

REVIEW ARTICLE

NEVER LOST IN HIMALAYAN SPACE

Mark Turin

Himalayan Languages Project
Leiden University
The Netherlands

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Overview

Getting anthropologists and linguists to contribute articles for a shared volume can be as risky as asking genetically close but socially estranged cousins to have dinner together. Whilst both the academics and the cousins might have a great deal in common, something appears to have gone sour at an early stage in their relationship, and attempts at dialogue may be strained to say the least. Given these challenges, the achievement of Balthasar Bickel and Martin Gaenszle in editing *Himalayan Space: Cultural Horizons and Practices* is all the more impressive. In this well-conceived and beautifully designed collection, Bickel and Gaenszle have gathered together seven essays by accomplished scholars working with various Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups in Nepal. The essays range from the anthropologically linguistic to the linguistically anthropological, and the quality of the writing demonstrates that the contributors have a deep understanding of both the theoretical issues of their discipline and notable respect for the ethnic communities with which they work. Although each of the seven contributions deals with a different feature of one of the groups making up Nepal's ethnic mosaic, they all address "the question of how notions of space and landscape find expression in Himalayan cultural traditions, languages, and practices" (page 9).

As a tribute to the successful collaboration between anthropologists and linguists, it comes as no surprise that Dr. Nick Allen's name occurs so frequently, both in the text of the contributions and in the bibliographical references. The editors of the volume are right to single Allen out for special praise for his pioneering research on the anthropology of Himalayan space. While Allen's 1972 article in the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* kick-started the discussion on the "interrelationship between physical space and the representations of this space" (page 9), the editors of the volume make it clear in their *Introduction* that the debate has progressed in the 25 years that have elapsed since the publication of his "seminal study" (page 10) on Thulung Rai symbolic classification and language. Bickel and Gaenszle speak in particular of a "convergence in the last decades between the social and cognitive sciences, especially between anthropology and linguistics" (page 9), and while this genuine *rapprochement* is to be applauded, there is still a long way to go. The institutionalisation of anthropology and linguistics in universities, and the resulting explosion of new departments in these disciplines, has spawned a plethora of short-lived and ever-changing theoretical affiliations. This institutionalisation, however, has not itself led to greater understanding between anthropologists and linguists. The real co-operation and shared vision has not so much a disciplinary basis as a practical one, and it is shared by only a particular subgroup of researchers of each discipline: the fieldworkers. At the other extreme, 'armchair anthropologists' and theoretical linguists still have, on the whole, as little in common with each other as they did 30 years ago, and many continue to view each other's disciplines with a mixture of bemusement and professional mistrust. As unpalatable as linguistic jargon is to anthropologists, so too is the nebulous relativisation of anthropology infuriating to linguists. Only when jargon and vague cultural observations are dispensed with, in the manner so aptly demonstrated in *Himalayan Space*, can prejudices be overcome and real dialogue begin.

Readers interested in spatial categories in the Himalayan region would be well-advised to read Bickel and Gaenszle's *Introduction* with care. Prior to introducing the contributions to the volume at hand, they offer a concise and well-written overview of the literature and themes that have influenced writings in the field to date (pages 9 to 19).

One of the most interesting points raised in the *Introduction* is of two main constructions of "cultural landscape" at play in the Himalayan region,

what the philosopher of visual media John Berger might have called ‘ways of seeing’. The Nepalese ‘hill’ conception is based on cardinal directions and mountain inclinations, whilst the Indic pattern relies more heavily on “body-based notions” (page 17). The editors are careful to present these two dominant ideas not as a binary structural opposition, but rather as non-competing spatial conceptions, both of which can exist within a community but be loaded with “different cultural valuations” (page 19). Despite this prudent disclaimer, it is clear that the Nepalese ‘hill’ model is more pervasive and “transparent” in Kiranti societies (page 17), whilst the Indic spatial construction is more clearly manifested in Newar culture. This theoretical construct serves as a useful framework for the whole volume.

The Contributions

The first essay in the volume, written by **Gérard Toffin**, offers a thoughtful analysis of spatial categories among the **Newars** of Kathmandu. According to Toffin, the aim of the article is to “analyse the ways the Newars think about separateness, spatial closure and boundaries” and to “open up a dialogue” between anthropologists and linguists (page 34). He succeeds in both arenas. His analysis of Newar spatial organisation places an understandable emphasis on the “concept of boundary” by which each spatial unit has an interior and an exterior delimiting the penetration or involvement of the outside world, and Toffin sees this as suiting the “general introversion of Newar society” (page 33). Moreover, he presents a convincing argument for suggesting that the pattern of enclosure of spatial units has been further reinforced by the *maṇḍala* model so prevalent in Newar settlements and places of worship. Domestic buildings, temples and even the palaces of the Kathmandu Valley all constitute “enclosed spaces, segregated from the outside by clear boundaries” (page 50), borders which play a key role in the “symbolic conception of space” (page 67). The main body of Toffin’s contribution is a detailed presentation of the inside-outside opposition in different realms of Newar life, ranging through the domestic, religious and architectural spheres. Although he presents his findings as schematic binary contrasts (see Table 2, page 67), Toffin convincingly argues that the relationship between two domains (the inside and outside) is “not one of simple opposition” (*ibid.*), and that the opposition is in fact complementary. Rituals related to boundaries, he writes, can be defined as “a means to unify contrasts and transactions with the environment outside”

(*ibid.*), a conclusion well-supported by his thorough description and careful analysis.

The second essay, by **Balthasar Bickel**, deals with **Belhare** cultural practices and language, both of which point to “a certain spatial structure of doing things, perceiving experiences and reasoning about the world in a ‘Belhare way’” (page 77). Bickel’s contribution is a genuine intellectual foray into cultural formalism in Belhara, and through his precise analysis, the reader is given an insight into the spatial ordering of this community and their language. With well-chosen examples, the author demonstrates that in common with other Kiranti societies, the left/right opposition is less pervasive in Belhara than “patterns and regulations” invoking up/down (page 74). There is a fascinating discussion on page 86 concerning *cautārs* (resting places), and how their distribution on the hill “inscribes into the landscape the mythological past and, thereby, power relations derived from it”. Bickel’s suggestion that “cultural practices are not fixed forever, but are constantly open to negotiation” (page 89) is an overtly anthropological statement and reaffirms his commitment to the interdisciplinary character of the volume. However, his division of spatial operations into the ecomorphic, geomorphic, arismorphic and physiomorphic (pages 79-80), may not appeal to some readers wary of neologisms. Bickel’s point is nevertheless an important one: “cultural formalism in Belhara draws upon five basic spatial operation types, each with its own geometry” (page 91), but his word choice at points obscures otherwise lucid observations: “an ecomorphically computed spatial trajectory is one where a perceived spatial division in the environment anchors the formal realisation of practices and cultural inscription” (page 80).

Broadly speaking, Bickel’s conclusion is that spatial language and spatialised cultural formalism both depend on, and construct patterns of, verticality and geography. Given the interlinked nature of thought and speech that he so carefully describes in Belhara, this parallelism comes as no surprise. The only real question which remains is the causative direction of this parallelism, and Bickel’s verdict is that the “homology between cultural formalism and language...is probably not due to a monodirectional Whorfian effect”, but rather that the existing homology “relies on a common cognitive world”, which in its turn is “closely related to the daily physical experience of people who do not travel much beyond the limits of their hill” (page 97). Bickel’s final paragraph makes a bold assertion that initiates a further debate on landscape and language. If, as he asserts, the ‘up

and down of landscape' is so inextricably linked to "much of what is characteristic of the Belhare way of life", then what will happen to the language (not to mention the "common cognitive world") if and when the Belhare become more mobile? As ever-increasing numbers of rural villagers flock to Kathmandu for work and study, and as remote valleys all over the country are electrified, 'developed' and given motor road access, how will this affect the "spatial language and spatialised cultural formalism" (page 93) of communities like the Belhare? These issues could form the basis of an intriguing follow-up study.

Karen Ebert's paper documents and analyses UP-DOWN marking in some of the **Kiranti** languages of Eastern Nepal and addresses its importance as a "cultural concept in Rai mythology" (page 105). The article is clearly written, the data cogently analysed and her thesis well-argued with the help of interesting comparisons and clear tables, making this contribution a pleasure to read. Ebert takes the reader through the various grammatical realms and lexical forms that index direction or spatial trajectory in Kiranti languages, including case markers, roots, adverbs and verbs. Whilst many languages have some grammaticalised form to indicate altitudinal level, Ebert posits that the marking of relative altitude in demonstratives and in the locative case system in Kiranti is "unique among the world's languages" (*ibid.*). The UP-DOWN dimension is particularly clearly specified in verbs of motion which "describe a trajectory from a higher, lower or same-level place to the place of orientation" (page 113). Other spatial dimensions and orientations play but a minor role in Rai languages: cardinal directions are often reduced to UP (north) and DOWN (south), human body orientations are largely absent, and RIGHT-LEFT and IN-OUT distinctions are "marginal" (page 115). Having demonstrated the pervasiveness of altitudinal terms in these languages, Ebert then turns her attention to Rai mythology, and through carefully chosen examples, she conclusively demonstrates the "cultural embedding" of the linguistic system. According to Ebert's analysis, the UP-DOWN distinction is central to the mythologies of the Rai peoples. UP carries the association of "barrenness of the high mountains,...poverty, but also...clean springs" and DOWN indicates "fertility and wealth, but also...uncleanness" (page 116). This "culturally relevant" opposition is both "based on geographical conditions" and "transposed onto the immediate environment" (page 124), but as Ebert points out, if there were "such a natural connection between environment and grammatical categories, one would expect the same

categories to exist also in other mountain areas” (page 125). Ebert acknowledges that most Camling speakers fail to use the altitudinal cases in everyday speech, and that the use of these grammaticalised forms seems to be restricted to the domain of mythological texts and cycles (page 116). As she goes on to suggest, one hypothesis could be that altitudinal cases developed first in ritual language, and only then “drained into everyday language” (pages 126-127). Ebert concludes with a timely reminder that categories in endangered languages “not present in the prestigious language—here Nepali—tend to be dropped first” (page 127).

Any student or scholar interested in the relationship between anthropology and linguistics would do well to read with care the final section of Ebert’s article. Entitled *Language and environment*, these three pages offer a lucid presentation of the issues central to the volume as a whole. The uniqueness of a locative case system for indexing relative altitude raises serious anthropological and linguistic questions. As Ebert herself writes: “Why would a subgroup of languages grammaticalize such forms? One could easily lapse into ethnopsychological speculations here” (page 125). Ebert wisely avoids the unsatisfying and deterministic argument, and in place thereof opts for a far more prudent explanation worth citing in full:

Nobody today would go so far as to claim a predictable relationship between language and environment nor between language and culture. On the other hand it is trivial that certain pertinent traits of the environment tend to find some expression in language, and that culture and language form an intricate system of interdependencies. It is therefore not unlikely that the prevailing importance of the UP-DOWN dimension in religious beliefs, in the ever present mythological recitations, and in everyday life has led to its grammaticalization. (page 127)

In the following essay, **Martin Gaenszle**, the co-editor of the volume, addresses two major questions affecting spatial organisation in Kiranti communities in Eastern Nepal. He first evaluates the role of the vertical dimension in ritual journeys and thereafter turns to how “this verticality [is] constructed in the ritual texts” (page 137). In common with the other contributors to the volume, Gaenszle notes the “pervasive use of vertical oppositions in both cultural categories as well as linguistic expression”

among the Rai ethnic groups (page 135), but his particular focus is on how **Mewahang Rai** oral ritual texts have “apparently preserved complex cultural notions in a relatively ‘archaic’ linguistic form” (page 136). The article is divided into two sections, the first deals with three different types of Mewahang ritual journey, the *Ma:maŋme*, the *nāgi* and the *Sarañdew*, and the second section offers an insightful analysis of some of the “grammatical forms through which the spatial orientation is projected” (page 150). Regarding the journeys themselves, Gaenszle raises a few important points. Whilst ritual journeys are documented in many areas inhabited by shamanistically-oriented ethnic groups, the intriguing feature of the Himalayan region in particular is that these journeys are “not only mythic...(as in other parts of the world) but journeys through the real landscape and thus combine cosmological notions with the known geography” (pages 136-137). Moreover, as Gaenszle goes on to explain, Mewahang ritual journeys are “based on images and concepts of not only a mythic geography...but also of a vertically layered universe which the ritual experts have to traverse in both, upward and downward, directions” (page 149).

In his discussion of the salient linguistic forms which occur in the ritual journeys described above, Gaenszle draws the reader’s attention to an important discovery. Whilst it is not uncommon for a ritual journey to be “strongly anchored in the situational context of the performance site and its environment” (page 150), it is striking that in all cases, the “deictic origin (i.e. the point from which the situation is viewed) is the physical position of the priest” (page 156). Gaenszle’s analysis thus goes further than simply repeating the well-attested observation that “the vertical dimension is deeply inscribed into the Rai languages” (page 150). He demonstrates how the movement of the tribal priest up and down the river “reveals the basic notion that the Rai see themselves as living in the middle level of a grand mountain slope which ascends towards the north and descends towards the south” (page 157). In line with Bickel and Ebert, Gaenszle also raises the all important question as to the “interrelationship of cultural categories and linguistic expression” (page 157), and he offers a restrained conclusion:

Neither can one say that it was culture that has shaped the form of the language nor that it was the language that has shaped the symbolism of the culture. It is likely, however, that both spheres have influenced each other... (page 159)

The real conclusion to the question of the importance of the vertical dimension to the ritual journeys of the Mewahang Rai is not the paragraph cited above but rather Gaenszle's insightful verdict that the vertical axis "can be seen as an ancestral axis: both UP as well [sic] DOWN are associated strongly with the ancestral forces. Thus the journeys appear to be a switch of dimensions" (page 160). When seen in this light, the notions that underlie the verbal and physical wanderings of the Mewahang are placed in a genuinely illuminating context.

Michael Oppitz's analysis of the body of myths chanted by **Northern Magar** shamans focuses specifically on cardinal directions, and in so doing, demonstrates the depth of his ethnographic insight. Couched in the explicitly spatial terminology of 'layers' and 'axes', Oppitz describes how this society 'thinks space' and how we, as researchers, might best make sense of these "various collective space concepts" (page 167). The specific myths dealt with in this chapter fall into two classes, *genesis stories* and *auxiliary myths*, and in the course of his elucidation, Oppitz points out some of the underlying structural elements of these oral accounts. Of particular note is the paragraph dealing with what he calls *tribal mandalisation*: the fact that "the cardinal directions are correlated with supernatural beings", or from another perspective: "different beings of the spiritual world are attributed to or associated with different points of the compass" (page 181). This bold assertion is supported by a wealth of ethnographic data which demonstrate that "Magar spatial ideas cannot be reduced to a single dimension" (page 197). The picture that Oppitz paints is rather one of "a variety of orientations", including "side by side: two linear ones, one along an east-west, the other along a north-south axis" (*ibid.*), not to mention "three cosmic layers—empyrean sky, human earth and chthonian Netherworld" (page 200). His most crucial point, however, is that Magar conceptions of space are not abstract and isolating but rather fit into the geographical conditions which are "projected onto the pre-existing landscape" (*ibid.*). Whilst "some of the canonical genesis myths" do not exhibit "geographical exactitude" (page 190), the same should not be said of "soul-searching songs". According to Oppitz's analysis, the sites visited in these songs are:

real place-names of villages, river-crossings, restplaces and landmarks. They are geographically exact: one could draw a reliable trekking map with them. (page 189)

Northern Magar conceptions of space, are both conceptually sophisticated and rooted in the concrete experience of landscape. The final paragraph of Oppitz's contribution clearly sums up his point and is worth citing in full:

By superimposing the vertical layers of the tripartite universe onto the north-south axis of geographical reality, Magar space inventors have opened the door for multiple metaphorical passages from one realm to the other. And the unimaginable and intangible cosmos becomes visible... (page 200)

The penultimate contribution to the volume is by **András Höfer** and deals with the “verbal movements across space” (page 205) of a **Western Tamang** group in Dhādīng district of Central Nepal. Fittingly entitled *Nomen est numen*, Höfer's paper carefully approaches the issues of “the function and conceptual foundation of a specific pattern of place-name enumeration to be found in ritual texts” (ibid.) which are part of the oral tradition of the community with whom he works. A specific concern of the author, and a question to which he devotes some space to in his article, is whether the oral enumerations of this Tamang group correspond to what are commonly referred to as “ritual journeys” in the anthropological literature. Somewhat similar to Oppitz's approach, Höfer posits that these verbal journeys take place in the “concrete, physical landscape” (page 222) and not in “imaginary regions”, and further points out that they follow “individual, ritual-specific ‘itineraries’” (page 205-206).

This 40-page article is full to the brim of interesting and interwoven observations about the verbal and ritual acts of the Western Tamang. One of Höfer's main points is that although many rituals “open with, or culminate in” the invocation or embodiment of a divinity (page 209), the “name of the place takes precedence over the name of the superhuman being which controls and inhabits the place, as shown by the fact that many places occur without any mention of the divinity” (page 217). It is from this absolutely key finding that the present article draws its title. A further central point is that:

some of the most important shamanic journeys lead northwards and are explicitly said to have as their destination the mythical site of Tamang ethno-genesis and to follow the route the ancestors took during their migration from Tibet to the present settlement area in central Nepal. (page 221)

The final article in the volume, by Judith Pettigrew, also raises the above issue with regard to the Tamu-mai (Gurung) in Central Nepal. In Höfer's analysis however, the northward verbal journey "reverses the narrative chain of myth" (page 222). Instead of progressing from a point of origin to the present, as one would expect a standard myth to do, these journeys, the "structural backbone of the text" (page 212), return back into the myth. As Höfer so eloquently puts it, such a journey starts out in the "human "here-and-now" and proceeds "back" to divine origins" (page 222). When seen in this light, the "conceptual logic" of the oral texts would seem to be a "mimetic ritual technique applied to reduce distance (distance in space and time, between the physical and the metaphysical)", a particularly interesting paradox since "distance is reduced precisely by 'realising' it: it first has to be walked in words" (page 226-227).

The final five pages of Höfer's article are devoted to the historical background of these verbal itineraries and the wider Tibeto-Burman context, and thus make for very interesting reading. Höfer is careful not to make ungrounded assertions, but he does suggest some intriguing possibilities. The itineraries of the *syibda* recitation, for example, he quite plausibly suggests, might "ultimately go back to a former regional cult which involved not only Tamang, but also other population groups" (page 229). More generally speaking, the prototype of the modern Tamang verbal journey may be derived from "physical journeys undertaken in the cult of territorial divinities among ancient Bodic-speakers" (page 233). The historical transition from physical to verbal, he adds, may be in part due to the fact that the latter provided a "means of saving time, costs and physical effort" (*ibid.*). This conclusion would then support Nick Allen's "cautiously formulated suggestion" that that the "verbal or symbolically enacted ritual journeys might derive ultimately from earlier physical journeys, such as processions" (page 230). And this in turn quite naturally leads to the well-supported inference that "enumerations of places and local gods in some of the latter rituals can probably be regarded as survival of the ancient pattern of the verbal journey" (page 231).

As can be seen from the above citations, Höfer's contribution is as ethnographically rigorous as it is intellectually insightful, and all readers would be well advised to pay special attention to the far-reaching conclusions of this article. Tucked away in an endnote, moreover, is a brilliantly-worded defence of native exegesis over anthropological abstraction, rounded off with a timely reminder that the Tibeto-Burman

languages of Nepal are not degraded forms of high Tibetan but dynamic and living tongues in their own right:

It should be stressed that my interpretation is based on the exegesis by my informants and attempts to render what the texts mean “here and now” to those by whom and for whom they are being sung or recited. This principle is followed on the understanding that despite certain gaps in the informants’ exegesis, meaning cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context of the performance, and that despite some archaic forms and despite numerous borrowings from Tibetan, the language of the texts in question is Tamang, rather than some sort of corrupt Tibetan. Etymological meanings serve to throw some light on the sources and the development of Tamang oral tradition, rather than to “correct” present meanings as given by the informants. (note 3, page 234-235)

Höfer’s emphasis is welcome: Himalayan ethnic groups and their cultures are all too often portrayed as being a deviant or archaic branch of one of the ‘great’ traditions which eventually subsume them, rather than as viable cultural entities in their own right.

The final contribution in the volume is by **Judith Pettigrew** and situates **Tamu** (Gurung) shamanic practice in a “wider discourse about history and identity” (page 247). According to Pettigrew, the Tamu “multi-dimensional” link to the landscape operates at both a “physical and conceptual” level (*ibid.*), and she offers an interesting comparative contrast to the situation described by Höfer in the preceding chapter. Whilst Höfer’s conclusion focuses on the creation of verbal journeys from physical ones, Pettigrew explains how the “conceptual landscape of a shamanic journey has been made physically explicit and why urban-dwelling Tamu activists have chosen to re-enact the shaman’s ritual journey on the ground” (*ibid.*). Pettigrew carefully demonstrates that ‘thinking landscape’ has important political dimensions and that the “parallel between shamanic and historical geography has only become explicit to the Tamu-mai since the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990” (page 248). Given the increasingly political nature of ethnicity in Nepal, her focus on conflict and discourse is welcome, as it is noticeably absent from the other contributions to the present volume.

A particularly fascinating section of Pettigrew's article deals with the Tamu encounter with archaeology, specifically the collaboration between the *TPLS* (often rendered in English as the Tamu Religious and Cultural Organisation) and archaeologists at the University of Cambridge. As Pettigrew writes:

Archaeological research has plotted new routes into the landscape of the ancestors. The land has been re-mapped but in a different way and the archaeological maps do not always coincide with the existing interpretations. The new maps provided by the archaeologists have expanded indigenous understandings of the landscape and have also provided new material for interpretation. (page 259)

In short then, as this article aptly demonstrates, the “encounter with archaeology has generated a degree of accessibility to a previously closed ancestral world” (page 260). Physical journeys, particularly when backed up by Western science, can thus be used to prove the “historical ‘authenticity’ of the shamanic version of history, which can be counterposed against what now appears as the historical inauthenticity of the Hinduised version” (page 260-261). Moreover, Pettigrew does not limit her analysis to the description of this encounter, but rather goes on to make some insightful anthropological observations on the nature of identity, landscape and journeying in the Tamu context. She convincingly argues that identities are tied to a landscape which is “simultaneously shamanic, historic, and contemporary”, a landscape which stretches to the “land of origin” in the north to the “eminently non-Hindu” south (page 249). And since identity is intimately tied up with place, journeying directly contributes to its construction, particularly given the “already established role that the ritual journey plays in the ongoing re-creation of identity” (page 264). Journeys into the historical landscape are thus “simultaneously journeys into the geographical and metaphorical landscape of the shamanic” (page 265), and as Pettigrew concludes:

History in landscape is being relocated and re-created it by those who have never left the landscape—the shamans. As interest is refocused on the past, it is simultaneously refocused on the shamanic. (page 265)

Somewhat akin to Höfer, Pettigrew makes a couple of extremely important points in footnotes which might have been better situated in the main text. Anthropologists involved in cultural preservation and ethno-activism should take note of the following, which deserves citing in full:

Saving culture is simultaneously changing culture. The activities of preservationists are leading to the emergence of innovative and syncretic cultural forms which have their origins in the past but their expression in the present. Change is thus taking place in the guise of continuity, and the process is facilitating the emergence of new Tamu identities.
(note 11, page 268)

Conclusion

Himalayan Space is an excellent collection of well-written articles by scholars working in the Nepal Himalayas. The type setting and layout by Andreas Isler are superb and should be singled out for special praise. His beautiful design clearly demonstrates that the impact of such a book has as much to do with its form as with its content, and the photos between the chapters are a welcome visual break. The thematic backdrop to the volume as a whole has encouraged the contributors to address issues rather than disciplines, an increasingly common approach in Nepal studies. The success of this volume may be, in no small part, due to the relative seniority of the scholars involved: some have been working in the Himalayan region for over 30 years. This time depth, together with the important perspective that it surely brings, has facilitated greater inter-disciplinary thinking through the reanalysis and recombination of fieldwork findings in new ways.

While reading the *Introduction* by the editors, I was particularly reminded of the writings of John Berger. When I found an old BBC copy of *Ways of Seeing*, I noted with interest that it was first published in 1972, the same year as Nick Allen's seminal article. Some of the 'ways of thinking' put forward in *Himalayan Space* seem so reminiscent of Berger's own writing that there is no better way to conclude this review than with a citation from Berger himself:

Seeing comes before words...It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are

surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled...If we accept that we can see that hill over there, we propose that from that hill we can be seen. The reciprocal nature of vision is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue. (pages 7-9)

Notes

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