

## **A Summit and a Photograph**

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Recent proposals to place a ladder to help more people reach the summit of Mount Everest have sparked controversy<sup>i</sup>. The arguments from both sides were primarily concerned with how much easier this would potentially make it to traverse this renowned piece of wilderness, with some arguing that it would diminish the achievements of those who reach the top without it. It is argued that placing a ladder effectively reduces the exclusivity of the experience of viewing the surrounding mountains from a higher vantage point, with journeys such as this still deemed to be human beings conquering the 'wild'; an argument backed up by the comparatively high mortality rate amongst those who attempt this feat which is still just under one in four.

Photography has a strong and distinct history of being associated with the ideas of 'taming nature', pioneering or 'conquering the wilderness'. The photograph enabled not just a new mode of control but a new branch of commodity with photographs from the edges of exploration and western reach being highly collectable.

In the U.S in the 19<sup>th</sup> century commissions were widely undertaken, as part of government expeditions to the western territories, to photograph areas such as the Grand Canyon and the Nevada Desert. Timothy O'Sullivan was responsible for making some of the most iconic images pertaining to the ideologies held by a government looking to continue a system of exploration and settlement. His images reflected a cultural desire to measure, survey and bring vast areas under control and reach new summits of the ongoing relationship between human and wilderness. His iconic images emphasised a use of scale as to reference the beginnings of a new order; one in which the arguable insignificance of a human being amidst extreme territories was to be overturned.



Fig 1.



Fig 2.

William Henry Jackson's images of the Grand Canyon arguably further embody the cultural parameters of the time, with figures often depicted on a visible edge of wild landscapes such as mountains, cliffs and rock-faces. Depicted against areas of such monumental scale the presence of the odd human being serves to highlight the exploratory drive of the time. The images also allude to the self-referential concepts at the forefront of the American Transcendentalism of the works of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson who proposed in his essay 'Nature' that we should "enjoy an original relation to the universe"<sup>ii</sup>.

These images converse with those such as Friedrich Caspar's 'Wanderer above the sea fog' (1818) and hone in on the desires so explicit in the works of Jackson and Sullivan, almost proposing an order of business with the sea straight ahead of the central figure and the heights of the mountains just beyond that.



Fig 3.

We can take a step back and ask ourselves why images such as these remain so iconic and central to our understanding of our relationship with areas of the wild such as mountains and deserts. They remind us of how many summits we still have left to climb. They remind us how little we really know and how little we understand about these landscapes that have formed and continually change. The National Geographic recently proposed that 86% of species remain undiscovered and unknown<sup>iii</sup>. This perspective giving information undoubtedly reiterates just how much we have left to find on this planet; we can climb the mountains but we are at a conditional mercy.

The ladder at the side of Mount Everest highlights not just a change in how we approach such challenges, but also how we photograph them. Whilst at one time it was desirable to collect images made of such summits it is now not enough to simply own a photograph it is necessary to obtain photographs of oneself at notorious points with an 'I was there' factor being key. A ladder making such an achievement so accessible drops the exclusivity and perceived accomplishment in the face of danger and the unknown in a similar way to the mass ownership of such photographs. We are not just climbing the mountain, we are now commoditising the experience.

#### Bibliography

David Abram, 'The Spell of the Sensuous' 1997  
Geoffrey Batchen, 'Burning with Desire', 1999  
Edmund Burke, 'A Philosophical Enquiry', 1998  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature', 1836

#### Images

Fig 1: Timothy O' Sullivan, 1867

Fig 2: William Henry Jackson, 1883

Fig 3: Friedrich Caspar, 1818

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<sup>i</sup> The Guardian, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/27/mount-everest-ladder-hillary-step>

<sup>ii</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature', first published 1836.

<sup>iii</sup> National Geographic, 2011, <http://news.nationalgeographic.co.uk/news/2011/08/110824-earths-species-8-7-million-biology-planet-animals-science/>