Mediating Mountains

Introduction to the Special Issue

Mountains confront us in many guises. They visualize space and provide geo-political orientations that address questions of historical, cultural, social, national, and individual identities. Mountains are subjects of philosophical reflections, environmental meditations, and ecocritical ontologies. They serve as a means of spiritual invigoration, scientific experimentation, medical therapy, and recreation. They are sources and resources of technological and artistic innovations, human and nonhuman exploitations. Mountain spaces are often borderlands, contested zones of imperial expansion, war, and migration. They are sites of tourism and industrialization, deposits of waste, and repositories of cultural memory; their forms are shaped and reshaped through processes of cultural and geological erosion. This polymorphous and fluid nature turns mountains into a dynamic medium that both reflects and grounds subjectivities. Mountains may also be conceived of as what Timothy Morton calls "hyperobjects" that affect the very ways we come to think about existence, earth, and society.[1]

The contributions to this special issue on mediating mountains set out to examine the cultural and aesthetic malleability of mountains. The articles included in this issue originated in the forty-sixth international conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies, which was held at the University of Innsbruck in November 2019. It is easy to see how a city towered by the Alps could provide a setting conducive to reflecting on alpine mediations across the Atlantic. The Alps have shaped the perception of mountains worldwide. Imperialist gazes and migrant memories have left us with alpine denominations in New Zealand, South America, Canada, and Appalachia.[2] The Alps, much like the mass media, have globalized perceptions of mountains. Beginning in the sixteenth century, mountains in the Americas were subjected to detailed surveys, recording economic, political, and scientific facts about mountains, such as information about resources, infrastructure, geology, and climate. Later, they also included aesthetic qualities such as visual and sonic aspects of mountains.[3]

If the Alps are an influential cultural model of mountain perception, mountain aesthetics, in turn, help us gauge the virtues and affordances of old and new media. Mountains have been frequently invoked as photogenic objects that reveal the nature of cinema, and they continue to serve as a testing ground for computer-assisted symbolic navigation. Mountains are objects of mediations and mediating agents. When

mountains labor, Norman and Saxon genitives are simultaneously at work. Mediating Mountains addresses the making of mountains as well as the mountains' makings. Mountains shape the images that we have of ourselves and the images we generate of our environments.

Drawing on Martin Heidegger's reflections on technology, we can associate these sides or dimensions of mountains with two kinds of imagination: a poetic imagination that re-imagines mountains by means of symbolic inscriptions and a technological imagination that operates by extracting material resources.[4] Both kinds of imagination can be seen as strategies of domesticating mountains. If poetic imagination appropriates mountains by allocating them special places in our symbolic universe, technological imagination promises to unearth their symbolic currency by getting a hold of the very substance of mountains.

While Heidegger conceived of technics and poetics in antagonistic and hierarchical terms, Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) has furthered our understanding of the dialogic and reciprocal relations among these kinds of imagination.[5] In particular the paradoxical and contradictory associations of poetics and technics allow us to appreciate fully the imaginary stakes of mountains. The popular custom of erecting crucifixes on mountain summits, which gained significance in Catholic Austria in the eighteenth century, exemplifies the symbolic investment in this practice.[6] Beginning in the 1820s, mountain crucifixes often included lightning rods that safeguarded the symbolic sanctification of nature in technical and prosaically pragmatic ways.[7] Accordingly, installing such crosses on mountaintops is a powerfully symbolic act that conveniently repurposes mountains into altars or even cathedrals and literally earths them with an emblematic device of Enlightened mechanical engineering. These mountain crucifixes are symptomatic of an overall trend toward a secular form of spirituality and a "new nature-based religiosity,"[8] which combines science and religion with a deeper appreciation of the material world. While these crosses seem to recall the animistic specter of paganism, paganism has become an important frame of reference in the modern technological imagination. Notions of cinematic animism persist throughout the history of film theory. From the early impressionist theories of Jean Epstein to Adrian Ivakhiv's ecological theory of the moving image,[9] film has been explored as a medium that reveals the soul or agency of things.

Richard T. Walker's pigment print *the plight of inconsequence #10* (2014; Illustration 1) draws attention to the duplicity of material resources and symbolic investments of mountain imaginaries. The iris-like visual indicates that the top of a mountain is a privileged part of symbolic investment. The eternal snow was a popular national and religious emblem throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and it continued to fascinate modernists like Georg Simmel and Ernest Hemingway.[10]
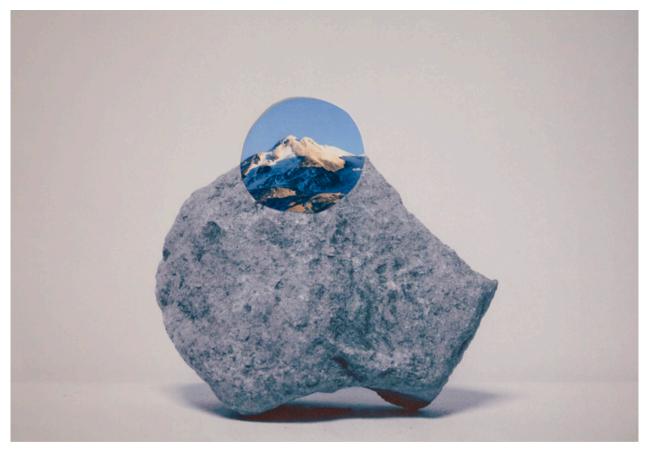
Illustration 1: Richard Walker, *the plight of inconsequence #10* (2014).
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

The inversion of scale and distance suggests that the features of mountains that receive the most attention in symbolic appraisals are only the tip of the iceberg. They are places sufficiently remote to serve as a virtual space of projection that both promises and undercuts the possibility of a supposedly immediate experience.

Arguably, *the plight of inconsequence* responds to Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818; Illustration 2). The outlines of a surrogate viewer are replaced by a disembodied gaze, outlined by the iris. In Friedrich's painting, the rocks serve as a pedestal for the wanderer and also provide a surrogate for the viewer's comfortable contemplative position. In *the plight of inconsequence*, the rock refers to the basic substrate of mountains.

If Friedrich's painting is paradigmatic of the poetic imagination of the sublime, we may associate Walker's image with the technological imagination of the machinic. The juxtaposition of iris and granite recalls a modern technological desire to overcome pathetic fallacies and find a non-anthropocentric reconciliation with nature through a technological apparatus. Photography, according to a popular account by one of its inventors, is "the pencil of nature."[11] Photography, in other words, is nature drawing itself. If it takes a mountain to understand a mountain, then perhaps the

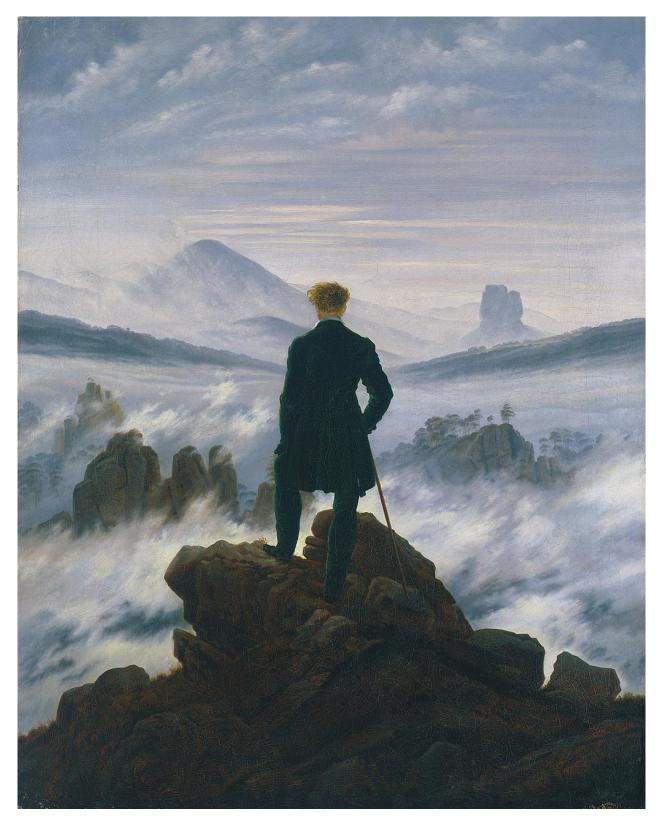Eva-Maria Müller and Christian Quendler

Illustration 2: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818).
Image uploaded to *Wikimedia Commons* by user Cybershot800i, from *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg (July 1, 2019).

new affordances of photographic, cinematic, and digital gazes may bring us closer to such an understanding.

Poetic and technological fantasies complement one another: frequently they are so enmeshed with one another that they present themselves in a monolithic form. An example from popular culture that merges past and future frontiers by juxtaposing nostalgia for the wilderness with a sense of futuristic humanism may help illustrate this point. The opening scene of the Star Trek film *The Final Frontier* (1989) stages an encounter between America's most famous monolith, El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, and one of America's most famous fictional captains, James Tiberius Kirk. In the film, Kirk evasively answers Spock's question of what motivates his ascent by citing George Mallory's famous reason for climbing Mount Everest: "Because it's there."[12] In an interview conducted during a location shooting at Yosemite National Park in 1988, William Shatner's explanation of the scene did not shy away from emotions:

> Free climbers challenge the rock, challenge themselves, they are at one with the rock, they become part of the rock. There is reason to believe that granite is alive, that crystal is growing. There's reason to think that if crystal can recreate itself that's one of the criteria of life and climbers believe that granite is alive and they get energy from the granite. Sun-warmed by eons of days in the sun, this rock can be thought of as alive and so they climbed this living body, seeking to be part of the living body, aspiring to climb to the top and challenging death and thereby gaining life. And that's what I thought Kirk would be doing and we treated it in a funny, in a comical fashion. . . . I think the climber wants to hug the mountain. He wants to envelop that mountain within his body, he wants to make love to the mountain. And on its highest and finest level, whether these tough young guys with their sinewy bodies in their one-meal-a-day routine will admit it, there is a passionate affair going on between the climber and the mountain. Why do I climb the mountain? I would say the climber would say "because I'm in love."[13]

Has Shatner just read Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985)? Is he antici-pating the ecosexual movement by two decades? Most likely not. Rather, he seems merely amused by the sexualized trope of the body of nature, which in its orthodox imperialist form follows the way "no man has gone before." Even though he appears to be free-climbing, his techno-erotic touch remains unchanged. What has changed, however, are our ways of reading these tropes. Over thirty years ago, Shatner was confident in invoking El Capitan as a symbolic site of humanity's triumph. Unaware of the exclusionist implications of his desire, he imagined a national park where all languages are spoken by climbers from all over the world and where wilderness would remain unchanged for the next three hundred years. Around the same time, Félix Guattari published his ecosophic manifesto *Three Ecologies* (1989), in which he calls for an end to modern monolithic myths, advocating a poetics of science and

technology that engages in processes of heterogenesis and does justice to a holistic ecology of environment, society and mind. Technological and aesthetic spheres converge in pluralistic studies, and an ecosophical perspective on mountains reveals their oscillation between sites of monolithic and universal mythmaking and places of singular otherness and diversity. We also find this notion in the writings of the classic American mythmaker Herman Melville, who dedicated his novel *Pierre; Or, The Ambiguities* (1852) "to Greylock's Most Excellent Majesty," indicating that, in the U.S., mountains have replaced lords and kings.

The contributions to this special issue address mountains in their mightiness and multitude as they speak to the complex fabric of the material, social, perceptual, and technological ecology of alpine space. The essays engage with the multifaceted nature of mountains and media, examining the singular positions and unique localities of specific mountains, their distinctive forms, qualities, and socio-cultural networks. The authors reflect on a variety of processes that assign meanings to mountains and inform how mountains themselves act as meaning-makers in a wide array of cultural concerns that range from Chinese ontologies of Being to Manifest Destiny; they explore modern tourism and ecological justice, analyzing discourses of political and symbolic control as well as alternative models of digital agency and human and nonhuman entanglement.

The first two essays examine transnational negotiations of mountain cultures. They show how cross-cultural encounters shape not just alpine space but also philosophical, political, and literary landscapes in the U.S. Exploring the geological and aesthetic guises of mountains through an intricate web of intertextual and intermedial references, the articles document how disparate mountain perceptions inform a plurality of mountain models that, like mountains themselves, are bound in what Timothy Morton calls a "sticky mesh of viscosity."[14]

In "Mountains and Waters of No-Mind," Birgit Capelle develops her argument along the circular and open-ended structure of a Chinese handscroll in order to trace the aesthetic relational capacities at work between mountains and water as well as East Asian philosophical traditions and American mountain literature. Drawing on Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996), Henry David Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), and Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958), she demonstrates that the alpine streams of non-substantialist philosophy run within "a temporally and spatially unfolding web of interdependence and mutual conditioning that actualized itself moment by moment."

Heinz Tschachler's essay addresses the mediation of divergent cultural conceptions within the American continent. "More Than a Feeling" explores how the mountains of the American West upset European landscape models that had dominated

the perception of alpine spaces on the East coast during the Lewis and Clark expedition. He argues that geological and meteorological challenges, together with military and agricultural interests, defied the projection of a symmetrical geography and contested aesthetic imaginations of the sublime.

The second set of essays is concerned with places that mountains occupy in the broader technological, socio-cultural, and ecological fabric of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Their authors are interested in the bigger pictures of mountains that are made possible by the vast urban networks of modern tourism and the film industry.

Michael Wedekind's "Mountain Grand Hotels at the Fin de Siècle" traces the ways in which the metropolitan phenomenon of the palace hotel found its way into remote regions of the Alps and how these hotels were tied to industrial progress and the technological and cultural control of a social and natural environment. His essay considers mountain grand hotels as intermediary agents that facilitate the consumption of mountain space through cultural appropriation and a series of technological advancements that include photography, the construction of railway networks, and the switch to electricity, all of which contributed to the promotion of the tourist gaze and its infrastructure.

Benita Lehmann's essay "Jennifer Peedom's *Mountain* as a City Symphony" examines modern mountain networks and the urban alpine entanglements from an eco-cinematic perspective. Her analysis of the film "draws attention to the deep structural links between urban centers and mountains" and engages with the indeterminant orchestration of human action, mechanical invasion, and geological deep time. Mountains are seen as neuralgic network points that mountain films trace and connect in new and meaningful ways. Parsing the curious network of Peedom's mountain symphony, Lehmann acknowledges its ability to address environmental issues in revision but also critiques the cinematic romanticization of the mountain film, recognizing what Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt call a "problematic inability to drive collective ecopolitical change."[15]

Together, the two essays in this section consider the ambivalence surrounding the organic quality of technological progression and the mechanical rhythm of mountain ecology. The contingent and multi-layered bundles of alpine connection, which collapse center–periphery binaries in a non-linear fashion, demonstrate not only the proliferation of meanings surrounding mountains but also the visceral and affective dimensions of their mediation.

The contributions in the third section expand on affective affordances of new media technologies in mediating human–mountain relations. In "Thereness," Sascha Pöhlmann theorizes the challenging presence of mountains that tests processes of

representation and cognition and equally invites and rejects human engagement in the virtual alpine playground. Analyzing *Celeste* (2018), *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017), and *Mountain* (2014), the essay showcases the unique audiovisual, tactile, and ludic qualities of mountain presence as it questions the limits of interactivity and the infinite realness of simulation in video gaming. New media technologies, Pöhlmann demonstrates, invite us to interact with mountains in a new way and allow us to see not only "what we can do with the mountain" but also "what this doing does to us."

Mark Nunes's essay "Becoming-Data, Becoming-Mountain" engages with the interface between computer-based technologies and their potential for action, both human and nonhuman. Drawing on actor-network theory, assemblage theory, and interrelational ontology, he examines how trail-finding, GPS tracking, and peak-finding apps span the physical boundaries of alpine ecology, the human body, and mobile technologies to "mark a coupling between human agents and a material environment." This combination of human and nonhuman agencies affords an apprehension of the augmented space that emerges when humans and GPS-driven apps inscribe each other and, in the mutual exchange of data, become expressive of mountainous terrain.

Digital topologies at the transversal interface speak to the post-humanist view of mediation and mobilize what Mark Hansen terms "transindividuation"—an impersonal environmental sensibility at the intersection of ontogenesis and technogenesis.[16] Mediation, as Richard Grusin reminds us, operates beyond communication: it is a "fundamental process of human and nonhuman existence" and as such extends epistemologies of knowledge production to include affective and collective modulation.[17] If we cannot experience mountains immediately but are continually haunted by their mediation, as the essays in this special issue demonstrate, we may find comfort in knowing that all bodies—be they modeled by ice, fire, digital programming, writing, painting, or love-making—are fundamentally media. It is through our understanding of mediated mountains that we may overcome the seemingly impassable divide between technology and nature, resolve the tension arising from the presence of mountains and the human desires it provokes, and find fulfillment in being continually situated "in the middle" of a most radical mediation.[18] And what better location to explore these themes than "between heaven and earth" (in a final nod to Adorno and Hegel[19]) learning from the geologically, historically, culturally, socially, and technologically molded forms that have long mastered in-betweenness?

Acknowledgments

Notes

1   Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

2   For Marina Frolova, the prevalence of the alpine model represents a real obstacle for understanding the diversity of the physical environments and social systems of different mountainous regions in the world in the second half of the twentieth century. Marina Frolova, "La représentation et la connaissance des montagnes du monde: Pyrénées et Caucase au filtre du modèle alpin," *Revue de géographie alpine* 89, no. 4 (2001): 160, DOI: 10.3406/rga.2001.3063.

3   Jon Mathieu, *The Third Dimension: A Comparative History of Mountains in the Modern Era* (Knapwell: White Horse Press, 2011), 16–20.

4   Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 5–36.

5   Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

6   The practice of setting up crosses on mountain tops is much older and its uses are diverse. For instance, in colonial explorations, the ceremonial insertion of tokens of civilization was a symbolic act to bless pagan land in return for material resources. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, believers frequently congregated around crucifixes in the mountains for mass during pandemics. See Helga Ramsey-Kurz, "Tokens or Totems? Eccentric Props in Postcolonial Re-Enactments of Colonial Consecration," *Literature and Theology* 21, no. 3 (2007): 302, DOI: 10.1093/litthe/frm027.

7   Martin Scharfe, "Kruzifix mit Blitzableiter," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 53 (1999): 289–336, DOI: 10.7767/boehlau.9783205789833.45; Jon Mathieu, "The Sacralization of Mountains in Europe during the Modern Age," *Mountain Research and Development* 26, no. 4 (2006): 343–49, DOI: 10.1659/0276-4741(2006)26[343:TSOMIE]2.0.CO;2.

8   Mathieu, "Sacralization of Mountains," 346.

9   Jean Epstein, "Le Cinématographe Vu De L'Etna (1926)," in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 287–310, DOI: 10.26530/oapen_413034; Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).

10 Georg Simmel, "Die Alpen," in *Philosophische Kultur: Über das Abenteuer, die Geschlechter und die Krise der Moderne* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1986), 125–30.

11 William Henry Fox Talbot, "Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or, the Process by which Natural Objects May Be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist's Pencil," in *Photography: Essays and Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York:

Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 24.

12   *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, dir. William Shatner (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1989).

13   William Shatner, "Original Interview: William Shatner," in *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2003), DVD, disc two.

14   Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 30.

15   Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, *Ecomedia: Key Issues* (London: Routledge, 2016), 7.

16   Mark B. N. Hansen, "Engineering Pre-Individual Potentiality: Technics, Transindividuation, and 21st-Century Media," *SubStance* 41, no. 3 (2012): 32–59, DOI: 10.1353/sub.2012.0025.

17   Richard Grusin, "Radical Mediation," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no.1 (2015): 125, DOI: 10.1086/682998.

18   Grusin, "Radical Mediation," 127.

19   Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 57.