

## The aesthetics of mountaineering

by Karin Hindsbo

*Alpinism is the art of climbing mountains by confronting the greatest dangers with the greatest prudence. Art is used here to mean the accomplishment of knowledge in action. You cannot always stay on the summits. You have to come down again... So what's the point? Only this: what is above knows what is below, what is below does not know what is above. While climbing, take note of all the difficulties along your path. During the descent, you will no longer see them, but you will know that they are there if you have observed carefully. There is an art to finding your way in the lower regions by the memory of what you have seen when you were higher up. When you can no longer see, you can at least still know.<sup>1</sup>*

René Daumal

In the posthumously published novel *Le Mont Analogue – Roman d'aventures alpines, non euclidiennes et symboliquement authentiques* (1952), the French Surrealist writer René Daumal describes the expedition to Mount Analogue, the mountain “that cannot not exist”. The mountain that extends inexorably all the way to heaven is situated geographically somewhere in the Pacific. Mount Analogue is unknown on the maps, since it can bend physical parameters like space and reflections of light, and is therefore invisible to the ordinary human being, nor can it be detected by physical instruments. Only in quite exceptional circumstances and only to the initiated will the mountain show itself. In the novel an expedition including the autobiographical narrator and ‘Father Sogol’ (logos spelt backwards) sets off to discover and climb the invisible mountain. Daumal died before he could finish the novel, so the expedition, quite symptomatically, never reached the summit.

In 1973 the Chilean film director Alejandro Jodorowsky presented his version of the end of Daumal’s expedition with the film *The Holy Mountain*. In the film, which later became a cult classic, with a bizarre and patience-challenging plot in classic seventies psychedelic style, several figures inspired by Daumal’s book appear, and continue the expedition towards the summit. These include an alchemist (played by Jodorowsky himself) who transforms excrement into gold, and who at the end of the film declares that real life awaits us, and then reveals the film set with cameras, scenery and all the related context.

It is in this complex, factual and Utopian universe that J&K take their point of departure with *The Perfect Stage*. In a total installation built up around a stage the mountain soars upward, the sun goes down horizontally, there are caves for penetration and absorption, an alchemistic kitchen, tents and a ‘base camp’. In addition, various characters appear – mountain-climbers, pilgrims, gurus, spiritual seekers, artists, alchemists, witches and magicians, hippies and tramps; and last but not least, there is a sea of props related to these different characters.

With the stage as the indisputable centre by virtue of its central placing in the title and installation of the exhibition, J&K appear to be continuing where Jodorowsky left off with the revelation of the film set. Just as Jodorowsky took up the legacy of Daumal, J&K start with the set and characters of *The*

*Holy Mountain* which appeared as a whole mise-en-scène at the end of the film. And just as Jodorowsky relentlessly invested himself not only as director, screenwriter, actor, set designer and costume designer, but also in the form of experiments with LSD, for example, for both himself and the rest of the film crew (at least according to the myths), J&K also perpetuate the both literal and esoteric universe of mountaineering in all its diversity and subject their own bodies to physical and spiritual trials.

For there is much more at stake for Daumal, Jodorowsky and J&K than reaching the top. It is all about the method and about the process of realization that is in play along the way. When Daumal wrote *Mount Analogue*, he was a devoted follower of the Russian guru Gurdjieff, who among other things regarded mankind as a sleepwalker whom it was however possible to awaken. Daumal is known for his combination of the mysticism of the East with the rationalism of the West, and according to him *Mount Analogue* only manifests itself when one becomes aware that one has travelled further in traversing it than if one travelled in a straight line, and that it can only be viewed from a particular point where the rays of the sun strike the earth at a certain precise angle, and when one is in possession of a particular substance, a peradam – the ancestor of the diamond, whose reflections can only be perceived by those who sincerely and truly need it. The way to *Mount Analogue* is thus just as much a journey into the interior as a journey to the summit – the ultimate summit, that is.

In *The Perfect Stage* the goal is to invest oneself fully in this journey and to open one's eyes to the challenge one faces here and now, specifically on the mountain, to look inward and to extract oneself from the enveloping clutches of Morpheus. Yet this journey is strewn with myriads of figures, occult elements and bizarre narratives. It is thus not so much the great shining narrative we are presented with as the cultivation of authenticity of detail and perhaps of the occult. The path to perfection is not pure, and we must soil ourselves in rituals, myths and contemplation if we are truly to follow it.

1 René Daumal: *Le Mont Analogue – Roman d'aventures alpines, non euclidiennes et symboliquement authentiques*, Gallimard: Paris, 1981, p. 161. English translation: René Daumal: *Mount Analogue: A Tale of Non Euclidian and Symbolically Authentic Mountaineering Adventures*, Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2004, p. 105.