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Re-Thinking Landscape through the German Aesthetic Tradition: Extreme Shapes and Transformations

In my study of the German environmental imagination, I trace the aesthetic dimension of landscape from late eighteenth century narratives and artistic depictions to today's media images, and show their indebtedness to the idea of performance. The images of nature beyond human involvement that I study are *Nachbilder* (after-images) of a dialectical process described succinctly by the German theoretician Walter Benjamin. As the result of shock, these images of encounters between humans and nature "at the end of the world" are produced under extreme conditions (during polar expeditions, tropical voyages, while mountain climbing, or diving into deep waters). Many of these extreme encounters take place in what postcolonial theory refers to as "contact zone." This is a zone within a pre-colonial, colonial, or post-colonial space that predetermines the encounter between a first-world subject and its other, the indigenous subject or indigenous nature—frequently a nature of such grand scale that its narrative or depiction can only be rendered with awe, like a spectacle that is out of scale. I situate my study of the aesthetic dimension of the German environmental imagination at the emerging intersection between postcolonial theory and environmental criticism, a new direction of research within cultural studies. I engage the methodology of eco-criticism to read extreme landscapes not merely as products of the subjective imagination (as the standard interpretation of the Romantic landscape suggests), but as products of a meaningful encounter between a human subject and a nature that is out of scale, which structures the encounter and leaves a physical impression on the subject, resonating then as an after-image. My study advances our understanding of the German environmental tradition to include chapters on "Eco-Criticism and the German Intellectual Tradition," "Alexander von Humboldt and the Aesthetics of Nature," "Nineteenth-Century Images of Landscape," "Landscapes in Cinematography of Mountains and Skies," "The Performance of Whiteness in Polar Nature," and "Re-Imagining Tropical Rivers and Forests outside the Framework of Tropicalization." A coda of representing environmental degradation concludes this study of narrating and depicting images of nature in extreme encounters.