

RECONFIGURING THE MOUNTAIN: A TOPOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO AESTHETICS IN AN AGE OF TIME- AND PLACE-ILLITERACY

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Where does knowledge begin?

Let's take the example of a mountain.

For a subarctic Norwegian, what could be a more mundane view than that of a mountain that you see every day. Still, steady, seemingly unmoving.

Can a local, not famous, mountain top, not very tall, hold the key to a major ecological insight in an "age of unreason"? Can it hold the key to an understanding of the embodied situatedness and technological formation of knowledge, and how these factors are co-constitutive?

In our time, as fictions are built upon fictions. theory upon theory, there is a need to touch ground again. As the editors state in this issue's questionnaire, there is a need to re-address "the fundamental question of access to knowledge and our ability to know."

As an artist researcher who uses the camera as means to think, a mountain is the perfect object. It is an object of stillness and motion, of different time scales, an entanglement of materials and meaning.¹ A mountain may have significant meaning for those who live in the area—emotional, symbolic—yet it has a materiality that stretches back millions of years in time. It is a popular motif for amateur photographers, and thoroughly mapped by cartography, satellites, and the like. Mountains are technologically mediated at the same time as having persisted throughout all human history as familiar features. A mountain is an excellent example of Karen Barad's point that matter and meaning "are inextricably fused together," and that "no event can tear them apart."² This is the case with *Klotinden*, The Claw Peak, an old, ragged mountain peak in the north of Norway, a local landmark, 671 m tall, which resembles an animal claw, a point of orientation for nearby villages, which has persisted though time, at least seemingly so for generations of humans residing at its foot.



Klotinden / The Claw Peak.

Photographer: Trygve Romsloe, Narvik Kommunale Fotosamling, Museum Nord.

For those of us who grow up in the coastal part of arctic Norway, a mountain is a landmark, a shape that lets you know where you are. As an artist, I have scrutinized this mountain repeatedly with my camera—I have photographed it, analyzed its representations, and affective meanings, I have walked around it, filmed its form from diverse perspectives, reflected on its shape, the shape as seen from side of my home village. I have written about it, too. Soon, I will analyze it with geologists: How old is it, how was it made, how deep are its roots, how high has it been? Why have I done so? Because I believe the mountain points towards some of the most central questions in Environmental Humanities and Aesthetics today, that is, how processes of the earth are entangled with human technology and the human grasp of nature.

TIME ILLITERACY AND THE “BIFURCATION OF NATURE”

A central part of the “age of unreason” described in the questionnaire is what geologist Marcia Bjornerud calls a certain state of *time-illiteracy*, the reluctance or inability to accept the passage of time, and to grasp the vastness earth’s history.³ The rise of populist movements, the prevalence of plastic surgery and the exploitation of natural resources are symptoms of this state: Short-term thinking is gaining ground, fueled by the shrinking attention span of corporate social media.⁴ At the base of this, there seems to be a prevailing (in our Western world) division between the human sense of meaning and the material processes of earth: the land of which we are part. One may argue that connected to this time-illiteracy, there is a place-illiteracy: an inability to grasp the human entanglement with earth, and the rootedness and situatedness of knowledge. From an understanding of place as what structures, encompasses and situates experience and knowledge, this certainly seems true. Place, according to the philosopher Jeff Malpas, is not merely a human projection: humans are also projections of place.⁵ Drawing on Aristotle’s concept of *topos* and Donald Davidson’s philosophy of the nature of interpretation, among others, Malpas theorizes about conceptual thinking as both place-structured and place-oriented, meaning that the way humans think, is intrinsically bound to the way they orient themselves in a field of land, as they measure features in relation to each other. In other words, knowledge is regarded as situated, embodied, and organized in a conversation with the topographies and textures of land. I find this understanding of place to be accurate, as it aligns with neuroscientific studies,⁶ studies of psychology,⁷ and anthropological and historical studies of indigenous people and their relation to the spatial, for instance the way the Inuit

people have their metaphorical understanding of symmetry, temporality, and spatiality from experiencing, and seeing nature.⁸

In this regard, a mountain is a topographical form, a portal to past experiences, which is entangled with local narratives, a human sense of time and orientation. It is material in motion, a configuration of minerals whose origin stretches far back in time. A mountain is a feature that humans of all times have encountered throughout various stages of technological development and knowledge. The experience of a mountain is an example of not only Karen Barad's, but also Whitehead's point: that there is no such thing as a division between the (scientific) realm of materials and the "byplay" of human minds. This bifurcation of nature is false. Instead, knowledge is *rooted* in the "primary realm of bodies," the bodily encounter with material formations—its textures and forms.⁹ We are invited to think of material processes and human sensations as co-constitutive, rather than as separate realms. We are invited to think of materiality as experienced. Or, as Didier Debaise formulates it, *nature as event*: "materiality gives *place* to subjective experience."¹⁰

AESTHETICS' RESPONSE

To enter nature as "event" and analyze how knowledge is shaped by its mediation in a time of "epistemological crisis," is to my view, one of Aesthetics' major missions. As Whitehead also stated, the modern conception of nature is *operative*: shaped by the operations, through which nature is understood, or, what he calls the *experimental apparatus*. Categories are determined by the experimental apparatus that one uses. If one is to understand how humans relate to, or grasp nature, one must examine the *operational* aspect of the sensing apparatus. Karen Barad makes a similar point: "apparatuses are not passive observing instruments, on the contrary, they are productive of, and part of, phenomena."¹¹ Just think of Alexander von Humboldt, the pioneering polymath artist and scientist who revolutionized the way nature was understood in his time, who understood nature as an *ecological web* where politics, plant species, and animal welfare were profoundly *interconnected*, in contrast to understanding the human-nature relationship as a two-way connection with humans on one side and nature on the other. Humboldt came up with his network idea by emphasizing subjective experience and interpretation, in addition to empirical scientific approaches, such as rigorous measurements and close observation.¹² He was present in the field with his moving, sensing body, and traveled across climatic zones, applying a multitude of experimental techniques, from drawing and

painting to scientific measurement. He stressed the importance of experiencing nature through feeling, and through embodied presence, in contrast to placing complete trust in the desk-based scientific methods of his time. In describing his approach to Goethe, he said that those who only tries to understand nature by classifying plants, “will never get close to it.”¹³ Through his diverse methods and his emphasis on sensing, artistic practice, and imagination, combined with measurement and registration, Humboldt was able to challenge the prevailing topology through which nature was understood.

The structure through which we understand *nature* and our relationship to it matters profoundly. When you alter form, meaning will follow. Here, I argue, we can exchange the concept of nature with the concept of *place*, in the sense Malpas has developed it: Nature is what structures experience and situates knowledge.¹⁴ Or, in the way Didier formulates it:, “nature as event.”¹⁵ The aesthetic tradition that adheres to the sensorial of such “events” has, in my opinion, a particular potential for studying the entanglement of materiality and meaning in the mediation of knowledge: the forms through which knowledge is formed. In this sense, Aesthetics should render visible what is otherwise taken for granted, from technological environments to pristine landscapes, and it has the tools for scrutinizing these in detail. *This* is where the crucial role of Aesthetics and its openness to *artistic experimentation* comes in. In the questionnaire, Aesthetics is described as the “antipode to so-called reason and rational knowledge.” The editors ask how one can “know *otherwise* in a social world marked by the crisis of knowing.” Can artistic processes and experimentation be such ways of knowing “otherwise”?

A DIFFERENT KIND OF KNOWING?

As an artist-thinker who thinks through the spatial configurations of the camera and through theoretical exploration, the word *otherwise*, feels inaccurate. Are artistic processes really a “different kind of knowing”? Different than what? Abstract knowledge? Knowledge acquired by theorizing. Rationality? Let’s remember what Whitehead said about the human grasp of nature, and how it is operationalized through the experimental apparatus, or rather, the technology through which we observe and measure the world. He calls the sensation of materials “psychic additions”: the “power” of materials to induce certain experiences and responses. For the artist-thinker, the experimental apparatus is the tool for thinking. For me, a moving-image artist, the spatial configurations of *the moving image* and the embodied explorations through the technological apparatus of the

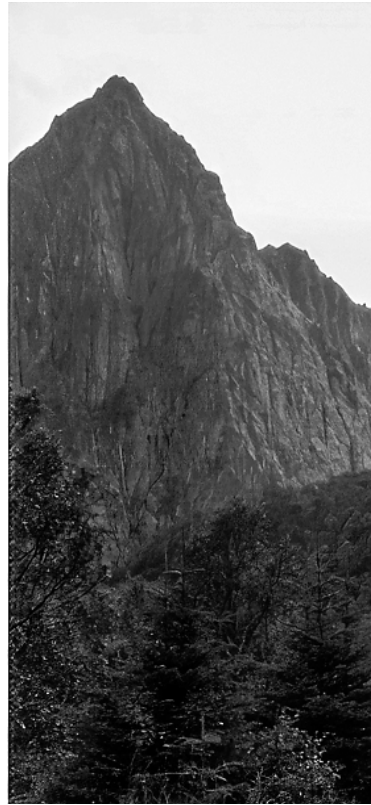
camera, are the means through which I reach what is *at the base of knowledge*, the raw material of abstract theories, and thus become aware of conceptual structures and their relations, potentials, and limitations. I will try to explain.

As a researcher, a key question for me has been the question of *how*: How is it that I, as an artist, think through the medium of the moving image? I consider my artistic practice, not as an activity that produces pleasing motifs or objects, but as processes, as ways to think.

For me, to be an artist is to have the opportunity think through the shifting relations of technologies, bodies, perceptions. The moving image is a highly relational medium, with the *potentiality* to make cuts in the texture of what the brain perceives as direct perception. Whitehead spoke about the sensation of materials as “psychic additions”: the “power” of materials to induce certain experiences and responses. Along the same lines, one could also say that cinematic techniques have *potentialities* as digital effects that offer extensive opportunities for ways to render images that in turn affect perception. Here, I choose to apply Agamben’s definition of *potentiality*, and the way Catherine Fowler defines and uses it in her analysis of moving-image art experiments in our digital age.¹⁶ She explains that potentiality is the “already proven capacity,” not as possibilities that may be argued for logically as a consequence, but as a potentiality that surely exists, while at the same time not existing as something that is actual or present. It is a potentiality that has the capacity to test the human perception in various ways; potentialities that may be experimented with, to reflect on their effects.¹⁷

TOPOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY: RELATED CONCEPTS

For me, the knowledge potential of the moving image lies in its topological features, and the way these features interact with perception, the sensing apparatus that is at the foundation of thinking. Topology is a concept that is useful for understanding the *material properties* of the moving image, its material behavior. De Bruyn presents topology as math in motion, focusing on relationships of juxtaposition, proximity, and envelopment.¹⁸ The moving image, I would add, is topological in the sense that it can stretch, overlap, juxtapose, and embed. However, when asking how one may think through this shifting material dynamic, one needs to also attend to the responses of the mind, the role of the imagination responding to the topological forms and shifting relations that comprise the moving image. Therefore, I would argue that as an artist, I think



Elisabeth Brun, 3 × Shapes of Home (2020)
Essay Film as Topography (2020)



through the topological features of the moving image, while *the way* I think through the moving image is *topographical*.

MOVING-IMAGE TOPOGRAPHY

A few years ago I artistically explored the peak of *Klotinden*, the Claw Peak, the mountain mentioned at the beginning of this essay.¹⁹ In my experiments, I circled around the Claw Peak Mountain, and filmed it from diverse perspectives. I had noticed that my affective relationship to it was connected to one singular shape: the perspective as seen from my childhood village. However, if you move slightly outside the village, or walk around it, as I did, you will see that the mountain is not, in fact, one mountain, but a shape that consists of two mountains that stand somewhat apart. By filming this mountain from a multitude of perspectives, and editing it in a discontinuous way, the static image of that mountain top was “disrupted”: I was profoundly reminded how meaning is intrinsically connected to static shapes, and how embodied movement and technological mediation of the moving image disrupts this static condition. How can the moving image have the potentiality of such a disruption?

As both philosophers and neuroscientists have argued, thinking depends on movement: To move is to think.²⁰ When you see something, or touch it, your brain draws a map, your brain carves a pattern in your head.²¹ Film, in this sense, is movement. The moving image, or progressive picture, as psychologist James J Gibson calls it, is information for the senses.²² Such *ecological perception* is a creature’s direct perception of its environment.²³ It is their reading of information that an environment provides to the senses, a consideration of its affordances. According to Gibson, the progressive picture is to human perception not the inner workings of apparatuses, or an illusion, it is a display of “transformations and magnifications and nullifications and substitutions of structure along with deletions and accretions and slippages of texture.”²⁴ In other words, it is information by which we orient ourselves. The brain does not distinguish between whether what you see is virtual or real. Consequently, when you make cuts in the fabric of film, as for example through montage, the space-time continuum may no longer add up, causing the brain to compensate. It makes a leap. It produces a fiction. It bridges the gap. I believe that’s what Deleuze calls “the unthought”.²⁵ The brain redraws its mental map.²⁶

I have called my approach *Moving-Image Topography*,²⁷ as the notion underlines such material thinking operations of the artist-

thinker: a process that is embodied, situated, materially structured, mediated and intrinsically linked to the way the brain orients itself through *movement*. This approach draws on philosopher Jeff Malpas's conceptual system of *philosophical Topography*, which conceptualizes thinking as place-oriented and place-structured: a situated, embodied, relational, material, and co-constitutive process.²⁸ The concept of topographical place that Malpas uses and further develops, goes beyond Whitehead's "bifurcation of nature." This is an understanding of place as what structures and encompasses experience. It is a theorizing of conceptual thinking as inseparable from material structures, and inseparable from the way the mind orients itself in a piece of land. Although we speak a lot about networks and flows, Malpas argues that the way the mind operates is topographically structured, an ability that is shared across cultures.

The thinking of the moving image, in this topographical sense, I argue, is to make cuts in this information of ecological perception.²⁹ The kaleidoscopic configurations of the moving image/photographic medium alter these relations, and thus have the potentiality to render them visible. Filmmaker and theorist Ryan Conrath emphasizes the importance of the montage cut in an ecological discourse. From his perspective, ecological discourse tends to emphasize interconnectedness, rather than separation, he says, but for there to be any relation at all, there must be a degree of separation:

The premise that montage obscures rather than clarifies ecology, however, is itself the by-product of a more fundamental separation anxiety animating much of ecological discourse: namely that nature is something indelibly outside, apart, other. In defiance of this notion, ecological discourse tends to place overarching emphasis on interconnectedness, but in doing so elides separation as a process fundamental to relation in the first place.³⁰

Conrath builds this argument on continental thought, from psychoanalysis to deconstruction, and on historical/material example: Vulnerable ecosystems were "discovered" by the US Atomic Energy Commission after the WWII, because of the nuclear fallout from detonated nuclear weapons in the Pacific. Violence rendered vulnerable relations visible. Similarly, Alexander von Humboldt, who revolutionized geography by introducing the topology of the ecosystem, was able to identify relationality because of difference, separation, violation, tension: it was in part by observing the effect of human violations of nature that he was able to identify relationality between

species, climates, and cultures.³¹ Conrath argues that in ecological relation, both in a political and a historical sense, relation is a function of separation.

CONCLUSION:

THE IMPORTANCE OF AESTHETICS—TOUCHING GROUND

Conclusively, going back to the points raised by the questionnaire, about the need in our time to address “the fundamental question of access to knowledge and our ability to know,” this essay advocates for a topographical and artistic approach to aesthetics. It argues for my view of artistic thinking through the moving image as a relevant, forceful means of investigating the embodied and spatiotemporal foundations of knowledge. I’ve argued that the topological potentiality of the moving image that Conrath describes, of separation and reunification, is at the core of the ecological and aesthetic potentiality of the moving image. Although according to Whitehead and Barad, material processes and experiences are inseparable, separation is needed to for there to be an awareness of relation. The kaleidoscopic aspect of the moving image has the potentiality to reconfigure static images through movement and the potentialities of the cut. Thus, the medium of the moving image is particularly relevant as a means of artistic experimentation and aesthetic thinking in age of unreason, both as spatial means to “touch” ground, a way to examine the embodied grounding of all knowledge, while also holding the potentiality to render visible the mediated relation to nature and our surroundings. Through experiments with the moving image, we may become more aware of how humans grasp nature through the “experimental apparatuses” that we use.

This essay has also reflected on the crucial role of aesthetics in our age of time- and place-illiteracy. I have argued that the branch of aesthetics that is focused on perception and the technological mediation of knowledge has an important mission: to scrutinize what we may take for granted, that is the ubiquitous technological environment of modern life, the topographical features, and architectural environments we surround ourselves with, and their co-constitutive role in mediating the relationship between humans and non-humans. The mediation of perception, and the situatedness of knowledge is central to our ability to know.

To summarize, this is how the Claw Peak, with the meaning and materials that constitute it, may have potential as an object of aesthetic-artistic study in a time of “unreason.”

- 1 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 2 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 3.
- 3 Marcia Bjornerud, *Timefulness* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- 4 David Archer, *The Long Thaw* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 5 Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
- 6 E.g., António Damásio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010).
- 7 James. J Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014).
- 8 Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archeology* 25, no. 2 (1993). Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001 [1986]), 264–265.
- 9 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922); Didier Debaise, *Nature as Event* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 10 Debaise, *Nature as Event*, 11. Emphasis added.
- 11 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 142.
- 12 Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2015).
- 13 Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*, 36.
- 14 Malpas, *Place and Experience*.
- 15 Debaise, *Nature as Event*.
- 16 Catherine Fowler, "Obscurity and Stillness: Potentiality in the Moving Image," *Art Journal* 72, no. 1 (2013), 66.
- 17 Fowler, "Obscurity and Stillness: Potentiality in the Moving Image," 66.
- 18 Eric De Bruyn, "Topological Pathways of Post-Minimalism," *Grey Room* 25 (Fall 2006), 32–63.
- 19 For instance, the experimental film, *3xShapes of Home* (2020).
- 20 Maxine Sheet Johnston, *The Roots of Thinking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Damásio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*.
- 21 Damásio.
- 22 Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.
- 23 Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 147.
- 24 Gibson, 293.
- 25 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 26 Damásio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*.
- 27 Elisabeth Brun, "Essay Film as Topography: Explorations of Place through Moving Image Thinking" (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2020).
- 28 Malpas, *Place and Experience*.
- 29 Brun, "Essay Film as Topography: Explorations of Place through Moving Image Thinking."
- 30 Ryan Conrath: "The Ecological Cut," *Millennium Film Journal* 69 (2019), 86.
- 31 Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander Von Humboldt's New World*.