15. LIBERATING THE CAPTURED IMAGE: *BERGFILM* LEGACIES AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN *FREE SOLO* (2018) AND *THE ALPINIST* (2021)

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Discussions of mountain films have long talked about "capturing" or "chasing" elusive images; as discussed below, this discourse surrounds the alpine films of the 1920s no less than the nature films and adventure documentaries of today. The present chapter explores implications of the language of the "chase" that lead to intriguing tensions with regards to mountain films. It begins by reviewing discussions of tensions between reality and representation, and between authenticity and technology, with regards to both the broader category of documentary film and the specific genre of mountain film. Exploring these complexities through readings of *Free Solo* (Jimmy Chin & Elizabeth Vasarhelyi, 2018) and *The Alpinist* (Peter Mortimer & Nick Rosen, 2021), the chapter argues that entanglements of physical landscapes, athletic challenges, and technological mediation have been central to claims of authenticity within mountain films since the advent of the genre, but digital technologies have intensified these entanglements and rendered them newly visible.

Chasing weather windows, chasing light, chasing the perfect alpine image: These tropes recur throughout statements around classic mountain films of the 1920s and 1930s. Sepp Allgeier, a prominent cameraman for these films, titled his 1931 autobiography *Die Jagd nach dem Bild* (The Hunt for the Image). Similarly, in Leni Riefenstahl's 1933 memoir about her work as an actress in Arnold Fanck's mountain films (before she gained notoriety as a director of propaganda features for the Nazi regime), she describes the process of "chasing down images like hunters" (Peabody 2020, 225). These examples

from nearly a century ago illustrate that, from the beginning of the genre, mountain filmmakers have portrayed themselves as pursuers of elusive subjects. An important foundation to the notion of chasing an image or event is that the event is real and intact. It is not faked and has been captured after a fair hunt. For documentary film, and for the specific case of mountain film, this implication has always been fraught. As Patricia Aufderheide notes, "the genre of documentary always has two crucial elements that are in tension: representation, and reality. Their makers manipulate and distort reality like all filmmakers, but they still make a claim for making a truthful representation of reality" (Aufderheide 2007, 9–10). Aufderheide does not explicitly discuss mountain films, but they might be seen as a particularly apt case for her point. In another, similarly framed introduction to documentary film, Paul Ward discusses the reenactments in the mountaineering documentary *Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, 2003) as a case study for the interplay between seemingly authentic historical material, in the form of interviews, and reconstructed video content: "[T]he evidentiary status of the testimony 'anchors' the reenacted scenes" (Ward 2005, 53). This relatively recent alpine film exemplifies the blend of creativity and documentation that marks the documentary genre.

In fact, long before *Touching the Void*, mountain films served as prime examples of this fundamental tension within documentary and semi-documentary films. The opening intertitles in *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, Arnold Fanck, 1926) state,

> The well-known sportsmen who participated in the making of *The Holy Mountain* ask the audience not to mistake their performances for trick photography. All shots taken outdoors were actually made in the mountains, in the most beautiful parts of the Alps . . . The big ski race is performed by German, Norwegian and Austrian master skiers . . . The screenplay to this motion picture was inspired by actual events.

Beyond the emphasis on the authentic landscapes and expert athletes, the linguistic repetition of "actually" or "actual" makes clear that the idea of authenticity is an overdetermined signifier within the film. Director Arnold Fanck reiterated this defense of the reality content of his films with regards to later productions as well, for example in his letter responding to a review that had questioned the mountaineering scenes in his 1929 film *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Pitz Palu*) (Fanck 1997, 146–49). At the same time, Fanck responded to critical commentary regarding a film's supposed deviations from reality by asserting that "a film is not there to render reality, but rather to yield art, which is to say the diametric opposite of reality" (Fanck 1997, 154). Fanck, the pioneering director of the mountain film genre, simultaneously emphasized the authenticity of his landscapes and insisted on the status of his

films as art rather than reality. While most of Fanck's films comprised major productions that featured melodramatic plots as well as expert mountaineering sequences, similar tensions arise in recent mountaineering documentaries. As seen in *Touching the Void*—and again in the recent films discussed below—the technical challenges and remote locations involved in mountaineering documentaries often make it impossible to film the initial event, so that reenactments, repeated ascents, or computer-generated graphic animations are used.

In their discourse of authenticity, mountain films portray their use of filmmaking technology as a process that yields a closer view of reality. Martin Heidegger offers a pertinent discussion of reality, observation, and science being intertwined: Reality (*Wirklichkeit*) is a process of perception or observation (*Betrachten*), in that both are formed through active processes within the perceiving subject. In other words, the scientist engages in "an entrapping and securing refining of the real," leading to a representation of nature that can be experimented upon—or used for a desired effect within the editing and montage practices of creating a film (Heidegger 1977, 167; cf. Lovitt 1977, xxvii). Seen in this way, reality is a construct that arises through deliberate work using material made available through tools of observation. These issues have been complicated further with the advent of digital film and ensuing debates regarding the status of the digital image. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, theorists of new media argued that digital images based on numerical data comprised a fundamental change in the art of film, since its former indexical connection to the filmed object was replaced by infinitely manipulable data. Formerly "the art of the index" (Manovich 1999, 174), cinema seemed to have become "the art of synthesizing imaginary worlds" (Rodowick 2007, 86–87). However, subsequent assessments questioned these assertions, pointing out that photographs were manipulated long before they were digital and that indexicality need not be at odds with numerical storage of data (Gunning 2008, 24–27). Tom Gunning elaborates that the "playfulness celebrated in the digital revolution remains parasitic on the initial claim of accuracy contained in some uses of photography" (27). In recent climbing documentaries, this process pushes in multiple directions: Of course, viewers might wonder to what extent the filmmakers enabled or altered the events they depict. At the same time, viewers are part of a media ecology that provides visibility, marketability, and therefore, funding that makes the climbs possible (See, for example, the culture of mountain film festivals, discussed by Julie Rak in Chapter 12 of this volume). Meanwhile, small digital cameras that are mounted on helmets, or integrated into smartphones, seem to offer an escape from the trappings of traditional technology, allowing a climb to be recorded without offending the climber's minimalist or romantic sensibilities that would take issue with a more visible array of filmmaking equipment. Digital film allows both the viewer and the subject of the film to subscribe to a "truth claim" (Gunning

2008, 24)—harkening back to Fanck's assertions of authenticity in his 1920s mountain films—that asserts they are engaging with an event that has been captured in the wild, minimally mediated, neither faked nor manipulated.

Recent mountain films inherit the legacy of the *Bergfilm* with regards to its landscapes and its discourse of capturing them authentically, while raising new questions that test or extend the genre's limits with regards to both impact and authenticity. In *Free Solo*, a 2018 film about an attempt by professional climber Alex Honnold to scale a 3000-foot vertical cliff without the protection of ropes, the filmmakers reflect at length on the impacts they might have on Honnold's climb and are aware of the high stakes with regards to his safety. But at crucial moments, precisely when the filmmakers seem to disappear from view, new kinds of impact and mediation emerge that warrant closer attention. In *The Alpinist*, a film shot before *Free Solo* but not released until 2021, a different problem emerges, in that the filmmakers find themselves trying to chase down a subject, the Canadian alpinist Marc-André Leclerc, who often eludes their attempts at direct visual documentation. As a result, other media must stand in for footage of Leclerc's climbs. In both films, digital technology yields important aesthetic effects. Sean Cubitt (2013) has argued that in environmental films, data visualization, as in *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) stands in opposition to environmental imagery, exemplified by *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004). At crucial moments in *Free Solo* and *The Alpinist*, however, this opposition dissolves: Visual representations of the physical world merge with data visualizations and digital graphic design in a configuration that I describe as the data-image. In these moments, the films do not chase natural subjects, but rather synthesize imaginary worlds, and thus render visible complex environmental, social, and infrastructural systems that stand behind seemingly unmediated experiences. While a nostalgic view of cinema as a formerly indexical medium might reinforce the romantic self-image of climbing culture, the overt technological mediation of these films metonymically emphasizes the economic and technological systems upon which contemporary climbing relies.

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The 2018 documentary *Free Solo* centers around a single event about which the filmmakers express significant misgivings: Alex Honnold's free solo climb of the 3000-foot granite cliff El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. The filmmakers reflect on the inevitability that the filmmaking process somehow impacts the course of events captured on screen. However, their reflections rarely extend to the status of the (digital) filmic medium, or to visuality as such. I propose that technologically mediated visibility is central to the film's impact. *Free Solo* opens with a series of shots showing Honnold climbing without ropes, juxtaposed with clips from interviews about the inherent risk

of death involved in free solo climbing. The primary elements introduced in this opening sequence—spectacular climbing and extreme risk—have been discussed in many reviews and critiques of the film, but one interview raises an intriguing issue that has received much less attention. Honnold responds to a question regarding risk by stating that he does not take risks recklessly. He prepares obsessively and methodically; indeed, this process of meticulous preparation is the focus of the vast majority of *Free Solo*. But he then acknowledges a potential problem: "Maybe I'm too close to it and I can't tell that I'm speeding towards a cliff." Maybe, he suggests, he is unable to see the risk clearly because of his limited perspective. The pronoun "it" is suggestively unclear in Honnold's statement, calling to mind his physical proximity to the specific section of rock he is climbing at a given moment, but also implying the much larger physical referent of an entire wall thousands of feet tall, as well as the psychological context of being continually immersed in the high-risk environment of a career built around free solo climbing.

Soon after, the film's title sequence sheds light on how the documentary might respond to Honnold's stated problem of being "too close." Just before the title screen, the main setting for the film is established through an aerial shot looking down at Honnold's van on the road to Yosemite, and then the image cuts to a series of shots showing Honnold driving and the landscape seen from his van. He declares, "I'm aiming towards the most beautiful valley on earth." With the celebratory but generic adjective "beautiful," the film introduces Yosemite as a visual spectacle. Honnold then describes his childhood memories of the park: "[W]e'd sit on these slabs above Tunnel View, which is, like, the most epic view of Yosemite." He continues: "As soon as you see El Cap it's like, 'Oh, there it is, pretty exciting!'" The word "view" is repeated and the act of *seeing* the mountain is emphasized, but the viewer has still not seen the granite face of El Capitan, and at the moment when Honnold says "as soon as you see El Cap," the opposite occurs: The screen goes dark as the van enters a tunnel; only a faint point of light can be seen just below the center of the screen, promising the view that Honnold has just described. But this promise is never fulfilled. Instead, a quick dissolve shifts from the darkness of the tunnel to an aerial view of the cliff face. The light at the end of the tunnel is aligned with a lighter-toned vertical stripe on the granite face, so that it might be described as a match dissolve between the almost-uniform darkness of the tunnel and the slightly varied rock surface of the cliff. The visual match draws attention to the fact that the darkness is answered not by the light of day, but by a technologically mediated perspective, a view from the sky, thousands of feet above the valley floor. As the aerial shot of the cliff face continues for several seconds, the camera seems to move downward and away from the rock face, so that it transitions from a high-angle shot looking down on the cliff to a horizontal shot looking at the mountain head-on. Honnold's problem of being

"too close" seems to be solved through the support of massive travel and data infrastructure provided to film his climb: The image from a helicopter, plus 3D imaging using data from Google Earth, provide the needed perspective.

The transformation of the image continues once the whole cliff is in view. A hand-drawn line showing Honnold's climbing route is superimposed over the cliff face. Then, as the camera seems to continue tracking away, the bold letters of the movie title come into view in front of the cliff: Digitized special effects transform the mountain into a cinematic spectacle. Finally, in the two seconds before the title screen fades to black, a last element of multimedia image manipulation appears. On the edges of the screen, in the dark spaces outside the lighter form of the granite wall, we see notes about the climb from Honnold's handwritten journals (Figure 15.1).

The motif of the journal becomes increasingly prominent throughout the film. During a training trip to Morocco, Honnold and his training partner Tommy Caldwell are shown in their hotel room after a day of climbing, Honnold writing in his journal, while Caldwell has a laptop open in front of him. Caldwell asks Honnold to read his journal entry for the day, and Honnold responds by reading a few fragmentary comments about climbing and the actions he needs to take to improve his training. As Caldwell bemusedly points out, there is nothing personal or emotional, only technical notes about how to scale a wall. The journal excerpt defies Caldwell's genre expectations, since the entries have the objective and pragmatic tone of an instruction manual rather than the more personal tone he expects from a diary. Recent scholarly discussions regarding diaries are informative here: Philippe Lejeune writes that journals can take various forms; the date and series of entries are the defining elements. He defines a diary simply

Figure 15.1 Opening title of *Free Solo* (2018)

as "a series of dated traces," and with this definition in mind, Honnold's notes certainly fit the genre (Lejeune 2009, 176). Building on Lejeune, other scholars have noted that diaries "are repetitive, rough, elliptical—in short, they are not for us' (Rak 2009, 20). Memoirs and autobiographies constitute "forms of social communication"; in contrast, "diaries are better described as forms of personal reflections that do not include a pact with a reader" (Quendler 2013, 341). Rather than provide a compelling emotional narrative for an outsider, Honnold's journals serve the intent of their own author, frustrating though it may be for Caldwell and the film viewer.

Later, when still images are shown of family photos or magazine covers featuring headlines about Honnold's climbing feats, pages from his journal are seen in the background as digital wallpaper. When the film shows Honnold's training nearing its peak, the visuals present a montage of short clips from his training routine while the soundtrack is an extended voice-over of Honnold reading from his journals, likely the longest sample of continuous speech from Honnold during the entire film. At first glance, the repeated emphasis on the journal seems to highlight his low-tech approach (an aspect seen most starkly in the contrast to Caldwell's laptop), but by repeatedly introducing it as the background to so many different parts of the film, a new emphasis emerges: The journal is one piece of technology among many; the simplicity or purity of Honnold's climbing is tethered to the complexity that surrounds him. The journal becomes the "unremarkable" and "naturalized background" that provides "connective tissue" for the various aspects of Honnold's life as a climber, aligning with the way infrastructure studies scholar Paul Edwards describes the functions of infrastructures in modern societies (Edwards 2003, 185). The journal is a crucial part of the information infrastructure of Honnold's climbing. It is the place where all of the technical information about the climb comes together, just as the filmic medium is where the broader set of technologies and support personnel (ranging from the park roads, retrofitted vans, supportive family members, and international hotels that enable Honnold's lifestyle, to the ropes, carabiners, cameras, and training partners that support his climbing) become visible. Following the notion of "media materiality" promoted by Jussi Parikka (2015, 139), all of this belongs to the materiality of *Free Solo*.

BigStar, the graphics company responsible for the visual design of *Free Solo*, states on its website blurb about the film that it "worked with Google Imagery to create a pixel-by-pixel rendering of the exact image of El Cap's structure. Through this partnership, we were able to zoom in extremely close to our model of the mountain and maintain the most finite details—as well as scale back wide enough to show the enormity of El Cap in relation to Alex's location" ("Ascent: Free Solo"). In addition to the digitized landscape data from Google Earth, BigStar highlights its use of Honnold's journals as a visual leitmotif, underscoring the importance of basic information infrastructures

and technologies alongside digital graphics. The importance of this digital design work is emphasized in the fact that Google Earth and BigStar are the final two names shown in the production credits at the end of the film, superimposed over an image of El Capitan, just before the image disappears and the remaining credits roll over a blank screen. While Rodowick asserts that an electronic image "never displays a spatial or a temporal whole" due to the abstract mathematical rendering of the image as data (Rodowick 2007, 138), the hybrid data-image finds new, and in fact more complete, ways to make the whole visible. Or, speaking with Friedrich Kittler, using digitized data, "any medium can be translated into any other. With numbers, everything goes,"—and yet, "there are still media; there is still entertainment" (Kittler 1999, 2). In contrast to Lev Manovich's claim that digital cinema "is no longer an indexical media technology" but an infinitely manipulable form of animation, thus emphasizing the "anything goes" side of Kittler's dichotomy (Manovich 1999, 175), Gunning insists not only that "there are still media," but that in fact not much is new about them: Photographic media have always been manipulated, and many important indexical media have always been numerical (Gunning 2008). These perspectives on digital media help contextualize the observation regarding *Free Solo* that, despite the hyper-mediation of the digital image, the product is still, more than ever, recognizable as a representation of the real.

The final credits, similar to the opening shots of Yosemite, emphasize that the film is not only a celebration of a single daring climber, but also a cinematic exploration of a dense set of infrastructures that underlie the climb. In numerous interviews, Chin and Vasarhelyi describe the immense labor and expertise required to prepare for the event, on the part of the camera team as well as Honnold. The result is what Joseph Taylor describes as "calculated spectacle" (Taylor 2020, 373). Moreover, as James Lucas points out, "Honnold has used the film crews not only to advance his career but also to help with logistics—and they've been there to bail him out in a pinch"—including the descent from his aborted first attempt to free solo El Capitan in November 2016 (Lucas 2022). The filmmakers do not merely capture an independent event, they provide the financial and logistical infrastructure to make the event possible. Despite the film's title, and although the film has been accused of rehearsing familiar and anachronistic tropes of "man against nature" (e.g. Graves 2019), *Free Solo* is never a vision of an individual struggling against pristine nature. From the extreme close-ups of handholds smoothed over and marked by the chalk of prior climbers; to the dozen cameras around, above, and below the wall and the expert operators and climbers working with them; to the repeated glimpses into Honnold's obsessive notes; to the digital graphics that bring it all together: The film is precisely about the infrastructures of mobility and visibility that undergird both the climb and the film itself. It presents a reverse of the "digital multitude" that Kristen Whissel has described as an effect that

provides thrill and triggers astonishment while serving as a visual tool "to interrogate the relationship of the individual to the collective and to dramatize the perils of fragmentation and isolation" (Whissel 2010, 109). Here, Honnold is alone on the wall, seemingly in the flesh, but surrounded by a digitized 3D image of the landscape. It is a vision of digital solitude. The solo climber, supported by the work of the multitude, plods upward as the entire world around him is digitized.

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The Alpinist was filmed largely before *Free Solo* but released after; in fact, the act of waiting is key for the film. Whereas the digital image in *Free Solo* navigates tensions of scale, mediating between the immensity of an object and the desire to view an event involving that object in minute detail, *The Alpinist* uses visual technology to navigate tensions of time and access. The film subjects its viewers to a struggle between what should (according to the rules that govern climbing documentaries) be seen and the footage that the filmmakers are able to capture. Moreover, in *The Alpinist*, the relation between film technology and the event it seeks to capture pushes in a different direction than in *Free Solo*: While the latter focuses on climbing without a rope yet makes no secret about the infrastructure of experts and sponsors that support Honnold's climbs (even if it leaves out the explicit moment when the film team aided his descent), the former presents its subject as "a man out of his own time," a climber supposedly adhering to romantic notions of adventure who is out of place in the technology-driven modern world. Through this discourse of romantic rejection of modernity and technology, *The Alpinist* offers a new take on the "dialectic of romanticism" (Coeckelbergh 2017, 3) that has marked the *Bergfilm* since the genre's inception a century ago. And yet, from the outset, the film foregrounds its reliance on digital technology to fill the gaps between what exists and what can be seen. The filmmakers make no secret of the fact that they are chasing Leclerc through a digital world.

The Alpinist begins with a voice-over while the opening credits are still showing on a black screen. The voice of Tim Ferriss is heard at the beginning of an episode from his hit podcast, "The Tim Ferriss Show," introducing "one of the most recognized climbers in the world, Alex Honnold." Ferriss asks Honnold who impresses him, and Honnold replies: "This kid Marc-André Leclerc." Honnold describes him as being "so under the radar" that very few people know about him. When Ferriss promises to add video links to his podcast website, Honnold interjects: "[T]hough one of the interesting things with Marc-André is that I don't know if there, like, is video of most of the stuff he's doing . . . yeah, I mean, he's just going out and climbing for himself in such a pure style . . . it's, um, it's pretty full-on."

This opening interview, in multiple ways, highlights the film's structuring tensions between immediacy and mediation, visuality and disappearance. Honnold serves as the totemic voice of authority on high-risk climbing; he is not seen, but is introduced by name, and his voice is readily identifiable to the audience, since both the steady, low, slightly monotone sound and the prosody marked by frequent informal pauses are familiar to viewers of *Free Solo*, which likewise features an interviewer's brief description of Honnold as its first moment of dialogue. Since *Free Solo* was released three years before *The Alpinist*, Honnold's voice carries authority regarding the "pure" and "full-on" qualities that he diagnoses in Leclerc's climbing. At the same time, the opening foregrounds multiple problems that will plague this film. Honnold's voice holds authority for the viewers that it would not have carried when the interview was recorded. His interview on "The Tim Ferriss Show" was released in May of 2016, more than a year before his successful climb of El Capitan and almost two and a half years before *Free Solo* was released. Among those familiar with high-profile climbers, he was very well known, but he had nowhere near the profile that he had attained through the Oscar-winning film by the time *The Alpinist* was released. In a review of *The Alpinist* for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Daniel Fienberg complains of moments in which "the filmmakers are being cagey, leaving out dates and chronology, preventing us from knowing when various talking heads were being filmed," resulting in an "amorphous mythologizing" (Fienberg 2021). This is certainly true of the opening interview, in which the myth of Marc-André Leclerc is founded on a statement from the climbing (and film) star Alex Honnold, yet one made before Honnold had achieved true stardom. But the film does not hide this fact; instead, I argue that the Honnold interview emphasizes precisely the necessity to use the visual, aural, and chronological manipulation offered by cinematic technology to render visible a story that does not want to be seen.

The opening visuals likewise simultaneously celebrate the film's protagonist and raise doubts regarding his status as a filmed subject. Honnold's voice is first heard over the black screen of the opening credits: The film begins by withholding views of its eponymous hero. After the question, "Who impresses you right now?," the dark screen cuts to an extreme long shot of a jagged mountain peak in winter, seen in an aerial view that gradually approaches the mountain. The visuals seem to appear in response to the expectation raised by Ferris's question. Still, the impressive aerial shots continue to be juxtaposed with the theme of not-seeing. While Honnold is voicing doubts regarding the availability of videos in response to Ferriss's promise to post video clips of Leclerc on his website, the film's visuals show footage from a helicopter that has now closed in on the mountain and is circling around the peak. During the exact sentence when Honnold declares that video may not be available, Leclerc is first seen clinging to a vertical spire. In other words, the first video

of Leclerc climbing is seen precisely as the availability of visual evidence is called into question. The beginning of the film is a deliberate montage and juxtaposition of sounds and images: The audio was recorded five years before the film's release; the video was shot later, but still multiple years before the film was shown to audiences. This contradictory mixture can be read as a deliberate foregrounding of a problem that is central to the film. In a review for *Climbing* magazine, Francis Sanzaro asserts that the opening climb (on Mt. Slesse in British Columbia) "sets a high bar cinematographically, but it's also the meta commentary on what, and who, you are about to learn about" (Sanzaro 2021). The overt "meta commentary" Sanzaro refers to involves the risk and reclusiveness of Leclerc's climbing, but the opening sequence also gestures toward the fraught process of weaving the available materials together into a coherent film.

The choice to use Honnold's interview in the opening sequence suggests to the viewer that the high bar set by these opening shots might not be sustained as the film goes on. Instead, as the next sequence makes clear, data and image will be cobbled together. The very next scene after the shots of Leclerc climbing shows director Peter Mortimer and his collaborators looking at their footage on computer screens. Later, in a sequence midway through the film that is mentioned in nearly all of the film's reviews, Leclerc disappears from view. While he is away climbing in remote locations, the filmmakers frantically try to make contact with him and piece together a sense of his activities from fragmentary posts and images on social media. Once again, rather than showing Leclerc climbing, the film shows the filmmakers engaging with digital media technologies. While Leclerc's absence in this sequence might seem like the opposite of the "full-on" presence that Honnold initially describes, both the opening sequence and Leclerc's disappearance from view in the middle of the film emphasize the filmmakers' balancing act as they navigate various image sources and options for stitching together a visual story.

The climbing episode that functions as the film's climax, in which Leclerc completes a solo winter ascent of Torre Egger in Patagonia, follows this same pattern of visually representing a climb despite lack of access to Leclerc's climbing. In Leclerc's first attempt of the ascent, cameraman and climbing partner Austin Siadak climbs with him on the first half of the mountain, and a number of shots display Leclerc traversing rock faces thousands of feet above the valley. But from the outset, the plan is for Leclerc to complete the climb by himself, without Siadak, and as a result, during the final phases of the climb (and during the dangerous descent after he abandons the climb due to the onset of a blizzard), the film offers only a few selfie videos or shots from a helmet camera. In his second, successful summit attempt, Leclerc climbs by himself with minimal gear in order to maximize his efficiency and speed. This time he does reach the summit, but the viewer sees almost nothing of the

Figure 15.2 Torre Egger in *The Alpinist* (2021)

climb. Leclerc begins in the dark; the viewer sees only his silhouette against the pool of light from his headlamp. As Siadak leaves him at the base of the mountain with a shout of "Good luck, Marc!," he is in essence bidding farewell not only to Leclerc but also to the visual traces of his ascent. Thereafter, Leclerc's progress up the mountain is depicted by a computer-generated animation showing his location as a dot of light rising up a three-dimensional graphic rendering of the mountain (Figure 15.2), somewhat similar to the graphic effects depicting Honnold's climb in *Free Solo*, interjected with two brief selfie videos that Leclerc takes at breaks during his climb and a final short video on the summit. Very little is seen of Leclerc, and nothing is seen of him climbing.

Throughout *The Alpinist*, the filmmakers' challenge is to gather whatever video they are able to capture, audio clips that provide narrative and explanatory content, and computer-generated images that augment the captured footage with digital data, and then curate, stitch together, and synthesize the disconnected and sometimes meager elements into a seemingly complete and coherent whole. The fact that this process can succeed reveals a core contradiction in Leclerc's image as a "romantic" (Wollaston 2021, Sanzaro 2021), described in the film as "a man out of his time," who frustrates camera teams' attempts to film him and who refuses to carry a cell phone. Despite his seeming refusal of the technologies and infrastructures of visuality, his position is remarkable in large part because he is so fully surrounded by these technologies. Like Honnold, he relies on sponsorships and functions, his reluctance notwithstanding, within systems of technological visibility that make them

possible. The Arc'teryx and Black Diamond logos of his equipment are visible even in the scant footage of his Torre Egger ascent. In the final episode of the film, the film's viewers—and Leclerc's loved ones—are granted one final video thanks to his cell phone reception on a mountaintop in Alaska.

In *Free Solo*, the hybrid data-image renders something visible that is too massive to be visually digested without technological mediation, while also providing the details and emotional impacts that result from getting in close. In *The Alpinist*, the hybrid data-image has a more modest goal: It is only thanks to digital visuality that anything resembling a film about Leclerc is possible. The final sequence of the film presents two images of Leclerc that the filmmakers seem to have been seeking throughout: The first shows Leclerc summitting a snowcapped mountain, with helicopter shots circling away to show the entire peak within the panorama of the surrounding mountains, as the individual figure of Leclerc appears ever smaller amidst the grandiose landscape. The triumphant visuals and rising music feel like a conclusion, but it is actually a return to the beginning: It is the continuation of the Mt. Slesse climb shown in the opening sequence. In a match dissolve, the mountain is replaced by the oval form of Leclerc's face, seen in close-up, gazing upward in a still photo. The film's directors describe close-ups as being crucial for their films' success, since these shots make climbing feats emotionally gripping for audiences (Bean 2021). In *The Alpinist*, the shots stitched together at the conclusion seem to offer this element of intimacy that Leclerc resists through so much of the film—yet, of course, the close-up is a still photo, taken years before the film was released, when Leclerc was still alive and full of youthful energy. It exemplifies photography's long-discussed affinity with death, capturing an image visually while its subject is doomed to fade.

With their depictions of cases at the limit of high-risk climbing and alpinism, *Free Solo* and *The Alpinist* also display different poles within the spectrum of what digital mountain cinema can do. Honnold's climbing is fascinatingly visible because he is surrounded by a multitude of supporting teammates even as he ascends alone. Meanwhile, Leclerc traverses the periphery, barely seen but still in contact. He marks the edges of what is visible, shedding his blue light on the land of technology of which he is no less a part than those at the center, and which is illuminated anew when viewers see the digital landscape from Leclerc's tragic position at its margins.

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