5. Nature on the move: from landscape to modern cinema

How do the mountains that surround us shape our perception of them? How are mountains narrated and depicted in paintings and photographs, in literature and in films? The Romantic material suggests that the concept of landscape develops in the perspective of the beholder who assigns it meaning and significance (see Weber 2010: 15ff.). In this chapter, I address the function of landscape in modern photography and cinematography. I begin with the depiction of the European Alps since the history of modern Alpinism can be linked to the history of European expansion and the Europeanization of the rest of the world (see Grupp 2008: 10-11). Colonialism and Alpinism are two sides of the same coin; they both stand for a different way of looking at the world that extends beyond the horizon (see Grupp 2008: 220). The history of Alpinism is also intimately tied to the development of European nation states and the military aspects of mountaineering (see Braham 2004: 35, Fleming 2000: 72, Gidl 2007: 12). Martin Scharfe has alerted us to the connections between Alpinism and the history of Christianity with its mission to domesticate mountains. Crosses on mountaintops are symptoms of the decay of our belief-system: the gaze from the mountaintop replaces God’s view of the world and promises power through the vantage point of mapping. It provides a commanding vantage point overlooking valleys and plains (Scharfe 2007: 21ff.). Scharfe also explains how the representation of mountains on maps changed around 1800 and started to model the bird’s eye view down onto the mountain from above, in preparation for the satellite view that we have today (see 2007: 237).

Discussing the cinematic aesthetics of the modern environmental imagination, I begin with the phenomenon of the mountain film, a genre that is still important for the environmental community today. The Mountainfilm Festival in Telluride, Colorado, for example, is a four-day, multisensory experience of art, adventure, culture and the environment which attracts filmmakers, photographers, conservationists, mountaineers, and explorers from around the world who come together to discuss issues ranging from endangered
cultures to grassroots movements. The aesthetics that inform today’s digital images of mountains and skies is built on a set of presumptions that were pioneered in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Walter Benjamin provides a contemporary conceptual framework for understanding the films of the early twentieth century with his theory about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin credits the medium of photography with freeing the human hand from the process of artistic reproduction and emphasizing the human eye instead which is much quicker than the hand, thus speeding up the process of reproduction by a significant measure (see Benjamin 1974a: 138).


The artist who serves as a mediating figure in the trajectory from the nineteenth-century landscape panorama to the aesthetics of modern-day nature photography is the French painter Paul Cézanne and his life-long fascination with the Mont Sainte-Victoire in the Provence. There are countless depictions