology, my analysis considers media history from a geological perspective of deep time that addresses contingent and non-linear developments of history, such as those that emerge through the repurposing of the footage in *Mountain*.

My discussion of *Mountain* explores the large-scale technological permeation of mountains to ask both what can be gained and what is brought to the forefront if we read mountains in the context of the city symphony. I argue that this specific generic reading highlights the film's production of density as it pertains to time, space, and footage. By tracing these various forms of densities and analyzing the filmic strategies used to convey them, this article demonstrates how *Mountain* expresses a very specific alpine agency. One way in which questions of agency interrelate with those of density is in the repurposing of footage from outdoor films that compose Peedom's film. Culled from an immense archive of mountain and outdoor films, *Mountain* may be considered a mountain film about mountain films. The film critically engages with the genre of outdoor films and their mediation of nature while also replaying some of the genre's most contested characteristics and forms of Romanticization. The final section of this paper addresses how this combination of critique and idealization is not a contradiction, but, rather, a core feature of a cinematic revision that ultimately shifts critical and cinematic attention to environmental concerns.

Alpine Technological Conquest

In order to come to terms with the technological permeation of mountains, the first section of this paper explores the historical and technological conquest of mountains, its cinematic mediation in *Mountain*, and how the film contributes to our understanding of imperial and technological invasion in alpine space. How are city symphonies and mountain symphonies similar, not only on the level of their content but also in their aesthetic form? What can be gained for the study of mountain films on a more general level? By bringing together footage that spans across a century of mountaineering, *Mountain* emphasizes how humans have inscribed themselves into the alpine landscape via a vast infrastructural network that includes roads and passes, as well as treks and transportation systems. Peedom's film is a reminder that the utilization of these networks, whether powered by humans, animals, or machines, has gradually moved from the lowlands to the highlands, connecting human settlements with alpine regions. This is highlighted in scenes of a horse track on a wide plain, presumably located in North America that is followed by black-and-white footage horses crossing a riverbed in a more alpine setting, as well as heavy-laden mules who climb up a wintery, snow-covered mountain pass.

The film establishes connections between modern alpinist interventions and early religious mountain hikes: the image of a mountaineer turning his oxygen flask cap is rhythmically followed by a monk turning the prayer wheels. The scene juxtaposes religious and archaic forms of mountain life with industrial and technological approaches to mountains. Consequently, the history of alpine exploration is condensed even further: masses of people gather at Mount Everest basecamp while the mountain itself rests solitary and majestic in the background. Mountaineers and sherpas pose for images and track toward the icy flanks of its peak. These scenes, connected via Chopin's *Notturno, Op. 27: No. 2 in D-flat major*—a slow piano piece—all demonstrate that "the great peaks of the world" had begun "to exert a force upon the imagination . . . that was easy to hear, hard to resist and sometimes fatal."[14] The black-and-white scenes condense the historical development of alpine space and the footage culminates in a tableau showing the date of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine's third failed attempt at Mount Everest.

To keep this network of alpinist interventions active in viewers' minds, footage in color shows how mountaineers use strap-on crampons to cross a glacial bridge, modern versions of those seen in the black-and-white footage. In order to bring this sequence of images to a close and thus connect the historic dimension of alpine conquest with that of historic milestones, the film presents Tensing Norgay's iconic photo of the first successful ascent of Mount Everest in 1953. The narrator frames these images' crucial impact at the emergence of mountaineering as a popular mass sport: "This was the moment that mountaineering as an adventure entered the popular imagination."[15] The entire passage is accompanied by energetic and triumphal string music. The strings of the orchestra support the strings of the alpine network mediated in the images of these scenes. The allegro vivace of the *Holberg Suite* by the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the images themselves remain largely natural in terms of their pace and rhythm, which draws parallels to slide shows. In this way, Peedom's film brings together the various exploratory and imperialist interventions that have shaped mountains from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and eventually paved the way for alpinist ambitions among the general public.[16] Peedom's film makes clear that, regardless of whether conquests were leisurely or imperial (or both), they were fostered by the infrastructural development of the alpine region.

Mountain addresses the history of the mountaineering infrastructure in relation to the history of alpine aesthetics. This is particularly apparent in images which stylize mountains as objects of art. In a scene from the film's second chapter, a lone mountain in the distance looks picturesque: the mountain is flanked by clouded sky and veil and seems to be floating weightlessly. As this montage draws to mind associations with the Romantic tradition, the search for the sublime is specifically picked up in another scene: a line of mountaineers traverses an alpine flank, and the frame

is so close that it mediates the immense height and exposure. The section is closed by the shot of a solitary man smoking a pipe on the edge of a rock, again only partially situated within the alpine landscape. The narrative voice contextualizes the interplay between urbanization and the emergence of the sublime as one that is deeply interconnected: "As cities grew and we insulated ourselves away from nature: The mountains called us back . . . We went in search of places that were intimidating and uncontrollable. That inspired in us the heady blend of pleasure and terror. Which we came to call the sublime."[17] These black-and-white scenes connect the history of mountaineering with that of aesthetic alpinism and demonstrate how early urban spaces and nature are organized in networks. *Mountain* is replete with such images in which lone climbers are juxtaposed with a magnitude of spiky peaks.

Still in black-and-white, the film highlights the technical and technological development of alpine skiing alongside the political developments of the twentieth century. Footage follows of skiers walking up a hill using the herringbone technique and collectively descending using the snow plough technique. Through these images, the film establishes associative links that echo the military history of World War I. The war triggered the development of skiing and became part of national culture, as illustrated by the fact that, at the end of WWI, every soldier in alpine regions was given a pair of skis.[18] With the war, the infrastructural development of the Alps became strongly pushed by and linked to military concerns and fostered infrastructural interventions like the building of mountain combat stations to secure the alpine borders.[19]

The film condenses the technological advancements in aviation and the technological development of cameras and links these to the empire building of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Images shot from a plane display diverse alpine scenery und images of rural settlements. While these scenes are related to airspace, other images show maps of various mountain ranges and territories. These images highlight the link between cartography and imperialist interventions like "the stabilization of territorial states" and the visual control of mountains by colonizers.[20] Images of white soldiers in a village with Mount Kilimanjaro in the background follow. These scenes highlight alpine networks as they spread from skiing in the European Alps to the subjugation of entire countries beyond the European realm. All these techniques and technologies are united by the goal to master and control, as the narrator suggests: "The imperial aim was to bring it and its peoples within the realm of the known and the owned. To replace mystery—with mastery."[21] The following scene highlights how colonial imperial expansion was superseded by neocolonial empire-building based on mountains as symbols as mastery—an idea that is literally carried to the mountains: a rope team with heavy cables hikes up a steep, icy mountain flank. The team mounts a cable roller that directs the cable back into the val-

ley. Cable car poles, steel ropes, and gondolas—arranged to an energetic and uplifting piece for string instruments—are embedded into nature. Technology at its height has now reached the summit as a gondola, crammed with laughing tourists, reaches the summit station.

In "The Nation's First Playground" (2006), Jennifer Lynn Peterson thematizes North American alpine development, characterized by the construction and development of national parks in the American West. She stresses that the transition from allegedly empty landscapes to touristic playgrounds in the American West was crucial for the creation of tourism-fostering infrastructural development. At the beginning of the twentieth century, travelogues, the early forerunners of nature films, were produced. These were supported by the technological development of film as well as the infrastructural and technological development of nature. Peterson's research on the relation between transportation systems and early travelogues of the American West highlights the importance of infrastructure for the mediation of mountains in travelogues, as they were "equally invested in the representing of the process of getting to that scenery—the railroads, cars, horse paths, and walking trails the traveler must use to reach the scenery—and the experience of viewing the scenery once one has reached it."[22] *Mountain* illustrates these early human-mountain encounters and the technological advancements where people serve as "mediating tourist figures within the landscape, essentially holding the audience's hand while leading it into the spectacular places on-screen."[23] In the scenes that highlight this connection, masses spread to line up on a mountain crest and gaze at the surrounding alpine scenery. Representing the density produced by infrastructural development in alpine spaces, the lift cables of the first ascent's rope team become a line of tourist mountain pilgrims that are carried to the top.

This dense geographical and historical network is inscribed into the present as the footage changes to color. The film again reflects the history of alpine technology as a tremendous one but at the same time as one of violence in the mountains. As Stephen Slemon notes: "Everest's paradigmatic inaccessibility, its figuration of otherness without cultural others, becomes violently translated—by commodification, by commerce, by the staging of postmodern nationalist arrival—into exactly its opposite: Everest becomes a main street, a traffic jam, a ship-of-fools party on the rooftop of the world."[24] In this sense, Slemon and the film suggest that technological development also frequently accompanies a sort of violence and demystification, which, as I will argue later, is not necessarily always the case. Summiting Mount Everest is mediated as if it were a strategic military operation. A computer-animated map of the trek from Kathmandu to Mount Everest is framed by the narrator's voice: "And the greatest mystery of them all: Everest. And so began the campaign to vanquish it."[25] Images that summarize the technological advancement of modern alpin-

ism show pressure chambers for training the mountaineer's lung capacity and over-alls with artificial oxygen tanks that are needed to reach Mount Everest's top. The martial framing of summiting the epitome of alpine space—Mount Everest—forms a contrast to the celebration of technological development. Further, this scene fore-shadows the film's critical engagement with human intrusion and its consequences for alpine space. To intensify the connections between terror and magnificence, the narrator closes the sequence as if the images were part of a war landscape: "Everest was placed under siege. Until at last it succumbed."[26]

The commodification of mountaineering on Mount Everest in the mass-oriented outdoor industry becomes clear when the film transfers the previous juxtaposition of pre-industrial and industrial society to the present, where "mountain mania cul-minates on Mount Everest."[27] In scenes of Sherpas trekking with mules, an infinite number of colorful religious flags towers above the base camp. Instead of a rural assembly of tents, the base camp has become more of a tent city. These images are accelerated, rhythmically edited, and accompanied by a piece in a minor key by the Australian Chamber Orchestra, highlighting the industrial character of modern alpinism, which "isn't climbing anymore. It's queuing. This isn't exploration. It's crowd control. This is the modern industry of ascent. In which the risks are often taken most by those who have least."[28] Ultimately, the film re-mediates Tensing Norgay's iconic ascent photo, but with a different outcome: a mountaineer on the summit holds a camera and pans it around himself. What initially appears to be a heroic singu-lar achievement is turned into a mass experience. Mount Everest's peak is crowded, people are waiting in line to replicate the photo at "the top of the world." The film not only comments critically on the effects of technologization but also the fact that mountaineering has become a lucrative business. These scenes stress the connec-tion between technology and society in such a way that "societies are made of the media that bind us together and media exist only where there are societies to bind them."[29]

Mountain, in these images, relates to the genre of the city symphony as it con-denses a hundred years of alpine history, accompanied by the orchestra's music, into a few minutes. Here, the time frame is not a single day, but decades. The geographical space switches from a global level to the realm of Mount Everest as the embodiment of what mountains signify for humans. Mountain simultaneously celebrates and crit-icizes the technological development of alpine space: it creates a critical focal point through the montage and revision of footage, which itself only becomes possible through its montage. This effect is reinforced by the film's juxtaposition of sound and words: while the music remains energetic, the images showcase masses making pilgrimages to the mountains and the narrator's closing comment that "our fascina-tion became an obsession" sets a critical tone for the following segments of film.[30]

In this change between black-and-white and color images, the film reveals the diversity of different forms of alpine networks: sometimes, these are immediate connections—the rope between two humans or the rope between human and mountain, while in other cases, these are larger, less immediate links such as those between a metropolis and a distanced alpine playground. However, these different connections showcase what Adrian Ivakhiv refers to as ecological thinking in terms of network narratives that "consist of lines of individual narratives that converge and diverge in ways that highlight both the casual links and the indeterminacies of the connections that make events possible."[31]

These connections between urban and alpine spaces were intensified through national, military, and commercial interests throughout the first half of the twentieth century—a period that also figures as a dense moment in mountain film history, marking the apogee of the German mountain film.[32] Like the *Bergfilm*, *Mountain* engages discourses of modernity. However, instead of highlighting the contrast between urban spaces and alpine nature that the *Bergfilm* is known to celebrate, *Mountain* resonates with recent research on mountain films, demonstrating that urban and alpine spaces are not polar opposites that cannot be imagined without each other, but have always been connected and circulated in networks into which modern landscapes are embedded.[33] In this sense, Peedom's blending of mountains with the avant-garde and city symphony do not merely challenge the contrast between the urban and the alpine but, in certain ways, also upsets the generic dominance of the German mountain film. The mountain symphony, then, in the way it emerges from Peedom's film, highlights the density and multi-layered nature of mountain-urban relationships. It contributes to a broadening of the genre as it showcases the collective human and nonhuman networks, exploring their organicity and fluidity "as circulating objects undergoing trials."[34]

Dense Mountain Time

One of the mountain symphony's strengths lies in its ability to render the relationship between humans and nature tangible as a closely entangled network. Montage and assemblage highlight the collective networks beyond the human realm. In order to better understand mountains as places of accumulated density, one must resort to actor-network-theory, which assumes that humans and nonhuman entities interact equally in networks that "share the same shape-changing destiny."[35] Networks, in that sense, are "never *bigger* than another one" but "simply *longer* or more intensely connected."[36] What makes actor-network-theory so valuable for viewing mountains as dense network points here is its assumption that "a given element becomes strategic through the number of connections it commands."[37] In this, it supports the idea that mountains serve as neuralgic points that bundle, re-direct and emanate

various connections.

I will trace how *Mountain* produces density as it concerns the entities of time, space and footage. My first argument about density pertains to temporal density, as the mountain symphony probes the relationship between human experience and measured time. City symphonies follow the clock, and their rhythm is a mechanical one. The mountain symphony, by contrast, follows a different rhythm. City symphonies re-embody the mechanical, industrial time referred to as "objective time" by Ori Levin.[38] *Mountain*, instead, approaches a different kind of objective time, namely, a "hyperobjective" or geological deep time,[39] where temporalities "are understood in this alternative account as concretely linked to the nonhuman earth times of decay and renewal but also to the current Anthropocene of the obscenities of the ecocrisis."[40] Accordingly, the mountain symphony addresses layered and non-linear developments of history. While Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1927), filmed over a period of three years and in three different cities, cinematically condenses footage "into a single 24-hour day,"[41] the mountain symphony condenses footage filmed over several years all over the world into one large timeframe and into a deeper temporal structure. The mountains in *Mountain* are contrasted with the ephemerality of human time through mountain time, as a sort of deep time. Mountains in Peedom's film, similar to the hyperobjects in Timothy Morton's elaborations, become "so massively distributed in time that they seem to taper off."[42] Through scenes that make human presence in high alpine environments seem particularly short-lived, such as when the narrator claims that "mountains humble the human instinct and reveal our insignificance,"[43] the camera dramatizes the mountain in aerial and panoramic shots from various angles. While humans might briefly inhabit high altitudes, as scenes of snow-covered tents on the mountain flank indicate, the presence of an individual mountain is suggested to outlive that of the alpinist individual. The tents in these scenes are symbolic of the status of alpinists as eternal guests: despite how well-trodden mountain paths have become, the individual mountaineer is only a fleeting presence on the mountain. Furthermore, the tents can be read as points of interconnection between the human and nonhuman and as objects through which human and mountain time meet and make the different scales of the alpinist and mountain timeline strikingly apparent.

The idea that mountains exist in a timeframe different from human existence is stressed by the narrator, who adds, "They live in deep time. In a way that we do not."[44] Through this statement, Peedom's cinematic archive reveals the geological age of the mountains and the layers of horizontally stratified flanks of a mountain range stand as witness to their geological age. Mountains have been compressed over millions of years and yet, through geological movements, have been transported to the surface. The idea that mountains live in a time that is different from human expe-

rience is reflected in scenes where time becomes condensed through the visual language of the symphony film with its time lapses and slow-motion images. In these scenes, Peedom's film portrays mountains as what Morton calls "nonhuman entities . . . that are incomparably more vast and powerful than we are."[45] Not only are mountains temporally vaster and therefore more powerful, but their temporal longevity also results in the fact "that our reality is caught in them."[46] While most of the original films from which Peedom draws her footage show explorers scanning, or mountaineers exploring, the surface of mountains, her quick and rich assemblage of clips has the human individual appear against the mountain and deeply embedded in its time. This kind of deep time afforded in *Mountain* also invites a consideration of reversed roles, in which the mountain rather than the mountaineer assumes the position of the observer: "Behind and beyond the mountains stretch eons too fast for us to comprehend. They were here long before we were even dreamed of. They watched us arrive. They will watch us leave."[47] The film itself, then, opens a third perspective that transcends the binary of visual mastery, as these meditative shots are released into an even bigger frame: a shot of the earth as seen from space. The film in these images becomes a space that transcends time and illustrates the dense relational network between mountains and humans.

Dense Alpine Space

My second point regarding density explores how *Mountain* produces and reveals geosocial densities, highlighting what Bruno Latour describes as the absence of distance in actor-network-theory: "there is no distant place anymore."[48] My argument follows Marc Boumeester in relating the mapping of space to questions of agency. He notes that "cartography is a useful instrument . . . which reveals much more of density than focusing on density itself: the mapping of agencies."[49] The dense compilation of the mountain symphony introduces the viewer to the different agents responsible for "the modification of mountains," disclosing, first, the cartography of technological intervention that shapes alpine space.[50] Technological force becomes visible through the agent of the machine that removes large stretches of forest on a mountain flank or through the snowcat that prepares a half pipe and models the mountain for the utilization of freestyle skiers. Accelerated and rhythmically choreographed to the music, the machines repeatedly move up and down the mountain. In this way, the mountain symphony highlights the agency of technology in choreographing alpine space. Likewise, these images present this space as one where network points, such as slopes and gondolas, create dense spaces for encounters between humans and nature. As in cartography, where the density of a certain area is determined by the "points or lines [that] may be concentrated in a given area,"[51] the mountain symphony is composed of moments and spaces of heightened contact

between the human and non-human. Understanding mountains' space and surfaces as a network helps "us to lift the tyranny of geographers in defining space and offers us a notion which is neither social nor "real" space, but simply associations."[52] The repeated punctual interventions into mountain space, which evidently has an enormous effect on nature, is further stressed in the arrangement of these images to a staccato piece for strings. When the camera slowly zooms out into a long shot of the mountain, it unites the fragmentary earlier scenes and visualizes the mountain in a way that resembles a map. The mountain's surface is carved with slopes resembling snowy highways, transportation systems like gondolas and lifts; restaurants dominate the landscape.

In its mediation of alpine spatial density, the film turns to the top layer of this network: humans who simply use the surface structure of the mountains. Symphonically accompanied, visually accelerated images of ski boots on icy terrain are followed by ski depots crammed with skis which empty, fill, and finally closed slowly with masses of unskilled skiers who descend a flat slope. The next images demonstrate how this space is created: two hands prepare explosives to be thrown out of a helicopter onto an untouched mountain flank, uncovering an even more violent and destructive network. These hands signify how alpine interventions are by no means anonymous but that the machinery used in alpine space is always controlled by human beings. They also demonstrate that interventions into the surface of mountains have far reaching consequences: the explosives, touching the snow in a singular spot that sets off an avalanche that affects an entire mountain flank, evoke associations with points of a neuralgic network that activate other regions through stimulation. Footage of freeride skiers ploughing through deep powder shows how their movements cause eruptions of white snow, resembling the images of explosives used to trigger avalanches. In that sense, the film draws parallels between the beauty of freeride skiing and the terrors of the destruction of nature. The film demonstrates how all agents of a network depend on and react to each other, requiring one "to think in terms of nodes that have as many dimensions as they have connections."[53] Arranged like points of a networks, skiers move down the mountain, their skis draw lines in the snow that have "a fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, capillary character."[54] These connective fibers shape alpine space just like hands and boots do. The alpine landscape in these images resembles the blueprint of busy urban infrastructure. These images visually portray alpine space as one of amplified technological inscription, technical progress, and human interventions. Mountains in these images are mediated as extensions of urban structures and extensions of the urban sphere which makes them dense, developed spaces.

Revisioning Mountain Film Footage

Mountain's production of density is also linked to its large scope of footage, as the film ploughs through the archives of the outdoor films industry. It produces a density that is linked to the re-arrangement of footage, which is my third argument about density. Building on the large media archive footage of cinematographer Renan Ozturk and his connections to various North American and European production companies, *Mountain* is the condensed result of 2,000 hours of archival footage that contains images from various mountain sport activities filmed all over the world.

The film's density of footage results from scenes that are taken from various outdoor films: footage from mountain documentaries such as *Epic of Everest* (1924), *Conquest of Everest* (1953), and BBC's *Planet Earth* episode "Mountains" (2006) focus on the conquest of nature but not so much on individuals. Scenes from freeride skiing and snowboarding films such as Candide Thovex's *Few Words* (2015), Sherpas Cinema's *All.I.Can* (2011) and *Into the Mind* (2013), Travis Rice's *The Art of Flight* (2011) and *That's It That's All* (2008), as well as films from the film company MSP productions, and the mountain bike film *Ashes to Agassiz* (2015) show how mountains serve as a playground and a backdrop. Other more alpinist-oriented films such as *Sherpa* (2015), *Sherpas: The True Heroes of Mount Everest* (2009), *Ice Revolution* (2012), Danny Macaskill's bike descent of Cuillin Ridgeline on Scotland's Isle of Skye in *The Ridge* (2014), *Meru* (2015) about the first ascent of the "Shark's Fin" route on Meru Peak in the Himalayan mountains, and Alex Honnold's attempt to free-climb El Capitan in *Free Solo* (2018) highlight the individual athlete as a hero who conquers nature. Footage from clips such as Red Bull's *Base Jumping and Slacklining on the World's Biggest Hammock* (2016) highlight how nature is instrumentalized as a marketing tool. Most of these mediations of mountains are united by the fact that their realization depends on sponsorship by major outdoor retailers/producers like outdoor equipment and clothing companies as well as brand imperia like Red Bull.

The film's use of this large archive produces density by adding layers of meaning to the films it incorporates; however, it also adds network extensions. *Mountain* reproduces iconic scenes from various outdoor films, and it ultimately criticizes its very origins. The images are released from their original frames of the action-loaded outdoor industry and relocated into a less human-centered and slower frame of reference: *Mountain* decenters humans in favor of mountains and critically comments on the interchangeability of the performances. In *Mountain*, the iconic scenes featuring individual athletes become interchangeable figures that repeat mechanical movements in the alpine setting, while their former context focused on individual athletes, brands, a mostly sensationalist narrative voice, and hammering music. Through the rearrangement and condensed presentation in *Mountain*, these revised scenes por-

tray the human-mountain relationship from a different angle; their re-purposing and altered orchestration cater to a different audience and, at the same time, also train a more mindful and ecologically aware audience.

The film activates a new network of reference that does not see mountains as a stage prop or background by replaying iconic footage of skiers who descend through deep powder into pine woods. Artistically, they drift through the snow. Critically framing the origin of these images, the narrator notes, "What odd devotions we undertake. What curious performances we put on."[55] The mountain symphony then showcases its capacity and power to remediate outdoor film images to a different purpose and within a symphonic structure: in a sequence of ski and snowboard freeriding scenes from various outdoor films, a slow-motion close-up of falling snowflakes mediates the transition to a freestyle skier who performs a backflip over a natural feature. These slow and meditative scenes are followed by faster sequences of freestyle skiing, which demonstrate how the skier mechanically transports the human–mountain relationship. Compiled into a sequence, a freestyle ski park on top of a mountain flank is used for various ski tricks. These images from various outdoor films show how one athlete after the other performs rotations and flips over artificial features. The power of the mountain symphony in these images lies within its orchestration of the mechanical repetition of tricks and movements by various skiers. The mountain symphony alters the machinery of this relationship: against the celebration of the alpinist hero on which the traditional *Bergfilm* is built, *Mountain* decentralizes the athlete as an individual by the visual string of performances and stresses the arbitrariness and repetitiveness of the modern outdoor film industry.

The film also mediates a madness that attacks the modern machinery of mountain commodification: mountains can strike out of the blue, as unpredictable forces that punish humans' exuberant approaches. These "strikes" become visible in the form of crashes and injuries, as mountains gain more agency in the film. The narrator frames the encounter between humans and mountains as one that is governed by addiction and unpredictability: "Adventurers sometimes liken fear to a rat. When you take risks, you feed the rat with fear. But each time you feed that fear it grows fatter. So, then you must feed it more fear to sate it. And yet more again and then still more. Until a madness bites."[56] Images of professional snowboarders who descend a steep mountain face are abruptly interrupted by snow masses that literally flush the athletes down the mountain massif. In other scenes, a singular skier gets caught in an avalanche and the snow forces are less gentle: out of the blue, he tumbles heavily and ultimately crashes into a crevasse. The film shows the result of the human–mountain encounter: a blood-smeared face with likely fractures.

From snowy peaks, the footage then changes to the red rock of the Grand Can-

yon: footage of Graham Agassiz's famous and near-fatal downhill crash featured in *Ashes to Agassiz* (2015) shows him on a mountain bike racing down a straight trail on a mountain flank. Suddenly, his bike snaps and he tumbles and crashes. The Red Bull film traces Agassiz's injury and recuperation in terms of a supernatural being: "A man at the top of his professional prowess, his mountain bike a natural extension of him … But like all great heroes, adversity comes a knocking. For Graham Agassiz, a relatively benign descent … reached out with its wicked limb and smacked him down."[57] By contrast, in *Mountain*, Agassiz becomes one of the many humans who approach mountains with too much exuberance. The symphonic arrangement no longer sits well with the stylization of Agassiz as the superhuman biker but turns him into a fallen hero. In these scenes, *Mountain* mediates alpine agency as one that counters human pretentiousness and thereby reckons not only with the outdoor industry but also with the athletes.

That the sensationalist and violent mediation of mountains is not necessary becomes apparent in other images where the film visually stresses how humans and mountains coexist in networks instead of nature simply being a background for action-loaded mediations. The film does so by remediating scenes from a Red Bull production that include a helicopter circling around a party scene at Grand Canyon. The footage is accompanied by party music and fast-paced editing. *Mountain*, in a striking sequence of images, takes the viewer to the cinematic landscape of the characteristic red, rocky landscape of the Grand Canyon, where slacklines across the canyon's abyss are arranged like the strings of a network. The mountain symphony, through slow and classical string music, connects to the strings of ropes stretched above the canyon the idea of a possible mindful coexistence between humans and nature. The red and yellow ropes of the net reveal an open hole in the middle, an empty point in the network, which, when a person jumps off into the depths, turns into a pregnant moment: the film highlights only the sound of shoe soles released from the construction. The slower, meditative visual language, which omits the marketing strategies and concentrates on the experience of human-nature encounters, creates the illusion of mindfulness. At the same time, as it does not engage with the infrastructural and technical necessities of the endeavor, the film is somewhat complicit in the human intrusion into nature.

From Symphony to Organicity

While the mediation of mountain-human encounters remains a symbolic one in the previous scenes, the mountain symphony also mediates mountains as living organisms that are embedded in their own life cycle. *Mountain* aligns with elements in the work of the French philosopher François Jullien, who contrasts conceptions of Western landscapes with Asian understandings of landscapes. He highlights the notion of

chi, a key concept for rethinking landscapes. Jullien notes that "the most glorious sites will consequently be those where it is most densely accumulated, where the circulation of this breath is most intense, its transformations most profound."[58] He stresses the Chinese understanding of nature as a compositum of "mountain(s)-water(s)," which highlights mountains as composite agents.[59] Like Jullien's proposal to stop thinking of nature in terms of absolute opposites, the film forces us to think of it, rather, as a fluid state that flows through everything and as an entity that surrounds everything. In a sequence of scenes, *Mountain* mediates this organic mountain cycle: the birth and coming-into-existence of mountains is mediated by images of erupting lava. Their maturation phase is exemplified by footage of solidifying lava that turns from bright red to black. Stratified mountain layers visualize the mature phase of mountains. Ultimately, as human remains are returned to the earth, mountains return to the ocean as sedimented particles that accumulate to rise again.

Like the city symphony *Organism* (1975), an experimental film on the organicity of New York City, *Mountain*, in these images, draws clear parallels between the organic structure of the earth with the human body. *Organism* "combined time-lapse photography of New York City with microphotography of the internal systems of the human body to provide a visual essay on the idea that the organization of the metropolis is a macrocosmic version of the internal systems that keep us alive."[60] *Mountain*, likewise, uses physical processes and elements to illustrate the earth's organicity and to remind us that the spaces sought after for ski trips are governed by the same principles as our own bodies. One scene in which this becomes particularly palpable is when bright red lava flows down from an active volcano onto its black ashy surroundings, followed by a shot that shows how the fiery liquid spreads into tinier branches. Not just in terms of their color, these scenes evoke associations with the network of human blood vessels. In images that describe this life cycle, lava erupts at the intersection of rocky coast and the ocean. Here, new soil is created at the very intersection of two elements. These images are followed by lava that is fluid enough to move but solid enough to reveal its texture. It again evokes associations of human nervous tissue, entangled like a network. The idea that solid mountains are eroding and return into a fluid state is stressed when the narrator comments, "A rhythm of uplift and erosion that makes not waves of water but waves of stone."[61] These waves are visually transferred to images of a stratified mountain range, which resonate with the Chinese word *mo* for "the lines of force that traverse the relief and hold it in tension" and "the pulse-transmitting arteries of the body."[62]

Moreover, through the very nature of mountains, they engage with humans as providers and nourishers. The narrator's comment "from these waves of stone flows life" is underscored by images of glaciers and mountains.[63] These are followed by images that show an ice cave that has been hollowed out by a torrential river that

resembles a giant vein. The last branch of this river flows into a river delta where, arranged like a nervous system, numerous smaller branches spread throughout the landscape. Finally, various animals that find nourishment from rivers, trees and meadows conclude this section and highlight the far-reaching impact of mountains on these creatures.

The film also suggests that the earth and its diverse environments are animate, breathing and possessing a heartbeat. Through time lapses, in a striking sequence adapted from the iconic film *All.I.Can* (2011), the film mediates the changing seasons of an alpine landscape in which leaves turn red and yellow until snow covers the trees again. Images of snow-covered fir trees, which evoke associations with human bodies, are fast-forwarded and rewound to create the impression that they are lifting and lowering their arms. The film expands the environmental network from the forest to the ocean: Images of water covered with a thick layer of ice rises and lowers through the tide. Through the rhythmical editing, these images create the impression of the earth as a being that breathes, the motions of the ice alluding to the movements of breathing. Lastly, the mountain symphony suggests that the mountains are animate beings not only entangled in an environmental network, but moreover connected with humans in a relation that is characterized by exchange. In this relation, mountains do not need humans, but humans need mountains: "They want nothing from us … And yet, they shift the way we see ourselves," the narrator adds, concluding, "More than ever, we need their wildness."[64] In these slow and panoramic images of various alpine landscapes, the mountain symphony reveals its essence, namely, the alpine environment beyond its status as a backdrop or an imaginative place which possesses the ability to impact humans.

Mountain draws analogies between the life of humans and that of mountains in different scales of space and time and, thereby, earlier sensationalist mountain films are endowed with an ecocritical undercurrent. Addressing the importance of environmental concerns, the mountain symphony emphasizes the critical role of mountains for the wellbeing of this planet. Mountains cover over a quarter of the world's land surface, directly support twelve per cent of the planet's population, and provide almost half of the globe's freshwater.[65] The mountain collective is a condensed symbol not just for the relationship between humans and non-humans, but for the overall condition of this planet. Thus, the film supports Jussi Parikka's idea that "the Anthropocene is a way to demonstrate that geology does not refer exclusively to the ground under our feet. It is constitutive of social and technological relations as well as environmental and ecological realities."[66]

Through its slow and mindful orchestration, the film resonates with a more recent trend in nature films that beckons the audience to become more ecologically aware.

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Like *March of the Penguins* (2005) and the television series *Planet Earth* (2006), the mountain symphony addresses "a new, more patient kind of audience, willing to see the experience of cinema less as a source of information than as a way of learning to be more fully present during gradual revelations of the particulars of the natural environment and human engagement with it."[67] The mountain symphony celebrates mountains as dense points of this connection between the environment and the human in a careful orchestration of relational strings. It also relates to the urgency to begin listening to nature if the very planet that provides for our basic existence is to be preserved. Accordingly, *Mountain* exemplifies Ivakhiv's suggestion that moving images affect our perception of ourselves, the world and all entities, as "these images move us, and we move with them. And as we do, we may realize that we too are moving images, seen and heard and perceived by others who are seen and heard and perceived by us."[68] The images of the mountain symphony urge its audience to realize that environmental concerns mediated in film open a path to reconsider mountains as dense places whose well-being is strongly linked to that of our existence. They are composite active agents, dense neuralgic network points that mediate between ideas of mountains as remote places of freedom, as sites of technological advancements and developments, as testing grounds, places of longing, and economic interests. Lastly and most importantly, they are places that co-exist and equally shape our reality. When *Mountain* ultimately reveals the very nature of mountains, it connects the mountain symphony with that of the physical reality of mountains as a major point of the ecological network: "Born of fire. Born of force. Mountains move. Over epochs they rise and fall. This is the symphony of the earth."[69]

What, in the end, emerges from Peedom's *Mountain* is a planetary orchestration that showcases mountains as focal points in the expansive network of a complex economic, social, technological, and cinematic ecology. By casting into relief mountains' densities of time, space, and footage, this article, like Peedom's film, exposes the fault lines of seeing alpine space as empty, remote, and far removed from human life. Rather, it invites viewers and readers to consider mountains as points of immense density. The film's activation and layering of various neuralgic networks creates new points of alpine media networks that draw attention to the cinematic and physical presence of mountains and their connections with us. By approaching mountains in symphony, *Mountain* ultimately provides an opportunity to come to terms with our current ecocrisis: it allows us to perceive humans and mountains as bound up together in space and time and perhaps finally helps us change our pace of action to harmonize our lives with the larger human and other-than-human network.

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