



**On
Everest**

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What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate it and other men. *Adorno and Horkheimer, The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*⁶¹

When we imagine it, the queues of climbers, the trash swirling around in the snow, the climbers stepping over or past dead bodies to get to the top, it is men that we imagine. White men, usually, because it is almost always white men climbing to glory. This is especially true now that many of Everest's current climbers are no longer experienced mountaineers, but rich people who have paid others to do almost all the hard work for them. Having no real interest in climbing any mountains but the one frozen, immense *celebrity* of nature, is the embarrassing big dick display to end all big dick displays. And people die from it.

Even for an experienced person, Everest is very hard to climb. It is this hardness that forms the appeal – whether for personal achievement, or for personal achievement and charity fundraising; it is the hardness that makes it impressive, and hardness which might encourage people to sponsor you, to make their donation 'worth it.' It might be just as hard to climb the stairs in a skyscraper thousands of times, and cost less, and be better for the environment, but that hardness is bland and unappealing. *I want to swing my dick at the top of the tallest mountain and know that I am real.* Such reality hunger has led to congestion to the summit, and to the necessity of a recent Nepalese clean up of the area, which collected 11 tonnes of rubbish and waste. 307 people have died on the mountain since 1922. This year, eleven people died in only nine days, trying to make it to

the top. Corpses and trash have become part of the Everest 'experience.'

Not many people who *live* in and around a mountain see it as a spire on which to pin their ego. It might be hated, loved, feared, but it is part of a world. One of the first two people in the world to summit the mountain, the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay (who climbed with Edmund Hillary), described Everest as a 'mother hen.'⁶² For him, the climbing of the mountain was, of course, an achievement, but he did not wrap his ego around the being of the mountain itself – describing it with the language of care, of tender knowledge.

Watching rich men risk their lives to climb, risk the happiness and security of their family and friends to do something that so many people have already done, is the ultimate spectacle of the Anthropocene. The mountain itself, its ecosystem, the local Nepalese community of Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists, the snow, the light, the air – these are not the point. The search for 'self actualisation' or triumph occurs on the most 'unreal' section of reality imaginable. Climbing to the top, jostling with others to get your tiny bit of space, your section where you can take a photo of yourself standing there mighty and alone, in shiny neon coloured jackets costing thousands of pounds. Mountaineering expert Maurice Isserman writes:

There are more interesting mountains to climb. There are more beautiful mountains. There are more challenging mountains that are a better experience. But it's a trophy. It's the biggest.

When asked why he was climbing Everest, the early British climber Edmund Mallory simply replied 'because it is there.'⁶³

My friend Lily once said to me, ‘if any bit of nature is Nazi, mountains are Nazi.’ Of course, mountains themselves are not fascist, any more than trees are, but mountain’s terror-inducing peaks have often been made to speak only of whiteness, of able bodiedness, of pure blood. The writer Richard Fuchs, writing in *Deutsche Welle* tells us:

... the German-Austrian Alpine Association, which was seen at the time as the voice of mountaineering, in the German Empire it was the first major sporting association to exclude Jews ... Flags bearing swastikas began flying over Alpine huts as early as 1924 - 10 years before Hitler seized power. The flags were followed by signs reading, “Jews not welcome here” ... Climbing expeditions, including the first attempt to reach the summit of Nanga Parbat in the Himalayas, were declared campaigns for Germany. Nazi propaganda pronounced that climbers would gain honor for Germany, or die trying.⁶⁴

The cult of summits, of winning, of masculine valour, has never been very friendly to Jews, or to the queer, or to those of colour, or to those without perfect bodies or deep pockets. The Nazi propaganda of the Alpine Association had nothing to do with *actual* mountains, and everything to do with turning ‘nature’ into a vehicle for human dramas of triumph and purity of soul.

There are other very hard things to do rather than climb Everest. You could take a year out of your job and work with refugees coming in at Calais. You could take a year out of your job to work for Rape Crisis. You could work with Native American water protectors and other indigenous groups to try and protect natural resources from rapacious capitalist

destruction. But somehow the executives and bankers and PR directors who climb Everest never do seem to take those options.

Everest is not for us, and that is why it is difficult to climb. We were never ‘meant’ to go there, are not designed to survive, do not belong. The vision of human endurance that we see up there is a pathetic expression of our inability to feel real in the reified world we have created, and of our desire to avoid the really hard things, which live inside.

An apocryphal story describes a man going to speak to a Christian hermit, who had spent the last 50 years in the desert standing on one leg, praying and suffering in subjection to god. The man asks ‘how can you stay on one leg for that long? It must be so difficult!’ The hermit replies, ‘Oh no, this is easy. Loving your neighbour as you love yourself, now, that is difficult.’

Self-inflicted physical suffering is profundity and transformation as voyeuristic display. I want to scream ‘get the fuck off of there!’ Down here, in the messy realm of the human and nonhuman, is the unbearable challenge to love what is not us – each other, but also everything else; the beautiful mountains and the slimy worms, the shivering soil, the poisonous jellyfish. ‘Nature’ is not your achievement to be had, juddering ejaculation of parochial whiteness and self-congratulation.

My friend is a trained mountain guide, and when she came to my university for postgraduate study, she joined the climbing society. After the first trip, she was considering quitting. The young men of

the group had insisted on climbing even though the conditions had turned, even though she had warned them it wasn't safe. As she went for her own long walk down below, enjoying streams, grasses and heather, they tried to climb the Scottish mountain and got horribly lost. They did not listen to her because she was a woman, and also because her attitude to the mountain was not one they recognised –

humble, interested, discreet. She put me in mind of Nan Shepard, careful watcher and walker of the Cairngorms who wrote in *The Living Mountain*:

... often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him. ⁶⁵

Do the men who climb Everest want to fuck it? Is it the ultimate prize, that saves one from any fear of shame, of self-disgust? Who can say a man who has climbed Everest is not tough? Fucking the most beautiful woman alive will not be seen by almost anyone – but everyone gets to see this. It's the kind of thing they'd put in your obituary, the kind of thing your colleagues will chat about at the work Christmas party – 'Steve climbed Everest, and raised £5000 for dementia relief!' Raising money for charity is good. Dementia is bad. These things remain true, at the same time as climbing Everest becomes the most colossal missing of the point available.

I once did some trekking in the Andes, and it was beautiful, and

tough. But what stays with me is sitting at base camp, at dusk, still surrounded by vegetation. Everyone else was busy cooking, and I sneaked away to sit with and watch the mountains. I learnt nothing, I have no profound spiritual wisdom to offer. I was a stranger too. But what I felt from the mountains was an intense, unutterably weird sense of presence. In my memory, I remember the mountains humming. Of course they probably weren't doing that – but my mind has a need to fill in something sensual to ground the intensity of that experience. The mountains were not looking at me, and I was nothing to them. I can't say what was there, but it didn't feel like a reflection of myself. It felt nothing like me, a language I couldn't parse, a being of which I had no access to, singing out over my head. Deep rumbling presence, the deepest base note imaginable, washed black and echoing. I did not get direct 'access' to the difference of the mountain's being, but observed that difference, circling outside of me, discrete, independent. Existent. Instead of climbing up, the able bodied, white display of moneyed mastery, could we not just sit down here for a second, and listen?

We cannot continue on with more corpses piles along the path to Everest, more rubbish for Nepalese citizens to clean up, more displays of flag waving, individualistic onanism. This attitude, of nature as a backdrop to our own triumphalism, is not only destroying this one mountain, but the world entirely. The plastic choking the coral reefs, the California wildfires, the floods in Bangladesh – the destruction of the environment is predicated on nature being perceived as something we USE; whether that be to make ourselves

feel special on a mountaintop, or something that gives us the raw materials for the objects we enjoy. It is exploitation, not cooperation or understanding. There is no mystery about what happens if we don't start to cooperate, listen, and work *with* nature –millions of nonhuman beings die, millions of humans die, and then, eventually, we all die. To watch people preen themselves on Everest is not only a spectacle, it is a warning. We have to manage the egoistic selfishness of capitalism, its desire to use up and spit out nature for its own ends, before it's too late. And it is those very people who climb Everest: the wealthy, the powerful, the strong, who hold these choices in their hands. It is up to them now to choose the stuff, the real stuff, of life.

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