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Dreaming of a Glacier

Snæfellsjökull in a Geocritical Perspective



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Foreword

Matthias Egeler and Stefanie Gropper

This book aims to outline the place of the volcano Snæfellsjökull in the European imagination, which through Jules Verne's novel *Voyage au centre de la Terre* has become Iceland's most famous mountain. The articles in this book bring together as broad a range of sometimes very different, though often interlinked, perspectives on the glacier mountain and its surrounding landscape as has been possible. This includes both the way how Snæfellsjökull was turned into a ›mountain of the mind‹, looming as large in literature, art, and popular culture as in topographical reality, and the way in which the concrete local topography of the western tip of Snæfellsness was charged with ›meaning‹ – or, sometimes, strikingly wasn't.

Our primary starting point and main methodological focus has been the paradigm of geocriticism, though we have not felt compelled to adopt a geocritical approach slavishly. To some extent, we have used geocriticism merely to open up questions and perspectives, without allowing it to restrict our view.¹ Geocriticism represents a paradigm focusing on the relationship between narratives (in the broadest possible sense of the term) and specific places. Its most detailed programmatic book – Bertrand Westphal's *La géocritique* – stems from the French tradition of literary theory.² At the core of Westphal's concept of geocriticism lies a shift of focus from author to place: his approach is geocentred in that it

1 For other important approaches to ›landscape‹ and its semantisation and interpretation cf., for instance, Macfarlane 2008; Schama 1996; Tilley 1994.

2 Westphal 2007; Westphal 2011.

does not analyse the *œuvre* of a *writer*, but works regarding a *specific geographical unit*. By shifting the focus from the perception (and/or imagination) of a single author to the way in which a single place has been perceived by a wide range of writers, Westphal's approach aims to achieve a deeper, pluralistic image of the places studied in a synchronic as well as diachronic perspective. It is central for the geocritical approach that this understanding is not a purely textual one: Westphal never tires to emphasise the interconnectedness between fiction and reality, how the literary treatments of places are never completely separable from their physical reality but at the same time influence our perception of this reality so much that they in turn constitute a major factor in the way that perceived ›reality‹ is constructed. How we see a place always is coloured by what we have read or heard about it. At the centre of geocriticism are inhabited places, places that are lived-in and experienced, the question of how they are experienced, and how this experience is reflected in and influenced by texts. Or in other words: geocriticism is not about texts, but about the interaction between texts – and other artistic expressions – and the physical places that humans experience; an experience for which mental concepts (as reflected in and influenced by texts) are just as important as the physical, ›objective‹ properties of a space.

The most central methodological tenet of Westphal's geocriticism, which he proposes in order to grasp this interaction between text and place, is multifocalisation. Multifocalisation is a formulation of the geocentred approach which does not focus on the single author but on the multitude of perspectives that a variety of authors (or painters, film-makers, travellers, etc.) have on a single place. Instead of focusing on one individual presentation of a place, the geocritical approach aims at forming a composite picture based on a range of different presentations to gain a more balanced understanding of the way in which the place in question is conceptualised. If one includes such multiple, multifocal perspectives, the result of the enquiry will never be a simple, monolithic image of a place. Rather, such an approach can

contribute to a more holistic perception of a place in all its complexity, it can grasp its inner tensions and contradictions and help to avoid simplistic stereotypes.

In this spirit, this volume is geocentrically focused on Snæfellsjökull and brings together, uniting them into one vista of this particular landscape, a broad (multifocal) range of treatments, imaginations, and narratives about this mountain and its surroundings. We hope that the resulting collection of essays develops an – if preliminary and tentative – multifocal and multicoloured picture of the (narrative, cultural, mental, imaginary, artistic) cosmos which has been created around this mountain. This picture tries not to focus on any one period, but brings together perspectives ranging from medieval saga literature to the present. Thus, this tentative reconstruction of the cosmos of the Snæfellsjökull mountain also aims to include the perspective of time, reconstructing some of the main strata and main lines of development that have contributed to forming today's picture(s) of this glacier.

The articles in our book cover a broad range of works, from medieval texts to modern literature, graffiti, film, and art. Thus, for instance, in addition to analyses of literary texts like the medieval Icelandic *Bárðar saga* and Halldór Laxness's novel *Christianity under the Glacier*, it includes a survey of the graffiti of Sönghellir, including the numerous cross carvings and Christograms found in the cave: while anything but extensive literary texts, these symbols still imprint implied narratives (the Christian history and hope of salvation) into the materiality of the mountain, and by the very act of evoking the Christian hope of salvation in dozens of repetitions they demonstrate that for their carvers the ›mountain of the mind‹ that was Snæfellsjökull was hovering on the edge of nightmare. Thus, these graffiti offer a perspective on the glacier that is very different from the views expressed by Bárður Snæfellsáss and Sira Jón Prímus, both of whom had a deep sympathy and longing for this mountain and wished to enter it at the end of their life. It is a central argument of our volume that none of these different

perspectives is intrinsically more important than the other, that none should be marginalised, and that they all form an important part of what Snæfellsjökull ›is‹ and ›was‹ (meaning: is and has been perceived as and imagined to be).

The volume is organised in thematic blocks. After a short introduction, in which Matthias Egeler summarises the theoretical approach of geocriticism, the first block engages with *Material Culture and Social Practice*. Here, Terry Gunnell's chapter *Invisible Force: The Absence of Folk Legends about Snæfellsjökull* makes a striking observation: when looking at Snæfellsjökull in folk legends, we do not meet the looming presence we would have expected, but rather a gaping absence. Thus, already in this first contribution we are jolted to wonder whether Snæfellsjökull is not a much more complex thing than we had thought and deserves more scholarly attention than it has hitherto received. For, of course, the remarkable absence of Snæfellsjökull in local folklore is not what we would have thought we would find. Continuing along the lines of the unexpected, the next contribution as well turns to something that is not normally studied in connection with Snæfellsjökull: graffiti. The graffiti found in *Sönghellir: The Singing Cave*, are introduced by Árni Hjartarson, Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson, and Lilja B. Pálsdóttir. These graffiti allow us a glimpse of the experience of Snæfellsjökull by early Icelandic travellers, which they expressed through the act of carving rather than storytelling but which nonetheless forms an important aspect of the Icelandic perception of the glacier mountain – and a hitherto unstudied one.

The next thematic block engages with *Literature*. This block as well starts with pointing out a remarkable absence: the absence of Snæfellsjökull from the account of *Landnámabók*, the medieval Icelandic *Book of Settlements*. In his *Snæfellsnes, the Glacier, and the Settlement of Iceland in the Book of Settlements, or: Snæfellsjökull as a Non-Entity*, Matthias Egeler highlights a second time, this time on the basis of the early written corpus, that it is not a given that Snæfellsjökull as a landscape feature has any kind of meaning for

the people living around it. Rather, such meaning is socially constructed in a process which starts to become visible only in rather later literary texts. During the Middle Ages, the most central literary testimony for this construction of the meaning of Snæfellsjökull is *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, which is introduced by Ármann Jakobsson's contribution on *Man and Mountain: Snæfellsjökull and Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. In this chapter, Ármann Jakobsson shows aspects of how this construction of the meaning of Snæfellsjökull happens in the first medieval text that engages with Snæfellsjökull in any kind of detail.

The following chapters of the literary block then engage with outsiders' perceptions of Snæfellsjökull before finally returning to its treatment in Icelandic literature. Alessia Bauer surveys treatments of the mountain in travel writing, presenting an analysis that ranges *From Johann Anderson to W.G. Collingwood: Snæfellsjökull in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Travelogues*. Another non-Icelandic – in this case French – perspective on Snæfellsjökull as a place of travel is elucidated by Katharina Simon: in her essay *Sneffels/Stromboli: The Volcanic Mountain and its ›Mise en abyme‹ in Jules Verne's ›Voyage au centre de la Terre‹*, she engages with the mountain's use as the entrance to the centre of the earth by Jules Verne. After this discussion of the work of the famous French novelist, the literary block closes by proceeding to the treatment of the mountain in Icelandic literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the broad spectrum of ways in which Snæfellsjökull maintains its role in literature still in this recent period is shown by Regina Jucknies in her essay *A Place of Desire, a Hideaway, or a Site of Crime: Snæfellsjökull and Snæfellsnes in Modern Icelandic Literature*.

The volume's last thematic block then turns to *Visual Media*. For travel writers, saga heroes, and novelists are not the only ones who each had their own perspective on Snæfellsjökull. The mountain looms large in the visual arts as well. One of the most important contemporary media of artistic expression is film. Snæfellsjökull in film is introduced by Hanna Eglinger's chapter on *The Cinematic Mysteries of Snæfellsjökull*, which covers cinematic

material as diverse as the Swedish film *Atlanten* (1995) by Kristian Petri, Henry Levin's film adaptation of Jules Verne's novel from 1959, and the film adaptation of Halldór Laxness's novel *Christianity under the Glacier* (1968) by Laxness's own daughter Guðný Halldórsdóttir from 1989. After this foray into the world of filmmaking, Haraldur Sigurðsson and Anne Herzog give us glimpses of Snæfellsjökull in the media of painting and photography. Haraldur Sigurðsson in his contribution *Between Prospect and Geology: Snæfellsjökull in Art* presents an overview of the history of Snæfellsjökull as a motif in landscape painting. This, in a manner which we hope will not be deemed too experimental, is followed by a contribution which leaves the plain of scholarly analysis: in her essay *Snæfellsjökull Volcano, Iceland, 2004-2017: An Artist's Personal View*, the French painter and photographer Anne Herzog allows us a glimpse of her personal relationship to the mountain. Herzog is an art practitioner rather than a scholar of art, and thus her contribution is an artistic and self-reflective rather than a scholarly one which adds a very different register to what otherwise is a collection of academic essays. After this, the editors close the volume with a postscript on *The Presence of Absence: Snæfellsjökull in Newsprint*, in which they discuss what currently appears to be the mountain's main feature in current news reporting: the melting of the glacier from which it derives its name.

With this volume, we hope to make a contribution to scholarship on at least two levels. When it comes to the rock-base of the material evidence, this volume presents the first book-length study of the cultural history of Snæfellsjökull. Since Snæfellsjökull, not least due to the success of Jules Verne's novel, is Iceland's most famous mountain, such a study is both justified and long overdue. Several of the contributions in this volume are groundbreaking in that they are the very first to tackle their objects: nobody before Árni Hjartarson, Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson, and Lilja B. Pálsdóttir has treated the Sönghellir graffiti, and nobody before Haraldur Sigurðsson has tried to survey the role of Snæfellsjökull in

art history, and these two chapters are not the only ones in this volume which are the first to grapple with their respective topics.

On a more abstract level, beyond the focus on Snæfellsjökull as such, this volume hopes to show the potential which an integrative geocentred approach can have for the study of northern European cultural history. Bringing a variety of different perspectives together can create a total that is greater than the sum of its parts: given how large Snæfellsjökull looms in the modern-day imagination of everybody interested in Iceland, it was equally surprising for editors and contributors alike, for instance, how markedly absent Snæfellsjökull can be from places where we would have expected it to be important, both in the early stratum of medieval literature in *Landnámabók* and in the more recent stratum of local folklore. A given entity is not equally important, nor is it treated equally, for and by everybody or from everybody's perspective. Bringing together contrasting perspectives substantially deepens our understanding of our objects of study and preserves us from simplistic views which merely reflect a single hegemonic perspective that for some reason has managed to become dominant and that has come to overshadow other perspectives which should be seen as equally important.

It is our pleasant obligation to express our thanks to all contributors, many of whom went far out of their way to help bringing this volume together. We owe particular thanks to Alessia Bauer and Katharina Simon, who stepped into the breach when we suddenly found ourselves without an author for a structurally important section of this book. Terry Gunnell pointed us to the topicality of Snæfellsjökull in Icelandic newsprint, thus providing us with the idea for the postscript that concludes this volume. One of the editors (Matthias Egeler) owes thanks to the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* and the Heisenberg Programme of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, which funded a substantial part of the editorial and copyediting work as well as covering the printing costs, and the *Institut für Nordische Philologie* of the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich for hosting him. For support

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The Editors

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