

Christian Rohr: Posing in front of the ice. Human-glacier relationships in the mirror of photographic self-representation

POSING IN FRONT OF THE ICE

Human-glacier relationships in the mirror of photographic self-representation from Belle Époque tourism to present

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Outline

- The origin and use of glacier images
 - A new perception and view of the Alps
 - A multifarious source for historical research
- Humans on glacier images
 - Scientific expeditions
 - Alpinism
 - Bourgeois tourists
- Conclusions: an “Instagram society” around 1900?

Changing perceptions of the Alpine summits

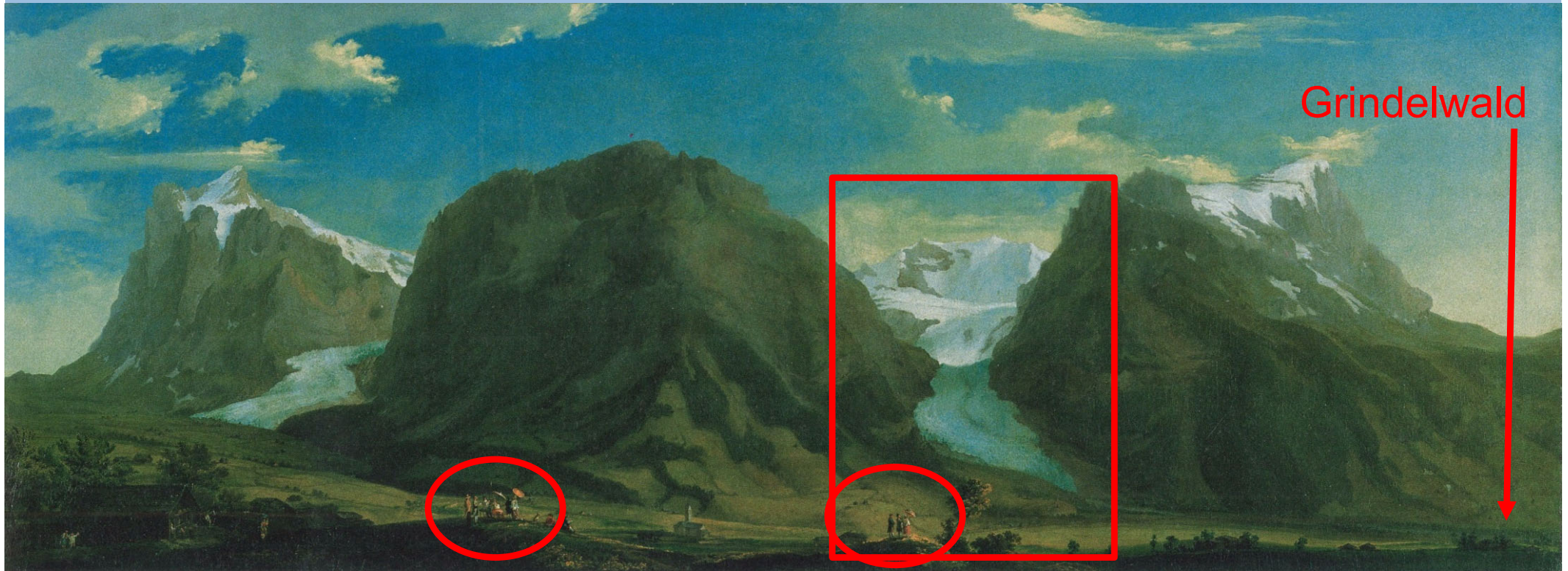
- Crossing the Alps as an inconvenient duty up to Early Modern Times
- 18th century: Alpine summits for the first time perceived as something sublime
 - Grand Tour travellers also visit Haute Savoy and the South-west of Switzerland
 - Ascent of medium-altitude viewpoint summits (e.g. Rigi)
- Paintings of Alpine summits and glaciers
 - First examples from the 17th century
 - Larger corpus of images from 1770 onwards
 - Focus on easily accessible glaciers, e.g. Grindelwald in the Bernese Alps

Glacier images as historical sources

- Pictorial sources and their evaluation for historical glaciology
 - Sufficiently dense corpus on a specific glacier over a longer period needed
 - Serial iconography
 - Method developed by Heinz Zumbühl since the 1980s
 - Challenges of glacier image analysis
 - Different types of images
 - Different perspectives
 - Distinctive landmarks necessary for comparison
 - Exact dating (year, season) needed
 - Sample of historical glacier images on www.euroclimhist.unibe.ch
- Glacier images as sources for the cultural history of tourism
 - Fascination of glaciers as driver for the development of Alpine tourism and infrastructure
 - Alpine travels as a means of social distinction and self-representation

The Grindelwald glaciers: an iconographic analysis for historical glaciology

Choosing a frame for comparison



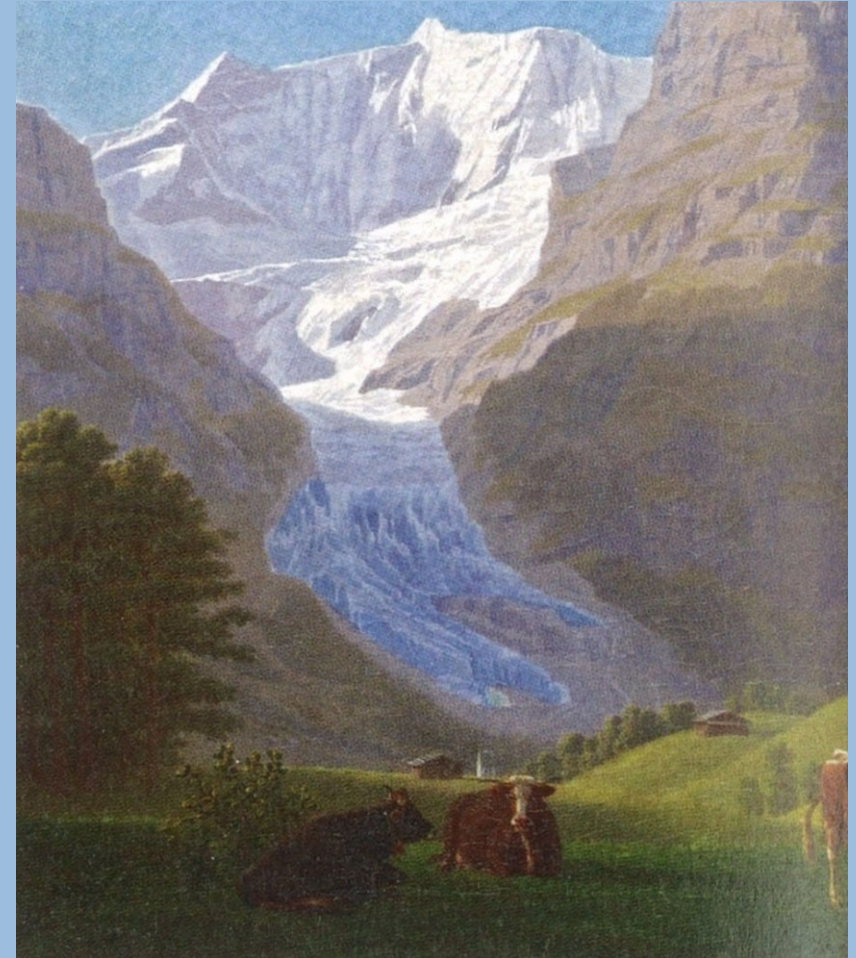
Caspar Wolf: Semi-panoramic view of Grindelwald showing the Upper and Lower Grindelwald glacier, 1774/1776. Aarau: Aargauer Kunsthaus. Source: Zumbühl et al. 2016: 61.

The Grindelwald glaciers: an iconographic analysis for historical glaciology

All images taken from Zumbühl et al. 2016: 110



Caspar Wolf, 1774/1776 (oil on canvas; detail)



Johann Jakob Biedermann, 1812 (oil on canvas; detail)

The Grindelwald glaciers: an iconographic analysis for historical glaciology

All images taken from Zumbühl et al. 2016: 110



Samuel Birnmann, September 1826
(pencil, watercolour, gouache; detail)



Aimé Civiale, 1859 (photo;
detail)

The Grindelwald glaciers: an iconographic analysis for historical glaciology

All images taken from Zumbühl et al. 2016: 110



Julius Beck, 1868 (photo;
detail)



Samuel Nussbaumer, 2013
(photo; detail)

The development of alpinism

- Horace Bénédict de Saussure (1740-1799)
 - Leading enlightenment scientist from Geneva
 - *Voyages dans les Alpes*, 4 vols., Geneva 1779-1796
 - Sets prize in 1760 for the first ascent of the Mont-Blanc
 - First ascent in 1786, de Saussure himself on the summit in 1787
 - Rich written and pictorial documentation

The development of alpinism

Christian von Mechel:
Abstieg von Mont-
Blanc im Jahr 1787
durch H.B. de
Saussure. Coloured
copperplate print.
Source: Haarlem:
Teylers Museum



The development of alpinism

- The “golden age of Alpinism” (1850s-1880s)
 - Climbing up the highest summits as a sport for elite bourgeois British
 - 1857: Alpine Club: elite Alpinists’ society in London
 - 1865: Edward Whymper ascends the Matterhorn (sportive contest)
 - The “democratization” of Alpinism
 - 1862: Foundation of the *Österreichischer Alpenverein*
 - 1863: Foundation of the *Schweizer Alpen-Club*
 - 1863: First organised group travels to the Swiss Alps by Thomas Cook
 - Mass travel guide books (Murray, Baedeker)
- Alpinism and Alpine tourism becomes a mass phenomenon

Upcoming mass-alpinism in the 1870s

Alpinists on the Mer de glace glacier



Bourgeois alpinists crossing the Mer de glace glacier near Chamonix.
Photos, unknown photographer, 1870

Orchestrated scenery due to the long exposure time needed!



Glacier tourism in the Belle Époque

Glaciers and tourists: advertising dreams on posters



Bourgeois tourists watching the Schreckhorn from the cog railway station Eismeer. Draft for a poster by Anton Reckziegel, 1905. Source: Bern: ALPS – Alpine Museum of Switzerland / Kneubühl & Aerni 2016: 98.

Glacier tourism in the Belle Époque

Bourgeois tourists posing on the Upper (?) Grindelwald glacier

Photo, presumably by
Arthur Gabler, around
1905. Source: Fritzsche et
al. 1980: 312



Glacier tourism in the Belle Époque

Bourgeois tourists posing on the Eiger glacier

Bourgeois tourists with sledges on the Eiger glacier, 1898. Photo and picture postcard by Arthur Gabler. Source: Bern: Museum of Communication



Glacier tourism in the Belle Époque

The Jungfrauoch cog railway

Cog railway station
Eigergletscher
(with Mönch in
the background),
coloured picture
postcard, Verlag
F. Oesch-Müller,
Bern, 1910s



Glacier tourism today

The legacy of the Jungfrauoch cog railway

Asian tourists with
posing on the
Jungfrauoch, July
2024. Photo by
Sam Buchli.
Source: Berner
Zeitung



Conclusions: an “Instagram society” around 1900?

- Humans on glacier images since the 18th century, but more prominent only from around 1870 onwards
 - Based on changing perceptions of the Alps in general
- Bourgeois alpinists and Alpine tourists
 - Travel to Switzerland as a means of social distinction
 - Self-representation not only in the Grand Hôtel, but also on the glacier
 - Staff (guides, photographer) needed
- Focus on spectacular views
 - Cog railways and other Alpine railways orientated towards glacier views
 - Easy accessibility not visible, but evident
- Outlook: Can Alpine tourism survive without glacier views?
 - Rising popularity of Arctic and Antarctic tourism

Thank you for your attention!

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