

## Scrambles Amongst The Alps

by Martijn van Berkum

*“When I think about something, in fact, I’m really thinking about something else. (...)*

*For instance, you see a landscape that is new to you. But it’s new to you only because you mentally compare it to another landscape. One that you know.”*

- Eloge d’amour, Jean-Luc Godard

For want of making a statement about nature that would make sense to me, I would need a proper metaphor, an alibi that allows me to explain certain things that I cannot tell in a straightforward manner. Now, of course this is always the case with metaphors. They are used to explain things you cannot put into words in an unadulterated form. In case of describing nature however, things are slightly more complicated and I feel obliged to give a short motivation.

You see, I’m convinced that you cannot describe nature, not philosophically, nor in a scientific manner and, not in the last place, not from an aesthetic point of view either. The moment you start describing it, studying or painting it, nature is undone and becomes something different altogether: a dissertation, a story, or an art work, anything that fits into a human framework of understanding. It’s a Bermuda triangle of philosophy, science and culture in which nature disappears. This notion, I must stress, should not be taken light-heartedly and be reduced to an intellectual exercise. I’m convinced that this cultivation of nature forms the philosophical premises from which we undertake the actions that lead to the very destruction of our surroundings - over-fishing, deforestation, global warming, the list is long... – and guides their economical or political motives. This transformation of a conceptual to a physical destruction can be observed all around us. Scientific knowledge, for instance, provides not only insight into nature, but also the instruments to control it and to alter a landscape into a crop field, a forest into a park, a lake into a leisure zone, a sea into a fishing ground or a mountain into a mine.

Unfortunately, avoiding any kind of cultivation in describing nature is a catch 22. And consequently, my attempt to find a proper metaphor and describe it by detour is in fact an act of illusionism. Nonetheless, I can’t point straight at this subject and say: this is what it means. Therefore, rather than avoiding cultivation and misunderstanding, I would prefer collecting a number of cases and narratives through which we can recognize existing misinterpretations instead and, by juxtaposing them, hopefully manage to create an understanding that is multidimensional. Ideally, such a configuration of different perspectives would create a context to look at nature, instead of constructing yet another definition.

So, my quest was to find a metaphor that would provide these different layers of narrative, backgrounds, history and interpretation. Not necessarily a thing that would sum it up altogether, but small enough to remain tangible and big enough to carry a range of stories and viewpoints that allow me to approach the subject from different perspectives. That metaphor is the Matterhorn, whose history, which comprises millions of years, unfolds a myriad of readings of nature.

### **100.000.000 BC – Birth of a mountain**

I would like to start at the very beginning, when the Matterhorn was born. If we would erase the artificial lines we have drawn over the map and zoom out to a global level, one can see that the Matterhorn isn’t just part of the Alps. The Alps, in turn, are part of the Alpide belt, a chain of mountains that stretches all the way to Asia and ends at the Himalayas. These mountains arose as a result of the collision of European and African tectonic plates, the stress of which caused sediments of the Thetys Ocean to be pushed up, forming current peaks such as the Matterhorn and the Mont Blanc. This process took place over a period of roughly 50 million years, after which the Alps slid into a period of comfortable hibernation for another 50 million years. It wasn’t until very recent that it woke up from the sound of human beings trampling on its ridges.

### 1865 – The battle of the Matterhorn

The first noteworthy accounts of such trampling date back to July 14<sup>th</sup> 1865 when, after a decade of failed attempts, the Italian Jean-Antoine Carrel and his party of climbing companions had nearly reached the top of the mountain. Despite ascending from the complicated and dangerous Italian side, their progress had been fair and the team was counting down the last meters. Somewhere around lunch time a sudden sound disturbed their concentration and when Carrel looked up he saw the British climber Edward Whymper kicking down some rocks from the top. Whymper, who was an inexperienced rookie, had departed just a few hours before Carrel's party and at 14.00 hrs. he was the first ever to reach the top of the Matterhorn. He beat Carrel by only 200 meters (1).

It may seem unfair perhaps and the fact that Whymper lost three members of his party on the descent of the Matterhorn makes me wonder whether faith took a cruel vengeance on the young and ambitious climber. The accident would hunt Whymper for years and even inspired Queen Victoria to consider outlawing the climbing of mountains altogether.

The deaths of his team members, however tragic they may seem given the circumstances, turned out to be just a fraction of the terrifying death toll of 450 climbers, many of which are buried at the cemetery at the foot of the Matterhorn. There's something completely incomprehensible about it. Why did so many risk their life trying to climb a silly mountain? I don't know. Nonetheless, the story of Whymper and Carrel is legend and despite the irrationality of it I can't help seeing it as a metaphor for nature, as an attempt to understand it. Not by studying it, painting it or simply marveling at its greatness, but by fully inhabiting it, by embracing its mysteries, slopes, corners and canyons, and ... its dangers.

### 1890 – Murder on the slopes

The success of reaching the top of the Matterhorn yielded Edward Whymper fame and prosperity and in 1871 his accounts were published in a book baring the somewhat corny title '*Scrambles Amongst The Alps*'. It allowed him to undertake several expeditions in Latin America, Greenland and Canada. Jean-Antoine Carrel would travel along in Whymper's shade on many of these adventures. The greater part his life however, he spend as a tourist guide on the Matterhorn.

In 1890 Carrel's faith was bound for eternity with this giant murderer when, at the age of 61, he died on one of its slopes. He got stuck in a snowstorm with a party of amateur climbers. Carrel managed to rescue his team and guide them to a safe place; he died of exhaustion shortly after (2). For much of his life Carrel had been a stonemason. It can't be a coincidence. For me, Carrel is the Matterhorn; he is a rock.

What leaps out of the adventures of Carrel and Whymper is the way the Matterhorn is completely identified with their ambitions and desires. They have become the same. One can argue there is a certain selfishness in the endeavors of Carrel and Whymper. The Matterhorn is understood as the pinnacle of greatness, not of its own however, but of the ones that reach its peak. My affection for Carrel derives out of the fact that his ambitions haven't been rewarded. His Matterhorn isn't the subject of success, but that of failure and therein lays a greater understanding of nature. Because, as much as we try to control it, our own mortality painfully reminds us about the inevitability of nature's laws. The time limit we have on our lives informs, to a large extent, our struggle against expectations and our fear of failure. It is for that reason I find the story of Jean-Antoine Carrel deeply compelling, since the Matterhorn took not only his dreams, but ultimately his life as well.

### 1958 – Third man on the mountain

More than half a century went by during which nothing noticeable took place at the slopes of the Matterhorn. Sure, thousands went up and down, some never came back again, some broke records, others mastered ridges thought to be impassable. On several occasions history was written, but none of it ascended into legend. It would take until 1958 for the Matterhorn to witness another miracle.

It was the year Walt Disney came to Switzerland to shoot *Third Man On The Mountain*, a corny Hollywood movie inspired by Whymper's success and the heroics of the early days of alpinism (3). It's a somewhat

soggy story about a young man day-dreaming about ascending the top one day and it would be hardly worth mentioning if it hadn't transpired into a work of greater grandeur, an enterprise that would take us into a new era, far past the time of nature's dangers and great wars, and thrust us into a new world of happy-go-lucky and entertainment: Disneyland.

### 1959 –Simulacra and Disneyfication

One year later, at June 14<sup>th</sup> 1959, an exact copy of the Matterhorn was opened in the Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California. It measured a scale of one to hundred, was exactly aligned to its spiritual father and lodged the first steel track rollercoaster in the world. For nearly a decade it would be the tallest manmade structure in Orange County, California and up until today it remains one of Disneyland's top attractions.

I can't help thinking what Carrel and Whymper's opinions would be about this copy-paste mini version. While they lied entangled in a wrestling struggle with the Matterhorn, a hundred years later people would be yelling at Yeti, the snow monster, while riding on a rollercoaster through the same mountain. Domesticated as a circus lion their Matterhorn now lies chained and caged in the plastic reality of Disneyland while people marvel at its greatness: like a freak of nature.



*“We think the need is for starting from scratch on virgin land and building a special kind of new community that will always be in a state of becoming. It will never cease to be a living blueprint of the future, where people actually live a life they can't find anywhere else in the world.”*

- Walt Disney (4)

In 1959 Disneyland had been open for nearly four years. It was a revelation in the world of entertainment; however, it turned out to be so much more than that. Disneyland was a revolutionary urban concept in which all levels of existence were commodified and commercialized. At the same time it was a simulation, a copy of the reality outside of Disneyland. In that simulation of reality however, all aspects that were thought

to be malevolent were carefully taken out, or covered up with a shiny coating; all aspects that were thought to be benevolent were enhanced and polished up to become a new kind of reality altogether: a hyper-reality. This phenomenon came to be known as Disneyfication or Disneyization, the latter a term coined by theorist Alan Bryman in the book *'The Disneyization Of Society'* (5). In his book *'Simulacra And Simulation'* (6), Jean Baudrillard formulates a different dynamic between Disneyland and the everyday American reality. Instead of understanding Disneyland as a simulacrum of reality, a make-believe or imaginary world, Baudrillard argues that the so-called everyday reality in American cities is in fact a simulation of Disneyland, the latter becoming a Platonian reality that Walt Disney, in the above quote, refers to as the *"living blueprint of the future"*.

The phenomenon of simulation is a cardinal principle for a proper understanding of nature. Prior to something becoming 'nature' it needs to go through a process of cultivation. This process consists of a theoretical, as well as a physical praxis. The former concerns the understanding of nature as a field of research and knowledge-production and comprises different areas in science and philosophy. They provide the entire framework of knowledge about the subject that we require for even simple notions such as defining what is and what is not nature. A conceptual simulation takes place on this level: the construction of ideas. A practical simulation takes place on the physical level: the actual transformation of nature to reconcile it with the realm of concepts. This shift takes place all around us: when we develop a site into a recreational area, when we build parks, gardens, camping sites and summer cottages, yes, even hikers rely on maps, roads and outdoor gear to be able to survive what's 'out there'. Disneyfication can be understood as a process that comprises all these simulations and has informed the transformation from 'Matterhorn, the mountain in Europe', to 'Matterhorn, the rollercoaster ride in Disneyland'.

### 2008 – The Matterhorn reduction

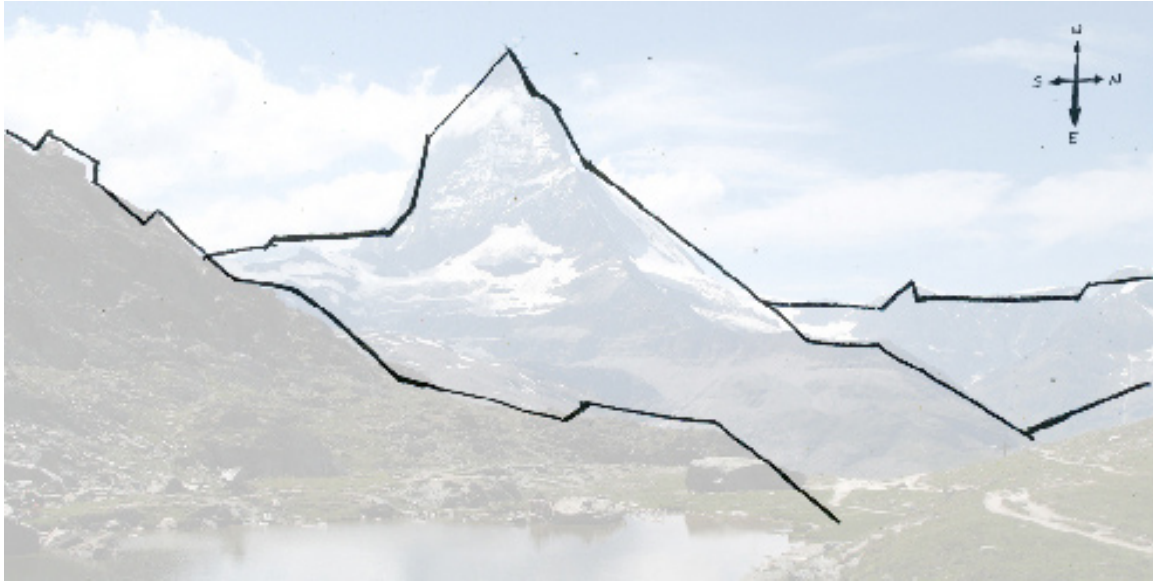
Today, if we want to see the Matterhorn, we don't even need to go to California or Switzerland anymore. All we need is a computer and Internet connection. A search query on 'Matterhorn' yields a result of 31.526 photos at the website [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com) (d.d. October 2008), taken by thousands and thousands of people. Interestingly enough the bulk of these pictures fit into no more than two categories:

1. Pictures taken from the Zermatt side in Switzerland, which is by far the most popular, probably because it offers the most dramatic view, with the top bending forward, the steep Hornli ridge – from which Edward Whymper made his historic ascent - that goes all the way down to the foot, and the 'shoe' behind it:





2. Pictures directly facing the Hornli ridge, often with the Riffelsee in the front:



In hardly any of these 31.526 pictures we can see the mountain from the west or the south side and again the 'real' Matterhorn is reduced to a simulation of two templates, both produced by the collective eye, that are reenacted by each new visitor of the mountain who takes the same shots and adds them to the online archives; a perpetual circular movement in which the same picture is reproduced over and over again.

It is paradoxical how such a vast amount of pictures of the Matterhorn can lead to such a dramatic reduction of perspectives on it. You would expect the opposite: that such an immense archive would provide a richness and diversity of views, experiences and narratives. Sure, no picture appears twice. In each of them the light falls differently; seasons and people in the picture change; some pictures have sunny afternoons, others have snowy mornings or vanilla sunsets. Nonetheless, despite all the differences, I can only see the mountain from the Swiss side, in a panoramic view and seldom, or rather never, I can see it from nearby, standing on its ridges, from the Italian side, on a shitty rainy morning, or on a dark night. The results seem to be preconditioned by matters such as aesthetic values and geography – the side that is the easiest to get to, where the major tourist resorts are located. Interestingly, Flickr doesn't seem to have an interest in fostering diversity, and as a result the index can be understood best as a 'popular vote', a constant repetition of the same picture. Flickr's claim of being a medium in which content is produced by and for its users sounds promising, however, in the end it seems to be capable of no more than creating just another mass-mediated image of the Matterhorn – singular, decontextualized, mass-produced and mass-consumed – and hence without content or value. More than ever, the medium is message.

### -- Human nature

Even though all anecdotes above have the Matterhorn as their main subject, I can't help thinking about how they reveal more about us instead. The Matterhorn is the subject of our ambitions when we try to reach its peak, subject of our desires when we rollercoaster through it and subject of our ideals when we try to capture it on photo. Therefore, the only logical conclusion I can come up with is the notion that nature is something I can only define by describing what it's not: not an ideal, not a desire and not an ambition. It's not knowledge; it's not art; it's not a representation of any sorts. This is a dialectical understanding of nature. A contradiction that reveals how, on the one hand, we need science, art and philosophy to understand nature but how, on the other hand, that understanding leads to an 'unbecoming' of nature; a process that has not only a theoretical praxis, that of understanding, but also an operational praxis, the literal destruction of nature.

In all stories the Matterhorn is cultivated and has become a representation of our own existence, rather than a representation of itself. For Carrel and Whymper the Matterhorn is a cultivation of their ambitions;

for Walt Disney it is cultivated for of its entertainment value; for the Flickr users it is cultivated by mass-mediation. Nonetheless, the Matterhorn is also the mountain that was born 100 million years ago out of the collision of African and European tectonic plates. And it will possibly remain that same mountain 100 million years from today, long after man has disappeared from the face of this planet. But until that day we will have to acknowledge that our understanding of nature is warped, pre-conditioned, cultivated and above all, dialectical. Moreover, we should also acknowledge that this condition becomes problematic when it leads to a physical destruction of nature. The big question, therefore, is not whether we can avoid cultivation, but rather, if we can manage to use our understanding of nature for preserving its naturalness. In other words, can we use our knowledge to prevent ourselves from destroying nature and create a better harmony between our environment and us? The 'Disneyization of reality' is striding forward and the further it goes, the more nature is instrumentalized and exploited for consumption and leisure, the less it is the natural environment we share with roughly 10 million kinds of other species. When we go out into nature we increasingly tend to behave as consumers or tourists, but that's not what we are. You can't be a tourist in your own world; there is no other planet out there we can return to. This isn't Disneyland; it is our home.

#### Notes

- (1) For a more detailed account on the first attempts to climb the Matterhorn, visit: <http://outside.away.com/outside/magazine/200005/200005hardway1.html>, d.d. October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008
- (2) Whymper, E. *Scrambles amongst the Alps, in the Years 1860-69*, John Murray, London, 1871
- (3) I can't resist pointing out the parallel to this text in which Walt Disney is, after Whymper and Carrel, metaphorically the "third man on the mountain" as well.
- (4) Quoted in *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (2001) by Richard E. Foglesong, p. 67, and *The Animated Man : A Life of Walt Disney* (2007) by Michael Barrier
- (5) Bryman, Alan E. *The Disneyization of Society*, SAGE Publications, London, 2004
- (6) Baudrillard, J. *Simulacres et Simulation*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 1981