His life beginning on 14 September 1926 and ending just before he reached the age of 90 in 2016, French author Michel Butor is the creator of *Paysages planétaires* (*Planetary Landscapes*), a work that is as cryptic as it is humorous: landscapes unfold in which the most diverse parts of our planet are connected with one another and are perpetually in motion. *Planetary Landscapes* begins, for example, with a hybrid composition in a poem entitled ‘ALASKAMAZONIE’,1 which is filled with life everywhere:

*Planetary Landscapes*

*Les cimes des conifères*
*le royaume des corbeaux*
*la petite et la grande Ourse*
*les aurores boréales*
*les restes des chercheurs d’or*
*les traîneaux sur la toundra*
*les mâts généalogiques*
*le cuivre et les dents de morse*

La mer, houles et replis, avec les cris des mouettes, grand large et marées, avec les chants des baleines au loin. Par les fenêtres du navire, nous voyons défiler fjords et glaciers. Soudain des blocs se détachent et tendent dans les chenaux en éclaboussant. Voici des chasseurs qui rentrent avec viandes et fourrures.

*L’empire des colibris*
*les aurores boréales*
*cyclones dévasteurs*
*les traîneaux sur la toundra*
*les radeaux sur les grands fleuves*
*le cuivre et les dents de morse*
*les auréoles de plumes*
*le royaume des corbeaux*²

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1. Alexander von Humboldt’s artistic and scientific *American Travel Journals* by Ottmar Ette

2. From *The Birth of Landscape from the Spirit of Theory* by Ottmar Ette
Flora and fauna at high and low latitudes, the tundra and the tropics, land and sea, heat and cold permeate one another without fusing together in movements of global dimensions that converge in the American continent; other parts of Paysages planétaires see different continents become part of a process of reciprocal exchange. Oceans and lakes illuminate one another through the connecting, life-giving element of water. As in his epochal experimental text Mobile, here too everything is connected via diverse forms of transportation and subject to a reciprocal transformation process that affects humans, animals, plants, rocks, the wind and water. Nothing on this planet stands alone. Michel Butor shows us a world in which everything is interrelated.

In rapid succession, Michel Butor’s readers may traverse the ‘ETATS ZUNI’ or the ‘VIETNAMIBIE’; the ‘OCEAN PAPOUINDIEN’ or the ‘CASPERTZIENNE ANTIL-LAISE’, the planes of the ‘PACIFIC SANDWICH’ or the ‘MONGOLIE TROPICALE’. No area exists as a lone entity. This is not a planetary idyll, however. In ‘ANDES AFRONIPPIONES’, we are given warnings that threaten to shake the earth:

D’un horizon à l’autre les trompes se répondent pour avertir de l’imminence du danger. Serait-ce le cataclysme annoncé? Toute la province est menacée, toute la nation, le continent même. Ne résistent que quelques îlots d’humidité.

It would thus be wrong to view Butor’s planetary landscapes as a playground for harmless exercises, as the point of intersection for an innocent game in which everything is connected: the playful movements in Butor’s world are aware of catastrophe, they are aware of cataclysm. They not only depict its natural beauty; they are also signs of an imminent downfall, since everything is connected to everything else through landscapes—planetary strata, in which the local, regional or national always invoke the transareal and planetary.

Alexander von Humboldt also designed planetary landscapes of this kind in his scholarly and literary mapping. He, too, was born on 14 September (albeit in 1769) and also died shortly before his 90th birthday. The writer and scholar sketched numerous landscapes in his American Travel Journals; these, too, consisted of far-reaching global strata and were often characterized by huge transformations, or indeed immense catastrophes. For example, in the section ‘Geognosy of America’ in Journal I, he offers a geological-literary vision. In this meandering passage that begins in the north of Venezuela, a place with which he was familiar, it is fascinating to observe how Alexander von Humboldt describes global movements as if in a time-lapse, presenting them as a moving image of coastlines and inland areas that stretch from the northern parts of South America across the Caribbean islands, directly to the north up to Hudson Bay, then south towards the Amazon, but also taking in the Strait of Magellan, in order to expand this hemispheric construction of America across the planet: Humboldt’s vision reaches across the Atlantic to Africa and Tibet in the east, and across the Pacific towards South-East Asia and the stretch of islands to the west of the coast. In this moving image, everything is connected to everything else: nothing stands alone in this planetary landscape.

Humboldt’s vision of a ‘Geognosy of America’ reveals a planetary landscape in which nothing stands alone and in which nothing is static. Nothing stays put and nothing is spared from immense transformations that fuse together and separate islands and continents, and which transform islands into continents and continents into islands. In his creation, Humboldt draws on his own observations, on available cartographies, and occasionally on indigenous sources. There is continuous activity in the form of earthquakes and other natural disasters that change the earth’s surface; that cause mountains to cave in and submerged sandbanks to re-emerge; that cause channels to form between continents and continents to drift; and which cause islands to separate from land and create new basins through flooding—such as the Caribbean or the
The birth of landscape from the spirit of theory

Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. These Humboldtian images ‘jump’ from continent to continent and from lake to sea, offering a comparative perspective, primarily in a transareal11 manner as a history of movement (as opposed to a history of space): for the author of Kosmos, spaces are always spaces of movement.

This is certainly the case in the first volume of Alexander von Humboldt’s Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent, in his ‘Essay on the Geography of Plants’. The geography of plants is described not as a territorializing history of plant distribution on the earth’s surface, but rather as a history of plant migration. For Humboldt, then, exploring the geognosy of America is a science that takes in the entire world: it is one in which coastlines ceaselessly change, in which continents are transforming constantly and islands emerge, move, and become submerged again, and are subject to no less ‘rupture’ and drift than continental masses themselves. Humboldt did not yet have access to a theory of tectonic plates, yet he sometimes comes remarkably close to this in his images of planetary landscapes.

In geological time frames, continental masses are astonishingly mobile. Alexander von Humboldt never doubts the fact that America and Africa were connected to one another at some point. He writes about the outline of the continents in his sketches time and time again, describing the Atlantic as the ‘Atlantic longitudinal valley’.12 In his ‘Geognosy of America’ sketch, he includes not only volcanic activity, but also the rotation of the earth and its profound influence on the entire planet. Indeed, with his ideas about constant changes and evolution, Alexander von Humboldt must be considered a significant trailblazer for the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, who was unsurprisingly an admirer of Humboldt when he was younger. The long-held yet misleading idea of the epistemological division between Humboldtian science and Darwinian evolutionary theory has long been debunked, and Humboldt’s American Travel Journals—which should be understood as the true origins of Humboldtian science—are evidence of this; even at this early stage, they contain the basic principles of Alfred Wegener’s much-contested thesis of the ‘continental drift’, which Wegener developed from 1912 onwards. Although he has erroneously been labelled a polymath, Humboldt thus does not stand for the residue of a traditional concept of science, but for a transdisciplinary science that was one of many influences on nineteenth-century historical scholarship.

Indeed, in his oft-cited reflections, Alexander von Humboldt drew on mythic constructions of flood from The Epic of Gilgamesh or the Bible—and ideas about catastrophes and spring tides that derived from these—as well as on concepts relating to the ‘accuracy of fit’ of the African and American coastlines that were crystallizing during the early modern period as a result of increasingly precise cartographic materials. It was not in vain that Humboldt measured the angles of these two continental masses in the parts where they extend and recede, and thereby identified key indicators that suggested the migration or drifting of the continents. In Journal I, he connected these angles with further indicators, such as common plants in America and Africa. Here, however, he not only addressed the geography of various plants, but also offered cultural and historical reflections about the differing development of humans in the south and in the colder, northern part of the globe.13

In fact, Humboldt drew conclusions about this cultural landscape that were based on all kinds of plant, animal and human migration across large distances, and he describes these movements in a number of other texts too. From today’s perspective, however, his conclusions are sometimes problematic. For example, as a result of the diversity of the constantly available food in tropical areas, he claims that people ‘are freed from the need to dry fruits or to orientate their culture towards survival. This explains the slow development of an intellectual culture, that is, the eternal childhood of farming in the hot zone. This need creates the arts.’14 However, these kinds of conclusions do not in any way compromise the dynamic, history-of-movement focus of Humboldtian theory.
Let us return to the planetary landscape. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Alfred Wegener arduously pushed his concept of ‘mobilism’—the shifting of individual continents—and spoke out against the powerful and influential followers of ‘fixism’. Yet with his scientific ideas about movements of all kinds, Alexander von Humboldt came very close to this kind of mobility concept even earlier. For in addition to a theory of catastrophe and an increasing cartographical ‘accuracy of fit’, his thinking was also driven by ideas about the earth’s rotation; as a result of his studies of volcanoes, he also put forward theories about internal earth forces that would go on to become tectonic plate theories in the twentieth century. Migration was the epistemological basis for Humboldt’s thinking—and it opened up for him new, promising perspectives about future landscapes of theory that would only become part of common knowledge in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

At the core of the Humboldtian epistemology, which was in no small part developed in the infinite measurement sequences and rich store of field research described in the American Travel Journals, is a focus on the mobility and relationality of all objects on our planet. For Humboldt, everything on our rotating globe is subject to constant motion and transformation: land, water, air, mountains, high plateaus and lowlands, continents, islands and archipelagos, as well as plants, animals and, last but not least, humans with their perpetually changing cultures. Humans must continue to adjust to the new paths and movements—and thereby to the changing conditions of life.

It is on the basis of this theory—this Humboldtian epistemology of life and movement, of nomadic knowledge and transdisciplinary mobility—that Alexander von Humboldt’s landscapes emerge. They are, in an excellent way, landscapes of theory. For Humboldt, landscape was born out of the spirit of theory. His empirical field research and precise ‘measuring’ of nature (which Friedrich Schiller once famously called ‘shameless’15) are certainly of critical importance; however, it is notable that this theory first produced the Humboldtian landscapes as well as his landscapes of theory. Two questions arise, then: what is a landscape of theory? And in what contexts did these kinds of landscapes develop for Alexander von Humboldt?

Landscapes of theory

It should first be iterated that the term ‘landscape’ is defined in relevant geography manuals in general terms as a ‘section of the earth’s surface [characterized by] its external appearance […] or its geographical position’.16 More specifically, the term relates to ‘the combined effect of the respective components and geofactors’, whereby the corresponding landscape is not the sum of these geofactors ‘but rather their integration into a geographical set of conditions or geosystem’.17 ‘Landscape’ corresponds terminologically to the terms ‘material’ and ‘life’, in that it relates to the ‘connections between the different [phenomena] that are unified in a landscape’, as well as to their interrelation.18 Making a distinction between a natural landscape and cultivated landscape appears to be problematic; the former tends to be avoided in more recent research histories of geography.19 From a geographical perspective, the term ‘landscape’ refers to a complex system of interrelation and synergy between different factors that cannot be reduced to a particular physiognomy. Consequently, the term ‘landscape’ may in the first instance be understood as the designation of a complex interdependent geosystem.

In the second instance, it is necessary to determine the aesthetic dimension of the term ‘landscape’. A narrow definition of the terms ‘landscape’ and ‘theory’ can be found in Joachim Ritter’s remarks on Petrarch’s ‘turn to nature as a landscape’.20 Here, in relation to the question of the function of the aesthetic—while contemplating nature as landscape—Ritter locates theory in the Aristotelian ‘sphere of the festival and festive play’.21 Taking this line of argument further, ‘theory’ is then connected with a modern idea of freedom whose origins lie predominantly
with Friedrich Schiller. Landscape thereby holds potential as a place—or perhaps even more as an area of play—for a theory that represents a space (Freiraum) outside of a direct instrumental rationality, in whatever form this may take. This is how theoretical thinking and aesthetic form converge within the scope of art.

Ritter’s discussions are undoubtedly more deeply rooted in Alexander von Humboldt’s understanding of nature than is generally claimed; Humboldt’s Kosmos is repeatedly referenced in Ritter’s work. And Joachim Ritter is thereby significantly closer to Carl Ritter, founding father of the modern discipline of geography together with Humboldt, than is acknowledged in his influential essay on ‘landscape’, which addresses the construction of the individual and subjectivity. Yet Joachim Ritter clearly sought to distance himself from predominant geographical definitions of landscape, as he is keen to emphasize in a footnote of his essay. Within this conceptual framework, to separate geographical from philosophical/aesthetic thought is as impossible as a separation of the Apollonian from the Dionysian in Nietzsche’s philosophy. It is, however, precisely this area of intersection that the philosophical thought and scientific practice of Alexander von Humboldt sought to negotiate.

Indeed, Ritter found it necessary to free Carl Troll’s understanding of landscape from the ‘connection between the “subjective” and the “aesthetic” that was so important to him’ when it came to natural sciences. Troll’s approach may be geographical, but it is certainly compatible with other methodological approaches. He defines landscape as a part of the earth’s surface ‘that establishes a spatial unit of a particular character, based on its external appearance, the interplay between its phenomena, as well as its internal and external positional relations, and which merges into landscapes of another character at geographically natural borders’. Is it possible that what Carl Troll calls the ‘interplay’ of phenomena opens up precisely this area of play for theory that is no longer necessarily tied to the idea of subjectivity, or even associated with the kind of central perspective that is anchored in the modern subject? In other words: might it be possible to conceptualize a force of the aesthetic as an aesthetic force, without linking the idea of landscape to the central perspective of the subject?

Even today, Humboldt’s theorem of multiple connectedness is present in geographical definitions of landscape (it is a term that caught on at the time, but which will be returned to in the context of the present article). The idea of the landscape refers to a geoecologically construable, complex system of interrelation and interplay, which makes the term ‘landscape’ applicable in very diverse ways—and aligns it with the notion of an open, polylogical system.

In this complex relationality of areas of tension and force fields, an increasing number of further aspects and dimensions of the term ‘landscape’ are being developed in cultural studies and cultural-theoretical contexts, and some of these are of significance in the present study of Alexander von Humboldt’s landscapes of theory and writing. For the art theoretician W.J.T. Mitchell, a landscape emerges from a triangular force field that is established through the relationship between place and space. Drawing on canonical studies by Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, the US art historian employs his terminological triangulation in order to harness relationships between places and spaces into a triangular force field that takes into account places of locality and spaces of mobility. His understanding of landscape thus only emerges in its actual configuration—and in fact in its true form—on the basis of this relationship.

A moment of movement is thus fundamentally inherent in this idea of landscape that is necessarily vectorially defined by—and charged by—the interplay between places and spaces. Landscape is unthinkable without the inclusion of vectoricity: as a term of movement, vectoricity refers to a poetics of movement that is understood as advancement.

Of these abovementioned perspectives, Mitchell’s mostly unconvincing thesis that posits an intimate relationship between landscape painting and imperialism is largely unimportant in
terms of his historical findings. However, his suggestion that landscape can only evolve out of movement, and that it is inextricably linked to the exertion of power—the power of thinking in particular—is more significant (an example of which is of course Petrarch’s famous Ascent of Mont Ventoux from 26 April 1336). It is safe to assume that Alexander von Humboldt was familiar with this theoretical and writing tradition, and that he referred to this implicitly when he artfully set out his diverse literary representations of mountain ascents and gave these philosophical as well as epistemological emphases. In this way, Petrarch’s Mont Ventoux is still present in the American Andes or other mountains of the ‘new world’ in those literary stagings in which Humboldt’s travel writing features an aestheticization of mountain landscapes.

For example, in his American Travel Journals, Humboldt describes the adverse conditions of an ascent of the Silla de Caracas saddle long before other mountaineering accomplishments in the High Andes of the Quito province:

Fantasies, intuitions are keeping me busy at this altitude, and since it always happens to geognosts at this altitude, this folly eases the pain of the discomfort I am overcoming. A rationally thinking man is exhilarated at the mountain’s summit, and he perceives his condition, as compared to that of the mob accompanying him, as an intellectual stimulation that gives him more energy than any food or drink. Fantasy works as a soothing balm full of miraculous curative powers that nature bestows upon the suffering man as a constant companion, and it heals the wounds of the physical organism, such as those deep wounds that are struck by one’s own and others’ faculty of reason.29

The transcendental qualities of the landscape are transformed into the transcendence of the thinking man in the face of adversity (Humboldt and Bonpland had long been deserted by the accompanying men, who had taken all of their food and drink back to Caracas). Thus nature deploys an aesthetic force over the landscape, a force that imaginatively and creatively inspires not only thinking and writing, but also the healing of physical and spiritual ailments. This includes ailments that are caused by one’s own or others’ (Apollonian) faculty of reason: Humboldt takes delight in a distancing from this reason through the Dionysian experience of a rugged mountainous landscape that is characterized by extremes, just like the one that Petrarch once espoused as a space of thought and perception.

If we take this idea as a point of reference for understanding landscapes as legible texts,30 and to explore their legibility from the perspective of a variety of disciplines, from geometry and geography to art history and visual culture, then it is worth also rendering legible a landscape that is heavily charged with vectors—including paysage littéraire, for example, to which French-speaking scholars are increasingly turning their attention31—in a narrower sense as landscapes of theory.

To claim that Alexander von Humboldt was one of the early masters of this kind of vector-charging and semanticization of legible landscapes of theory is no exaggeration. In his landscapes, he combines the Apollonian with the Dionysian in a form of science that is exhilarating and joyous—and he does so not only at mountain summits.

Precisely which parts of these landscapes does Humboldt render legible and vividly imaginable? The landscapes are sketched in the form of a literary text or a painting, but also in phono-textually interpretable sound patterns, synaesthetic compositions and technical drawings; these sketches reveal a model—a model that lays bare a landscape’s complex theory and epistemology in a self-reflexive and meta-reflexive motion, all in a single gaze. Theory is rendered visible in artistic form, and—in the best case—becomes quasi-graphically clear, like a quasi-simultaneously perceivable total impression.32
Regardless of the artistic medium in which the landscapes of theory are sketched, and whether they depict deserted stretches of sand or highly populated archipelagos, desolate mountainous regions or inundated riverside landscapes, they always stage and embody a model of the movement of life forms and cultural norms, registering historical developments and contemporary refractions in a mobile network of coordinates. These landscapes of theory serve to choreograph the hermeneutic exercises in understanding that they seek to achieve in a sensuously comprehensible way. Landscapes are moving images of imagining and thinking, of writing and of living: an experience of fantasies of one’s own and fantasies that have been encountered. Not just from a geographical or art-historical perspective, either, but from a philological perspective, too—landscapes are full of life and presuppose movement, in the sense of both motion and emotion. They are landscapes of emotion in the poetic and poetological senses.

In the first instance, this involves a process of spatialization that enables the theoretical foundations of an artistic, scientific or technical sketch to become visible. The so-called spatial turn has had the effect of silently making movement—the vectoricity that is inscribed in the spaces and stimulated by movement—disappear behind the spaces that have been (re)constructed in the sketch.

This visible-making, in the sense of both visualization and rendering visible, primarily affects vectorization in the form of a landscape of theory insofar as places of movement and spaces of movement appear as highly mobile choreographies. The choreographies have (animated) vectors that take in both historically accumulated movements and movements that are prospectively anticipated in the future. Landscape is always oriented towards the future; thanks to its high movement coefficients, it explores that which horizons in motion are professing—or rather, what they are uncovering. For Humboldt, landscape alone is not simply a witness to a historical having-become, but rather an area of play for future sketches as well as sketches of the future. After all, in the future a piece of this freedom will be scientifically and artistically consolidated in the landscape.

It is precisely the aesthetic dimension and the specific liberty of artworks that mean that they do not only open up a past of represented things and undoubtedly important memory functions through their presence and presentation. More significantly, the horizon of prospective representation—a kind of prospection—is simultaneously brought into the image and into the field of vision via the artwork. This process of convergence within the artwork means that the landscapes of theory release perspectives about those parts of a theory or epistemology that are already present vectorially, but which are not yet really thought out (or indeed formulated). And it is precisely here that the aesthetic power of artistic landscape forms is located.

Beyond spatialization, landscapes of theory therefore always also have a future-oriented dimension and a prospective aesthetic power in which a future thinking-out already takes form, and in which the gaze is prepared for immanent forms of composition. It is therefore not simply a matter of consolidating that which has already been expatiated or that which can be expatiated, but also of a consolidating pre-emption of future developments pertaining to complexity and multiple connectedness. In this way, landscapes are moving images of that which stood before and that which is to come, the future: this is clearly evident in the future volcanic ascents that are shown in the drawings of the ascent of Pico del Teide on the island of Tenerife, and even in the sketch of Humboldt’s ‘Painting of Nature in the Tropics’. Un volcan peut en cacher un autre: behind one mountain is hidden another mountain; behind one landscape is hidden another. In the landscape of the present, ‘behind’ or ‘beneath’ the landscape of the present one, we prospectively read the landscapes of the future, through which we begin to roam.

These considerations may productively be linked to an anthropological and, in the broadest sense, cultural-theoretical approach that draws on the social sciences. This approach uses
the imagery of landscape to bring together the phenomena of modernity and globalization—phenomena that were of such critical importance for Alexander von Humboldt’s project about a different modernity. In his 1996 book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai, an Indian scholar working in the US, begins by sketching his own path—‘born into the ruling classes of the new nations’—and thereby produces a kind of vectoricity that is illuminating not only in terms of his autobiography. Indeed, it seems to run through all of his theoretical constructions, for these are highly influenced by notions of mobility.

In one of the most influential passages of the book, Appadurai notes the importance of considering the new cultural order on a global scale as an order that no longer allows us to think ‘in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries)—vocabulary that in many ways reminds us of Alexander von Humboldt’s sketches that span the entire world, sketches that put forward a future understanding of transareal connections that is balanced and based on an outward-facing world consciousness.

In contrast to common models of globalization and development, and even in contrast to the canonical ideas of Wallerstein or Wolf, Appadurai offers his own suggestion for five dimensions that play the role of landscapes in his text: *ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes* and *ideoscapes*. He adds that in this division of different landscapes, the common ‘-scape’ suffix is intended to point to the fact ‘that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors’.

This is how different kinds of landscapes emerge, constructed according to their chosen perspectives and the actors of the respective ‘scapes’; these are, however, also landscapes that, on account of their multiple connectedness, draw attention to their networked nature while retaining their respective ‘views’. In the interplay between situatedness and perspectival set, landscapes are formed which cannot be reflected without the vectoricity of changing perspectives. However, are these theoretical landscapes of *ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes* and *ideoscapes* to be understood as landscapes of theory or the like?

At best, these ‘scapes’ may only be considered to be landscapes of theory to a limited extent. Appadurai’s model is more interested in the general imagery of scapes than in the thinking and unfolding of concrete landscapes. This also applies to Appadurai’s intelligent idea of culture, which is sceptical towards any form of essentialism. Accordingly, the relatively open idea of culture that Appadurai develops in the first part of his volume defines ‘culture as the process of naturalizing a subset of differences that have been mobilized to articulate group identity’. This may be tied into a mobile concept of a (cultural) landscape that is oriented towards movements and flows of all kinds, whereby all of the landscape’s processes of naturalization are subjected to a critical revision. Was it not Humboldtian scholarship that developed possibilities of thinking opposed to a clear division between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, and thereby offered us possibilities for future thinking that we ought to apply in a more targeted manner in years to come? Humboldt’s landscapes of theory have not yet been properly investigated, and they open up even more diverse prospects for future paths of scientific exploration.

### Landscapes of multiple connectedness

Alexander von Humboldt’s *American Travel Journals* give us a vivid image of the slow production and emergence of ideas, and the basic principles of Humboldtian science, through the process of writing itself. Time and again, his sketches of basic theorems are literally interrupted as certain ideas appear to force their words upon him, indeed seem to harass him, to the point where he must write them down quickly or insert them into his work.
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This applies in particular to the theorem that becomes a kind of Humboldtian axiom over the course of his scientific and literary work. Midway through a sketch of his Mexican travel journey in French, Humboldt noted down an idea in German in the moment that it became clear to him; revealingly, this then appears as an insertion in his climatological–geoecological reflections:

L’évaporation, causée par la chaleur, produit le manque d’eau et de rivières, et le manque d’évaporation (source principale du froid atmosphérique) augmente la chaleur. Alles ist Wechselwirkung. Tout le plateau depuis Oaxaca à Chihuaua est de plus triste monotonie de construction. D’immenses plaines, des bassins à sol uni de 30–40 lieux carrés, généralement le triple plus long que large, dirigé le diamètre plus long du nord au sud, entourés par des collines ou hauteurs à contours uniformes et ondoyants et élevés à peine de 150–200 t. au-dessus des plaines voisines.44

That Alexander von Humboldt was an outstanding scholar who joins the ranks of a long list of scientific observers of what we now call geoecology or geoecological systems is a fact that Humboldt research has made increasingly clear, especially over the past two decades.45 The fascinating aspect of Humboldt’s outlook in the American Travel Journals is that we can see this founding principle of his thought grow more mature in a range of contexts and connections as well as in diverse disciplines and subject areas. Even if it may seem that formulations ‘reveal themselves’ to him, this is not a case of sudden inspiration.

Indeed, the fundamental realization that everything is connected to everything (if not always at the same time and place) permeates Humboldt’s thinking in every area: in his analysis of eco-systems as much as in his investigation of early American codices; in the area of geology and volcanology as much as in the history of the ‘discovery’ and conquest of the American hemisphere; in plant geography and climatology as much as in anthropology, the history of languages and zoology. As he writes his manuscript, an investigation of individual subjects is continually transformed into a pattern of relations and interdependencies that he recognizes with an increasing degree of precision. Over the course of his travels through the American tropics, Humboldt’s gaze is increasingly drawn not to individual phenomena, but to their complex multiple connectedness. Alexander von Humboldt became a researcher and thinker of a relationality that sought to apprehend everything it encountered in its multiple connectedness as well.

This is illustrated in a particularly impressive section of the abovementioned investigations of the volcanoes of the High Andes of the Quito province. His analyses draw as much on philosophical studies of historical reports on volcanic eruptions as they do on his own extensive field research, and they lead Humboldt to draw the conclusion that his investigation is less about individual volcanoes to which certain phenomena can be attributed, but rather about a volcanic landscape that is related to a multitude of communications, and that the interconnections between these communications must be researched. He emphasizes:

Je crois qu’au fond toute la province depuis Pichincha, Cotopaxi à Tungurahua, Carihuairazo, et le Sangay n’est qu’un seul Volcan, un assemblage de concavités dans lequel fermente la matière acidifiable. Toute la partie élevée de la prov. peut être regardée comme une seule montagne; ce que nous nommons Pichincha, Cotopaxi ne sont que plusieurs cimes qui couronnent cet immense dos. Ce grand Volcan a plusieurs bouche, tantôt il dirige ses matières vers Tungurahua tantôt vers Cotopaxi. [...] C’est pour cela que la terre s’ouvre où l’on l’espère le moins où extérieurement rien ne l’indique.46
Humboldt’s focus is decidedly on the connections, the ‘communications’ between individual volcanoes and volcanic eruptions that have continued to shake the province at different places through all historical eras, and especially in the 1790s, not long before his own stay in the province in 1802. Rivers would occasionally get closer to one another without converging (‘sans se communiquer’); however, at times even geographically distant volcanoes might interact and directly communicate with one another via their flowing lava. Larger distances were not of importance in this process: ‘Cela n’est rien géologiquement et l’on peut considérer la province de Los Pastos et le district de la ville comme appartenant à ce même grand Volcan que j’ai décrit.’

This is how, at the tip of Humboldt’s quill and before our eyes, a complex and multiply connected volcanic landscape is born, one that is in constant movement and in which everything appears to be connected with everything—if not always simultaneously. In this context, it is unsurprising that Humboldt very soon began to take significant interest in exploring the question of communication and relations between the most diverse parts of the earth’s surface—which is constantly in motion—by identifying certain phases of especially strong volcanic activity and positioning the activity in relation to the rest of the world.

Looking at Humboldt’s planetary landscapes—with their moving continents, torn-off islands or flood catastrophes on a biblical scale—it is already evident how, in the area of geology and especially in the field of so-called plate tectonics, Humboldt translates very diverse individual phenomena into landscapes of multiple connectedness. It is also clear that Humboldt believed that his theories lent themselves to the field of volcanological research. For here, too, was his axiom valid: everything is interrelated—especially in planetary interplay.

It is frequently possible to observe a phenomenon in the American Travel Journals that we could call (travel-literary) superposition. That is, often beneath the present journey is an earlier journey, beneath one town is a previously visited town, beneath one landscape is a landscape that has been traversed earlier (or indeed will be traversed later), which Humboldt stitches into the present movement as if it is a collage.

This also applies to individual stages of his journey through the equinoctial areas of the new continent itself. Here, the traces of landscapes through which he has travelled before (and sometimes through which he is yet to travel) appear beneath the region that is being depicted, and a complex portrait of landscape superpositions arises. Un paysage peut en cacher un autre. On the way through the Andes, the travelling group crosses the ‘Inca palace’ in Guanani, a place that Humboldt and Bonpland investigated and sketched a number of times. Here, a completely different landscape suddenly opens up in a supplementary commentary:

Malgré le froid qu’il fait à Guanani (nous eûmes 7½ ° de R.) la position de ce palais est bien belle, pittoresque. Il se trouve au sommet des Andes et on y jouit d’une vue immense sur les plaines de Puira et Lambayeque, bordé par l’horizon de la mer pacifique. Lorsque nous passâmes, ces plaines étaient couvertes d’une brume épaisse de laquelle sortaient en forme d’île les pointes des rochers situés au Sudouest et on devinait plus qu’on distinguait l’horizon de la mer. Ces groupes de rochers isolés ressemblaient à la vue des Canaries que nous eûmes du haut du Pic de Teyde.

If there is a landscape that continues to influence all others, then it is the archipelagic landscape of the Canary Islands as Humboldt saw it from the peak of Pico del Teide for the first time. This was the first (and perhaps for this reason, a very memorable) extra-European landscape that the Prussian traveller encountered.

Indeed, the relationality of the archipelago is different to that of other places or phenomena that stand in direct connection with one another, such as the volcanoes in the Quito highlands.
For the island landscape of the Canaries is a specific model of space and movement: its archipelagic structures reveal the most varied forms of landscape expression, construction and discontinuity, for example in the separation of islands from one another by water. This Humboldtian model landscape was the first extra-European landscape that he encountered, and represented an archetypal original structure (Ur-Struktur) for him. This archipelagic structuring appears in diverse texts, contexts, places and locations in the American Travel Journals. It forms the foundational landscape of theory in which Humboldt is continually interested in his writing.

Aside from the sequence of Humboldt's travels, the reason for the ubiquity of the Teide and the Canaries' archipelagic structure can be found in the fact that the islands of the archipelago reveal a basic figure of relationality and multiple connectedness, in that each island has its own logic, form and function, yet is simultaneously relationally connected to all the other islands of the archipelago.

In addition, this open relational structuring of an isolated island world and a multiply connected world of islands always points beyond the individual archipelago; it connects the different islands with islands in other archipelagos, too, via trans-archipelagic connections. Humboldt describes this concept by referring to the Canaries alongside the Caribbean archipelagos or island worlds in the American Travel Journals. For Humboldt, archipelagos are figures of multiple connectedness and therefore emblems of a relationality that is of great epistemological relevance for Humboldtian science.

For this reason, they are not only ubiquitous in his entire oeuvre, but also create a basic pattern of Humboldtian writing, a pattern that almost obsessively recurs exactly where one least expects it: in the expansive steppes of Siberia, for example, where Pico del Teide returns as seen from above, together with the Canaries' variously shaped islands. It is in his model landscape of the archipelago that Humboldt's relational, multiply connected thinking is most incisively landscape-focused. The multiple connectedness of archipelagic structuring produced in Humboldt a mode of thinking that is expressed in his cultural landscapes of the ‘Inca palaces’, with their scattering across wide disparate parts of the Inca kingdom, and in the different volcanoes in the High Andes of Quito. It was out of this structuring that his landscape of theory was born, together with its embodiment of a relational epistemology. Everything is interrelated, after all.

With their transareal connections and links, Humboldtian landscape pictures give rise to discontinuously interconnected and overlapping landscapes in which the sensory and tangibly perceptible world opens up dimensions that cannot be accessed through physical movements alone. In the view from above, Humboldt’s ‘thinking man’ becomes aware of his limits, but also of his potential for a life with broader connections that are continually expanding. He is developing a world consciousness that longs for more distant worlds while focusing on a concrete place. Thus it is not in Kosmos that landscapes extending beyond the planetary emerge for the first time. For there is no single place in which the entire world in its great diversity is accessible to the traveller, writer and scientist at once. Nowhere is there a place in which everything exists. As a result, everything is always characterized by something missing, a lack that longs for transareal landscape images with their superpositions.

If there is no place of wholeness, if there is always something missing, then the vectorization of one’s own life is the necessary consequence. This is brought about through an interplay between physical and emotional movement at first, but there are also those landscapes that emerge out of Apollonian intelligence and Dionysian passion, landscapes that may still be considered landscapes of theory. These are landscapes of a theory of the world, landscapes of a theory of humankind: landscapes of a life that does not wish to be satisfied with the limitations of the planetary.

Translated from German by Leila Mukhida.
Notes

1 Michel Butor, ‘Paysages planétaires,’ in Oeuvres complètes, Vol. XII: Poésies 3 (2003–2009), ed. Mireille Calle-Gruber (Paris: La Différence, 2010), 738. I would like to thank Patrick Suter (University of Bern, Switzerland) for kindly drawing my attention to the text.


3 Butor, Paysages planétaires, 740.

4 Ibid., 746.

5 Ibid., 747.

6 Ibid., 748.

7 Ibid., 750.

8 Ibid., 751.

9 Ibid., 759.

10 Ibid.

11 For more about the epistemology of this movement concept, see Ottmar Ette, TransArea: Eine literarische Globalisierungsgeschichte (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012).

12 See also the keynote I gave at the conference organized by Julio Ortega, entitled ‘El Valle Longitudinal: Alejandro de Humboldt y las relaciones transatlánticas’ (VII International Conference on Transatlantic Studies, ‘After Transitions/Global Humanities/Transatlantic XXI Century’, Brown University, Providence, RI, 22 April 2015).

13 Alexander von Humboldt, Amerikanische Reisetagebcher, Tagebuch I, 47r–53r.

14 Ibid., 50r.


17 Neef, Gesicht der Erde, 700.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.


21 Ibid., 144.

22 Ibid., 179.


24 See Christoph Menke, Kraft: Ein Grundbegriff ästhetischer Anthropologie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008).


29 Humboldt, Amerikanische Reisetagebcher, Tagebuch III, 39r–39v, 1.

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36 Ibid., 32.


40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 12.

42 Ibid., 15.


45 See also Ulrich Grober, ‘Humboldt, Haeckel und 50 Jahre Ökologie’ in Ette and Drews, *Horizonte*.


47 Ibid., Tagebuch VII bb u. c, 22v, 1.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., bb u. c, 58r, 3.


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von Humboldt, Alexander. Amerikanische Reisetagebücher, Tagebuch I, 47r–53r.


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