

# Scaling High Places. Mountaineering Narratives as Climatological Tales

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## Abstract

Christoph Ransmayr's 2006 novel *Der fliegende Berg* and Thomas Glavinic's *Das größere Wunder* (published in 2013) confront very different ideas of mountaineering. Glavinic's protagonist Jonas joins a commercial expedition to summit the world's highest mountain. These highly criticized commercial endeavors are in contrast to Ransmayr's scenario in which two brothers, Patrick and Liam, embark on a journey to a mythical peak—the only Himalayan mountain yet to be summited. The commercial sporting extravaganza and the ultimate independent adventure represent two extremes of a practice aimed at producing intense physical encounters with nature. Both novels confront the possibility of such encounters with an account of the life of their protagonists within a thoroughly modern world. In aligning biography with the ascent of the respective peak, the narratives present themselves as mediations between personal and planetary scales. Climate, thus, is present not only as an obstacle to overcome, but as a narrative device negotiating increasingly precarious relationships between humans and nature. In comparison with non-fictional mountaineering accounts, these narratives reveal an understanding of climate which is not exhausted in a "weather-biased understanding of the atmosphere" (Fleming/Jankovic 2). Instead, they resurrect apparently discarded notions of climate as a local and bodily entity. Using Fleming/Jankovic's concept of *Klima*—an understanding of climate which combines natural and cultural facts—this paper investigates the methodological and narrative aspects of scaling, acclimatization and high-altitude in order to unearth the myth underlying these climatological tales and their (possibly) productive and destructive effects on current discourses on human-nature-relationships in the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** climate, mountaineering, high-altitude climbing, Everest, scaling, modern myth, Christoph Ransmayr, Jon Krakauer, Thomas Glavinic, Robert MacFarlane, environmental humanities.

## Resumen

En las novelas *Der fliegende Berg* (2006) de Christoph Ransmayr y *Das größere Wunder* (2013) de Thomas Glavinic, se enfrentan dos ideas radicales en torno al alpinismo. Jonas, el protagonista de Glavinic, participa en una expedición comercial para encumbrar la cima del monte más alto del mundo. Esta clase de proyectos comerciales tan fuertemente criticados se presenta en total oposición a lo representado en la novela de Ransmayr, en la que los hermanos Patrick y Liam se embarcan en un viaje personal a una montaña mítica – el último monte del Himalaya que nadie había logrado subir. La extravagancia deportiva y comercial y la aventura totalmente independiente representan los dos extremos de una práctica que tiene como objetivo la producción de enfrentamientos intensamente físicos con la naturaleza. Las dos novelas confrontan la posibilidad de estos enfrentamientos con relatos de las vidas de sus protagonistas en un mundo completamente moderno. Ajustando las biografías con la subida a las montañas correspondientes, los relatos se presentan como mediaciones entre escalas personales y planetarios. El clima, por lo tanto, no sólo está presente como un obstáculo a superar, sino como un recurso narrativo que negocia las relaciones cada vez más precarias entre humanos y naturaleza. Comparados con relatos alpinistas de no-ficción, estas narraciones revelan una concepción del clima que no se circunscribe únicamente en una mera "concepción de la atmósfera siempre afectada por el tiempo/clima"

(Fleming/Jankovic 2). En su lugar, renuevan percepciones aparentemente rechazadas del clima como entidad local y corporal. Usando el concepto de *Klima* desarrollado por Fleming/Jankovic—una noción del clima combinando hechos naturales y culturales—este artículo investiga los aspectos metodológicos y narrativos de la escalada, la aclimatación y la alta montaña para sacar a la luz el mito que subyace estos relatos climatológicos, además de mostrar sus (posibles) efectos productivos y destructivos en discursos contemporáneos sobre las relaciones entre humanos y naturaleza en el Antropoceno.

*Palabras clave:* clima, alpinismo, escalada de altura, Everest, escalada, mito moderno, Christoph Ransmayr, Jon Krakauer, Thomas Glavinic, Robert MacFarlane, humanidades ambientales.

All too often, mountaineering narratives—fictional and non-fictional—are read exclusively as stories of individual transformation and success. Even more often, they are scaled up to phantasms of universal human achievement.<sup>1</sup> However, ecocritical researchers have pointed out that the relationship between humans and mountains is less modernly clear-cut than it may seem (Ireton/Schaumann 5), nor can the seemingly intimate confrontation of ‘man and mountain’ be separated from the accumulating planetary impact of mass tourism (Mazzolini 2010). In fact, criticism of high-altitude climbing in particular (see Narula 2019) has called into question once again the reasoning that drive people, or, rather, seem to draw people up the highest peaks. Altitudinal and longitudinal ‘high places’—that is, mountain-peaks and places beyond the polar circle (Cosgrove/della Dora)—hold sway over the human imagination. Despite their seemingly exhaustive exploration, they still mark ‘ends of the earth’, but not only have the ‘highest places’ lost their character as “primary places of authentic wilderness” (8), they appear to have moved much closer. A trip to Antarctica or up Mount Everest—at least to Base Camp—is no big deal anymore, only a question of money time. However, the appeal to visit ‘extreme’ places where (mostly white, male, Western) humans cannot or do not dwell, is unbroken.<sup>2</sup> The illusion of uninhabited places leads, paradoxically, to crowding on cruise ships and climbing tours, because the fantasy of ‘pure motives’ remains disconcertingly successful and is only beginning to be widely accepted as a destructive force. ‘High places’ are regarded as ‘extremes’ that allow for unmediated experience of oneself and one’s environment; they hold the promise of ‘pure’ knowledge. Here, modern scientific perspectives meet the (gendered) individualist attempt to will one’s body into anything. This is intimately connected with atmospheric conditions and the manipulation thereof. In this paper, I aim to show how current mountaineering narratives contribute to and challenge notions of purity; how they construct ‘high places’ as narrative devices; and how they thereby produce climate as an entanglement of human and other-than-human, material and imaginary things, becoming a crucial element of our present culture of climate (change).

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Bogost criticizes the tendency to draw “life lessons” from climbs (reaffirming, in turn, notions of ‘purity’): [www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/06/free-solo-alex-honnold-lessons/592513/](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/06/free-solo-alex-honnold-lessons/592513/).

<sup>2</sup> Equally disconcerting is the tendency of mountaineering accounts, travel narratives and advertising to disregard the fact that people do live in or close to those places and the “deserted” wildernesses are often cleared for the tourist’s pleasure.

Confrontation with ‘extreme’ climates—that is, atmospheric conditions unsuited to sustain (human) life—is a cultural icon for the malleability of environments. ‘Extreme’ qualifies both the conditions on a mountain (altitude, weather, environment) and the amount of energy and determination necessary to physically and mentally endure the perils of the endeavor. It refers thus to a relationship between humans and nature that is framed both in terms of opposition (e.g. humans ‘conquering’ the mountain) and of continuity (e.g. humans connected to, or on the same scale as the mountain). If ‘extreme’ means “situated at the farthest possible point from a center” (Merriam-Webster), high-altitude mountaineering produces a world in which center and periphery are very similar to classical notions of climate. “The actual meaning of the word ‘climate’ was expressed through the word ‘zone’, which meant ‘belt’. The Earth was circumscribed by ‘zones’, bands lying between parallel circles and characterized by specific climatic conditions” (Boia 18). This cultural geography of climate connects latitudinal and altitudinal ‘high places’ with tropical mountains mirroring global climate zones, so that climbing amounts to a metonymical journey around the world:

It was a commonplace of modern physical geography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the altitudinal belts of tropical mountains such as Chimborazo or Kilimanjaro allowed the climatic belts of the globe to be observed and studied over the limited space of a few miles, and within sight of the equator. (Cosgrove/della Dora 3)

Taking up the image of the mountain-as-globe, mountaineering narratives reactivate an idea of climate that is not exhausted in a “weather-biased understanding of the atmosphere” (Fleming/Jankovic 2). Rodger Fleming and Vladimir Jankovic introduce the term “Klima” to denote their understanding of “climate [as] a discursive vehicle capable of naturalizing matters of social concern into matters of natural fact” (2). Mountaineering tales draw on climate as a ‘discursive vehicle’ because it appears to be undeniably ‘natural’—it represents a pure confrontation with ‘nature’; that is, the encounter happens undisturbed by other life forms. Thus, questions of responsibility and reciprocal relationships apparently have no effect on the mountain or the mountaineer. Moreover, *Klima* acts as a naturalizing force and, thus, invalidates and refutes its own cultural and social character. This can yield troubling effects in regards to the perception of human-nature-relationships. Where it serves to naturalize certain culturally produced environments and relationships over others, *Klima* as a discursive vehicle becomes a potentially dangerous device. It conceals the cultural nature of the human made world in and outside of fiction.

In this paper, I want to argue (1) that the motivation to scale ‘high places’ has always been a negotiation of how far human environment production can reach, and (2) that literature is a privileged site not only of the production of environments but also of the (potential) disguise of harmful cultural practices and material consequences. I will read and analyze mountaineering narratives as climatological tales; that is, as stories negotiating cultures of climate and human-environment-relationships in terms of experimenting with scales and scaling.

## Scalar Encounters

The confrontation with deep time that has been part of mountain imaginaries for centuries (Rigby 131) is intensified by anthropogenic climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution or, in more general terms, the geo-cultural concept of the Anthropocene. One of the Anthropocene's defining characteristics, according to Timothy Clark, is a "derangement of scales" (Clark, "Scale" 150), e.g. the uncanny realization that everyday actions have global consequences. This leads not only to well-meaning but nonsensical environmental advice but undermines societal structures and cultural norms: "Received concepts of agency, rationality and responsibility are being strained or even begin to fall apart in a bewildering generalizing of the political that can make even filling a kettle as public an act as voting" (151). This is due to "scale effects," which occur when increasing the scale of a given thing leads to fragility or malfunction:<sup>3</sup>

As a result of scale effects what is self-evident or rational at one scale may well be destructive or unjust at another. Hence, progressive social and economic policies designed to disseminate Western levels of prosperity may even resemble, on another scale, an insane plan to destroy the biosphere. (150)

'The Anthropocene' names the growing realization that there is no "outside".<sup>4</sup> But what is its effect on narrative ascents of Earth's highest peaks? If climbing—like filling a kettle—becomes a public act, one that further implicates the climber in environmental degradation, which insights beyond a simple dismissal of the practice can be gained from reading mountaineering narratives? How can stories of scaling (a mountain) contribute to understand the conflict between the temporal and spatial range of the Anthropocene and the inescapable 'terrestriality' of human beings?<sup>5</sup>

The historian Deborah Coen proposes to circumvent the intellectual gridlock of conflicting scales by adapting a "history of scaling" (132). Instead of accepting the apparent incompatibility of the human (terrestrial) and planetary (global) scales with which current environmental crises confront us, scaling analyzes "the work of mediating between different systems of measurement, formal or informal, designed to apply to different slices of the phenomenal world [...] in order to arrive at a common standard of proportionality" (132). A critical reading, or "scale critique" (Clark, "The Value" 40) of seemingly innocuous tales of individual success contributes to the project of a 'history of scaling' what Timothy Clark terms "scalar literacy" (38). Shifting the focus from confrontation to mediation, then, reveals insights beyond the statement that the modernity in which mountaineering narratives mattered is over, or has never been modern in the first place. Instead, I aim to demonstrate how applying Coen's idea allows for a thorough investigation of proportionality not only in history, but in literary and cultural studies as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Clark exemplifies this with conflicting scales on a map (you try to find a certain address and someone gives you an image of the whole earth).

<sup>4</sup> See. California and the disappearance of the outside...

<sup>5</sup> "Terrestriality, defined as that 'normal' prereflective sense of scale inherent to embodied human life on the Earth's surface, forms a kind of transcendental, one that both underlies and exceeds any view that it is merely our social context that determines our understanding of ourselves" (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 33).

In a way, reading mountaineering stories as climatological tales is a challenge to the myth that the turn from ‘Mountain Gloom to Mountain Glory’, which Marjorie Hope Nicholson famously described, marks the end of pre-modern ignorance toward and the beginning of modern dominance over non-human and human nature. This supposes that physically scaling heights helps to achieve a literal vantage point, producing a disconnection of body and mind, thus, overcoming terrestriality. But, as Nicholson already showed in 1959 and scholars such as Kate Rigby (2007) and the contributors to Sean Ireton and Caroline Schaumann’s excellent collection *Heights of Reflection* (2012) explored further, even in regards to mountains: we have never been modern (Latour 1993). Regardless of the groundbreaking scientific discoveries (Rigby 138), the distance of even the highest peaks is not enough to escape our own ‘terrestriality’, neither physically, nor scientifically. Terrestriality, it appears, is a matter of atmosphere (Nitzke, “The End”).

Hence, in stories of high-altitude climbing the quasi-transcendent goal of achieving a position ‘above’ the world is undermined because the climber not only finds nothing but ‘world’, s\*he *makes* world as s\*he climbs the mountain. From this perspective ‘climatological tales’ turn out to be stories about the consequences of human actions, the inescapable connection of human and other-than-human worlds through body and atmosphere. Breathing, moving, digesting; all the basic bodily functions become—often inadvertently—subversive acts insofar as they undermine meta-poetic notions of climbing-as-writing<sup>6</sup> and challenge epistemic claims to objectivity and ‘pure’ reason. Climate emerges as an entanglement of physical and imaginary actors, calling into question what can be known and told about the mountain (climate) at all.

Comparing *Der fliegende Berg* and *Das größere Wunder*, I will show how the novels mediate different modes of gaining and presenting knowledge by means of scaling. Both the narrative and the narrated bodies become a medium of this technique. The protagonists are in constant exchange with their environments and hence are not moving through static spaces or ‘nature’ but produce sites and atmospheres as dynamic environments, of which they are an integral part. There is no confrontation but a mutual production of environment and organism; in other words, the ‘natural’ environments are not to be understood as a *surrounding* outside of the characters but are in constant exchange with and depend on the characters and the narration.<sup>7</sup>

## Acclimatization and Scaling

The excessive attention to atmospheric phenomena in mountaineering narratives is more than instrumental to the ascent. It is crucial both for the climbers and the climatological reach of the narrative. Accounts of mountaineering devote large parts to the description of acclimatization, because it is literally vital knowledge. But it is also a narrative scaling device that engages the reader in a sort of metonymic pact; that is, the

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<sup>6</sup> Berwald 2012.

<sup>7</sup> This is a paraphrase of what I have elsewhere coined “ökologisches Erzählen” (ecological storytelling, Nitzke, “Prekäre”).

promise that identification is founded on the material basis of common terrestrial experience—the ‘extreme’ quality of the environment intensifies the metonymic technique (Verfahren) of realist storytelling (Baßler 3).

This concerns non-fictional narratives as much as it does fictional ones, Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* (1999), for example, uses detailed descriptions of the techniques, resources and time that different commercial providers deem necessary to a proper ascent, in order to compare their levels of responsibility and ultimately assess their part in the ‘disaster-season’ of 1996. A sudden change in weather conditions cost the lives of 30 climbers, among them several experienced guides. Krakauer, though an experienced mountaineer and “outdoors-writer”, joins a commercial Everest-expedition as an amateur high-altitude climber. He frames his text as a participating observation to determine the validity of increasing criticism towards commercialized climbing expeditions. By subjecting his own body to the climate of the mountain and the skills of his guides (or lack thereof), Krakauer calls upon the metonymic pact. He insinuates a double perspective: that of the able, though relatively inexperienced participant in a specific commercial Everest-tour and that of a journalistic observer of commercial high-altitude climbing as a whole. Thus, the relationship between human and environment is primarily focused on practical considerations. Krakauer draws conclusions about the moral and ethical consequences as a context to his experience and evaluation of specific ways of scaling the mountain, focusing particularly on the technique of acclimatization.

Adaptation to the low oxygen levels of high altitudes above approximately 5000 m (Everest Base Camp) requires a weeks-long process of ascending and descending the mountain in stages. Above 8000 m begins the so-called ‘death zone’ where the oxygen saturation of the atmosphere is too low to sustain life. Acclimatization is in equal shares a physical and a mental process, requiring the climber not only to pull through a range of unpleasant and dangerous bodily sensations but to put off the goal time and time again. Although crucial to a successful ascent, it is easy to see why the tedious and exhausting praxis beguiles some into cutting corners. Krakauer argues that responsible tour guides know how to select and prepare their participants by helping them to incorporate literally the knowledge that is necessary to achieve their goal. This is important, as many claim that the Mount Everest-business has reached a point where, if you are rich enough, you can practically pay Sherpas to carry you to the top. The interconnectedness of knowledge in an abstract sense and the ability to discipline one’s mind and body according to that knowledge is significant in respect to the central claim of mountaineering narratives. While traditional associations of mountaineering, which according to Denis Cosgrove and Veronica della Dora figure “high places as spaces of muscular and masculine challenge” (4) are still prevalent, Krakauer shifts focus to a somewhat more environmentally aware narrative. His emphasis on responsibility contrasts responsible and irresponsible climbing businesses in terms of their attempt to control both corporeal and atmospheric conditions vs. an attempt to adapt to them.

Krakauer, like many others, claims to take part in the kinds of climbing efforts that are ‘pure’ in that they are based on an interest in immersing oneself, albeit with technological support, into natural environments, rather than on conquering and

controlling them. Nonetheless, the technological process of adaptation to the nearly unbreathable atmosphere evokes a “discourse of purity” (Gordon 1) or, in other words, a claim to naturalness.

In order to reach Mount Everest’s summit, the majority of climbers rely on supplemental oxygen, hence, creating a separate, individual breathing environment within and apart from the ‘death zone’. While Krakauer allows for a “purity of motivation” (1), advocates of ‘gasless climbing’ despise any form of mountaineering that requires ‘technology’. Reinhold Messner, arguably the most famous advocate of this style of mountaineering, claimed to reach Mount Everest’s summit by “fair means”, that is, without supplemental oxygen, “or not at all” (1).

Attaching moral value to a style of mountaineering—whether in regards to means or motives—creates precedence for relationships between human and non-human agents on a much larger scale. Even though it can be argued that there is hardly any way for a human being to climb a mountain without technological aides (such as ropes, boots, measurement instruments etc.), the tendency to judge encounters with nature according to a perceived spectrum of alienation is decisive. Instead of shifting the discussion to the question whether all mountaineers are inevitably cyborgs and thus claiming that the usage of supplemental oxygen to be regarded as an arbitrary rule of a sport (Gordon 2), I propose to regard acclimatization as a technique of scaling: Aside from the literal scaling of rock and ice, acclimatization entails that humans *cannot*, in fact, be placed just anywhere on Earth. From this perspective, hypoxia, or altitude sickness, is the dangerously real ‘scale effect’ (Clark) of high-altitude mountaineering. It debunks the modern fallacy that life on a 20<sup>th</sup> century consumer level can be continued as it is in the changing climate of the future. Acclimatization and its effect on the narratability of experience is explored in the literary texts to which I will turn my attention in the following. On the surface, Thomas Glavinic’s *Das größere Wunder* and Christoph Ransmayr’s *Der fliegende Berg* hardly are futuristic narratives that explore artificial climates and prospective human-nature-relations. Nevertheless, the respective ‘scalings’ of climate and biography outline both problematic and promising ways in which bodies and atmospheres form cultures of climate.

## Climate and Biography

The different types of mountaineering presented in the novels are mirrored in a significantly different form. Much like Krakauer, Thomas Glavinic’s protagonist Jonas attempts to summit Mount Everest as part of a commercial tour, whereas the brothers Liam and Patrick in Ransmayr’s text attempt the first summit of Phur-Ri, the “Flying Mountain”. While both texts allude to the mythical qualities of a journey this extreme, Ransmayr’s novel even assumes the form of an epos.<sup>8</sup> Close to the spoken word, first-person-narrator Patrick’s recollection of the endeavor to reach one of the ‘last white spots’ on the world map, formally exhibits the story as “work on myth”.<sup>9</sup> It confronts

<sup>8</sup> On Ransmayr and the specific poetics and form of his narrative texts, see Nitzke, *Widerständige Naturen*.

<sup>9</sup> See Müller Funk 2008 (*Die unendliche Arbeit am Mythos*).

vastly different timescales and presents a version of the mountaineering narrative which, though eerily reminiscent of for example Reinhold Messners *Der nackte Berg* (2002), maps out a narrative environment (Um-Welt) which explores the force of narrating itself as a crucial part of the physical reality of mountaineering. *Das größere Wunder* on the other hand provides a narrative that comes much closer in form to mountaineering narratives such as Krakauer's in negotiating physical mountains and "mountains of the mind" (MacFarlane).

It is no surprise that there are significant overlaps and similarities between mountaineering accounts such as Krakauer's and literary renderings. However, it is less a relationship of adaptation (of 'real' events into more thrilling 'fictions'), but one of co-evolution. The 'reality', or rather, plausibility of the climber's environments rests on metonymic techniques in both cases. Narrative techniques play a particularly important role in texts that reside in the borderlands between fact and fiction. There, the "precarious nature" of ecological relationships becomes the engine for the reflection and, more importantly, the production of environments (Nitzke, "Prekäre Natur"). A crucial difference between these modes of writing about mountaineering, however, is whether narrative techniques are considered as a means to an end (to convey a 'story' or something that 'really happened') or the narrative text is itself the end. Still, this is no categorical difference but a gradual one and one that gains importance only in sight of rigid ideas about reality, objectivity and a subsequent expectation of discipline. Interestingly, mountaineering narratives continue a legacy that blurs these perceived disciplinary borders more than it affirms them. This has a significant impact on the cultural nature of atmospheres and climate.

As many of the essays in Cosgrove and della Dora's collection as well as Deborah Coen's research show (2011), even the distinction between 'narrative' and 'scientific' accounts is a relatively recent development in the history of geographical and climatological science. Coen focuses on the Austrian climatographer Heinrich von Ficker in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to show how the identity of mountaineer and researcher actually enhanced the scientific value of his writings. Beyond providing the means to organize the vast Habsburg-empire, Ficker's "climatographies" used what he called "meteorological travel narrative" to synthesize data. As Coen outlines, this type of science was soon to be rendered irrelevant by the systematic institutionalization and later computerization of science and the end of the "heroic age of individual exploration" (62). While they are marked and marketed as 'novels', I read Glavinic's and Ransmayr's publications as versions of 'meteorological travel narratives' that continue the work of the researcher-explorers of the nineteenth century. Thus, they are viable sources for an understanding of cultural climates precisely because they focus—though with different success—on the poetological conditions of writing as much, or even more than, on the environmental conditions of the mountains.

*Das größere Wunder* lays strong emphasis on the protagonist's travel and subsequent personal development and adheres in many ways to the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*. As a child, Jonas and his brother are taken in by a wealthy patron because their mother is not able to care for him and the disabled Mike. Jonas conceives

of travel as a form of communication between himself and “the world as a whole”, or, in other words, as a practice of scaling between world and self: “Jonas lernte, dass Reisen an sich eine Form von Kommunikation sein konnte, Kommunikation mit sich selbst und mit der Welt in ihrer Gesamtheit [...] ihre Erlebnisse waren wie Nachrichten an jenen Teil ihrer selbst, die sie noch nicht kannten” (56). When both his brother and his adoptive brother die, Jonas continues to travel the world alone. His inherited wealth affords him to find truly solitary places and communicate with himself and the world as a whole without risking contact with other human beings. Without necessarily dwelling too long on his privilege, Jonas is aware that his relation to ‘wilderness’ is one that cannot be universalized or scaled up. Solitude appears to be a privilege of the rich.<sup>10</sup> However, he seems to prefer places that are abandoned by humans rather than ‘untouched’ or ‘truly wild’, not necessarily because there are no such places left, but because he prefers human presence as a memory or absence rather than to confront himself with ‘his kind’ directly. That changes when he meets a woman, Marie, who rather stereotypically ‘re-socializes’ him. The attempt to summit Mount Everest, for Jonas, is a way to deal with the subsequent break-up and an overall feeling of loss. Continuing a tradition to watch solar eclipses, Jonas climbs Mount Everest as much in search of yet another message to his inner self as to follow his death-drive. The tedious nature of acclimatization is above all a distraction from his lovesickness; most of the time, he is too preoccupied with his bodily reactions—which resemble exaggerated symptoms of lovesickness—to think much about his lost love. Instead, he joins the “Fight for Everest”,<sup>11</sup> watching his fellow mountaineers succumb to hypoxia, and mental and bodily break down. True to metaphor, they appear as victims of a war: “Die meisten Mitglieder seines Teams schienen angekommen zu sein [...] ein wenig erinnerten sie Jonas an die Opfer eines Giftgasangriffs” (462). The choice of words is significant—Giftgasangriff (toxic gas attack)—does not only suggest the mountain as an active opponent, but as an adversary not shying away from the worst possible means of combat. Despite their prosthetic breathing devices, the weapon that is the mountain’s atmosphere threatens to defeat them. The unquestioned assumption that humans have a place anywhere on Earth is, thus, violently refuted.<sup>12</sup> Acclimatization as preparation for ‘hostile’ climates, here, is equated with military training for an advance into hostile territory. Consequently, it is met with a counter-attack. But since the opponent, Mount Everest, is indistinguishable from nature, the narrator’s comparison falls short of making evident the vulnerability of the environment. Instead, it reiterates the phantasm of an all-powerful nature whose conquest is basically human self-defense. Nevertheless, this image effectively blurs the line between mountain and mountaineers whom the

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<sup>10</sup> Here, the novel implicitly repeats what William Cronon already criticized in his seminal essay “The Trouble with Wilderness”, albeit, it seems, without being aware of the problematic stance at all.

<sup>11</sup> Title of an Account of the 1924 Expedition by N.F. Norton and others which Robert MacFarlane calls upon as the reason for his fascination with mountaineering (1).

<sup>12</sup> In his essay *Luftbeben* (2002), German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk links the toxic gas attacks from 1915 to a radical change in human-nature-relationships. The weaponization of the atmosphere itself, he claims, eradicates the un-questioned assumption of its breathability and thus transforms the environment from a state of latency into one of evidence (Sloterdijk 7).

breathing equipment was supposed to safeguard. Lacking energy and oxygen, the mountaineers lose the ability to control their own actions and thoughts and feel hardly more than the penetration of their bodies by the mountain's *Klima*; that is, both the expectations and imaginations of the mountaineering history of Mount Everest and its physical atmosphere. In *Das größere Wunder*, the acknowledgement of the radical otherness or non-human nature of the mountain is the last attempt to remain separate, to distinguish oneself from one's environment:

Es war kalt. Es war so kalt. Nicht einmal in der Antarktis hatte er so gefroren. Der Wind peitschte in gnadenlosen Böen gegen die Wand, und Jonas spürte, wie Ernst die Lage war, wie leicht nun ein Fehler den Tod bedeuten konnte. Alles um ihn war Gefahr, Menschen hatten hier keine Existenzberechtigung, sie durften nur auf einen Passierschein hoffen, auf ein Visum mit äußerst kurzer Rechtskraft. (460)

Despite the hostile climate and the death toll, the mountain cannot keep the climbers off its back. Yet, crowded as it is, the vision of Mount Everest as a pristine site of untouched natural force is proven wrong again and again. Jonas constantly encounters climbers unwilling to accept and respect that they are not the ones dictating the conditions of 'their' trip (and not all of them are the subject of poetic justice). Making up for his own short-comings with respect for the mountain and the professional mountaineers—like Krakauer, Jonas claims to be a rather inexperienced mountaineer when it comes to extreme heights—Jonas is humbled in a way that lets him seem, if not able, at least not delusional: "Ich habe hier nichts verloren, war sein einziger Gedanke. Echte Höhenbergsteiger sind Giganten. Ich bin keiner, Ich bin ein Eindringling in einer Welt, die für mich zu groß ist. Ich bin ein Hochstapler" (480).

Ironically, this thought as well as his final ascent are framed by hypoxia. Despite all warnings, and the stunning number of bodies covering his path, Jonas ends up on the summit all by himself. Deprived of oxygen, he succeeds in his unlikely endeavor and, almost against his will, becomes a somewhat pure climber. He scales the peak without supplemental oxygen since most of his group's supplies were stolen by other, less prepared climbers. However, it is this 'loss' that turns his solo ascent into the transformative experience he was seeking all along.<sup>13</sup> The exaggerated summit experience even leads to a personal happy ending. After a more than unlikely descent, Jonas' will to live is finally restored by a reunification with Marie. This can be read either as another ironic turn, a subversion of the idea of a 'purity of motivation', or a deepening of the impression that the narrative is less than reliable and Jonas is in fact the imposter he fears to be.

Although centered on a single character, Glavinic's novel offers, sometimes inadvertently, an interesting picture of the collective effort necessary to scale 'high places' and its environmental consequences. The remarkable descriptions of the littered slopes and the apparent obliviousness of his fellow climbers to their destructive force

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<sup>13</sup> Jonas' summit is in many respects a reversed version of Ulysses' journey to the underworld. He seeks clarity, if not divination, to complete his personal odyssey and find a way to return to the woman he loves—only in the extreme climate of the top of the world, it seems, Jonas is actually able to confront himself. In lieu of an underworld filled with spirits, the confrontation with the death-zone serves as a real-world transgression aimed at giving direction to an otherwise disoriented life.

paint a grim picture of the chances to locate a spot on Earth that is not thoroughly pervaded by human beings—it appears likely only under the conditions of absolute oxygen depletion. Under these conditions, however, the high-altitude atmosphere ends up having surprisingly little effect. Despite the detailed descriptions of acclimatization and climbing techniques, the novel falls short of offering a position or a stance beyond that which Krakauer and others have criticized for years. Even Jonas' supposed transformation remains hollow as he does not appear to have changed at all.

Where *Das größere Wunder* culminates in a transformative experience, *Der fliegende Berg* begins with one.<sup>14</sup> The first chapter, called “Auferstehung in Kham. Östliches Tibet, 21. Jahrhundert”, contrasts the practicalities of the narrator's encounter with death with the rhythm of verse and stanza:

“Ich starb/  
6840 Meter über dem Meeresspiegel/  
am vierten Mai im Jahr des Pferdes.  
Der Ort meines Todes/  
lag am Fuß einer eisgepanzerten Felsnadel,  
In deren Windschatten ich die Nacht überlebt hatte.  
Die Lufttemperatur meiner Todesstunde/  
betrug minus 30 Grad Celsius,  
Und ich sah, wie die Feuchtigkeit  
Meiner letzten Atemzüge kristallisierte  
Und als Rauch in der Morgendämmerung zerstob.” (9)

The contrast between form and content provides a sense of the sublime for the miserable fact that a sudden change of weather (Wettersturz) marks the prosaic difference between life and death. Neither the stunning vista of the stars nor the measurements of the mountaineer's instruments can provide a way out. When both ancient and modern means of navigation fail, the narrator loses orientation: “Als zuerst diese Zahlen/ und dann auch die Sterne verblaßten/ Und schließlich erloschen, hörte ich das Meer [...]/ War ich am Grund des Meeres?/ Oder am Gipfel?” In a way, the opening scene confronts two ways of orientation: Stars and instruments refer to navigation by technological means, while the apparent disorientation of the protagonist makes room for another way to relate to the world: human relationships. His brother Liam, who finally finds and saves him, takes as much part in his apparent resurrection as the thought of his lover Nyema, whom Patrick met on the way to the mountain. The ocean that he believes he hears brings to mind the Irish sea, thus producing a precarious continuity between his home and his, or rather, his brother's destination. On the mountain, close to death, the instrumental network of latitudes and altitudes ceases to enforce world-shaping dominance. The world between the Himalayan summit and Ireland, between Patrick and Liam, Patrick and Nyema is emphatically not distinguished into objective and subjective, known and unknown, real and imaginary things. Here, I disagree with Olaf Berwald's reading of the novel. Berwald's interpretation of the narrator's death or dissolution as a “step into the uncontrollable danger of language itself” (347) relies very much on the suspension of disbelief. As his own analysis of the

<sup>14</sup> This reading of *Der fliegende Berg* is part of an essay on Ransmayr's specific poetics of time, see Nitzke, *Widerständige Naturen*.

contrasts of the brother's approaches "competing but codependent methods of conceptual ascent" (336) and their eventual dissolution shows, the narrator is losing everything but control over the narrative. Quite the opposite is true: Throughout the text, the narrator demonstrates that, where all else fails, his voice and writing is, in fact, the only capable, if not reliable medium for their experience.

Climate becomes an agent in this account equal to human characters in the novel. It denotes the thin line between life and death that determines the course of the story. Although the narrator's death in the beginning of the novel seems to violate the inherent rules of realist fiction—e.g. "I" can never report their own death—the novel manages to balance realistic and seemingly fantastic elements of the plot. It instrumentalizes the atmospheric conditions to set up a precarious relationship between characters, narrator, reader, and environment which allows for a further subversion of straight dichotomies, such as those between climber and mountain, human and nature, the brothers and their approach to the ascent, and, finally, between fact and fiction. On the mountain, these distinctions turn out to be sea-level phantasms without consequence. What becomes apparent, instead, is the connection between living 'things'. In other words, the scale shifts from an opposition of human and nature to one in which biosphere and geosphere become significant, if not equal, actors of natural history. As a result, 'the human', at least for a moment at the beginning, is removed from the center of meaning making.

Tellingly, the novel achieves this by linking Patrick and Liam with butterflies that perish in the sudden cold spell. Just as the mountaineer depends on absolutely perfect climatic conditions, a drop in temperature, a storm or sudden windfall can kill off whole swarms of the butterfly. But the butterflies, which need to cross the Himalayan Mountain, Apollo, appear to be innocent of any intention to 'conquer' the mountain. Rather, the narrative speculates, their path is older than the mountain range they are crossing:

Sie flatterten selbst über höchste/ schneeverwehte Pässe in unbewohnte,/ von Schmelzwasserbächen durchzogene Täler,/ folgten vielleicht einer Nahrungskette,/ die blühende Sümpfe mit Gletschern verband,/ vielleicht aber auch bloß/ einer zum Irrweg gewordenen Route/ einer Erinnerung, die in jene Urzeit zurückreichte,/ als sich zwischen dem Ort ihres Aufbruchs/ und ihrem Ziel/ noch kein Eisgebirge erhoben hatte,/ sondern nur sanftes, fruchtbares Hügelland. (17-18)

The Mountain Apollo represents a deep-time memory that reaches beyond the existence of the Himalaya. A species memory spanning geological time seems to render the lifetime of an individual human utterly insignificant, and yet, this outlook does the opposite: They become part of a history that does not end with the death of an individual.<sup>15</sup>

In the novel Patrick *has been* dead, although his brother saves him and Liam *does live* on, although Patrick is not able to find him under the snow that has buried him and leaves the mountain alone. Again, purity of climbing style and of motivation are pitted against each other. It seems as if Liam's skills, knowledge and determination, rather than enabling his survival, condemn him, because he continually seeks control. Like Jonas in

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<sup>15</sup> Sabine Frost reads the butterflies as black signs on white ground, resembling the letters on a page thus opening a level of poetological reflection.

Glavinić's text, Liam's desire to summit is a means to get away from and master an internal challenge. He does so in a twofold manner: first, by reconstructing old photographs of the thus far undiscovered mountain peak and using geodetic technology to model the unknown area and, second, by proving his own model right through to verifying it in person. At the same time, he seeks to prove the reality of his projected self-image. The project to control his sexual desires—his homosexuality stands in conflict with his familial upbringing – resembles the relationship between his geodetic models and the mountain: both appear as problems of control. Liam is certainly no amateur climber, but he fails to step out of his *idea* of the mountain—he climbs a simulation, albeit a very 'realistic' one, rather than dealing with the facts of the actual environment. The type of scaling that Liam's technology provides, accurate as his simulations might be, does not account for the *Eigensinn* or agency of the mountain.

Ransmayr's narrative is devoted to the effort of scaling. Even though the text contests all attempts to take control over climate and biography, the brothers do reach the peak of Phur-Ri and thus complete their journey. The straightforward success of Liam's computer model and the discovery of Phur-Ri is, nonetheless, put into perspective by the more complex negotiation of scales reflected in Patrick's narrative. Here, confrontations between the indigenous knowledge of Nyema's (Patrick's lover) tribe and Liam's simulation, between the past and the present, the physical and epistemological conditions of the environment are subject to continual negotiation.

In both novels, the intricate relationship between different local climates, the process and practices of acclimatization and the narrative structure which parallels biographical *Klima* and geographical 'high place' takes up a project that has lain dormant since the historical climatographies Deborah Coen investigated. The relationship of body and atmosphere as a feature of knowledge production and epistemological value is reflected in these texts, not as a deterministic feature, but as condition and result of putting oneself in relation to one's environment. Whether on the crowded and littered paths of Mount Everest or the untouched slopes of Phur-Ri, by his presence alone, the mountaineer connects climates on different scales, thus proving, after all, that the world he might have attempted to leave behind, literally sticks to his soles.

The perspective of *Klima* as a multi-faceted entanglement of nature and culture, body and atmosphere, fact and fiction, then, is a chance and a challenge to position oneself within an atmosphere. This perspective allows for a re-evaluation of mountaineering stories as climatological insofar as it challenges the notion that there is a 'natural' nature that somehow lies 'under' layers of cultures. Or, in Robert MacFarlane's words: "[a]t bottom, mountains, like all wildernesses, challenge our complacent conviction—so easy to lapse into—that the world has been made for humans by humans" (MacFarlane 274). Quite the opposite, the world, as encountered in narrative texts, *is* made not only for but by humans. Dying in a 'hostile' climate affirms that 'man' can in fact penetrate even the untouched slopes and leave a lasting mark on any mountain. The corpses littering Mt. Everest's peak signify, even more impressively than any flagpole, the reach of human beings. The bodies themselves become (frozen) monuments to human reach. Other than tropical climates, the planetary death-zones

keep the dead in place, affirming the claim to universal human dominance and the (assumed) right to be virtually everywhere.

What Timothy Clark calls the “derangement of scales” (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 125) is at work, here, with a heightened sense of urgency: were it only one or two humans in ‘contest’ with a mountain and its *Klima*, the impact of said humans was indeed negligible. More than anything, the elaborate artificiality of *Der fliegende Berg* demonstrates the precariousness of such an assumption. Furthermore, from an ecocritical perspective, it risks to slide too far into purely ‘literary’ mountains, clinging to the modern illusion of human existence as an ultimately traceless phase of Earth’s history. The construction of a plausible last ‘white spot’ on the world map, Liam and Patrick’s solitude on the mountain and the almost entirely undisturbed contact with Nyema and her tribe in Tibet present, from this perspective, a problematic form of narrative nature conservancy. Despite its descriptive accuracy in regards to scenery, technique and plausible characters, it seems to be ‘construed’ as in ‘unreal’ because it is intensely reminiscent of a (wild) world that no longer exists. The narrative produces—precisely through this artificiality—a type of immediacy that for others is only available in extreme circumstances. Like Jonas’ hypoxia-solo-summit of Mt Everest or a momentary delusion of solitude during a sudden snow storm,<sup>16</sup> the novel reactivates a dream of solitude that is, in the Anthropocene, a mere illusion.

Mountaineering, with its idea of immediate contact with wild, untouched nature resurrects an image of the world that is structured by spatially arranged climate zones; only now, in contrast to the classical order, the farther you are from the climate of the ‘civilized’ center, the better, because the ‘extreme’ seems to offer a spot away from the mess. Hence, they produce a nostalgic *Klima* which, if taken too literally, contributes to a type of benevolent denial of the ecological, social and ethical crises at hand. At the same time, they uncover a simultaneity of climate concepts which—instead of an ever forward moving motion—enriches the present with the past. In place of progress and order, it exposes mess and precariousness and in it a possible space to rethink and retell these all too familiar climatological tales.

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<sup>16</sup> “The world beyond the whirled snow became unimportant, almost unimaginable. I could have been the last person on the planet” (Macfarlane 277).

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