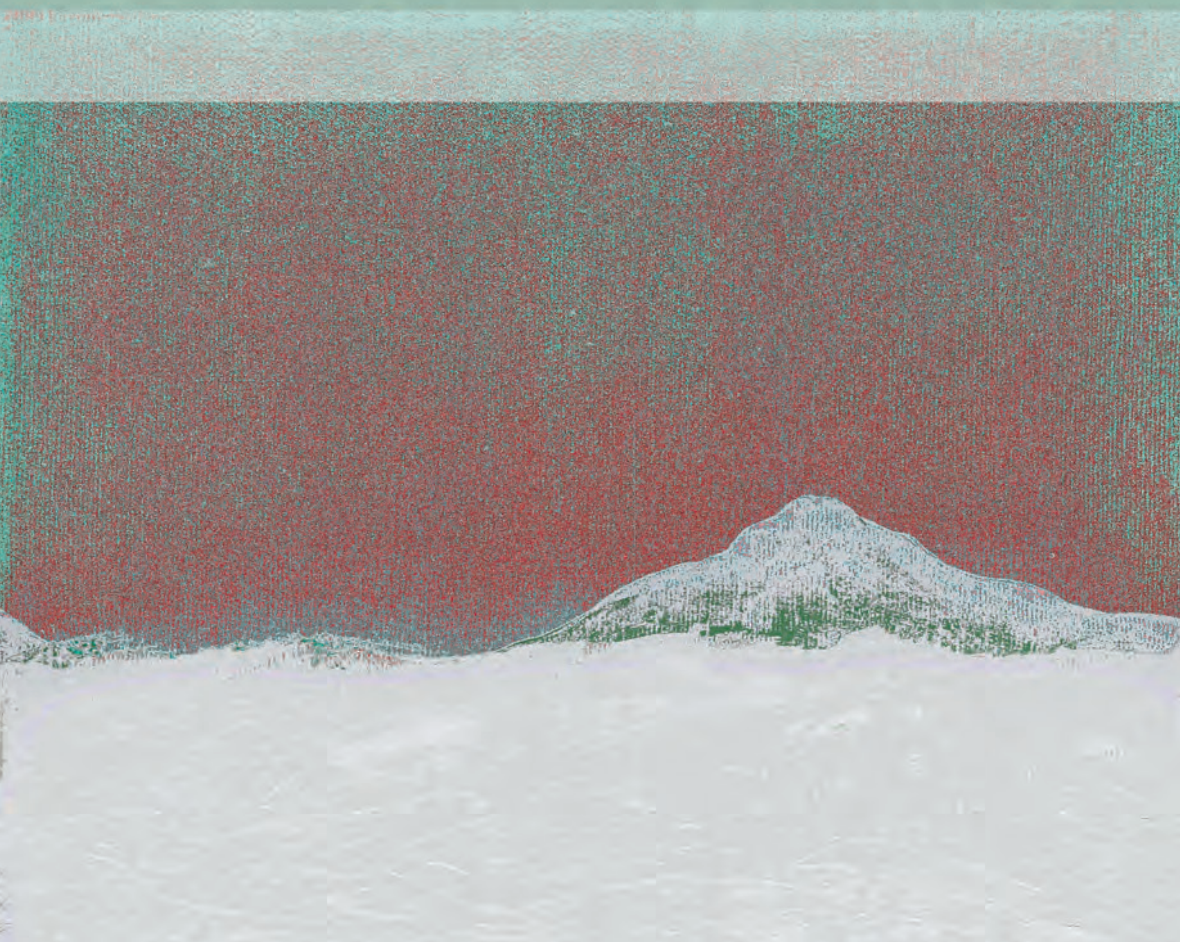


GLOBAL MOUNTAIN CINEMA

EDITED BY CHRISTIAN QUENDLER, CAROLINE SCHAUHANN,
AND KAMAAL HAQUE



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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
13 Infirmay Street
Edinburgh EH1 1LT

Typeset in 10/12.5 pt Sabon by
by Cheshire Typesetting Ltd, Cuddington, Cheshire, and
printed and bound in Great Britain

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 3995 1997 7 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 3995 1999 1 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 3995 2000 3 (epub)

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CONTENTS

List of Figures	viii
Acknowledgments	xi
List of Contributors	xiii

Introduction	1
<i>Christian Quendler, Caroline Schaumann, and Kamaal Haque</i>	

PART I GENRE

1. Cinematic Mountains: The World and Vision from a Height <i>Tom Gunning</i>	21
2. Ski Comedy: On the Light Side of Mountain Film <i>Eva-Maria Müller</i>	35
3. High and Low: Porosity in the Neapolitan Anthology Film <i>I vesuviani</i> (<i>The Vesuvians</i> , 1997) and Mario Martone's Episode "The Ascent" <i>Daniel Winkler</i>	51
4. Inversions of Mountain Cinema: Post-Humanist Ethics and Aesthetics in Zhao Liang's <i>Behemoth</i> (2015) <i>Christian Quendler</i>	67

PART II NATION

5. Creative Geography and Volcanic Mountains: Arnold Fanck's *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937) as Mountain Film
Qinna Shen 87
6. Scaling the Mountain, Elevating the Nation: The “Golden Age of Himalayan Climbing” on Film
Harald Höbusch 111
7. Unshaming *Brokeback Mountain*: Rocking *Heimat* in Transnational Coming-Out Mountain Movies
Ralph J. Poole 129
8. Transcultural Negotiations of Mountain Aesthetics in *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017)
Sophia Mehrbrey 149

PART III ENVIRONMENT

9. Leni Riefenstahl's Mountain Films: Ecologizing the Genre
Kamaal Haque 167
10. A Glacial Pace? Mountain Cinema and the Imagination of Climate Change
Alexa Weik von Mossner 179
11. From *Locus Amoenus* to *Locus Absurdum*: Skiing at the End of Nature in Ruben Östlund's *Force Majeure* (2014)
Caroline Schaumann 193
12. Festival Obscura: Gender in Festival-Driven Mountaineering Documentaries
Julie Rak 209

PART IV MEDIA

13. *The Evening Rains in Bashan*: Mountains in Chinese Cinema in 1980
Mia Yinxing Liu 227
14. Film, Memory, and Intermediality: Exploring the Andes in *La cordillera de los sueños* (2019)
Michael Fuchs and Anna Marta Marini 243

15.	Liberating the Captured Image: <i>Bergfilm</i> Legacies and Digital Technologies in <i>Free Solo</i> (2018) and <i>The Alpinist</i> (2021) <i>Seth Peabody</i>	261
16.	Geological Platforms, Embodied Infrastructures: On the Mountains in <i>Death Stranding</i> (2019) <i>Daniel Reynolds</i>	277
	Index	291

FIGURES

0.1	Humboldt's <i>Geographia plantarum lineamenta</i> (1817)	4
0.2	Berghaus's <i>Physikalischer Atlas</i> (1845–1848)	5
2.1	<i>Habitus clivé</i> and the comic skier in <i>Max fait du ski</i> (1910)	41
2.2	Comic assemblage and the human locomotive in <i>Der große Sprung</i> (1927)	42
2.3	“Schneepalast” Berlin (1927)	46
4.1	Human displacement and cinematic refractions of reality in <i>Behemoth</i> (2015)	71
4.2	<i>Behemoth's</i> (2015) mythopoetic journey from a bygone idyll through the inferno and purgatory of mining to ghostly real-estate “paradise”	73
5.1	Teruo's parental house and Mt. Fuji are conflated in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	90
5.2	Mountain views through a window in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937) and in <i>Der heilige Berg</i> (1926)	91
5.3	Crater shot of Mt. Aso and of the Mt. Yake crater in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	92
5.4	Eruption of Mt. Asama in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	94
5.5	The fuming Mt. Yake in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	97
5.6	Teruo chasing after Mitsuko in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	98

5.7	Teruo's hand and foot close to a fumarole in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	99
5.8	Horned devil holding a noose in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	101
5.9	Cover of the tourist guide "How to See Beppu," Beppu Municipal Office 1935	102
5.10	Buddha juxtaposed with Enma, King of Hell, in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	103
5.11	Amida Buddha accompanied by the <i>bosatsu</i> Jizo in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	103
5.12	A close-up of Buddha with a spiky corona in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	104
5.13	Mitsuko wearing her wedding kimono in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	105
5.14	A triple exposure rendering Teruo dreaming of the rescue in <i>Die Tochter des Samurai</i> (1937)	106
6.1	Maurice Herzog in <i>Victoire sur l'Annapurna</i> (1953)	114
6.2	Science in <i>The Conquest of Everest</i> (1953)	118
6.3	Celebrating the German ascent in <i>Nanga Parbat 1953</i>	121
6.4	Italian unity in <i>Italia K2</i> (1955)	124
8.1	Austrian Alps in <i>Tiger Zinda Hai</i> (2017)	152
8.2	Snowboarding in <i>Tiger Zinda Hai</i> (2017)	153
8.3	Domesticating the exotic Alps in <i>Tiger Zinda Hai</i> (2017)	154
11.1	Family photography session in <i>Force Majeure</i> (2014)	198
11.2	Family photographs in <i>Force Majeure</i> (2014)	198
11.3	Cables in the snow in <i>Force Majeure</i> (2014)	200
11.4	Abandoning the bus in <i>Force Majeure</i> (2014)	204
13.1	Mountains of Sichuan in <i>Bashan yeyu</i> (1980)	228
13.2	Mountains as markers of the journey along the river in <i>Bashan yeyu</i> (1980)	234
14.1	Astronomical observatories on mountaintops in <i>Nostalgia de la luz</i> (2010)	245
14.2	Composite illustration of the vertical pan that showcases the north-south expanse of the Andes in <i>El botón de nácar</i> (2015)	246
14.3	A highly symbolic volcanic eruption in <i>La cordillera de los sueños</i> (2019)	248
14.4	The Andes and Santiago at their feet in <i>La cordillera de los sueños</i> (2019)	250
14.5	A selection of individual frames illustrating the transition from a painting of the Andes in the subway station (captured on film) to motion pictures of the Andes in <i>La cordillera de los sueños</i> (2019)	254

FIGURES

14.6	The transition from a map of the region to the Andes evokes the cartographic function of cinema in <i>La cordillera de los sueños</i> (2019)	257
15.1	Opening title of <i>Free Solo</i> (2018)	266
15.2	Torre Egger in <i>The Alpinist</i> (2021)	272

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Like a film production or mountain expedition, this book is the result of lasting and trusted teamwork. Christian Quendler’s research project “Delocating Mountains: Cinematic Landscapes and the Alpine Model” (2020–2024), funded by the Austrian Science Fund, provided the network for a longstanding collaboration that helped to shape this volume. The three of us convened on the alpine-urban campus of the University of Innsbruck in June 2022, at the Third International Mountain Film Studies Workshop “Global Circuits of Mountain Cinema,” where we hosted a roundtable presenting initial ideas for this anthology. In the years prior, we had already gathered at Innsbruck for the workshops “Alpine Americas” (2020) and “Global Mountain Cinema” (2021) as well as the international conference “Mountains & Cinema” (2021), all organized by Eva-Maria Müller and Christian Quendler. At these events, we were able to build our team of contributors. We thank all participants for their productive input. Our special gratitude goes to Eva-Maria Müller, who accompanied this research initiative from its very beginnings, Daniel Winkler for organizing two follow-up workshops at the University of Heidelberg (2022 and 2024), and Michael Fuchs for his editorial work on the manuscript. What a fitting conclusion it is that we gathered once again at Innsbruck University in November 2024 for a symposium on “Transatlantic Mountain Cinema.”

This book would not exist without the engaged support of the team at Edinburgh University Press. Commissioning Editor Gillian Leslie and Assistant Editor Kelly O’Brien of Film Studies were phenomenal to work with, offering

unwavering support and quick and helpful advice when needed. We are most grateful to the editors of the *Traditions in World Cinema* Series, Linda Badley and R. Barton Palmer, and appreciate the effective feedback of the reviewers. Stefanie Pörnbacher and Hilde Wolfmeyer at Innsbruck University were extremely helpful with the final preparation of the manuscript and the index.

We furthermore thank: Harald Höbusch and the team at *Colloquia Germanica* as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their assistance with an earlier publication, the special volume *Beyond the Classical Bergfilm* (2023, co-edited by Kamaal Haque and Christian Quendler); Emory University's Hightower Fund for supporting a memorable lecture by Quendler, "Mining Movies in the Age of Cinematic (Post)Humanism," at Emory in 2023; the US Fulbright Program for hosting Eva-Maria Müller as Postdoctoral Research Assistant at Emory in 2023; the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) granting Caroline Schaumann a research stay in Germany in summer 2024; and the University of Innsbruck for hosting Schaumann as Visiting Professor at Innsbruck in fall 2024.

Finally, we thank our spouses—Grace, Bruce, and Katrin—for their productive advice, patience, and support. We dedicate this book to our children, the next generation of scholars, mountaineers, and consumers of global culture: Tobin and Levin Quendler, Matilda Schaumann Willey, and Sophie Haque.

The research for this volume was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF; P32994-G; grant doi: 10.55776/P32994).

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INTRODUCTION

Christian Quendler, Caroline Schaumann,
and Kamaal Haque

Whether as sites of aesthetic marvel, peaks of conquest, national symbols, or evidence of environmental devastation and climate change, mountains pose challenges of many kinds, including physical, mental, technological, ethical, environmental, and representational ones. If one considers their geologic origins and geographic shapes and locations, mountains are impossible to behold unless one assumes a global perspective. By the same token, their expansive and diverse manifestations are impossible to comprehend unless they are conceptualized through models of human scales. They are not only privileged sites of survey and vision but reward us with cross-sectional and intersectional awareness. The past decade generated a resurgence of mountain and mountaineering scholarship, for instance Mathieu (2011), Kupper (2014), Price et al. (2013), Hansen (2013), Debarbieux and Rudaz (2015), Isserman (2016), Höbusch (2016), Ireton and Schaumann (2012 and 2020), Schaumann (2020), Rak (2021), and Ives (2021). Moving both at imperceptibly slow and violently fast paces through plate tectonics, erosion, sedimentation, and volcanism, mountains assume both liminal and central positions. They mark borders, margins, and peripheries and serve as signposts of national, religious, and cultural identities. In spite, or perhaps because of these challenging and elusive attributes, mountains afford us a multitude of diverse perspectives and insights. This volume interrogates cinematic models of understanding mountains. Exploring how cinema shapes—and has been shaped by—global and globalized perspectives of mountains, the contributions examine how cinema

mediates the manifold cultural dimensions that intersect with mountains and how cinema responds to legacies of mountain culture and its imperialist and (post-)enlightenment investments.

Throughout the Romantic and modern periods, mountains have been addressed as transcendental and quasi-transcendental objects. They have been considered sublime. For Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Schiller, immense objects such as mountain peaks can trigger existential reflections that strain our affective and imaginative limits but ultimately allow human reason to triumph over the material world (Burke 1757, Kant 1764, Schiller 1793).

For the modernist philosopher Georg Simmel, mountains resonate with an almost otherworldly sense of remoteness. Drawing on Wilhelm Worringer's art historical distinction between empathy and abstraction, Simmel argues that high alpine regions affect us as "abstraction from life" ("On the Aesthetics of the Alps," 1911, 190). The vertical landscape of the Alps captures the opposing forces of life and freezes their oppositional dynamics in a seemingly eternal stasis of prehistorical and deep-temporal dimensions. Thus, mountains have not only come to represent perceptual and representational limits, they also figure as reminders of their cognitively impenetrable materiality:

On the one hand, the Alps appear as chaos, as the unwieldy mass of the formless, which has only randomly gained contours and is without any inherent sense of form; the secret of its materiality, of which one grasps more from a single glance at the configurations of the mountains than in any other landscape, reveals itself silently. (Simmel 1911, 189)

In the context of current environmental theories, mountains may be approached as what Timothy Morton has termed hyperobjects, referring to vast objects and forces such as climate change that defy comprehension and may only be grasped through abstraction and synthetic reasoning. Not unlike manifestations of the sublime and akin to the affective resonances of mountains described by Simmel, Morton describes hyperobjects as grounds of reflection for shared subjectivities: "These entities cause us to reflect on our very places on earth and in the cosmos. Perhaps this is the most fundamental issue—hyperobjects seem to force something on us, something that affects some core ideas of what it means to exist, what Earth is, what society is" (Morton 2014, 15).

As fundamental parts of our eco-mental system, mountains have been saturated with all kinds of totemism and animism, by which we extract from and project onto mountains forms of social order and cultural understanding (Bateson 2000, 492), and which render their geological massiveness into mythical, spiritual, social, economic, and political expressions of power. From an ecological perspective, mountains can be productively studied as a *dispositif* that shapes our epistemologies and helps to develop the intervening spaces of

our environmental networks. Approaching mountains as a *dispositif* can help us to conceptualize relations that span across oppositions and interdependent domains such as nature and culture, mythology and science, economy, and technology (Deleuze 1992; Peeters and Charlier 1999). The “nature” of mountains figures both as a material resource of geopolitical power and a symbolic form of cultural self-expression. This nature is itself mediated by cultural myths, scientific discoveries, and technological innovations and serves as mediator of national and transnational, cultural and intercultural relations.

Cinema is an especially effective vehicle to render the symbolic and cultural merit of mountains. According to W.J.T. Mitchell, mountains or landscape in general can be understood as transactional media that “naturalize” the interactions between humans and the environment: “[W]hat we have done and are doing to our environment, what the environment in turn does to us, how we naturalize what we do to each other, and how these ‘doings’ are enacted in the media of representation we call ‘landscape’” (1994, 2; cf. also Harper and Rayner 2010). The underlying model for Mitchell’s conception of landscape is cinema or the moving image, for it renders both humans and landscape in and as motion rather than arresting their nature in states or fixed forms: “[M]oving pictures, in a very real sense, are the subtext of these revisionist accounts of traditional motionless landscape images in photography, painting and other media” (1994, 2).

Explicating the cinematic subtext of Mitchell’s conception of landscape, Ian Christie points to additional ways in which cinema and classical film theory can deepen our understanding of landscape’s cultural work. Christie draws on André Bazin’s reflection on the ways landscape functions in neo-realist cinema of the 1940s and 50s:

Discussing the Po marshes episode in Rossellini’s film about the liberation of Italy, *Paisà* (1946), he notes that “the horizon is always at the same height,” because this “is the exact equivalent, under conditions imposed by the screen, of the inner feeling men experience who are living between the sky and the water and whose lives are at the mercy of an infinitesimal shift of angle.” (Christie 2000, 167)

Bazin draws attention to the ways the physical or concrete reality of the cinematic image interfaces with mental or abstract meanings added by the mind. Accordingly, the filmic image is “a fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges only after the fact, thanks to other imposed facts between which the mind establishes certain relationships” (1948, 37). Cinema thus maps an important premise of Western landscape conception, in which one concrete *aspect* or sighting is put into mental relation with an idealized totality of the land (Jullien 2018).

GLOBALIZING THE ALPS

Historically, the Alps have assumed a powerful modeling role in shaping the perception and conception of not only mountains but the peoples, plants, and animals inhabiting the mountain world (Macfarlane 2003; Mathieu 2011; Debarbieux & Rudaz 2015). As early as in the sixteenth century, mountains became the locus of detailed surveys that recorded economic, political, and scientific facts, such as information about resources, infrastructure, geology, and climate. Later, these also included aesthetic qualities such as visual and sonic aspects of mountains (Mathieu 2011, 16–20).

In the wake of European exploration, conquest, and colonialism, the Alps globalized perceptions of mountains. Alexander von Humboldt's paradigmatic cross-sections of global mountains feature vertically aligned vegetation and subterranean zones along with information on flora and fauna, agriculture, rocks, and the atmosphere, mirroring horizontally aligned climatic zones of the Earth. In Humboldt's *Geographia plantarum lineamenta* (1817) (Figure 0.1), Mont Blanc is placed right in the center of the page, while images of Mount Chimborazo (Andes) to the left and Mount Sulitjelma (Lapland) to the right offer both a scaled-up and scaled-down version of Mont Blanc, with vegetation zones and snow lines replicating those of the Alps, but at different altitudes

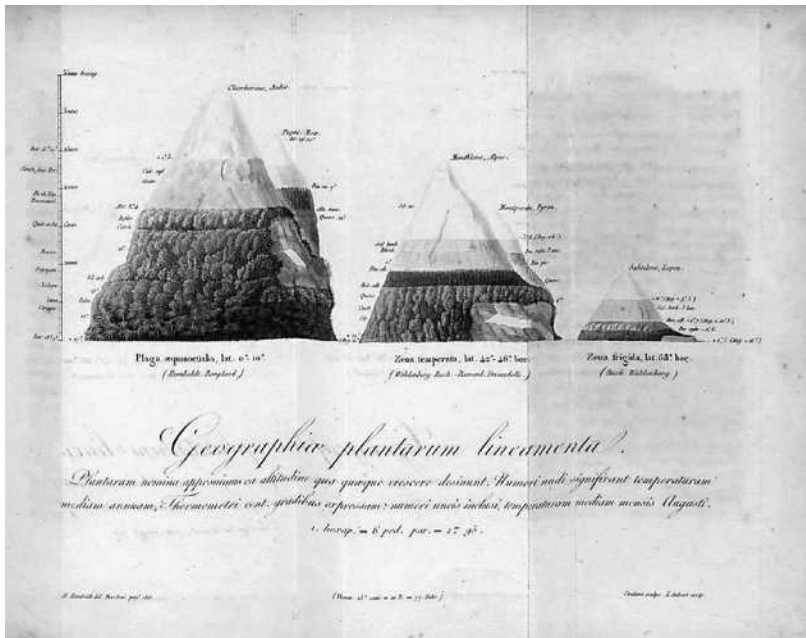


Figure 0.1 Humboldt's *Geographia plantarum lineamenta* (1817)

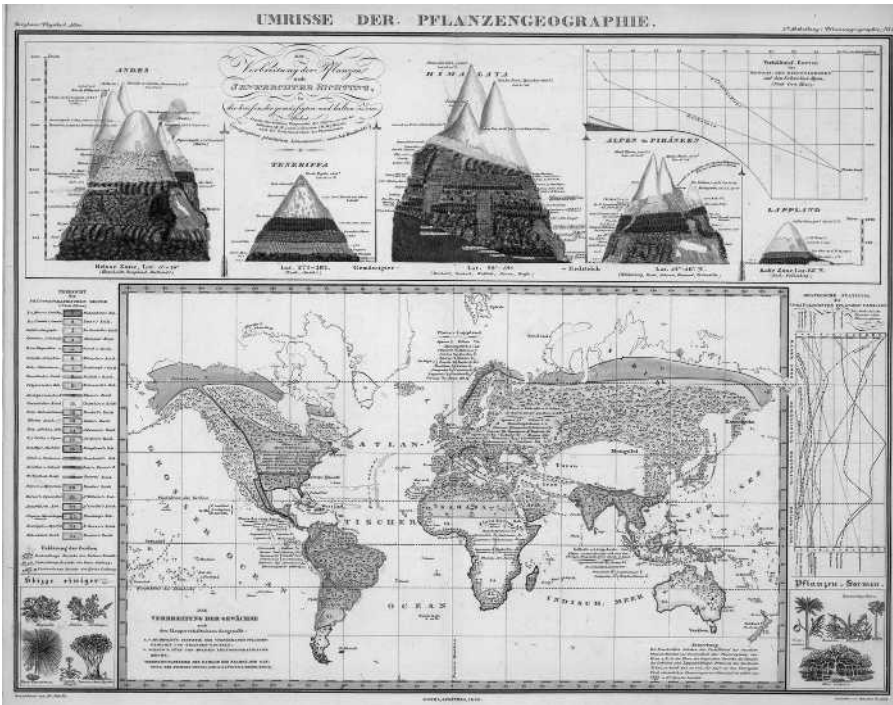


Figure 0.2 Berghaus's *Physikalischer Atlas* (1845–1848)

and latitudes. Heinrich Berghaus's popular *Physikalischer Atlas* (1845–1848) (Figure 0.2), the first comprehensive atlas of the world designed in part to accompany Humboldt's *Cosmos*, once again featured comparative height profiles, placing Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa at the center with Pyrenean peaks and Mount Sulitjelma serving as smaller scales to the right, outflanked by the Himalayan peak Dhaulagiri, Tenerife's Pico de Teide and Andean peaks to the left. In the world map below the peaks, Europe and the Alps form the center of the image, with the Americas to the left and Russia and Asia to the right. The Alps thus provided a standard against which global mountains and mountain ranges were measured, mapped, portrayed, and grasped.

The so-called Alpine model also determined aesthetic, scientific, and ethical approaches to mountain ranges and provided moral values and meaning. In this way, the British mountaineer Leslie Stephen, in his work characteristically entitled *The Playground of Europe* (1871), drew on Humboldt's height profiles but extended the model of vertically aligned botanical and climactic zones to zones of Alpine travelers. Delineating zones of nationality/ethnicity, gender, and class privilege in vertically aligned partitions, Stephen turned the geographical scope of the Alpine model into an ideological one:

Travelers, like plants, may be divided according to the zones which they reach. In the highest region, the English climber—an animal whose instincts and peculiarities are pretty well known—is by far the most abundant genus. Lower down comes the region where he is mixed with a crowd of industrious Germans and a few sporadic examples of adventurous ladies and determined sightseers. Below this is the luxuriant growth of the domestic tourist in all his amazing and intricate varieties. (211)

Stephen's taxonomy situated mountaineers, tourists, and women along a vertical scale, as if to follow a natural distribution according to gender, nationality, and physical fitness (Schaumann 2020, 226–27). Rooted in European imperialism, the Alpine model had a lasting and global impact on the ways mountains were perceived, marketed, and preserved. Fueled by coal-burning steam engines, the British Empire opened a network of train tracks and economic circuits transporting goods and people from all over Europe to the Alps. The model thus proved immensely successful in promoting mountains as global tourist destinations for climbers, skiers, and tourists alike and, more recently, catalyzed debates in relation to sustainable development (Mathieu 2019).

Many depictions of mountains, whether on maps, in written texts, photographs, or in films, explicitly or implicitly continue the Alpine model and its entrenched ideology. In *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872), North American explorer Clarence King christened the Californian mountains the “new Alps” (45) and continually juxtaposed his experiences with those of British climbers in the Alps. The North American naturalist John Muir advocated for European top-down models of forest management in his zeal to protect sequoia trees in the High Sierra, scorning Indigenous practices of deliberately setting fires—which, as we have now come to understand, actually protected the forests from larger fires and promoted healthy forest ecosystems. Since research originating in the Alps defined the concepts and vocabulary of scientific discourse in other mountain ranges, Alpine namesakes appeared in mountain ranges in North America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, China, and Japan.

THE ALPINE MODEL AND MOUNTAIN CINEMA

While vertically-structured zones of exclusion were replicated and widely popularized in nineteenth-century narratives of mountain exploration, they also informed modern approaches that discovered the high alpine terrain as a scientific and technological laboratory of experimentation (Felsch 2007). Cinema played a crucial and manifold role in such techno-scientific explorations of nature and their commercial, aesthetic, and transnational contexts.

Beginning with the first decade of the twentieth century, films featuring mountains celebrated both spectacular ascents and cinematic feats and lastingly influenced modern notions of the picturesque. Divested from the aesthetic and political implications of Romantic art theory, these pictorial values became amplified in emerging commercial discourses, promoting Alpine tourism with powerful cultural ramifications. Until this day, cinematic appropriations of the mountain picturesque project a singularity of historical, ethnic, and cultural otherness in formulaic or stereotypical images, fueling social desires to fossilize and commodify nature, wildlife, and Indigenous cultures (Peterson 2013). At the same time, cinema was touted as a medium of modern animism. To filmmaker and early theoretician Jean Epstein, cinema's animating power is perfectly suited to bring out the true character and soul of the material world. Arguing against a picturesque aesthetic of cinema that arrests nature and forces the environment to conform to established notions of natural beauty, he promoted a film aesthetics that embarks on new terrains of unfamiliar sensations and reveals to viewers "the landscape's dance" (Epstein 1921, 237).

To some extent, the emergence of the German mountain film in the 1920s and 1930s integrated both picturesque and photogenic aesthetics of mountains. Arnold Fanck is often credited with having invented this genre and with initiating the acting and filmmaking careers of Leni Riefenstahl and Luis Trenker. Fanck discovered the mountain film as a field of cinempoetic experimentation that combined nineteenth-century iconography with constructivist aesthetics and brought together documentary and ethnographic impulses of field cinematography with the affective landscape of melodramatic narratives.

In contrast to earlier expedition and picturesque scenic films, the German mountain films of the 1920s mark a distinct shift from a transnational toward a national outlook. Arguably, this is also reflected in the generally congenial depiction of both tourists and locals, echoing a growing tourism industry and the development of alpinism (Klecker & Quendler 2023). Sometimes considered a German response to the American Western genre, the *Bergfilm* is indeed best understood in the context of national film histories that began to take shape in Europe and North America in the late 1910s. The rise of the Western in the 1910s as a signature national genre of the US followed concerted efforts by the film industry that sought to gain domestic control over the film market, which was largely in the hands of European companies. Moreover, the move of the film industry from New York to California allowed for year-round on-location shooting of exotic subjects and action-packed stories (Anderson 1979). Notably, the rise of the Western coincided with the demise of another landscape genre, the Southern mountain melodrama, which—by focusing on plots of feuding and moonshining—projected an internal national other on Appalachian mountaineering culture.

Although the German mountain film was well integrated in Alpine tourist networks and offered a comparable set of attractions, unlike the Western it did not advance to an international brand that would be emulated across the globe. Instead, the *Bergfilm*'s ties with national-socialist cinema (on ideological and personnel levels) posed critical challenges for both filmmakers and scholars (Rentschler 1990; Horak 1997; Rapp 1997; Koepnick 2002; von Moltke 2005; Baer 2017 & 2024). Thus, the German *Bergfilm* can be described as an attempt at domesticating mountain movies as a national genre, which (in rivaling the Western) projected its own nostalgic rhetoric of authenticity and its own ways of "naturalizing" a synthesis of technology and landscape.

Arnold Fanck's film *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, 1926) is a case in point that accomplishes this synthesis by drawing on the Alpine model's vertically-structured zones of exclusion. The mountain peaks are reserved for male rituals of self-purification and self-discovery. When Diotima, a dancer from the city, asks the unnamed "friend" what is to be found on the top of the mountains, he laconically replies, "one's self." When she asks "the friend" to take her with him, he tells her to wait until he has found the perfect mountain for their engagement. While "the friend" is out looking for a church in the shape of a mountain dome, Diotima gets to know his friend Vigo, who not only wins a ski race for her but also falls in love with her. The lower competitive world of alpine sports and tourism is set apart from the higher spiritual world of mountaintops and they are linked together by a love triangle. Some sixty-five years later, Werner Herzog would apply the same template on a cosmopolitan scale in *Schrei aus Stein* (*Scream of Stone*, 1991; see also Quendler 2020).

The idea of mountains as sites where physiological and technological limits are tested prevailed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It took center stage in the national races to claim the first ascents of the highest peaks in the Himalayas in the 1950s (see Harald Höbusch's contribution to this volume). The extreme filmmaking conditions during such expeditions also inspired the French New Wave filmmaker Luc Moullet. In a review of the Trento Film Festival in 1963, at the time the only film festival dedicated to mountain films, Moullet declared mountains a paramount cinematic terrain precisely for the challenges they pose for the filmmaker. Moullet surmised that the different atmospheric pressure at high altitudes rids filmmakers of their usual ways of seeing and of deceptive habits and routines affording greater cinematic possibilities:

Under the effect of the pressure difference, everything takes on a different value, freed from incidental experiences, which the mind does not ignore, but restores to their real places; every word loses its symbolic meaning to take on its full formal value. One recognizes there the formal priority of modern cinema, the art of being and no longer that of the sign. (Moullet 2009, 53; translation cited in Klecker & Quendler 2023)

For Moullet, the mountain experience is a fundamentally cinematic one in which high altitude heightens our aesthetic sensibilities. Not coincidentally, Moullet's speculations on the effects of high altitude recall the nineteenth-century scientific experiments that explored mountains as "laboratory landscapes" (Felsch 2007) while also establishing heights of exclusion, displacing Indigenous inhabitants and explorers of mountain regions. Reinhold Messner's self-serving declaration in 1978 that alpinism was a joke, since there was nothing left to explore in the world's highest mountains except one's own limits, brings such reasoning to its problematic conclusion.

This cursory survey of mountain cinema reveals that the German *Bergfilm* is but one, albeit influential, moment in the history of mountain cinema, and that the prevalence of the Alpine model represents an obstacle for understanding the diversity of physical environments and social systems of different mountain regions in the world (Frolova 2001). In this way, the enthusiastic reception of the German *Bergfilm* obscured other national and transnational developments of mountain cinema drawing on different cultural models and conceptions of mountainous landscapes. By resituating mountain cinema in wider transnational contexts, this volume aims at correcting this bias in historical accounts of mountain cinema. This is not to devalue the historical importance of the German *Bergfilm* and its lasting, albeit ambivalent, influence on further developments in mountain cinema. On the contrary, the special role of the German *Bergfilm* in film history can only be fully appreciated when discussed in the contexts of earlier and other mountain film traditions. More importantly, in order to assess the role of cinema in the global dissemination and transformation of the Alpine model, it is necessary to parse transnational ramifications of both the German *Bergfilm* and other mountain film traditions.

Our volume's overall rationale progresses from practice (genre), entity (nation), territory (environment), to intermediality. While the German *Bergfilm* combined nineteenth-century iconography with constructivist aesthetics, fusing documentary and ethnographic impulses with melodramatic narratives, the book's first section reconsiders this legacy by exploring mountains as sites of cinematic innovations across a variety of genres and aesthetic traditions. Accordingly, the contributions map new ways of approaching the idea of mountain cinema along key dimensions of cinema such as semiotics (Gunning), genre (Müller), auteurism (Winkler), and aesthetics (Quendler) and explore the narrative potential of field cinematography and its ramifications in the mountain melodrama, comedy films, and political and ethical independent filmmaking.

In "Cinematic Mountains: The World and Vision from a Height," Tom Gunning analyzes how mountains gain meaning in different cinematic traditions and forms, from silent cinema to modern avant-garde film. If mountains serve as sites of transgressive moments that lead characters to either

sainthood or an outlaw life, they also point to ways of signification beyond norms and expectations. Gunning's chapter is a programmatic invitation to expand and revise global mountain cinema that sets the stage for the ensuing chapters, which follow different generic paths. Eva-Maria Müller excavates the comic tradition in mountain movies (from slapstick onwards) in her contribution "Ski Comedy: On the Light Side of Mountain Film." Beginning with Arnold Fanck's lesser-known comedies of the 1920s and 1930s, *Der große Sprung* (*The Great Leap*, 1927) and *Der weiße Rausch* (*The White Ecstasy*, 1931), and ending with the recent mountain comedy *La loi de la jungle* (*Struggle for Life*, Antonin Peretjako, 2016), Müller investigates the potential of comedy and traces a transnational tradition of cinematic slapstick. Daniel Winkler turns to volcanic mountains as a site of geological and artistic interplay in new auteur cinema in "High and Low: Porosity in the Neapolitan Anthology Film *I vesuviani* (*The Vesuvians*, 1997) and Mario Martone's Episode "The Ascent." Using Benjamin's and Lacis's concept of the porous, Winkler addresses the geological and generic amorphism in the New Neapolitan Cinema, investigating whether the five films that make up the anthology *I vesuviani* can be approached via a common geological underpinning of tuff and the porous, which likewise links Naples to nearby Vesuvius. In "Inversions of Mountain Cinema: Post-Humanist Ethics and Aesthetics in Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* (2015)," Christian Quendler looks at mountains through an inverted lens, thus expanding the canon of mountain films. Considering exploration films as an early genre of mountain cinema, Quendler introduces mining films to mountain cinema and discusses its changing aesthetics. Quendler locates *Behemoth* in relation to traditions of both cinematic and geographic humanism.

As the history of European mountain climbing followed colonial expansion, global aspirations in early exploration and travelogue films funneled capitalist and colonialist interests by promoting a readily accessible encyclopedic view of the world (Gunning 2008). The chapters in Part 2 address this legacy by outlining the sometimes competing national thrust of European mountain films, but also point to both global and local regimes of mountain films as transnational networks of film production, distribution, and reception. Investigating the national and transnational directives of mountain films across different periods and global relations, the contributions travel along a lateral West–East axis, following filmmakers and mountaineers from Europe to the Himalayas (Höbusch) and Japan (Shen), and also charting the reverse direction, as in Ralph J. Poole's examination of *Heimat* tropes in contemporary Westerns and Mehrbrey's analysis of alpine mountains in Bollywood films.

It should be pointed out that mountains not only serve as sites of transnational and transcultural filmic negotiations but also appear as persistent

protagonists that, throughout film history and across different genres, enact globalized and localized visions of the world. In this way, several chapters in other parts of the book (Müller, Quendler, Rak, Liu, Fuchs and Marini) also stage transnational negotiations taking place in cinematic characters, plot, setting, production, and reception. For instance, Mia Yinxing Liu's chapter sees mountains in film as activating the public memory of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, while Michael Fuchs and Anna Marta Marini's contribution on historical memory specifically looks at the ways that trauma is reconfigured in representations of the Andes in the medium of film. Tracing cinematic production routes from Europe to Asia, the United States, and South America, we move beyond generic and national confines toward a transnational history of mountain cinema.

In her chapter "Creative Geography and Volcanic Mountains: Arnold Fanck's *Die Tochter des Samurai* (*The Samurai's Daughter*, 1937) as Mountain Film," Qinna Shen uses Fanck's liberal use of geographic inaccuracies and his inclusion of Buddhist mythology and symbolism as a point of departure. Shen suggests that Fanck not only employed such iconic imagery to promote a somewhat formulaic representation of what is typically Japanese for Western audiences, but that he further exploited Buddhist iconography in the service of the larger goal of establishing a certain linkage to Nazi ideology. In this way, *Die Tochter des Samurai* presents Japan as a nation with justifiably colonial ambitions—like Nazi Germany. By comparing and equating both nations in their need of *Lebensraum*, Shen argues, Fanck engenders the tradition of the German *Bergfilm* to endorse a nationalistic and ultimately expansionist agenda.

Harald Höbusch's chapter, "Scaling the Mountain, Elevating the Nation: The 'Golden Age of Himalayan Climbing' on Film," traces similar ideological directions in the context and reception of European mountain climbing in the Himalayas. In the years between 1950 and 1954, four of the fourteen yet unclimbed 8,000-meter peaks were claimed in quick succession by French, British, German, and Italian mountaineering expeditions. Höbusch's contribution analyzes four widely screened documentaries—*Victoire sur l'Annapurna* (Marcel Ichac, 1953), *The Conquest of Everest* (George Lowe, 1953), *Nanga Parbat 1953* (Hans Ertl, 1953), and *Italia K2* (Marcello Baldi, 1955)—to maintain that these expedition films buttressed French, British, German, and Italian national identity and self-image in the aftermath of World War II. During this critical period of worldwide political, economic, and cultural reconfiguration, each film—albeit in different ways—inscribes the exploits of successful mountaineers into a national imagination that serves to rebuild the country's identity.

The following two chapters take an opposite direction of transnational negotiations moving from East to West. In "Unshaming *Brokeback Mountain*:

Rocking *Heimat* in Transnational Coming-Out Mountain Movies,” Ralph J. Poole uses the German concept of *Heimat* as both a physical location and a sense of belonging to map the construction of queer desire that is freed from heteronormative constrictions found not in urban subculture, but in the rural mountainscape of *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and *God’s Own Country* (Francis Lee, 2017). Whereas *Heimatfilme* have traditionally promoted clear-cut, binary gender roles by way of safeguarding and promising straightness as a paradigm, Poole’s analysis of queer rurality calls for a space of belonging and defiance, thus claiming cinematic mountains as a space of possibility and reimagination.

In her chapter “Transcultural Negotiations of Mountain Aesthetics in *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017),” Sophia Mehrbrey investigates depictions of the Austrian Alps in *Tiger Zinda Hai* (Ali Abbas Zafar, 2017), a controversial Bollywood action thriller banned in Pakistan for its political content. As Mehrbrey states, Bollywood films often establish romantic relationships in dancing scenes that use creative geography to demonstrate the mythical value of symbols such as wind, sunsets, and mountains. Due to the political tensions in Kashmir, Bollywood productions began filming in the Swiss and Austrian Alps. In *Tiger Zinda Hai*, the scenes that take place in the Austrian Alps do not hark back to mythical traditions in an imaginary mountain landscape but form a closed micronarrative within the intradiegetic reality, referring instead to the aesthetics of the *Heimatfilm*. This unconventional representation of mountains points out the self-reflexive dimensions of a mountain idyll that at times recall and offer new perspectives on the creative geography of Fanck’s volcanic mountains in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (Shen) and the negotiations of gender relations in an emotional-laden homeland of the *Heimatfilm* (Poole), proposing the possibility of continued (re)constructions of these tropes.

Since mountains are especially fragile environments where the effects of climate change are readily visible, mountain cinema has creatively engaged ecocritical perspectives and visual and narrative approaches in order to draw attention to an increasingly devastated mountain world. Part 3 gathers essays analyzing the diverse and wide-ranging cinematic strategies used to depict the human impact on mountain environments. While harking back to familiar tropes of mountain abundance and mountain scarcity, the scope of films discussed here is transnational and transgeneric. The contributions address not only climate change but also other anthropogenic changes, suggesting that mountain cinema can effectively and viscerally convey the intersections of social justice and environmental concerns and delineate the human condition of precarity in the Anthropocene. The axes in this section are both geographic and temporal. Beginning in Europe (Haque, Schaumann, Weik von Mossner), contributions move to the Arctic (Weik von Mossner) and the Americas (Rak). Chronologically, this section contains analyses of films from the 1920s to the present day.

Kamaal Haque's "Leni Riefenstahl's Mountain Films: Ecologizing the Genre" examines Leni Riefenstahl's films *Das Blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*, 1932) and *Tiefland* (*Lowlands*, 1954) as being focused on ecological themes: mining in the former and the scarcity of water in the latter. Haque reads the different endings in the films (tragic in *Das Blaue Licht* and happy in *Tiefland*) as related to whether the natural resource in question is renewable or not. At the same time, he argues that Riefenstahl's environmental solutions always depend on deus-ex-machina situations. Haque shows how focusing on mineral extraction and water scarcity brings a new angle to the genre of the German mountain film.

In "From *Locus Amoenus* to *Locus Absurdum*: Skiing at the End of Nature in Ruben Östlund's *Force Majeure* (2014)," Caroline Schaumann shows how Östlund interweaves elements of both the German mountain film and the disaster film to investigate our disorientation and vulnerability in the Anthropocene by tracing a family's skiing vacation in the Alps with humorous absurdity. Schaumann suggests that the larger force majeure of climate change goes unmentioned in the film but forms an unstated backdrop to the film, as an incalculable combination of manmade and natural forces that leads to helplessness, guilt, shame, and disillusion. In this way, *Force Majeure* calls into question modern definitions of human control, exclusivity, masculine prowess, the meaning of family and friends, and the restorative power of nature.

If climate change is unmentioned but implicit in *Force Majeure*, it is at the forefront of the films considered in Alexa Weik von Mossner's "A Glacial Pace? Mountain Cinema and the Imagination of Climate Change." Weik von Mossner examines three films from the last fifteen years in which glaciers play major parts: *The Age of Stupid* (Franny Armstrong, 2009), *Peak* (Hannes Lang, 2011), and *Chasing Ice* (Jeff Orlowski, 2012). She argues that all show the urgency of the changing environment, but each film does so in a different tempo. Weik von Mossner attempts to determine which type of presentation is most effective in mobilizing viewers. While there is no one best way, Weik von Mossner argues that the most commercial of these films, *Chasing Ice*, with its urgent call for action, has attracted the most attention, but she alerts us to the importance of slower pacing and a focus on local inhabitants found in *The Age of Stupid* and *Peak*, as well.

Just as Weik von Mossner focuses on the viewer experience, Julie Rak's chapter, "Festival Obscura: Gender in Festival-Driven Mountaineering Documentaries," examines films screened in a different context than most of those in this volume, that is, at mountain film festivals. Noting a greater inclusion of female and minority climbers in mountain festival entries, Rak shows, through examples from both North and South America, how the dominant ideals of mountain heroism, with its masculine heritage, hamper widespread representational change. Rak argues that even when women are the focus

of films at mountain festivals, the audiences of those festivals still primarily wish to see adventure narratives, limiting the selection of female bodies and mountain activities. Thus, *Pretty Strong* (Leslie Hittmeier, Colette McInerney, & Julie Ellison, 2020) shows strong bodies, just as one would expect from a climbing film, while *Cholitas* (Jaime Murciego & Pablo Iraburu, 2019) places the Indigenous Andean climbers within more conventional mountaineering narratives of heroism. Rak points out that questions of female representation in mountain festival films remain, while emphasizing the increasing presence of women in the festival entries.

Cinematic mountains have been instrumental in conceptualizing the social, cultural, and technological mobility of the cinematic gaze. They have been crucial in remediating art-historical notions of landscape and in developing various strands of pictorial, figural, generic, and affective theories of film and media. The question of what cinema does to landscape also raises the question of what landscape does to cinema and media at large. The fourth section of the book examines conceptions of cinema that have emerged from pre- and post-cinematic encounters with mountains. How do mountainous “reinventions of cinema” remediate our environmental awareness and understanding? While the first three sections of this volume focus on films, Part 4 expands our investigations beyond cinema. Contributions focus on mountain cinema in intermedia and inter-art relations (Liu), technological implications (Peabody), historiographical ramifications (Fuchs and Marini), and, finally, in a videogame (Reynolds).

In “*The Evening Rains in Bashan: Mountains in Chinese Cinema in 1980*,” Mia Yinxing Liu views the prizewinning *Bashan yeyu* (*Evening Rain*, Wu Yigong & Wu Yonggang, 1980) through the lens of both Chinese film history and Chinese landscape history and theory. Taking many visual cues from the long history of Chinese visual arts, the film, Liu argues, updates traditional landscape art through cinema. Goddess Peak, halfway through the film and halfway through the journey of the film’s characters, serves as a focal point. Liu presents a reading of a film barely known outside of China and adds to our global mountain cinema repository. In a coda, Liu notes that, poignantly, the film takes place on the Yangtze River, where the Three Gorges Dam has changed the landscape since its completion in 2012. While the mountains of the title remain, they are now several hundred meters smaller, and the present-day viewer is confronted with a disappeared landscape.

Seth Peabody is interested in how digital technology affects change in two recent mountain film documentaries. In “Liberating the Captured Image: *Bergfilm* Legacies and Digital Technologies in *Free Solo* (2018) and *The Alpinist* (2021),” Peabody shows that questions of authenticity have been part and parcel of mountain films since the time of the classical German *Bergfilm*. Looking at *Free Solo* (Jimmy Chin & Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, 2018) and

The Alpinist (Peter Mortimer & Nick Rosen, 2021), he considers how the use of digital technology—a digital camera and, above all, digital graphics including route maps—informs the films. Peabody coins the term “data-image” for those sequences where shots of routes or of climbing are merged with “data visualizations and digital graphic design.”

In “Film, Memory, and Intermediality: Exploring the Andes in *La cordillera de los sueños* (2019),” Michael Fuchs and Anna Marta Marini examine the role that the Andes play in the history of Chilean national identity, especially in the aftermath of the Pinochet dictatorship. Mountains are always present on the horizon but, Fuchs and Marini argue, are often barely noticed and taken for granted by Chile’s urban residents. As the authors show, the mountains allow the director Patricio Guzmán to address his and his country’s complicated past, especially the 1973 military coup and its continuing aftermath.

Finally, Daniel Reynolds brings a new perspective to the volume by analyzing the shape mountains take in the videogame *Death Stranding* (2019). In a fictional United States, now renamed the “United Cities of America,” the player controls the character Sam Porter Bridges as he travels West. According to Reynolds, Sam’s interaction with the landscape, including the mountains, shows how this is a reenactment of “the myth of westward expansion.” Mountains are but one example of the geography in the game, but the most extreme and the most immutable one. They are also the feature that best demonstrates Sam’s embodiment in the landscape and that makes the usually implicit relationship between technology and landscape explicit.

In *Global Mountain Cinema*, we refer to the so-called Alpine model not only with respect to the beginnings of Alpinism but also as a philosophical undergirding that informs the perception, depiction, and mapping of mountains, including the legacy of the German *Bergfilm*. We acknowledge that the Alpine model has left lasting imprints on a monolithic and largely Eurocentric mountain cinema, often shoving aside discussions of mountain cinema in other national contexts, especially the Global South. While we attempt to overcome this bias in gathering essays that go beyond the often-traditional focus on the nationalist bent in order to broaden the scope of mountain cinema, our coverage is by no means geographically encyclopedic, and some regions and mountain ranges of the world are not encompassed here. It is our hope that this volume will encourage further work on the topic, with special attention to hitherto neglected areas. The multiplicity of approaches in *Global Mountain Cinema* mirrors the diverse forms of global mountains themselves.

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PART I

GENRE

I. CINEMATIC MOUNTAINS: THE WORLD AND VISION FROM A HEIGHT

Tom Gunning

1. MOUNTAINS AND VISION: TWO QUOTES

Two quotes, one by a filmmaker and one by a novelist, will open this essay on the relation between mountains and vision: “It is like viewing a vast landscape from a mountain: you can see four separate rivers distant from each and yet from the mountainside you see them all at once and see where they converge” (Griffith on his 1916 film *Intolerance*). “These mountains, somehow, they play at hide-and-seek, and all before one’s eyes” (Melville 1961, 92). Griffith and Melville here immediately pose mountains not simply as “sights,” but as bearing complicated relations to human vision.

Griffith compared the radical use of parallel editing in his epic film *Intolerance* to a panoramic view from a mountain height that could unify distant spaces into a single aerial landscape. *Intolerance* intercut four stories from different historical periods, and Griffith used the mountain view analogy to illustrate this trans-historic mode of narration. In his introductory story to his *Piazza Tales*, Herman Melville uses his upwards gaze from his piazza to the towering “majestic mountain, Greylock” (1852)¹ to initiate a fable of the ambiguities of vision, with an ascent up the mountain crafted as a Spenserian fairy quest. Both see mountains not simply as elements of geography, but as vantage points which lift us out of the ordinary, transforming human vision into something more.

In this essay, I explore the affinity between mountains and cinematic vision across a variety of genres, periods, and modes; from silent cinema to Classical

Hollywood, from Italian neo-realism to North American avant-garde films. I claim that mountain views display what Siegfried Kracauer called “inherent affinities” to cinematic modes (1960, 60). Across a wide range of films (historical, generic, and stylistic), views of mountains and mountain-views challenge ordinary human vision and practices of everyday life to confront something out-of-bounds, conveying a vision of freedom and transcendence. This challenge confronts the norms of everyday life with diverse impulses: martyrdom and sainthood, but also metaphysical doubt and a life lived outside the law.

2. CINEMA LANDSCAPES AND MOUNTAIN VIEWS

From its beginnings cinema has engaged with landscape. The very first films remained human-centric (the vaudeville acts that dominated Edison’s kinetoscopes of the 1890s or the local views of Lyons that made up the first Lumière programs). But the aesthetic of “the view,” a pictorial capturing of a place, soon played a role in early cinema programs,² beginning with the peripatetic cameramen the Lumière Company sent around the world in the 1890s to take films for their programs. Eventually, cinematic touristic views of ocean and lake shores, waterfalls, and mountainscapes rivaled city streets, comic vignettes, and records of current events. In cinema’s second decade, these early landscape films evolved into a genre known as the “scenic” and became a regular component of the early film shows. The programs of European fair-ground movie exhibitors and American nickelodeons demanded variety, and the scenic provided ersatz travel experiences. They displayed a beauty and calm that contrasted with the action-filled short comedies and melodramas with which they shared the bill. During the classical period of cinema exhibition (basically from 1917 to 1960), when film programs centered on feature-length fictional films, the popularity of landscape-centered films persisted in the form of short travelogues, which preceded the feature film along with cartoons and newsreels.

However, mountain views (and landscapes) soon became absorbed by the increasingly dominant narrative films, providing settings for dramas and locales for stories. Although this process could be viewed as a diminution of the importance of the geographical and geological world—its subordination to human drama—mountainscapes in some films managed to do more than simply provide a background to human struggles. I have described early cinema as a “cinema of attractions,” stressing cinema’s power as a visual moving image, rather than simply a vehicle for storytelling (Gunning 1989). This claim for the importance of visual attractions does not diminish the role of narrative in cinema but hopes to clarify it. So-called “narrative” film possesses other aspects than its plot. Mountains in cinema can provide more than

a theme or a visual flourish. They embody the intense relation film has with the visual and material world.

Cinema provided a new medium in the ongoing process of discovering the meanings inherent in our world. André Bazin concluded his seminal essay on "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" by saying "On the other hand, the cinema is also a language" (1967, 16). But this language of cinema is not verbal; it uses the world to speak about the world. In other words, there is more to cinematic language than syntax and grammar. Film relies on meanings inherent to, not abstracted from, the image itself. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty declared in his brief but profound essay on cinema, "Film and the New Psychology," the profound affinity between cinema and phenomenology helps us describe cinema as a language drawn from the world around us:

Phenomenological or existential philosophy is largely an expression of surprise at this inherence of the self in the world and in others, a description of this paradox and permeation, and an attempt to make us see the bond between subject and the world, between subject and others, rather than to explain it as the classical philosophies did by resorting to absolute spirit. Well, the movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and the world, and the expression of one in the other. (1964, 58)

In this view, mountains in cinema can provide not simply a backdrop or setting, nor an abstract symbol, but something that absorbs and exceeds all of these. Within a story a mountain becomes more than a place or geological feature. Its manifestation on film conjures a range of associations and meanings, which the movie as a whole articulates. We might call these symbolic if we understand this term from a phenomenological and hermeneutic perspective, rather than an abstract signification of meaning. Paul Ricoeur has described the symbol in a manner that recalls Merleau-Ponty and seems to evoke the cinema:

Man first reads the sacred on the world, on some element or aspect of the world, on the heavens, on the sun and moon, on the waters and vegetation The manifestation through the thing is like the condensation of an infinite discourse; manifestation and meaning are strictly contemporaneous and reciprocal ... (1967, 10–11)

The cinema makes meaning through appearances. Like the cosmic symbol, what it shows becomes manifest through an image, not an abstraction hovering beyond it in need of explication. In narrative cinema the action of the story, expressed through the selection and juxtaposition of images, articulates these meanings even as it presents them.

3. VISION AND THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

Within the mythic discourse that Ricoeur invokes, mountains serve as the dwelling place of the Gods. We must approach this not as a naïve fairytale, but as rooted in human experience of the mountain. Mountains tower in the distance, joining sky and earth, performing a cosmic role. As an *axis mundi*, they join the various cosmic levels and can provide a gateway beyond the ordinary human realm. Humans ascend them only through effort. They possess a different terrain from the flatlands where most people dwell, and they even have their own climate (I think of my favorite range of mountains in the Colorado Rockies, which bear the beautiful name “Never-Summer Mountains”). Mountains can be inhospitable to humans or breed a unique sort of inhabitant: highlanders. According to mountain mythology, the human who ascends to or dwells in the mountains no longer remains ordinary but becomes fundamentally transformed. This mythology raises a question for film aesthetics: How can what sounds so metaphysical, outside of normal human experience, belong to cinema without betraying the medium’s quality of inherence, its worldly material nature—as Kracauer put it, its affinity to the material world?

Joining earth to heaven, mountains have been claimed as the home of the Gods (Mount Olympus, Mount Kailash, Mount Meru). A holy mountain becomes a taboo place, not to be transgressed by humans. (As it says in *Exodus* 19:23: “Moses said to the Lord, ‘The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, “Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.”’”) Forbidden to the multitude due to its sanctity, for a few the mountain becomes the place where God may be encountered, the site of a theophany, such as Moses on Mount Sinai and Mount Horeb in the Torah, or Muhammad at Mount Hira. The holy mountain offers a site of vision in several senses. Here God becomes manifest, an experience beyond human vision. But even within human vision, the mountain provides a site of unbounded vision, a vantage from which vision extends for miles. (In the *Gospel of Matthew* 4:8, a mountain view provides a vision of the wide world with which the devil tempts Jesus: “Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world”). As an extension of worldly sight, mountain vision invites a secular interpretation as well, a visionary space both geographically and supernaturally.

4. THE ASCENT OF THE NEO-REALIST MOUNTAIN

While the mountain can symbolize transcendence, its spectacular physical and material aspects determine its cinematic affinity. In Roberto Rossellini’s neo-realist films, which I discuss here, transcendence remains rooted in a close

encounter with the earthly as seen from the heights. In these films the cinematic mountain avoids an allegory that would evacuate gross materiality in favor of a readable spiritual meaning. In his feature film *Stromboli* (1950), starring Ingrid Bergman, and his short film (part of *L'amore*) *Il Miracolo* (*The Miracle*, 1948), starring Anna Magnani, Rossellini films the stories of women whose ascent of mountains involves both an excruciating physical effort and a process of transformation.

Despite being condemned by Francis Cardinal Spellman in 1951 as sacrilegious and subsequently being banned in New York State (leading to a US Supreme Court decision granting movies freedom of speech protection), *The Miracle* finds spiritual experience in physical embodiment and environmental materiality (Wittern-Keller & Haberski 2008). Anna Magnani plays Nanni, a simple-minded goatherd who believes a wandering mendicant (played by Federico Fellini, who also wrote the scenario) is St. Joseph. Their encounter leads to her pregnancy, which she understands as miraculous. Scorned by the town she lives in, she undertakes a difficult journey, toiling up a mountainside to a chapel where, all alone, she gives birth to her child. The film ends with her breastfeeding her baby. It opens with a pan down from a view of a mountain peak against the sky to focus on the sea below. On this mountainside, poised between sea and sky, the goatherd and wanderer meet.

Rossellini's film refuses to define events as supernatural (e.g. by special effects, as in the 1959 Hollywood film, also called *The Miracle*, in which a vision of the Madonna is given a visible aura, glowing technicolor blue).³ True to his neo-realist style, Rossellini conveys the possibility of something as holy, but leaves the ultimate determination to the viewer. After her seduction by the wanderer, the film shows Nanni's descent to town followed by her goats, filmed with a duration and tactility that ground us firmly in the phenomenal world. The film dwells on the surface of things and conveys gravity as well as grace through the movement of bodies framed in shots that rarely isolate characters from their environment. Later, when Nanni leaves her village and climbs up the mountain, her weary steps and labor pains take place within shots that balance her figure against massive stone steps, mountain cliffs, and sounding cascades. During her journey she gazes at the world around her: at the town where a religious procession is taking place, or toward the mountain's peak above and the ocean below. The goat that seems to lead her to the mountaintop church appears as a natural part of the mountain environment. While one can read it symbolically, the goat never loses its realist appearance. Likewise, when Nanni drinks from a rivulet running down the cliffside, the symbolic sense of her being suckled at the mountain's breast never outweighs the cinematic textures of water, stone, and thirsty woman.

A perilous climb up a volcanic mountain forms the climax of Rossellini's feature film *Stromboli*, the story of Karin, a Lithuanian woman who marries

a simple fisherman to get out of a displaced persons camp after World War II. An alien being in the small fishing village at the foot of the mountain, distrusted by her husband and scorned by the women, she decides she must escape this life. The camera conveys Karin's gaze as she surveys the desolate volcanic island of sharp rocks surrounded by the sea, mountain peaks towering above. As in *The Miracle*, the mountain links elements of water, earth, and sky—and smoldering volcanic fire. Although Karin decides to leave the island, she finds this difficult to arrange. She resolves to climb Stromboli to reach another village, where she believes she will find passage off the island. Like Nanni, she is now pregnant, although in the early stages. Besides the effects of the wearying climb, the volcanic fumes which cover the mountainside overwhelm her as she climbs.

Although some shots of her ascent show the vistas of the sea below or the sky above, others reveal an obscure smoke-filled atmosphere that limits her vision. Karin coughs and seems asphyxiated by the volcano's fumes. She collapses from the effort and the smoke. Slipping on the rocks and the dark volcanic ash, she weeps and holds her womb as she watches craters belch steam and fumes, moaning to herself, "enough, enough." At night, a shot of the star-filled night sky conveys her slumber, followed by the light of dawn breaking on her face. Karin's series of contradictory reactions on the mountain summit ends the film. As she looks at the smoke rising from the crater, she intones to herself: "What beauty ..." But as she climbs down a cliff, she cries "No, no I can't go back!" She weeps and speaks of her unborn child and adds "God! Merciful God!" in a tone that sounds as much like accusation as invocation.

Rossellini ends his film by cutting to a shot of birds soaring over the mountaintop. An allegory of God's mercy? Or an image of a transcendence that remains out of human reach, only glimpsed in the mountain against the sky? The version of this film that RKO released to American theaters in 1950 ended (as I recall from seeing it on television decades ago) with a narrator's voice explaining that Karin has found faith in God and showing her descending the mountain. The difference between this disowned version and the film that Rossellini approved highlights his inconclusive ending: Rossellini's version ends on this image without spoken commentary and thus keeps questions and resolution open, allowing a range of meanings for the mountain.

The ascent of these women up in the mountains images a complex relation between human dwelling and the natural world. If these ascents do not necessarily imply the sacred, they do envision something beyond the ordinary human life. As my next examples show, the trek away from flatland terrain into the mountain fastness can also portray living beyond human law in ways that question the role of security and order.

5. MOUNTAIN LOVE OF OUTLAWS

Victor Sjöström's 1918 film *The Outlaw and his Wife* offered one of the earliest and most profound explorations of the mountainscape. In the film's original Swedish title, *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* [*Mountain-Ejvind and his Wife*], the protagonist's name, "Mountain Ejvind," replaces the term "outlaw." His mountain hide-out defines his identity as an outlaw. The film introduces Ejvind (played by the director Sjöström) on a mountainside as he helps Arnes, a wanderer, conceal his theft of sheep's wool from the authorities. This opening setting sets the theme of making one's own law in the wild. However, Ejvind takes a job in the lowlands at the farm of Halla, a kindhearted landowner who becomes attracted to him. Although he is living under the name Kari, a visitor recognizes him as Ejvind, an escaped thief, and informs the local bailiff. Halla defends him against the accusation, but he confesses to her his identity and previous crime: He once stole a sheep to feed his starving family. He escaped from jail and has lived for years as an outlaw in the mountains (in a flashback we see him in the mist-covered Icelandic mountains cooking his meal in a hot spring). He also confesses to Halla that he loves her, saying she is "as beautiful as a blue mountain rising in the mist." She responds that she will flee with him into the mountains; as an intertitle puts it: "Hearth and home and every man's respect—she gave it all up for his sake." On their ponies they are shown climbing up into the snowy mountains. Halla gazes down at her farm below but turns to Ejvind, saying, "On, on and upwards!"

An intertitle summarizes and characterizes their outlaw life: "For five years they lived as outlaws—hunted like animals. But they were rulers of the mountains. The whole country—as far as the eye could see—was theirs!"

A panning shot introduces their new environment of gleaming glaciers. The outlaw couple, now with a small tow-headed daughter, settles in the highlands, and images frame them nestled among the vast vista of the mountains. Sublime landscape surrounds them; Ejvind beckons their child to the edge of the cliff and rolls a boulder over the edge to show her both the danger and majesty of their mountain home. As he lifts his daughter to see the depth below, they are framed in a long shot, backlighting their small human figures against the dark outline of a precipitous cliff and the glow of the sky. Few images capture so well this precarious, but glorious, union of human and mountain. Magnificent location shooting juxtaposes the life of this family against a background of distance and depth. The viewer senses the bracing mountain air and its smell of freedom.

But their freedom is threatened by invasion. A dark shadow passing over stones ominously announces the arrival of a stranger. However, the wanderer turns out to be Arnes, Ejvind's wool thief comrade from the opening, who is welcomed into the family. They live together in the pictorial landscape the

camera creates: mountain lakes where the men fish, and the steaming hot springs where Halla does the wash. But Arnes threatens this natural harmony when he casts a lustful gaze at Halla. When Ejvind slips from a cliff while gathering herbs and clings precariously to a branch, Arnes at first throws him a rope. But a flashback to Halla and her ample breasts tempts Arnes to consider cutting the life-sustaining line. He relents, however, and pulls his friend to safety. The dramatic shots of Ejvind suspended from the cliff, with a vista of the valley and its river far below, shows both his vulnerability in this world of heights and his almost superhuman struggle to resist falling.

Tormented by his desire for Halla, Arnes tries to kiss her. Outraged, Halla takes him to the cliff where Ejvind hurled the boulder and points to her husband bathing in the mountain waterfall below and declares her devotion to him. Arnes agrees he should leave the mountain family and return to the world below. Sjöström repeatedly frames the mountain scenes with the distance and depth of the lowland in the background, rendered hazy through aerial perspective. The rest of the world seems to have disappeared for this outlaw family; yet this distant vagueness poses a looming threat. As Arnes begins his descent into this world he sees the Bailiff's mounted posse coming to arrest the outlaws. He returns to warn the family. As the posse struggles with the men, Halla gathers her child. In the third dramatic long shot of the precipitous cliff, she stands horrified, having cast her daughter into the river below to prevent her capture. However, Ejvind knifes the Bailiff and flees with his wife, ascending further up the mountain as they cross the snow fields and glacier.

A lacuna of years follows after a shot of the tiny figures climbing further up the mountainside. The film reveals the outlaw couple, now aged and sheltering against a winter storm. In contrast to the earlier idyllic images of their mountain domain, they now huddle together in a small hut, imprisoned by a blizzard that has lasted seven days, nearly mad from hunger. In this confined environment they turn on each other with accusations and insults. Memories invade the space of their hut, flashbacks of their earlier escape to the mountains in love and joy, fording mountain streams together. The views outside their hut are dark and obscured by blowing snow. In the howling blizzard Halla hears the cry of her dead daughter. A striking shot shows the child, her arms outstretched as if beseeching, superimposed ghost-like over the torrent in which she drowned. In despair Halla wanders out into the night storm and Ejvind finds her in a snowbank. The old couple embrace for a final time as the snow begins to cling to them. We see the door to their hut ajar, the interior empty and the hearth fire burning out. Their world is emptying. A final close-up shows the couple's frozen embrace. The film's last title reads: "Their only law was their love."

6. FATAL MOUNTAINS

The link between outlaws and mountains reflects both historical realities when the wilderness represented an untamed realm beyond the law and an ambivalent attitude toward nature as both a refuge and chaos. The American Western frequently uses mountains to visualize the wild frontier. Andre De Toth's 1959 film *Day of the Outlaw* benefits from Hollywood's increased use of location filming after World War II and crystalline deep focus cinematography by cameraman Russell Harlan. While many Western landscapes focus on the desert or the plains, here wintry mountains provide the setting. Fleeing from a bank robbery, Jack Bruhn's outlaw band invades a hamlet nestled among the snow-covered mountains and proceeds to terrorize its inhabitants. Bruhn (Burl Ives), a feral patriarch ruling a primal herd of violent men, has been severely wounded and hopes to cross the mountains to avoid the law. The interiors of the few buildings that compose the town provide precarious shelter, and contrast with the forbidding mountains that surround them. Although the outlaws seek shelter, Harlan's cinematography frames them against the looming mountains in the distance, especially during the prolonged fistfight between cattleman Blaise Starrett (Robert Ryan) and the outlaws.

In order to get these dangerous men out of his town, Starrett convinces them he can guide them to a mountain pass that will provide an escape route. As the gang leaves the town, the vista of the mountains has become obscured by mist and snow. The screen seems to glare with white, almost snow-blind, as the horses step awkwardly through deep snow. Climate, rather than the ascent, poses an obstacle to human effort. The film's location shooting emphasizes the frigid air in which breath smokes and heaps of snow slow progress. Slow dissolves of their labored trek make the space seem unreal. Bruhn eventually collapses from his wound and dies in the snow. The mountain landscape now shines with a fearsome clarity and Starrett, the supposed guide, gazes toward mountain peaks in the distance. He is questioned by the Indian member of the gang: "You see anything?" Starrett replies, "Not much." The Cheyenne responds: "There's nothing to see." Rather than vision, these mountains offer obscurity; instead of an escape route, the pass becomes a snowy labyrinth, and in place of a guide, Starrett, a man who intends to destroy those he leads—an anti-Moses. As in Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*, the now leaderless thieves begin to kill each other, hoping for a larger share of their booty. Even the pack horses refuse to go further. The last members of the gang freeze to death, unable to find shelter or start a fire. Having led the gang to meet their death, Starrett returns to town. The film ends as it began, with a pan moving over the mountain range beyond the town. *The Day of the Outlaw's* view of the mountains remains resolutely negative, a realm of inhuman death. The mountains offer neither freedom nor transformation; rather, they deal out a fatal justice.

Outlaws and mountainous terrain invoke the Western genre more than the predominantly urban gangster film, but Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* from 1941 presents an exception, expressing a nostalgia for rural settings and ending in the Sierra mountains announced by its title. Its credit sequence shows mountain heights, but these open views are soon replaced by images of a penitentiary. Bank robber Roy Earle is released from the prison gates and immediately expresses a desire to see green grass and trees. On his way to his next heist, he nostalgically stops at the Indiana farm his family used to own. At a California gas station, he gets a glimpse of the Sierra Nevada in the distance. The opening contrast between expansive mountains and confining prison runs throughout the film, articulated in the conversations Ray has with Marie, who becomes his lover. She overhears Roy talking in his sleep about "crashing out." She compares her past life to his imprisonment, constantly wanting to "crash out" too, whether from an abusive family or a job in a dime-a-dance club. A comment by a doctor underscores this sense of fatality when he describes Roy and gangsters like him as "rushing towards death."

Double-crossed after a botched heist, Roy flees, leaving Marie at a bus stop, and heads for the mountains seeking refuge. As his car races down the highway, the high Sierra looms in the distance, motorcycle police in pursuit not far behind. Walsh's camera repeatedly pans the landscape, taking in the car's trajectory and the mountain heights it climbs toward. Roy careens up a twisting mountain road, racing ever higher. He rushes, it seems, toward freedom, or death, until he encounters a roadblock. He leaves the car, rifle slung on his back and machine gun in hand, scrambling among the boulders, stumbling and losing his iconic fedora hat. He finds a sheltered position, and fires on the cops gathered below. When a cop calls for him to surrender, the reverse angle shows the mountain as Roy responds in defiance. He remains concealed from both the police and the camera, and his voice echoes from the rocky cliff, as if the mountain speaks for him.

As night falls, cops, onlookers, and reporters gather below, including Marie, who heard of Roy's plight over the radio and rushed to her outlaw lover. A spotlight travels over what a radio journalist describes as "Earle's rocky fortress." At dawn, the sun rises over Mt. Whitney, "the highest mountain in the United States." The cops try to persuade Marie to call Roy down, but she refuses. Hearing the barking of Marie's dog, Roy emerges from his rocky crevice and is shot by a rifleman above him. His body plummets down the cliffside. Weeping over his body, Marie asks a reporter about the phrase she heard Roy utter in his sleep: "What does it mean when a man crashes out?" She moves towards the camera into close-up as she repeats his answer, "Free, free." She leaves the shot as the camera lifts to frame the mountain peak against the sky. The film is over. Roy Earle is "free"—dead, yet the mountain remains towering above.

In all these films, ascending a mountain triggers transforming moments for the protagonists: revelations, birth, death. Climbing a mountain tests physical bodies and emotions. But the camera captures the mountain's solidity and independence, as well—its beyond-human nature. It can figure fate and death, or life and love, or an image of freedom that might include all of these. The image of the mountain summons up less an answer than a question. The images show the mute existence of the world confronting human effort and desire—as only cinema can.

7. VISION: THE MOUNTAIN'S CENTRAL REGION

Decades ago, my fellow NYU graduate student John W. Locke published an essay in the journal *Artforum* about Michael Snow's film *La Région Centrale* (1971), sub-titled "How You Should Watch the Best Film I ever Saw" (1973a, 1973b). Locke shows how this film raises issues of vision in cinema in a unique manner precisely by taking a mountain as its subject and camera technology as its method. Locke places his discussion of the unique camera movement featured by Snow's film in the context of cinema's fascination with movement through space, specifically what he calls the "space pan" and traces this figure of cinematic style in a number of films, including Walsh's *High Sierra* (1973a, 67). Snow's 1971 film stands as perhaps the ultimate mountain film, one in which no human beings appear, and no conventional narrative action takes place. Instead, the film stages an encounter between its mountain locale and a unique cinematic technology. Snow designed a mechanical camera mount which could pivot in every direction, panning in effect within the total surface of a sphere. This camera mount converts camera movement into a complex system. The film embodies vision as an ever-mobile sphere of sight.

A technical *tour de force*, this universally moving camera was placed on a mountaintop in northern Quebec. The camera's global movement, supplemented by zooms, could be remotely controlled (and therefore the operator remained invisible, off-screen, as does any direct image of the camera itself, other than the shadow it sometimes casts into the frame). What we see is the nearly acrobatic operation of the camera as it records the landscape within a constantly moving frame. For nearly three hours the film's viewer witnesses a moving panorama of this mountain space from a fixed position. The camera pans at various speeds and distances, turns, and inverts itself, accompanied by a series of beeps on the soundtrack that seem to correspond to the camera's remote commands. The filming takes place at all hours: bright afternoon, dim dawn, even at night with a full moon. I believe that no film has ever surveyed a space so fully or demonstrated with such wit and variety the possibilities of camera movement. As Locke stresses, the camera moves—and therefore sees—as no unaided human eye ever could. This transparent eyeball is fully

technological, a non-human view designed for the human spectator. Never have I experienced a mountain terrain with such fullness—its rocky surfaces, its lichen, its vast vista, its shifting clouds and skies, its horizon—all seen through constant cinematic movement.

La Région Centrale therefore places this mountainous terrain and the act of seeing front and center. The complex trajectories the camera's frame traces over this landscape and its duration replace any narrative development with an almost symphonic course of movements and variation, divided into sections demarcated by a shot in which a large X covers the screen. The stripping bare of the film of anecdote and human presence paradoxically allows the encounter of nature and technology to take on a titanic scale in which movement and stasis, eternity and constant change, wrestle before our eyes.

What sort of vision emerges from this encounter between landscape and augmented camera movement? As Locke says, this vision transcends the human. He asks rhetorically: "How can a film be made which looks like nothing the viewer has ever seen before? How can a film be made which is not based on the viewer's ordinary way of seeing the world?" (1973a, 71). The answer is the experience of watching Snow's film. This claim for a non-human vision raises fundamental issues about the nature of cinema. Does the movie camera seek to mimic the way the human eye sees, or does it offer an alternative? The film answers, "both." Like all technology, the camera not only draws on the affordances of the human body and its perception, but transforms and supplements these, presenting new possibilities and new definitions to human existence.

La Région Centrale's retooling of human vision not only lies in its ability to take positions rarely (if ever) encountered in ordinary human life (twisting in space, upside-down views, circular trajectories from earth to sky, zooming), but also in the speed of its movement. As Locke says, at the climax of the film the speed of camera movement pushes our limits of perception:

As the end approaches the camera is making continuous sweeps from ground to sky and back to ground. As I watched these become progressively faster and faster, I reached a point fully ten minutes before the end of the film when I thought that the movements couldn't possibly get any faster. I was wrong because they just continue to get faster and faster. (1973b, 72)

Even after repeated viewings, I am always amazed at the speed of this section of the film, in which the camera literally whips from earth to sky, creating a sense of a planet rapidly rotating in space, a cosmic view unanchored by gravity, fundamentally unmoored, yet always caught within a cycle determined by the camera's program.

In the final moments of *La Région Central*, the camera appears to cease its endless rounds as it fixes its sight on a view of the sun in the sky. The luminosity of this source of light bleeds out any recognizable image. We could see this ending as a sort of revelation, a vision of light itself, and of a certain transcendence perhaps comparable to the mountaintop epiphanies of religious encounters. But one might also see it as an ironic dénouement that eclipses vision in the fullness of light, the vanishing of any earthly image—or indeed any image at all. It remains for each viewer to give it meaning.

This final presentation of the excesses and limits of vision returns us to my opening quotations as expressing the gamut of mountain vision. My quote from Griffith about his own epic asserts a mountain view as all-encompassing, a viewpoint that could take in all of history and contemplate its significance. Melville's quote can only be understood within the ironic nature of his ironic fairytale in which the narrator ascends the mountain in search of the source of the flash of light he had glimpsed from his piazza below. "Fairies there, thought I; some haunted ring where fairies dance," the narrator speculates. However, his quest leads him to a strange hermit girl whose glazed window reflected light. From her high vantage she gazes intently on a house below. Distance and the mountain haze make it appear to her like "King Charming's palace." The narrator recognizes it as his own home with its piazza. Without disillusioning the young woman, he descends. In contrast to Griffith's epoch-embracing vision, Melville's parable plays upon the inversion of points of view and their ambiguities.

I would claim Snow's film embraces both possibilities of revelation and irony. The affinity that cinema bears to mountain landscape encompasses the breadth and the ambiguity of vision. A cinematic mountain offers both a view and a viewpoint, a place to be filled through an ascent and one to be emptied, often through death. Cinema does more than continue the tradition of landscape images. Through its capacity to convey motion it allows us to experience both ascents and descents, but most essentially to experience the lifting of life out of the ordinary that mountain vision represents.

NOTES

1. Melville in the 1850s lived at the foot of Mt. Greylock in The Berkshires and in fact dedicated his novel *Pierre or the Ambiguities* to the "majestic mountain Greylock."
2. I treat what I call the "View Aesthetic" in early non-fiction film in my essay "Before Documentary."
3. *The Miracle* (Irving Rapper, 1959), despite bearing the same title, has an unrelated plot.

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2. SKI COMEDY: ON THE LIGHT SIDE OF MOUNTAIN FILM

Eva-Maria Müller

In the early days of mountain cinema, comedy was a popular genre through which to show the Alps (Mantovani 2020, 35), with skiing at the precipice of the *Bergfilm*. Arnold Fanck, the leading director of the German mountain film genre, referred to his first cinematic works not as mountain but as *ski* films (Haque 2020, 252). These films—above all his comedies *Der große Sprung* (*The Great Leap*, 1927) and *Der weiße Rausch* (*The White Ecstasy*, 1931)—had tremendous impact on the development of ski tourism and the cinematic representation of mountains in general (Peabody 2021). Despite this impact, the discourse on mountain film surprisingly does not consider the role played by ski comedy. Instead, it largely maintains an interest in mountain melodrama, following Siegfried Kracauer’s remarks on mountain film as an odd pastiche of “inaccessible steeps and insoluble human conflicts” (1947, 110), and builds on contemporary reviews that saw in the *Bergfilm* a “great tragic symphony” (Rosenfeld 1926). In addition to predominantly melodramatic associations with the genre, the perception of comedy as lowbrow entertainment previously hindered critical perspectives on humorous mediations of mountain cinema. To fully comprehend mountain cinema and gain a broader understanding of its diverse nature, it is crucial to appreciate the contributions of ski comedies as one of mountain film’s oldest subgenres.

Recently, Christian Quendler argued that humor is central to grasping the multidimensionality of alpine environments (2022, 137). Indeed, throughout the long history of scholarship on humor, theorists have underlined humor’s

potential to produce excess in meaning (Koestler 1964) and transgress boundaries (Freud 1991[1905]). Within the polyvalent landscape of humor, scholars highlight its potential to subvert and sustain norms (King 2002, 8), an instrumental component for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of mountain film. In this chapter, comedy alerts us to traditional conceptions of mountain cinema and animates a productive reconsideration by challenging some of the genre's defining principles that date back to the Weimar tradition. If the *Bergfilm* consolidates hierarchical social structures and national boundaries, establishes the male alpinist hero, and displays control over alpine landscape, the ski comedy exhibits nonhierarchical networks and global circuits, mocks the individual male alpinist hero, and transgresses notions of power and control in mountain cinema. This intervention in key themes of traditional mountain film liberates corseted perceptions of mountains and their mediations in a playful space of comic freedom. Thinking of mountain film in lighter terms not only offers a preliminary assessment of the ski comedy but, as the best (and sometimes even the funniest) comedies do, "achieve[s] something that is more than simply funny" (Mast 1979, x). When the ski comedy trips up the alpinist hero and celebrates the freedom from traditional gender roles, we find that mountain films from the genre-defining 1920s and 30s offer a surprisingly timely value critique that speaks to questions of gender equality and tourist consumption. In its analysis of representative ski comedies from the silent and sound eras, this chapter showcases mountain film's investment in the comic mode and addresses its mutually subversive and affirmative stands in (re)negotiating gender roles and tourist landscapes. It asks how the comedy finds itself on skis and how, in turn, skis find their way into comedy. It explores skis' potential as "gag machines" (Gunning 1995, 96) and symbols for social mobility, asks how the genre popularizes and critiques mountain travel, and demonstrates how global, socio-cultural and economic circuits manipulate the comic landscape of skiing.

THE DYNAMICS OF SKIING AND FILM COMEDY

Ski slopes are productive playgrounds upon which to illustrate the most common theories of humor: Touching on the superiority theory of humor, skilled skiers might slip into laughter at the misfortune of a beginner struggling to master the sport, experiencing a triumphant, malicious enjoyment that reflects the peculiar power struggles on the ski hill. Novice skiers laughing off their frustrations, then, engage in humor within theories of release as they redirect their emotions. While Sigmund Freud saw in laughter a gratifying mechanism to reduce nervous energy (1991, 167), Immanuel Kant could just as easily have returned from his first ski lesson when he described laughter as "an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened

expectation into nothing” (2002, 209). The idea of the travel-averse philosopher on skis amusingly follows Kant’s own understanding of humor as a form of release and relaxation. It creates a sense of joy that disrupts an established order, as if all sense of logic, coherence, consistency, linearity, and clarity were momentarily undone to allow unconscious associations free rein, shifting energy into a playful diversification of meanings. This sudden moment of humorous transformation, frequently classified as an instance of incongruity theory, springs from a collision of two different frames of reference, or circuits, that elicits a change of perspective, provokes momentary defamiliarization, and creates a surplus of meaning. In *The Act of Creation* (1964), Arthur Koestler refers to the clash of unconnected matrices, or their tipping into each other, as “bisociation”—a creative act that suddenly, yet logically, links the unrelated, the strange, the incompatible, and incommensurable. The comic unlocks unexpected meaning by means of difference, conflict, and counter-imagery. Humor also develops from contrasts as in the oft-cited mechanical encrustation of the living, the basis of Henri Bergson’s seminal humor theory *Laughter* (1900), which contains elements of release, superiority, and incongruity. His understanding of laughter revolves around the relational and metaphorical opposition of the living and the mechanical and sees comic deviation in moments when automated mechanisms violate an organic progression or habitual expectation (Bergson 1900).

The identification of comedy with the mechanical relates to the circuits that connect our reflections on mountain film in this book; it also connects the methodological pathways within this study. Laughter arises from the collision of semantic circuits, skiing creates circuits between bodies and landscapes (Rapp 1997, 89), and mountain film develops in global circuits of technological and aesthetic modernity (Peabody 2021, 2). If humor develops from “a spontaneous flash of insight” (Koestler 1964, 45) that creates multiple meanings and ends up either in laughter or in intellectual synthesis, then the mountain film operates as a “creative catalyst” (Peabody 2021, 2) that reveals the multiple dimensions of alpine realities and harmonizes what Eric Rentschler and Caroline Schaumann refer to as the *Bergfilm’s* dichotomous epistemologies (Rentschler 1990; Schaumann 2014). Ski comedy has the potential to reconfigure several of mountain film’s oppositions, such as nature/technology, tradition/modernity, stillness/mobility, rural/urban, man/woman, and, perhaps most significantly, tragedy/comedy.

The film comedy’s “in-between state” (Horton 1991, 5), together with “skiing’s ability to reconcile various dichotomies” (Denning 2015, 108), introduces a series of thematic moves away from the ideals of the classic German mountain film. These include an interest in modern mountain imaginaries over Romantic yearnings and a shift of cinematic interest from mountains to skis. If Weimar mountaineering film flees from the thoroughfares of

modernity (Rentschler 1990, 139) and frequently conceals signs of media networks, the ski comedy uses the cinematic apparatus and high velocity of the modern circuits in which it operates to bring to light new forms of mobility. The cinematic interest of ski comedy thus lies less in pitting human fate against alpine nature than in praising the machines that overturn—rather than entrench—the contradictions of alpine modernity. Freed from the tragic constraints of the *Bergfilm*, ski comedy's unsparing display of the human figure's lack of skill and adaptability results in laughter rather than death. Instead of iconic frames of alpinist control, the ski comedy offers volatile projections of modern mobility. Trains, cars, roads, photographs, cameras, telephones, and hotels feature prominently in the ski comedy alongside its eponymous star.

Skis, as historian Andrew Denning argues, are a symbol of modernity (2015, 8), and mountain film scholars highlight how they are emblematic of media and mobility. Throughout the history of the ski film, scholars, directors, and producers have argued that skiing “lends itself to film better than any other sport” (Senn 2022, 4; Rapp 1997; Rapp 2002; Aspetsberger 2002; Herzog 2005; Martin 2017). This close relationship is supported by the joint evolution of ski and mountain film camera techniques, which famously led to the global success of the Arlberg technique (Rapp 1997, 91). Accordingly, Christoph Rapp assigns the roles of both subject and object to skiing in mountain mediascapes. He situates the “continuous dynamic” of skiing in relation to the cinematic dynamism of film and stresses the sport's inherent cinematic properties (Rapp 2002, 81). Like early cameras, skis document movement and project it onto a white surface. They aptly mediate movement between the body, a three-dimensional landscape, and the two-dimensional space of the cinema screen. Body, skis, mountain—in this triangle of mountain mediation, the skiing body is both the athletic medium that prefigures movement and the aesthetic camera that records it (Rapp 2002, 89).

As a type of magic object, skis possess significance beyond the objective and help us make sense of the tangled network of mountain ecology, economics, culture, technology, and semantics. Just how skis connect the scrambled lines of multiple discourses and assemble a variety of projections on mountain space, and how skis might work comedically towards revealing the multidimensionality of mountains, is a question that at least in part requires specific investigation. Thus, I will now begin to schuss through the comedic landscape of the ski film and explore two cinematic sites of slapstick skiing. The first and main site of analysis is the slapstick ski comedy. It highlights the centrality of objects in film comedy at the intersection of vaudeville and early slapstick and explores the role of skis as symbols of social mobility and tourism. To show a very different mode of ski comedy and to honor its accelerated implications for mobility and tourism, the second site of analysis is twenty-first-century travel

ski comedy, in which laughter arises from the human inability to navigate the cultural contact zones and globalized economies of commercial skiing. While slapstick of the 1910s and 20s celebrates skis as instruments of comedy at the expense of skiers, travel ski comedy rarely finds laughs in athletic inability. Instead, it addresses the deplorable state of the ski economy and reminds us of the genre's ability to draw attention to severe socio-cultural and ecological grievances. Each of the two cinematic sites of analysis probes different historical contexts of mountain film and includes a variety of regional, national, and transnational settings of comic skiing. As the "universality of film comedy" (Horton and Rapf 2013, 1) and the omnipresence of skiing in slapstick comedy and mountain film make it impossible to articulate ski comedy in full detail, the films in this chapter are mere examples of the many ways in which mountain cinema has made use of the comedic potential of skiing—or to paraphrase genre theorist John Frow, these films do not belong to the ski comedy but are, rather, uses of it (2014, 2).

SLAPSTICK IN THE SNOW: SOCIAL MOBILITY AND TOURIST EMPOWERMENT

Skiing appears remarkably early in the global history of cinematic comedy. This emergence is situated in the performative, theatrical origins of cinema (Kaes 2006, 56) and positioned in relation to key characteristics of slapstick comedy's humor economy. Along with other instruments and theatrical props, the laughable fall on skis, like the slip on the banana peel, draws attention to slapstick's inherent commitment to physical comedy, while also pointing at the material objects that give rise to laughter (Mast 1979, 23–24; Malakaj and Lyons 2021, 12). In his study on comedy, Andrew Scott understands slapstick as a site "where the body meets the world of things" and underscores the role of objects in negotiating the connection between world and body: "By examining the identity and utility of things and playing with the spaces they occupy, their dimensions, properties, and cultural significance, the body's relationship to the external world is made strange" (2014, 74). His reflections on object-based defamiliarization processes meet, in part, with Tom Gunning's understanding of slapstick devices as "gag machines," which stimulate fresh perceptions by assuming a life of their own and subsequently underscore physical comedy's investment in the mechanical (1995, 96; 2010, 140).

The films of slapstick icon Max Linder show us the degree to which skis are gag machines embedded in the larger historical context around the turn of the twentieth century that saw a renaissance of athleticism, technological advances, and the development of an entertainment industry. Skis figure in a number of films featuring Linder's on-screen persona, also called Max, but they take center stage in *Max fait du ski* (*Max Goes Ski-ing*, 1910), a short that follows Max's clumsy and frantic skiing attempts from inside his hotel

room to a wintery landscape. The film's comic effects build strongly on the corporality of the first Lumière jests and lay the foundation for ski comedy's visceral engagements with modernity, physical gags, and incongruous semantic circuits that will become staples of the genre. These effects include an amusing engagement with emblems of modernity (i.e. hotels, photo cameras, skis) and the temporary violation of conventions in moments of discrepancy when outdoor equipment is tested indoors, bringing down the athletic hero. Max, the upper-class twit, trips, slips, slides, falls, and can only keep on his feet with great difficulty and the help of others. In these moments, the comedy not only offers opportunities to participate in the aesthetic and athletic possibilities of modern life; it indulges in an art of falling that degrades the alpine hero and draws on the social inclusivity of humor to harmonize class difference.

In *Max fait du ski*, skis are a comic object for social mobility that reorder the social fabric by constructing an incongruence between habitus and field. With Pierre Bourdieu's research on embodied social history in mind, Max's ski performance decodes comedy's potential for social mobility.¹ In addition to poking fun at bourgeois attempts at skiing, Max's pitiful athletic feats demonstrate comedy's ability to mess with social order. The ski comedy allows for the dandy Max to pass through his social field and provides an ideal image of Bourdieu's *habitus clivé* along the way. By leaving Max tied to his skis as he exits his hotel room to step into the snow, Linder perfectly captures Max's socio-somatic dislocation that keeps his habitus under tension along with his body (Figure 2.1).

The skiing body's potential to wander through social strata, and the symbolic and cultural capital that structures this potential, becomes even more apparent in Arnold Fanck's ski comedy *Der große Sprung*, in which the ambiguous playfulness of the ski comedy toys with *Bergfilm* paradigms and comic effect contributes to the empowerment of tourists—both male and female. In this sense, skis behave, like bicycles, as a symbol of modernity that is also linked to women's liberation (Hallenbeck 2016). Just as Linder's Max becomes someone else by stepping into his ski gear, the female protagonist portrayed by Leni Riefenstahl is emancipated in the comic landscape of skiing. The film features Riefenstahl in the role of the local goatherd Gita, who manipulates the rules of a ski race, a ski comedy staple, to be conquered by the wealthy urbanite Michel Treuherz (Hans Schneeberger). Gita clearly sets the terms for the courtship and skillfully misleads Michel's rival Toni (Luis Trenker), a native of the Dolomites. Ultimately, Michel wins the race and Gita's heart with the help of clever tricks orchestrated by Gita and his loyal servant Paule. In contrast to Fanck's earlier productions, *Der Berg des Schicksals* (*Mountain of Destiny*, 1924) and *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, 1926), in which the female leads are either baleful fantastical



Figure 2.1 *Habitus clivé* and the comic skier in *Max fait du ski* (1910)

projections or in desperate need of rescue by a man, Gita rewrites at least some of the contemporary rules for courtship and takes her destiny into her own hands.

Der große Sprung offers a remarkable contrast to Fanck's earlier films in other ways, too. Rather than follow a typical tragic course, it "skillfully satirize[s]" some of the features of Fanck's other films (Horak 1997; Peabody 2021). *Der große Sprung* pokes fun at the sentiments of Fanck's previous pathos-laden mountain dramas—which tend to glorify mountains as places of mythic struggle or naïve innocence—by celebrating the ski as a mischief device in a vibrant mix of ski acrobatics and slapstick interludes. It is worth noting that in this film, Fanck approaches slapstick from two directions: first, via Paul Graetz, one of the most important Berlin comedians of the 1920s who turns to the slopes for comic effect, and, second, via the professional skier Hans Schneeberger who manipulates his athletic skills to act funny. Throughout the film, it becomes obvious how effectively skis facilitate laughable moments and how strongly the ski comedy contains core elements of early physical comedy: As if it had served Tom Gunning as a basis for his observations on slapstick staples (2010), *Der große Sprung* shows children playing, utilizes strings and threads for the miraculous disappearance of skis, and brings unusual body shapes into play via Michel's inflatable helium suit, which is supposed to prolong the novice skier's jumps and protect him from falling injuries.

Fanck's readiness to tap into the comic and narrative repertoire of early slapstick extends to the film's participation in cinema's budding fascination with disruption (Gunning 2019, 142). Michel destroys sheds and breaks up crowds on his run and, at one point, delivers an insightful comic assemblage of disparate elements. For Christian Quendler, comic assemblage affords an understanding of a protagonist's placement within the technical and technological landscape of mountains (2022, 137). This is certainly true for Fanck's Michel: When the out-of-control skier tears down a chimney from the roof and continues his descent with a smokestack in his hands, he resembles a locomotive riding through the wintery landscape as if on rails (Figure 2.2). Following Quendler's argument further, forging new connections across different planes also echoes James Beattie's first formulations of incongruity theory as a Horatian monster combining different parts to form a laughable idea (1779, 320). In certain ways, Fanck's locomotive offers an amusing exchange of the monsters of mountain gloom with those of early tourism. Because more than conjuring laughter, the assemblage of skier and chimney contributes to a reevaluation of the relationship between human, objects, and mountains in ski landscapes as it points to the central role of trains as accelerators of cinema and tourism.

As a key element of comic assemblage, skis also take on a central role in an accumulation that, laughable or not, ties together a myriad of stereotypes and



Figure 2.2 Comic assemblage and the human locomotive in *Der große Sprung* (1927)

characterizations of travelers and travelees.² When *Der große Sprung* pits Toni against Michel, the film comically articulates the discursive construction of mountain travelers and mountain locals along notions of difference. Unlike in *Der heilige Berg* and *Der Berg des Schicksals*, Toni does not embody the tragic hero who rescues his beloved and falls to his death with his friend, nor is the mountain an enclosed space for a few protagonists but a permeable setting for the pleasure of many. Instead, he is a lustful local and dimwit resistant to social and technological progress in a well-orchestrated assemblage of stereotypes built on the dominant discourse in mountain travel writing that renders alpine men as stupid, backward, and available for sexual play (Müller 2024). Not only does such cultural Othering carry the film's general comedic atmosphere, but it is communicated and effectively introduced via skis: On one hand, Toni's concupiscence only brings him into unwelcome proximity to Paule and Michel, whose bodies repeatedly become wedged into each other during their ski course. On the other hand, Toni's Nordic skiing technique clearly situates him in the allochronic discourse of a backward mountain man who skis "like Andreas Hofer."³

While the Tyrolean Toni loses his former heroic position in the Fanckian *Bergfilm*, the tourist Michel, rendered a "brave glacier flea" in the original film title, reaches new heights of heroism, evidently recoding what it means to be a mountain hero. The ski comedy hero does not look like a mountain hero, move like one, nor share his traditional qualities: Michel is lanky, unathletic, sickly, shy, and can barely keep up with the physical presence of his rival, who calls him "the little man" and repeatedly pokes fun at the falling urbanite. Diverging from the heroes in Fanck's earlier mountain films, falling does not stand in the way of a happy union; instead, it brings the clumsy Michel straight into Gita's bed, as Fanck's careful editing suggests.

Fanck also pokes fun at the values that were paramount in his early mountain films. Honorable behavior, still obligatory in *Der Berg des Schicksals* and *Der heilige Berg*, is ridiculed in *Der große Sprung*. This is particularly striking in a scene toward the film's close, in which Toni feels snubbed by his opponent's numerous tricks and wants to punish Michel with a sound beating. Instead of the swindler's quick rebuke, this ski comedy opens up a slapstick arena surrounded by snowcapped mountains for the two suitors to battle it out. Nowhere else in the comedy is the clash of two incongruent circuits as conspicuous as in Michel and Toni's dance of comic beatings. And nowhere else do skis have such countless implementations as a comic weapon—as sticks, shovels, barriers, and jumping aids. By pitting the two suitors against each other, Fanck successfully provides a cinematic mediation of the "*Eifersuchtstanz*" ("dance of jealousy") of a Tyrolean whose pride has been wounded, thus tapping into a stock act of Tyrolean Evenings—those staged spectacles that have served to promote Tyrol since the nineteenth

century and are today synonymous with the problematic development of mass mountain tourism in the region. Thus, with Michel and Toni's dance, Fanck offers yet another instance to consider skis as comic objects connecting various strings within the network of mountain tourism.

What *Der große Sprung* essentially shows is an empowerment of mountain tourists: One does not need to behave like a Tyrolean, one does not need to look like one, and one does not even need to be able to ski like one in order to find happiness in the mountains of Tyrol. This is the ultimate message of Fanck's ski comedy, embodied by the unusual hero Michel Treuherz. Although Michel cheats, falls, slips, relies on the help of his servant Paule, and, in his athletic abilities, is surpassed even by Gita's goat, his happiness seems unfettered. Michel achieves, if not moments of masculine heroism or singular mountain glory, at least the restoration of social order so typical of comedy when, toward the end of the film, he sets off skiing with Gita and their flock of children. The film's comic mode moves away from *Bergfilm* conventions while at the same time reconfirming them in the act of departure that Geoff King describes as an ambivalent move toward and away from harmony (2002, 8). Thus, the inability to move through alpine terrain does not end in tragedy, as it would in Fanck's previous *Bergfilms*, but leaves us with a happy ending. This already indicates that the slapstick ski comedy is not solely about quick gags and physical jests, counteracting persistent scholarly assumptions that label ski films as action-laden and plotless (Rentschler 1990, 148; Horak 1997, 46; Rapp 2002, 80).

Finally, Fanck's ski comedy rejects yet another presumption of the *Bergfilm* as a highly national phenomenon, when the director does not merely foreground transnational interests via the subject matter of travel, but openly reflects on the transnational context of comedic production:

Now hardly any German company would have the courage to produce a full-length grotesque. But fortunately, Ufa had just passed into American hands—the Parufamet; and since Americans are, after all, much more amenable to humor, especially grotesque humor à la Chaplin, Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd, the film was approved. (König and Trenker 1992, 119)

Transnational networks, whether with regard to production, theme, or genre, have been with the ski film since its first turns at slapstick and remain key in the twenty-first century, with films that critique at least some of the circuits of global ski tourism switched on, in part, by Fanck's ski comedies.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY SKI COMEDY: WHEN SKIING IS NO JOKE

Almost a century after Fanck's ski comedies premiered in German movie theaters and contributed to the international promotion of the sport, skiing is considered a common pastime across the globe; and mountains, along with beaches, are deemed among the world's most popular tourist destinations (Müller 2024), sustaining an industry that annually generates 33 billion US dollars in the Alps alone (Martin 2020). While slapstick ski comedy portrayed skis as the great social equalizer in the mountains in the first decades of the twentieth century, ski comedy at the beginning of the twenty-first century disenchanters viewers of the belief that skiing has the potential to harmonize inequalities and adopts a more comprehensive perspective of the ski industry. In this vein, travel ski comedy mobilizes globalized comic visions that engage less with individual skiers and their physical shortcomings in an emerging sport, and instead expose both the human inability to navigate transcultural contact zones and the deplorable state of commercialized skiing. The laughter provoked in the twenty-first-century ski comedy is thus less a result of the mechanics of skiing than of the machinery of ski tourism that encrusts humans (and mountains) in globalized patterns of promotion and consumption. This is a form of laughter, caught up in matrices of power imbalance, that operates within the logics of emotional release, allowing the ski comedy to perform less visible but equally felt shortcomings of humankind. Although an exploitative capitalist system is no joke, the setting of cross-cultural encounters in unfamiliar terrain creates situations in which laughter can provide an almost Freudian relief from sites of hegemony and ecological destruction.

The French comedy *La Loi de la Jungle* (*Struggle for Life*, 2016), set in French Guiana, is a perfect example that speaks comic truth to the capitalist network of the ski industry. The film, which draws elements from slapstick and screwball comedy, follows Marc Châtaigne (Vincent Macaigne), a hapless intern at the Ministry of Standards, who is sent to Guiana by ministry officer Rosio (Jean-Luc Bideau) to implement European construction standards at "Guya-Neige": the first ski resort in the Amazonian rainforest developed to increase tourism to French Guiana. Such indoor ski halls are implicated in the history of mountain film and travel, as the first indoor ski resorts constructed in Berlin and Vienna in 1927 indicate (Denscher 2022). Built in the wake of Fanck's *Der große Sprung* and embedded in a larger exhibition park to promote new destinations to German travelers, the Berlin "Schneepalast" (Figure 2.3) was a financial success and inspired Dagfinn Carlsen, a Norwegian athlete who starred in Fanck's *Das Wunder des Schneeschuhs*, to initiate the building of a permanent ski hall in Vienna (Denscher 2022). The analysis of *La Loi de la Jungle* in this section shows that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, indoor ski



Figure 2.3 “Schneepalast” Berlin (1927)

resorts continue to engage with the mechanics of mountain tourism and, in their comedic mediation, address issues of social and environmental justice.

The film, by Grenoble-born Antonin Peretjatko, includes some of ski comedy’s staples already deployed in Weimar cinema and expands them toward more comprehensive comedic refigurations of ski tourism. Similar to the Fanckian ski comedy, in *La Loi de la Jungle* the introduction of skiing goes hand in hand with the planning of a railway line, while an unconventional hero is placed at the center of the film’s humor economy. Like Michel, Marc is an urbanite without ski skills. With his stooping posture, lanky hair, and his tendency to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, Marc is neither in command of his body nor his private life or career. As soon as he arrives at the development site of Guya-Neige, he stumbles over tropical shrubbery, falls to his knees repeatedly and can only navigate the rainforest with the help of the local Duplex (Pascal Légitimus) and the female intern Tarzan (Vimala Pons). Instead of falling on alpine slopes, Marc stumbles through a (neo) colonial landscape and frequently gets in the way of two circuits that repeatedly collide over the course of the film: a tropical ecosystem and capitalist neocolonial desires. When Marc insists “on doing his job” and starts to write a report envisioning Guya-Neige as a “vector to meet and have fun” that “will enrich the social biotope” and soon become “the number one spot in Guiana,” an Anaconda slithers across his laptop, introducing meaning beyond the marketing terminology. In moments like these, Peretjatko uses a form of displacement that goes beyond the rural/urban divide in order to raise awareness of neocolonial ignorance of local environments. Marc remains silent as he witnesses the destruction of forest life, which is replaced with plastic firs. That Guya-Neige is not envisioned as a place to foster understanding but rather as a

money-making machine becomes apparent throughout the film. With very few scenes shot on ski hills and a number of instances that highlight the mechanical nature of the profit-seeking ski industry, skiing as sport remains peripheral in the film, while international investors and corporations with greenwashing agendas work toward initiating ski tourism in Guiana. In the end, the indoor ski resort is never realized: During the opening ceremony, investors discover what they think is a gold nugget and the site is turned into a gold mine. The fake nugget was lost by Damian (Rodolphe Pauly), the auditor for *Cayenne-Manaus-Trains*, who manufactured it to help with local land negotiations. For the investors, skiing is not a sport but a means to an end. Marc fails his internship owing to the closure of the project and remains blind to the profiteering he has enabled, returning to France worried about what might happen with “the ski classes for Guineans” and “public interest,” but, in a quick pun, is reminded by Rosio that “life has other interests.”

In its satirization of ski tourism as a neocolonial practice, *La Loi de la Jungle* provides counter-imagery to the blissful ski vacation and conjures a form of laughter that “goes beyond the function of addressing the (erstwhile) colonial” (Reichl & Stein 2005, 12). To demonstrate the film’s role as a comic weapon, Peretjatko installs a key object not of comedy, but of colonial expansion: the arrow. Damian embodies the French colonialist and continually brags about his commercial prospects even if it means that he has to “eat the Indians alive.” Every time he utters this warning, a poison dart hits him out of nowhere and forces him to the floor. The film’s comic vision emphasizes a chain of perpetual exploitation, in which each participant is cast as both villain and fool in a reckoning with the ski industry. Marc sets out to maintain mass ski tourism in the colony but sees it manipulated in comedic circuits.

The display of the human inability to interrupt the mechanics of capitalist usurpation in *La Loi de la Jungle* has a defamiliarizing effect. It “de-automates our perception,” as Heinz Antor explains in his exploration of postcolonial laughter, “and makes us look afresh at what we are surrounded by every day” (Antor 2005, 94). Thus, contemporary ski comedies are not mere light-hearted forms of entertainment. They are comic reflections that deserve a place in unsettling the business with skiing. Curiously, it is the pain more than the pleasure associated with a ski holiday that resonates through contemporary ski comedies. Such comic mediations dredge

the comedy up from a depth of affliction or anxiety, rage or humiliation so as to invest it with the authority of that experience. In articulating the unspeakable, in a sense more exacting than coming up with insults or obscenities, it must transcend the trauma in question without simply negating it, an exercise that demands both courage and truthfulness. (Eagleton 2019, 141)

Awkward physical movements on the way to social mobility in twentieth-century skiing feats and the deplorable state of twenty-first-century ski tourism are clearly not unspeakable in the same way, but they all find articulation and humorous relief in skiing's comic visions.

Ski comedy's slapstick repertoire of comic occasions, instruments, assemblages, appearances, and perspectives creates a cinematic space that allows for joyful liberation and is deployed throughout twenty-first-century ski comedies such as Ruben Östlund's *Force Majeure* (2014) and its US adaptation *Downhill* (Jim Rash & Nat Faxon, 2020). The comic mode in ski films is more than a promise of pleasure. It provides an opportunity to come to terms with human inadequacies and re-evaluate notions such as superiority and control, in mountains and beyond. Ski comedy has the potential to free not just ourselves (or our bodies and value systems) from the constraints of convention but also, as I hope to have demonstrated, our comprehension of mountain film from generic restrictions. Since the early days of film comedy, skiing has helped us to see how we position ourselves in relation to each other and mountains as socio-cultural, ecological, economic, and symbolic spaces. In each of the cinematic examples discussed, comic skiing plays with the boundaries of freedom and control, raises awareness of dominant codes, and manipulates them in comic vision, as if to suggest that ski comedy contains it all—the eager alpinist, the emancipated Other, the exploited landscape, and more—and allows us to see, in miniature, the entire wondrous world of mountain cinema.

NOTES

1. Indeed, Max's skiing attempt and comedy's overall role in transgressing both habitus and field was addressed by Christian Quendler in his talk "Queere Chimäre: Humor und Assemblage" (Innsbruck, University of Innsbruck, June 17, 2021).
2. The term "travelee" was coined by Mary Louise Pratt in analogy with the term "addressee" and in relation to such terms as "colonizer" and "colonized" (*Imperial Eyes*, 258). Just as "addressee" denotes the person addressed by a speaker, "travelee" refers to the person traveled to by a traveler. For a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of "travelee" as a critical term see Catharine Mee, *Interpersonal Encounters in Contemporary Travel Writing: French and Italian Perspectives* (London: Anthem Press, 2015).
3. Unless stated otherwise, all direct references from the ski comedies discussed are translated by the author.

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3. HIGH AND LOW: POROSITY IN THE NEAPOLITAN ANTHOLOGY FILM / VESUVIANI (*THE VESUVIANS*, 1997) AND MARIO MARTONE'S EPISODE "THE ASCENT"

Daniel Winkler

VESUVIUS AND THE ITALIAN SOUTH

As a spectacular volcano oscillating between Heaven and Earth, city and sea, Vesuvius stands for the ambivalence of mountains as mythological places of the gods, long considered taboo or associated with danger for human life. As a landmark of Naples, it is a material sign of a pronounced local identity but, with its divergent climate and volcanic activity, it also symbolizes the material, social, and ecological precariousness of the Italian South:

[M]ost travellers went no further than the environs of Naples, where Vesuvius loomed large. Just as Naples was a synecdoche for the south, so Vesuvius was a synecdoche for Naples and the south, underscoring the natural and picturesque connotations of both. (Moe 2002, 45)

From the eighteenth century onwards, Vesuvius increasingly became a place of longing because it made an extraordinary experience possible, because, as the paradigmatic volcano of the Italian South, it frequently erupted on the threshold of modernity. In this sense, it grew into a popular attraction and a stop on the Grand Tour and embodied the early modern topos of Naples as a "paradise inhabited by devils" (Moe 2002, 46ff.). For the travelers of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it became, as the cultural historian Nelson Moe points out, the epitome of an experience of foreignness

(Moe 2002, 55ff.). Hence, the volcano stands for a double, quasi-exotic longing for the Mediterranean South, imagined as passionate and chaotic, as well as for the intense physical and sensual experience of the natural volcanic spectacle.

As early as the seventeenth century, so-called tour guides, *ciceroni*, led visitors through the Phlegraean Fields, to various grottos and to the assumed tomb of Virgil in the north of Naples (Emslander 2012, 13ff.). The ascent of Vesuvius was soon embedded into the antiquity tourism around Pompeii, which was buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD and excavated in the eighteenth century (Richter 2007, 19ff., 71ff.). Thus, Vesuvius is closely interwoven with a double mythmaking of the Gulf of Naples. As the ascent of Vesuvius on the threshold of modernity became part of the itinerary of the Grand Tour, the view of Vesuvius turned into a topos of the film history of Naples with the first pictures of the Lumière brothers in 1898. Analogous to Ian Christie's observations on landscape painting, the landscape presented here is thoroughly inscribed with ambivalence, if only because the writings and films about the Gulf of Naples address the largely urban audience of Northern and Central Europe: "The represented countryside or rural landscape is thus already exotic, or picturesque or nostalgic for a majority of its audience, which has neither a philosophical nor proprietorial relationship to it" (Christie 2000, 168).

Starting from this cultural and historical background, this essay undertakes an exemplary counter-reading of the so-called New Neapolitan Cinema of the 1990s, which, as Roberta Tabanelli points out (2021, 96–97), is known for a specific grotesque realism that reformulates the (neo-)realist tradition on the basis of peripheral locations and shows everyday city life in a grotesquely distorted way. Against this backdrop, the relationship between mountain or topography and cinema will be examined in three steps: I begin with Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis's essay (1924) on Naples as a porous city and as a next step ask how far the "New Neapolitan Cinema" can be understood as specifically porous (Marlow-Mann 2011). If one looks from Benjamin and Lacis's theorization to the wider relationship between city, volcano, and cinema, a clear difference from canonical mediations of historical Alpine ascents in the style of the German mountain film emerges in both material and symbolic terms (Martin 2017, 30–36): The materially porous shape of the Gulf of Naples cannot be located in isolation through a simple aesthetic of altitude. Mountain and valley, or volcano and city, are already closely interwoven on a basic level through the genesis of tuff, which makes the perforated soil and is the main building material of Naples.

This is the starting point for an analysis of the anthology film *I vesuviani* (*The Vesuvians*, Antonietta De Lillo, Stefano Incerti, Antonio Capuano, Pappi Corsicato, Mario Martone, 1997), made by five representatives of the New Neapolitan Cinema and set in five different, mostly outlying areas of the

Gulf of Naples. The film explores the porous aesthetic of Naples by making spatial, artistic, and cultural references to heights and depths. *I vesuviani* is topographically characterized by a slow uphill movement that eventually leads to Mount Vesuvius in the final episode. At the same time, the five episodes are characterized by a dense network of references that oscillate more and more between lowbrow and highbrow as the film progresses, thus making the film also appear porous through a colorful mixture of these allusions to different genres, among other things (Hecken 2012, 11).¹

POROUS NAPLES

During the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Grand Tour, Naples became a popular destination for German philosophers and sociologists such as Theodor Adorno, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Walter Benjamin, and Asja Lacis. As the historian of science Christina Wessely outlines (2019), their observations on the Gulf of Naples are united in the concept of “Naples as the counter-place of a capitalist modernity.”² Detached from southern Italian intellectual circles, the above writers developed a thesis in which Naples becomes the ideal of a different modernity, captured by Sohn-Rethel in 1926 in the “ideal of the broken,” as well as by Benjamin and Lacis two years earlier in the concept of its “porous” nature. In different ways, they correlate the broken and porous with the eruptive materiality of the volcano or archaic-anarchic shape of Naples and a “triumph of man over nature” that is not yet complete (Wessely & Voller 2018). Naples thereby becomes the embodiment of a different modernity, insofar as it lacks the rationality that normally governed urban chaos and caused the firm division of space into spheres of rural and urban, public and private, which was the case in the majority of northern and central European cities.

In their conception of Naples, Benjamin and Lacis examine a whole series of topoi of a “belated,” “chaotic-loud,” and “barbaric” European South, which selectively reveals a hegemonic regime of a north-to-south gaze in the style of the Grand Tour travellers of the late eighteenth century (Verdicchio 2007, 260). At the same time, their concept of the porous refers concretely to the material conditions of the city: Naples is essentially built on or from tuff, which is a porous type of rock. Tuff is formed as a result of volcanic eruptions after magma that has been ejected from the crater cools into stone. Water vapor and various gases that escape from the rock create cavities and a porous structure that is particularly suitable as building material due to its malleability (Mittelmaier 2015, 80).

Benjamin and Lacis refer to the metaphorical transferability of the tuff structure onto the city as early as the 1920s, when they describe not only the architectural shape of Naples but also the everyday life of the city and the

mentality of the Neapolitans as archaic-anarchic, based on the characteristics of the tuff:

As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its “thus and not otherwise”. (Benjamin & Lacis 1979, 165–66)

In 2015, Martin Mittelmeier presented a differentiated reading of the career and aesthetics of the concept of the porous, noting that the porous in Benjamin and Lacis is ultimately transferred from the material origin of the term to the shape, architecture, and mentality of the city in terms of cultural anthropology. The so-called porosity serves as a characterization for the chaotic diversity of Naples:

Nothing is fixed, everything is allowed to mix in improvised and surprising turns, [. . .] private and public life become confused. [. . .] The porous is highly contagious. Observed as a natural property, it spreads through the architecture to all the everyday phenomena observed by Benjamin and Lacis. (Mittelmeier 2015, 79–80)

Mittelmeier makes it clear that Benjamin and Lacis do not stop at an anthropological approach to the porous but even make their essay structurally porous in the sense of an archaic-anarchic politics of form: “The ‘unforeseen constellation’ is shaped by things made porous, torn from their contexts” (ibid., 82). In the sense of an equal arrangement of things, Benjamin and Lacis focus on a “circular structure” in which “everything is equidistant from the centre. As a constellation, these porosities encircle a porosity as their empty centre” (ibid., 82). “The colourful hustle and bustle of Naples” thus becomes “the stylistic ideal of one’s own writing” (ibid., 82). The individual fragmentary observations on Neapolitan porosity—like the material structure of the tuff or volcano itself—are full of holes, are archaic-anarchic in structure, and oscillate between the heights and depths of Naples and its peripheries. This is all the more true in view of the transformation of the landscape through human intervention; in other words, its material and climatic vulnerability.

FROM REALIST TO POROUS CINEMA

If one understands the concept of the porous as a politics of form, it appears to be extremely inspirational for the positioning of the New Neapolitan Cinema

in the area of tension between scenic materiality and visual imagination. While the early cinema of Turin, Milan, and Rome mostly consisted of studio productions, from the 1910s onward many films were made in Naples that stage the above-mentioned longing for an archaic-anarchic, imagined Mediterranean South in the style of cinematic realism. Recourse to techniques such as shooting outdoors and using amateur performers, that is, capturing the topography of the Gulf and the everyday life of the city—not least with a view to Vesuvius and the tuff architecture—allows for imagining volcanic nature and theatrical city spectacle as a “Neapolitan Formula,” a quasi-orientalist echo of the Grand Tour (Marlow-Mann 2011, 41 ff.). Gustavo Serena and Francesca Bertini’s *Assunta Spina* (1915), at the intersection of realist cinema and diva film, can stand as a paradigm for this. Popular sound films of the postwar period, for example anthology films such as Vittorio De Sica’s *L’oro di Napoli* (*The Gold of Naples*, 1954), fall back on codes established here, often in the form of “pink neorealism” that captures the everyday life of the “little people” in optimistic, regionalist comedies with star casts. Vesuvius is often positioned as the epitome of Naples’s passionate mentality in the opening credits. This procedure is countered by the cinema of the 1960s, such as Francesco Rosi’s *Le mani sulla città* (*Hands over the City*, 1963), as a political answer to the comedy genre with panoramic shots of the city’s periphery afflicted by building speculation.

From the early 1990s onward, the New Neapolitan Cinema tended to break with an orientalist representation of Naples, although individual films from earlier decades had already done so (Marlow-Mann 2011, 71 ff.). With its focus on the fringes of the city, it oscillates between a realistic and grotesque aesthetic that can be understood as porous cinema in the spirit of Pasquale Verdicchio (2007, 269):

The activities of contemporary cultural workers in Naples provide varying views into the strata of Neapolitan reality that are as layered and hardened as the lava flows of Vesuvius. But the ancient volcano is dormant and the analogy functions for the city itself.

An excellent example of this is the five-episode film *I vesuviani*, which has been identified as a kind of manifesto film for the “Neapolitan School” (Marlow-Mann 2011, 1–2). The cast was predominantly Neapolitan but also had national stars such as Anna Bonaiuto, Iulia Forte, Enzo Moscato, and Toni Servillo and was produced by the Neapolitan company Megaris in co-production with Rome’s Mikado Film and the TV stations RAI and Tele+. Like several other films of the New Neapolitan Cinema it premiered at the Venice Film Festival and was also reviewed internationally; for example, in the entertainment magazine *Variety* (Rooney 1997). At the box-office, however,

the film (which reached less than 20,000 viewers, 27 per cent of them in Naples compared to 6.8 per cent in Milan) was rather a disappointment. Unlike Antonio Capuano's anthology film, *Polvere di Napoli* (*The Dust of Naples*, 1998), which was released the following year, reached a slightly larger audience, and referred directly to De Sica's successful film *The Gold of Naples* (1954), *I vesuviani* is still not commercially available on DVD. Nevertheless, the episodes are by five of the most productive Neapolitan filmmakers of the 1990s, namely Papi Corsicato, Antonietta De Lillo, Antonio Capuano, Stefano Incerti, and Mario Martone, who all had previously made feature-length films. Luca Bigazzi (camera) and Jacopo Quadri (editor), two of Italy's most successful contemporary camera operators and editors, were also members of the film crew (Marlow-Mann 2011, 34–38, 204).

With a view to the realist, grotesque remediation of the relationship between scenic materiality and visual imagination, *I vesuviani* is a prime example of porous cinema. The filmmakers present a re-reading of the imaginary space of the Gulf of Naples as an area of tension between high(brow) and low(brow) by drawing on the anthology film as a popular Neapolitan postwar genre. In doing so, the film not only deliberately omits a classical narrativization of Naples but also intentionally disappoints any audience expectations of a volcano film. Symbolically charged and easily recognizable places of the Gulf, such as Vesuvius, form a deliberate blank space in a porous aesthetic. In view of the famous passage from Benjamin and Lacis's Naples essay quoted above, *I vesuviani* can thus be seen as a film that explores the relationship between cinema and landscape, imagination and materiality in unforeseen ways, avoiding "the definitive and the lasting" in the sense of an archaic-anarchic aesthetic (Benjamin & Lacis 1979, 166). The filmmakers rely on a style that decenters and amalgamates instead of familiarizing topographies and generic homogeneity. In other words, in analogy to Mittelmeier's analysis of the essay, the film is shaped by "things torn out of their contexts," namely episodes which are divergent in style and content and which form an "empty middle" in an equivalent; in this case, episodic structure (Mittelmeier 2015, 82).

I VESUVIANI: CLIMBING NAPLES

I vesuviani blends high and popular culture references on the basis of five very different peripheries and zones in the Gulf of Naples. They range from the flat industrial suburbs in the northwest, such as Pozzuoli, to Mount Vesuvius near the southeast of the city. The film does not focus only on the inhabitants of Vesuvius, the *vesuviani*, but uses them as a *pars pro toto* for the inhabitants of the entire Gulf. It thus creates a framework that (re)mediates a Neapolitan regionalism through topographies, figures, and plot patterns, not least by accumulating national and global genre traditions and trends. This is already

clear from the extra-diegetic film music, which introduces the film with a loud drumming that is followed by high-pitched vocals and makes the Italian or Global South into a cultural reference. The *vesuviani* are therefore located extremely heterogeneously in the contrasting areas of plain and hill, city and country, sea and volcano.

The anthology film also combines high(brow) and low(brow) in a figurative and literal sense. In the first three episodes, porous elements and “mythical” protagonists take center stage in different ways. They range from the descendants of the Roman goddess of the hunt (D-)Iana, who appear in the first episode as a biker gang, to the transvestite Maruzzella, who performs in a porn cinema in Naples, and to the mad fisherman Telemaco, who lives on the outskirts of Pozzuoli. More characters appear in the last two episodes: some seemingly aristocratic figures who live in the hills of Naples and the city’s mayor, who embarks on an ascent of Mount Vesuvius. While women or queer figures in flat or maritime topographies are initially in the foreground, high-placed male figures and corresponding topographies gradually move into the center. These cinematic landscapes are strongly characterized by a porous remediation of popular cinematic genres and canonical texts and authors. These include Mafia films, fishing films, Westerns, martial arts films, Derrida, Lenin, Pasolini, Dante, and ancient Mediterranean myths. The episodes of *I vesuviani* are thus infused with a cultural and topographical aesthetic of heights and heightenings within the framework of the New Neapolitan Cinema’s characteristically grotesque realism. An essential role is played by a porous aesthetic in the areas of tension between high and popular culture on the one hand and by scenic and material forms of staging via references to the “volcanic” elements of earth, fire, and air; that is, the components of lava or tuff and water on the other.

Papi Corsicato opens the film with “The Lineage of Diana” (*La Stirpe di Iana*), a medial mix of Roman and ancient mythology around the goddess Diana, who is presented at the beginning of the film in a cloud of garish pink smoke, followed by a sequence introducing a female biker gang with reference to popular genres such as the Western, martial arts, and Mafia films. He thus emphasizes the ambivalence of celestial and terrestrial dimensions; that is, the elements of air and earth. Images of the flat hinterland and the sea focus on prairie-like landscapes with cacti rather than on the scenery of the Gulf of Naples. This backdrop becomes the stage for the aforementioned “divinely” legitimized female biker gang, who are all named after cleaning and washing agents such as Ajax, Atlas, Dixan, and Tide (some also refer to Greek mythology), and who successfully manage to take on a male Camorra clan (i.e. the Neapolitan Mafia). The vertical, transcendental dimension cited at the beginning is accentuated in the episode mainly through the aerial acrobatics and martial arts of the female gang, who seem to be as invincible as popular

super-heroines and, in the end, manage to beat the clan and take over their sanctuary (Verdicchio 2007, 271–72).

Antonietta De Lillo’s “Maruzzella” is the only episode that is almost entirely located indoors, which, metaphorically speaking, leads the audience from the plains into the “deep layers” of the city and negotiates the elements of fire and water in the form of a subcultural, queer Naples. Here, the mythical times of the Roxy porn cinema are retrospectively recounted. It owes its success to its star transvestite Maruzzella, whose name refers to the pasta dish of *maruzze* (sea snails) he used to cook in the cinema, and who stands for the Vesuvian passion that keeps the cinema going in the “belly of Naples” but which is eventually lost. He falls in love with the only female spectator, Elvira, and thus turns the episode from a *travesti* into a love story. A wedding scene as a happy ending, underlined on the soundtrack by a 1960s twist, shifts the film atmospherically and spatially toward the sea (Tabanelli 2012, 98–99). Vesuvius as a symbol of Neapolitan passion does not form a backdrop but rather a clearly defined empty space. The emphasis of the finale is placed on the transformation of the figures, who instead of looking at Vesuvius, gaze into a void.

Antonio Capuano’s “Sofialorèn” makes porous Naples its material point of departure for the elements of earth, air, and water. Set on a hill above the sea in the Rione Terra of Pozzuoli, as the center of the volcanic Phlegraean Fields known for fumaroles (ejections of sulphurous gases) and bradyseism (the gradual rising and sinking of the ground), the episode is framed by underwater footage (Marlow-Mann 2011, 165). The action takes place partly in an abandoned and largely dilapidated palace, built on and made of tuff, more specifically, in the blue room of the protagonist Telemaco, and partly in and by the sea. Capuano (re)mediates the southern Italian fisherman’s film against the backdrop of ancient mythology in a grotesque way. The name of the dishevelled protagonist Telemaco refers to Odysseus’s son; his pet, an octopus named Sofialoren, refers to the famous Neapolitan film star from Pozzuoli. Symbolizing Telemaco’s sexual desire, the octopus transforms into a princess at night and, at the end of the episode, is greedily devoured by the characters in an aberrant *Grande bouffe* (Marco Ferreri, 1973), and the original myth is thus symbolically consumed (Tabanelli 2021, 97–99).

The last two episodes largely dispense with such grotesque staging patterns. They link the scenic and material staging of the porous with a twofold aesthetic of height. The elements of earth and air are loaded with canonical genre references in the form of plot episodes that lead to the heights of the city and the Gulf. Stefano Incerti’s “The Devil in the Bottle” (“Il diavolo nella bottiglia”), inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Bottle Imp*, links the plains and heights of the city with fairytale-Faustian as well as social-realist references by examining a socio-topographical positioning of Naples between street and palace. The focus is on a homeless man who washes car windows to

survive and on the (pseudo) aristocratic residents of high-rises, located in the hills of the city as symbols of a well-off milieu. The connecting link between the topographical extremes is the bottle that gives the episode its title, which still contains two wishes and, for a short time, opens up undreamed-of spaces of action for the protagonist. As in “Maruzzella,” the episode concludes with a sea scene in which the protagonist sets off in a boat and Vesuvius becomes visible in the background. This is the transition to Mario Martone’s episode “The Ascent” (*La salita*).

LA SALITA: ASCENT AND DESCENT

The last episode continues the upward movement in both a cultural and topographical sense and also forms the medial counterpart to the beginning of the film, namely Papi Corsicato’s grotesque Western, biker, martial arts, mafia-movie parody. Of all the episodes of *I vesuviani*, “The Ascent” is the one that is most strikingly different, as Martone focuses entirely on the ascent of Mount Vesuvius by the mayor of Naples, played by Neapolitan actor Toni Servillo. Clearly framed in a more minimalist and realist way than the other episodes, the sequence gradually proves to be a “mountain-ridge-like” reflection on the Italian left. “The Ascent” thus distances itself from the references to popular culture in the preceding episodes; the relationship between mountain and cinema is predominantly negotiated by means of canonical intermedial references and is thus particularly porously framed by the strong contrast.

As in many films that stage mountain climbs, “The Ascent” is framed in terms of cultural history. Only here, the film does not refer to any historical first ascent, as is the case in Philipp Stölzl’s *Nordwand* (*North Face*, 2008), which is about the first attempt to climb the north face of the Eiger. In the person of the mayor of Naples, a politician takes center stage, who can stand for the political awakening in the Italy of the 1990s after the investigations of corruption surrounding *Tangentopoli* and *Mani pulite*, which shook Italy’s political party landscape. An old woman calls to the mayor at the beginning of the episode, addressing him as “Tonino,” which is a specific reference to the long-time communist and eventually socialist politician Antonio Bassolino. Bassolino was mayor of Naples from 1993 to 2000 and embodied not only the cultural revival of the city and an urban re-branding in the sense of a “Neapolitan renaissance” but also, at least from the viewpoint of the left-wing cultural scene, big promises that were made but never delivered (Marlow-Mann 2011, 165–66).

While in the first episode Papi Corsicato takes up the vertical, transcendental dimension in references to mythology or martial arts films, the last episode is followed by an entirely physical upward movement of the protagonist. Vesuvius is only brought into view as an exception. Instead of spectacular

views of the volcano, we have shots dominate that focus on the figure's immediate local surroundings: scrub and lava rock or sections of the volcano that oscillate between green zones and barrenness. When we see a wider shot of the landscape, the city of Naples lying at the foot of the volcano usually comes into the frame. The protagonist repeatedly emphasizes the changes in the city to the figures he meets on his path (Tabanelli 2011, 62). The self-reflexive, intensive experience of nature and the passionate ascent and self-exaltation historically associated with Mount Vesuvius and the Grand Tour are literally counteracted by Mario Martone. This becomes apparent in a realist, grotesque remediation already present in the first few shots, when the smartly dressed, cigarette-puffing mayor in a trench coat, suit, and Italian sash walks up the paved first stretch to Vesuvius. He is seen from the perspective of a coach of Japanese tourists, where the tour guide presents the mayor as a tourist attraction, in analogy to the increasing cult of personality in Italian politics, so that the tourists eagerly wave to him (Marlow-Mann 2011, 167).

After this, the focus is on the mayor's ascent of Mount Vesuvius. Instead of tourists, he encounters a number of people from Naples on his way through the undergrowth and tuff. To them he repeatedly stresses the cultural upswing of the ill-reputed Naples thanks to his urban policy. If they react at all to the self-praise of the increasingly insecure mayor, they do so in a critical manner. In addition to figures from everyday life in Southern Italy, including a policeman, a priest, and the old Don Giulio with his donkey, the film mainly shows people from Neapolitan cultural life who either want to leave the city, have returned to Naples after a long absence, or have already passed on to the afterlife. The mayor encounters, among others, a theater actress, who, out of frustration with local working conditions, emigrated to Australia for an extended period, where she regained her creativity and spirituality, and, from a distance, a man with a wheelbarrow full of books, whom the mayor chases through the undergrowth. Finally, he finds only the fallen books, among them Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917), a textbook of socialist state politics with a focus on the tasks of the proletariat, and Derrida's *Marx's Ghosts* (1993), an analysis of the legacy of Marxism listing the tasks of a "new international" in times of neoliberal and postnational states. This is followed by an encounter with a young singer, who wants to cancel his concert contract with the city and go to Palermo to be with his girlfriend.

At the end, the grotesque realism of the film, i.e. the dreamlike dimension of the mayor's ascent, becomes fully apparent, as Vesuvius here becomes a personal *purgatorio*, i.e. mountain of purification: Echoing Dante also in language, he meets the elegantly dressed communist *L'Unità* journalist Francesca Spada, who committed suicide and who denounces the patriarchal and petty-bourgeois mentalities in the party (Marlow-Mann 2011, 167). In other words, as the film progresses, the mayor is more and more confronted with his past,

not least with his transformation from communist intellectual to pragmatic reformist mayor. Instead of a sublime contemplation and determined ascent of the volcano, “The Ascent” stages an increasingly unbalanced figure, who realizes his “betrayal” of his own political principles.

The mayor walks down the path with a priest, who seems to be running away from him, sits down, and lights a cigarette. Suddenly a voice sounds from off-screen and a raven becomes visible on the ridge; this is the moment when it becomes clear that the parallelization of ascent and descent is presented as a remediation of Pasolini’s *Uccellacci e uccellini* (*The Hawks and the Sparrows*, 1966). Like the original, starring the Neapolitan actor Totò, “The Ascent” deals with the failure of the social dialogue between Marxism and Christianity that aimed at overcoming capitalism in favor of a more just society without poverty. To this end, Martone revisits Pasolini’s talking raven, which has been read as an echo of Palmiro Togliatti, the party leader and representative of a Christian Marxist path to communism, who died in 1964 (di Stefano 2015, 225). It comes flying into the frame while the melody of the partisan song *Fischia il vento* (“The Wind Whistles”, 1943)³ is heard on the soundtrack, which contrasts the marchers’ broken shoes with the “red spring/where rises the sun of the future.” As with Pasolini, the raven embodies the voice of reason that is critical of capitalism, interjecting the buzzwords “free market,” “privatization,” and the “consumption of cultural tourism” in the presence of the increasingly annoyed mayor and tracing his career to the “last King of Naples” in a sarcastic tone: “You have to believe in miracles. You too are a miracle: Always a communist, you now govern by accepting the values of a capitalist society. [. . .] The monarchs and the clergy have been replaced by the power of television”⁴ (in Tabanelli 2011, 34).

Here the mayor’s physical ascent becomes clearly intelligible as the political and moral descent of a career marked by compromises and contradictions. But if the raven in Pasolini is a strict ideologue, here at least it hints at a dialogue between the left-wing government and the left-wing grassroots in Bassolino’s sense when it proposes accompanying him (“Do you want us to walk a little road together?”). This suggests that the mayor’s ascent to the summit in office attire symbolically traces a path of repentance (Verdicchio 2007, 276), which is particularly evident in a previous scene of the ascent, when the mayor stumbles and catches sight of a group of people who live below in the tuff caves of Vesuvius. This encounter with card-playing cave-dwellers contrasts with all other encounters in a topographical, social, and linguistic sense. Emblematic of the left’s unfulfilled political promises, the scene foregrounds the failures of the mayor’s career as the residents mention the gas pipe explosion in the northern suburb of Secondigliano in January 1996 that killed eleven people, with one body never recovered from the rubble (Bini 2018, 561). When he finally hands down a packet of cigarettes to the people in the cave, the gesture becomes a

symbolic compensation for not having eliminated the housing shortage or carried out the necessary redevelopment measures to prevent the sacrifice of human lives.

If Martone's analogy of ascent and descent at first seems to deal with a certain generation of the political left and its disappointments, it is striking that many of the mayor's encounters are with children and animals and that the materiality and transformation of the volcano and of himself become more important. More clearly than in the other episodes, the dimension of the Anthropocene becomes visible when, in the course of the ascent, the mayor slips more often, is out of breath, increasingly soils his office clothes, and finally removes his Italian sash. The previous scene with those trapped in the caves can also be read in analogy to volcanic eruptions such as the historical burial of Naples or Pompeii. The raven's prophetic monologue, wrapped in poetic language about Vesuvius, which will one day erupt and flood the surrounding area like the sea, also points in this direction. Above all, the increasing blurring of boundaries between city and volcano is shown when, in one scene, a building site on Vesuvius finally comes into the mayor's view, where clearly child labor is employed. When he asks what they are doing there, he gets no answer. This can figuratively stand for the fact that the mayor has not only lost his political overview but also his moral compass.

The external transformation of the mountain and the protagonist can be read in Marxist ecocritical terms in analogy to the concept of the porous: As the vulnerability of the mountain becomes a symbol of political and moral failure, the mayor's ascent turns into a porous landscape of his soul. The people and animals the mayor encounters, starting with Don Giulio and his donkey, all either move slowly, or stand completely still, or even stand as if they were part of Vesuvius itself. As a sign of deceleration, they seem to be an ecocritical answer to the mass tourism around Vesuvius cited at the beginning, but also to the ambition of the mayor, who is completely committed to the principles of modernization and acceleration. Only the ever-increasing air pressure and the increasingly detached surroundings seem to allow the mayor to take a critically distanced view of his (actions in) Naples.

In their analogy of tuff soil, urban architecture, and mentality, Benjamin and Lacis emphasize that the Neapolitans preserve "[i]n everything [...] the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations" and that in Naples "[t]he definitive is avoided" in favor of the porous (1979, 166); this is especially true for this last episode of *I vesuviani*. If Pasolini's *Uccellacci e uccellini* ends with a reference to the film's beginning—that is, a circular structure—Martone's abrupt ending underscores the absence of any meaning. The mayor remains alone and sits down on a stone, makes a quick grab for Lenin's *State and Revolution*, which he soon puts back into his coat pocket, and asks into the void: "But what am I supposed to be doing here?" (*Ma che*

devo fare qua?”). Thus the last episode closes far from any summit heroics or hope for a change in social conditions, even in ecocritical terms.⁵

The ascending mayor’s perception of Vesuvius, a volcano more subject to material and climatic change than other mountains, is analogous to historical accounts of volcano ascents. For example, Alexander von Humboldt already described that, at volcanic heights, self-perception becomes porous. In the face of distortion and confusion, heat and cold, rock and lava, above and below can no longer be clearly distinguished (Schaumann 2020, 56–59). In keeping with the merging of the elements of earth, rock, and air in tuff, that is, with the crater-like structure of the volcano, the protagonist’s path up Vesuvius has no clear end point. Instead of a fixed center or summit, the volcano has a hole; in other words, a void. In this way, the last episode reflects the porous, formal language of the grotesque, realist film *I vesuviani*. Episodic in structure, the plot ultimately revolves around an empty center. The intense interaction of body and consciousness (essentially a transformative power) that is normally attributed to the mountain film is here at best a profound perplexity. Thus, the cult of altitude appears most powerfully as a postmodern worldly experience, far from the one that transcends everyday life, which is reflected in the general absence of panoramic shots, denying the audience any sweeping views into the distance.

NOTES

1. Hecken (2012, 12) notes that “the terms *high* and *low* in the field of art and culture are often directed at works of certain genres, which are generally rated high in one case and low in the other. The aesthetic and/or political, moral criteria that are applied are mostly seen as fulfilled or disappointed by certain classes, so that sociological classifications and social assessments are also connected with the classification *high/low*.”
2. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
3. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/music/lyrics/it/fischia-il-vento.htm>.
4. “Bisogna credere ai miracoli. Anche tu sei un miracolo: sempre stato comunista, adesso governi accettando i valori di una società capitalista. (. . .) Ai monarchi e al clero si è sostituito il potere della televisione.”
5. At the same time, the increasingly grotesque ascent can, in the sense of Roberta Tabanelli, stand paradigmatically for a porous cinema: “Like the asphyxiated and labyrinthine city that Benjamin and Lacis portrayed, so is Martone’s Naples, made up of nooks and crannies, narrow alleys and doorways, fragmented among small squares, stairways, and hallways of buildings, often blocked by grates, gates, railings, and scaffolding, ready to disappear in every shot, an absolute theater where there are no longer any distinctions between inside and outside, public and private.” (“Come la città asfittica e labirintica che hanno ritratto Benjamin e Lacis, così è la Napoli di Martone, fatta di angoli e crepe, vicoli angusti e portoni, frammentata tra piazzette, scale, androni di palazzi, spesso bloccata da grate, cancelli, ringhiere, impalcature, pronta a sparire ad ogni inquadratura, teatro-assoluto dove non ci sono più distinzioni tra dentro e fuori, pubblico e privato.” Tabanelli 2011, 54).

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4. INVERSIONS OF MOUNTAIN CINEMA: POST-HUMANIST ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN ZHAO LIANG'S *BEHEMOTH* (2015)

Christian Quendler

Mountains persist as sites of (filmic) exploration well into the twenty-first century even if the subjects and objects of exploration have changed considerably in the long course of history. Although the origins of mountain cinema can be traced to early forms of exploration cinema, particularly to expedition and travelogue films of the first decades of cinema, mountain films are rarely discussed as exploration films. Yet, viewing mountain films within a historical framework of exploration films promises a better understanding of the sensational, documentary, personal, and ecological aspects that characterize many mountain films; it can also serve as a reminder that an account of mountain cinema should not only focus on the cinematic construction of mountains through stories of ascent but also address the destruction of mountains through all forms of extractions, including the removal of mountain tops.

A historical outline of exploration cinema could be traced along shifting gazes that have variously re-oriented the scope of exploration films. In particular, one can discern changes in emphasis from exotic to authentic as well as from personal to ecocritical concerns.¹ Feeding on colonial exoticism, the imperial gaze of early expedition and travelogue films fueled fantasies of putting an end to unexplored parts of the world. In her essay “L’essence du cinéma” (1925), Germaine Dulac regards cinema as an embodiment of the liberal spirit, where one discovery always leads to the next and thereby develops our sensibilities for the new (191): “With cinema, there are no more unexplored countries, no more barriers between us and things, no more barriers between our minds and

the truth in its subtlety, and, scientifically speaking, no more errors or distortions” (194, my translation).

Thus, cinema’s appeal as a means to exotic daydreaming has been readily supplemented by scientific invocations of film as a means of research and education. In response to Pierre Leprohon’s *L’Exotisme et le cinéma* (1945), Jean Thévenot argued in *Cinéma d’exploration, cinéma au long cours* (1950) that the “excessive exploitation of exoticism, whether real or fake” will inevitably lead to commonplace films (31).² In order to avoid this impasse, films should cease to be exclusively entertainment but serve as a means of documentation, for which “the primary virtue must be authenticity” (Thévenot 1950, 21). Notably, combining sensational, educational, and touristic appeals, German mountain films of the 1920s and 30s, particularly Arnold Fanck’s ski films, anticipated this rhetoric of authenticity so prevalent with exploration movies of the 1940s and 1950s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, one can note a reflexive shift in the explorative scope that focuses on the environment as a realm of personal self-exploration. In the documentary *Everest Unmasked* (1978), Reinhold Messner expresses this quite bluntly: “All the mountains in Himalaya and Karakoram and also Patagonia are explored. It is no longer important for the human world to explore them. What is important is to explore myself.” In a similar vein, filmmakers have faced mountains as challenges that bring out new visions, styles, and techniques of filmmaking. For the Nouvelle Vague filmmaker and critic Luc Moullet, the natural setting of mountains affords filmmakers “with a clearer vision of reality” and “allows them best to discover the truth without the aid of reflection” (Moullet 1964, 53). In his films, Moullet embraces the technical and financial constraints alpine filmmaking puts on a production to reinforce his auteurist interventions. In *Les contrebandières* (*The Smugglers*, 1967), he also effectively exploits mountainous terrain as a defamiliarizing setting for his satire of patriarchal capitalism and bureaucratic authoritarianism.

In the context of the Anthropocene, such reflexive approaches to environments attain new meanings, as the act of exploration turns into a (media-) archeological endeavor that excavates anthropogenic and cultural layers that have amassed as landscapes, allowing us to see more clearly the intersections of geological, touristic, and other kinds of visual extractions. These intersections have become the focus of a number of documentaries in the past two decades, such as Michael Glawogger’s *Workingman’s Death* (2005), Jennifer Baichwal’s *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) and *The Anthropocene* (2018), Valentina Pedicini’s *Dal Profondo* (2013), Salomé Lamas’s *Eldorado XXI* (2016), or Ben Russell’s *Good Luck* (2017). In the light of this explorative trajectory, I propose to include mining movies under the notion of mountain cinema. While this may appear as an inversion of mountain cinema, it also takes us back to the early fascination with the interior of mountains that

largely preceded personal and economic exploits of mountaineering. Zhao Liang's poetic documentary *Behemoth* (2015), which explores the heart of global mining in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, is a particularly powerful case of inverted mountain cinema. *Behemoth* not only addresses the destruction of landscape and nomadic ways of living, it also revises the genre of exploration film by subverting its rhetorical frames of the exotic and authentic as well as the personal and spiritual from ecocritical perspectives. Notably, Zhao discovered his filmic territory on a satellite map when he spent an entire year driving around the country scouting for a place: "When I was in Inner Mongolia, I was looking at the map and this area was black. I couldn't see very clearly, because there was all this thick smog from the coal mines" (Qin 2015). Zhao's anecdote inverts the classical exploration narrative: Not blank spaces or the absences of inscriptions that on traditional maps denote the unknown, but darker, saturated plots become the attraction for the explorer.

The film creates a cinematic experience of environments that are difficult to access, as they have become zones of social exclusion, economic externalization, and alienating enclosures.³ To the extent that the film deals with areas we mainly know about through statistical data of remote sensing and journalistic interviews, *Behemoth* can be described as cinematic countermapping that sheds light on human and environmental exploitation by means of guerilla filmmaking. In another sense, *Behemoth* is itself the product of a globalized cinematic vision that allows us to trace new figurations of transnational cinema. In this chapter, I aim to examine the aesthetics and ethics of the film in relation to two humanistic traditions: a cinematic and a geographic one. Both had their heydays in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1980s, geographic humanism together with Marxist geography became an important heuristic impulse for feminist and critical geography. At the same time, cinematic humanism experienced a renaissance in both China and the USA.

BEHEMOTH AND THE LEGACY OF CINEMATIC HUMANISM

Behemoth begins with a series of distant shots that show detonations at an open surface mining site. Then a slow-motion shot closes in on one of the explosions. The camera focuses on the blasting rocks as they are flying toward the camera while we hear the sonorous bass of Tuvan throat singing. Juxtaposing the traditional music of Mongolian herdsman with slow-motion images of industrial destruction creates a powerful opening image of cultural delocation and natural destruction in one of the most degraded areas of China (Yin et al. 2018). In cinematic terms, the opening shots recall the humanistic world cinema of Godfrey Reggio, in particular his use of slow motion in *Powaqqatsi* (1988), which begins and ends with images of gold mining in Serra Pelada, and

the deep medieval chanting that frames *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). In this sense, the pre-title sequence of *Behemoth* can also be viewed as a gesture of relocation that resituates humanist aesthetics of world cinema in an area that has become a hotspot of global mining.⁴

Reggio's world cinema provides a productive point of departure for my attempt at locating *Behemoth* on a geo-cinematic map. Reggio's films are exceptional examples of experimental non-narrative cinema that have reached mainstream audiences. They also reflect a geo-political re-orientation in American avant-garde cinema in the 1980s toward global and ecological concerns (MacDonald 1992). Reggio's symphonic films offer a frame of reference in placing and marketing independent Chinese cinema in the Western arthouse market. A prominent case in point is *San Yuan Li* (2003), directed by Cao Fei, Ou Ning, and other members of the media collective of the U-thèque, which is frequently described as a film symphony in the tradition of the 1920s as well as Reggio's more recent revival of the genre (Berry 2010; Chien 2018). In his collaborations with the composer Philip Glass, Reggio not only revived this historical genre; he also updated the global humanist visions that can be encountered in film symphonies such as Walter Ruttmann's *Melodie der Welt* (*Melody of the World*, 1929). This ideological context of humanism, its complicated and, at times, complicit relationship with neoliberal capitalism, generated some controversy as to the film's exploitative aspects and Eurocentric bias (Roberts 1998).

How does *Behemoth* relate or respond to the aesthetic, ideological, and commercial legacies of Reggio's world cinema? Like Reggio, Zhao draws on archaic religious concepts, which he re-envision by creating new images and discovering unseen realities. In paraphrase of an apocryphal source, the title sequence introduces *Behemoth* as a God-created beast that feeds on a thousand mountains. Like Reggio, Zhao is in search of a new visual iconography. Through carefully crafted tableaux shots he seeks to restore the affective power verbal narratives have lost.⁵ Perhaps the most startling set of compositions that reveal both parallels and differences between Reggio's and Zhao's mythopoetic approaches are long landscape shots that feature a naked body in a recoiling fetal position (see Figure 4.1). This visual allegory of human vulnerability and displacement is enhanced by a triangular line of refraction that—like a shard in a broken mirror—frames the human figure. The body does not seem to belong to the environment in which it is depicted, and the scene does not seem to belong to a documentary on mining. Such a glitch in realism is a recurring theme in digital world cinema, in which Thomas Elsaesser (2009, 5) detects an ontological skepticism toward the photographic regime. In the case of *Behemoth*, this is articulated through an alliance between digital video and painting. The artistic composition and arrangement of these shots test the limits of the documentary genre and probe the ethics of art. Is it possible to



Figure 4.1 Human displacement and cinematic refractions of reality in *Behemoth* (2015)

contemplate the scarred landscape as aesthetic objects and investigate them at the same time as sites of human suffering and exploitation?

The ambivalent affective appeal of the images is reinforced by the poetic frame of the documentary, which frames the filmmaker's journey to the coal and copper mines in the Wuhai area as an adaptation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Throughout the film we see a coal miner carrying a large mirror on his back. Like Virgil in the *Divine Comedy*, he guides the filmmaker and his audience through purgatory, hell, and paradise. The mirror in *Behemoth* and, by metonymical extension, Zhao's camerawork do not return reality

but give us a mytho-poetic map. Like a color-shaded topographic map, the different circles or stations in the film's journey follow a symbolic color scheme (see Figure 4.2). As in the *Divine Comedy*, the journey starts at the edges of a bygone idyll. Amid highly saturated green pastures, enormous heaps of coal waste form a mountainous landscape, which takes us from the dark pits of the coal mines to the inferno, a copper smelter that is gradually revealed in a long fade from red. The purgatory is dominated by shades of gray and shows the tolls the black lung epidemic takes on the workers' and their families' lives. Surprisingly, the journey ends in one of the many ghost cities that have emerged in the wake of China's massive construction movement but only gradually populated, giving an eerie and surreal testimony to the country's economic and environmental dilemmas. In contrast to Dante's Heaven, Zhao's invocation of a paradise is not a transcendental vision or a dream but the clashing reality of China's urbanization plans. Rather than displace and distort reality, the literary and mythological map helps to trace a reality that is excessively overwhelming and inconceivably surreal. In a cartographic gesture that parallels the destruction of nomadic land, Zhao shows us a rarely seen territory through the inventory and interiority of world-cultural maps.

Behemoth can be seen as a creative act of mapping out the deterritorialization of Mongolian culture. By appropriating a canonical work of world literature, it also projects a map of global cinema. The poetic frame marks not only a generic, artistic, and medial transposition, it is, above all, also a transcultural one.⁶ Dante's *Divine Comedy* both defamiliarizes and familiarizes. While the fictionalized frame increases aesthetic distances, it also brings a distant and largely invisible reality closer to the European cultural imagination. To the extent that the *Divine Comedy* is often read as a harbinger of Renaissance humanism, its remediation in *Behemoth* invites a reflection on the changes in humanist (and humanitarian) ideologies that have informed both Chinese and Western filmmaking since the 1980s, its ambivalent reception and recent revival on national and global scales. Zhao's invocation of the screen as a broken mirror can be interpreted as an ontological critique of photographic realism and an affirmation of new subjectivities emerging from the intersection of digital and painterly frames. I want to address the ethical ramifications of this skepticism and describe what may be called a post-humanistic aesthetics that programmatically embraces the tensions and contradictions of cinematic humanism.

Feature-length manifestoes of cinematic humanism can be traced back to the late 1920s, where films such as Walter Ruttmann's *Melodie der Welt*, (*Melody of the World*, 1929) provided an idealistic counterpart to the cinematic materialism of the Soviet montage films such as Dziga Vertov's *Šestaja časť mira* (*A Sixth Part of the World*, 1926). Yet, cinematic humanism reached its fullest



Figure 4.2 *Behemoth's* (2015) mythopoetic journey from a bygone idyll through the inferno and purgatory of mining to ghostly real-estate “paradise”



Figure 4.2 (continued)

creative and critical potential through postwar neo-realist films. Mediating the shocking impression of seemingly unfiltered and uncensored reality through the symbolic form and the safe environment, cinema added a new geo-political spin to the tension between affective immersion and aesthetic distance. Cinema's virtue as "world-picture," which for art historian and humanist Arnold Hauser results from its capacity to blend spatio-temporal nearness and remoteness,⁷ seemed predestined for forging an international affective community of moviegoers willing to commit to transnational humanitarian causes. As Karl Schoonover points out, "[r]ealism emerged as an affective means to manage the dueling proximities of empathy and worldly goodwill. The promotion and criticism of Italian postwar films not only offer American audiences a way to reorient themselves to the consumption of cinema, but they also permit those audiences to imaginatively remap their place in world politics" (2012, 103).

Drawing on Siegfried Kracauer's account of cinematic spectatorship, in which he envisioned films that "transform the agitated witness into a conscious observer," Schoonover calls the viewer's engagement with neo-realism "the spectatorial mode of the bystander" (1997, 58; quoted in Schoonover 2012, 86). This cinematic synthesis of affective experientiality and reflective mediation became the foundation of humanist appreciation of cinema, the belief in cinema as an essentially humanist medium, the revival of cinema as a universal language, and a means for unified global vision and understanding of the world. As Schoonover argues, in the postwar period this spectatorial mode of the bystander was also well-suited to the "Marshall Plan ethos of global communalism involving troop divestiture, humanitarian aid, and the liberalization of markets, which at the same time endorses cultural imperialism as a means of political suppression and economic doctrine" (2012, 103).

However, cinema's power to deliver traumatic events in dispassionate form to emotionally upset while providing us with a space of contemplation was also met with skepticism. Critical detachment may give way to self-complacent consumption of shocking images. Kracauer himself became increasingly weary of humanism. For him the depiction of violence in what he called "Hollywood terror films"⁸ did not agitate viewers toward ethical outreach but merely gratified their emotional needs in a perverted narcissistic way. While humanist critics believed photographic realism of suffering would stir disinterested indignation and political agitation, critical theorists saw it as a form of degradation or even social pornography. Similarly, Ralph Ellison and James Agee have voiced their reservations about the cathartic release of humanist realism, which evaporates in hypocritical self-congratulation, transforming humanist equidistance into self-righteous complacency and moral numbness (see Schoonover 2018, 126 and 105). In response to newsreel footage of the battle of Iwo Jima, Agee famously compared the impact of the war images to the "invariably degrading" effect that pornography has on its viewers and readers (!):

"If at an incurable distance from participation, hopelessly incapable of reactions adequate to the event, we watch men killing each other, we may be quite as profoundly degrading ourselves and, in the process, betraying and separating ourselves the farther from those who we are trying to identify ourselves with" (179).

For Agee, the degrading effect results from a socially perverse imperative to consume atrocious war images in order to "nurture our patriotism, our conscience, our understanding, our sympathies" (2005, 179).

As Carolyn Dean (2004, 20) observes, even though the pornographic metaphor proliferated in social and art criticism, the iconophobic, male gaze that pierces through this metaphorical blending of carnality and carnage is rarely acknowledged. This is all the more surprising as pornography is almost exclusively discussed as betraying an evidential, indexical reality. A notable and influential case in point is Frederic Jameson's contention that the visual as such is "*essentially* pornographic" (1992, 1), which renders actual pornographic films as mere "potentiations of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body." It seems that Jameson's iconophobia has fully succumbed to the fetishist logic of a possessive (male) gaze. In Jameson's pornographic regime, everything is objective and objectified, commodified and deeply alienated. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard uses pornography to describe an increasing technological abstraction of the body,⁹ as subjectivity seems to evaporate in the hyperreality created by the ubiquitous presence of images and screens. The impersonality of the image, which for the humanist was a prerequisite of cool, political reasoning, for the postmodernist has

become a means of re-realizing the world. If in the humanist aesthetics the immersive detachment works toward a common sense of awareness, the porn-metaphor suggests that the affective immediacy of the image allows no delay for reflection and denies the viewer a place in this reality.

The photographer and theorist Allan Sekula (1984, 45) describes this humanist aesthetics as experiencing “a cognitive dissonance in having been caught between the false power and the impotence of the pornographic spectator.” Whereas the false power refers to the privileged vantage points of the camera that may pose as an immediate witness at a war site or as a surveyor at great heights in the case of aerial shots, the impotence of the photographic spectators results from their inability to ascertain the reality of the real. Sekula argues that the camera not only empowers the viewer’s gaze but also charges it with the “universal sympathies” of the photographer as “the exemplary sufferer, the risk taker, the heroic embodiment of courage and moral outrage. [...] By promoting the war photographer as a ‘concerned’ and ‘innocent’ witness, liberal ideology promotes an image of its own bogus humanism” (Sekula, 45–46).¹⁰

It is easy to see how Reggio’s neo-humanist world cinema becomes a welcome target for this kind of criticism. The Qatsi trilogy aims at maximizing the kinetic effect of cinema and putting the viewer into a trance-like state. It is cinema in search of a world-picture or, as Reggio puts it, it intends “to create a mosaic, a monument, a frozen moment of the simultaneity of life as it existed in one instant at the Southern Hemisphere” (MacDonald 1992, 388). Martin Roberts classified the liberal humanism of *Baraka* (Ron Fricke, 1992) and *Powaqqatsi* as “coffee-table globalism” (1998, 66–67) that follows the tradition of the National Geographic Society and takes its inspiration from Joseph Campbell’s universalist mythologies. “While ostensibly celebrating global cultural diversity, the film [i.e., *Baraka*] seems most concerned with framing that diversity within an overarching humanism, affirming a commonality which transcends cultural difference” (68). Seen through Renato Rosaldo’s concept of imperialist nostalgia, “[w]atching films such as *Baraka*, it could be argued, enables First World audiences to mourn what capitalism has destroyed while at the same time absolving themselves of any responsibility for it” (Roberts 1998, 69).

In order to fully understand *Behemoth*’s relation to this tradition of cinematic humanism, we need to account for the radically different role humanist realism played in China during the 1980s. Cinematic humanism offered an ideological framework to challenge orthodox Chinese national narratives (Lu Xinyu 2010, 22). Humanist realism was sufficiently compatible with doctrines of social realism; yet it also allowed for subversive ways of undercutting materialistic doctrines of class on an idealistic plane. The focus on the body and the individual could serve as a strategy of declassification (*qujiejihua*) and depoliticization. As Gao Minglu points out:

The “individual” not only refers to a particular individual, but more importantly it can be abstractly defined as any ordinary, non-politicized Chinese person. And furthermore, this ideal nonpoliticized Chinese person can be representative of truth, goodness, and beauty, i.e., what is conceived of as the true human nature uncorrupted by any political propaganda. (2011, 66)

Godfrey Reggio's humanist world cinema can be productively compared to the ethnographic epics that in the 1980s delivered international acclaim to the fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers. Movies such as Fei Xie and U Lan's *Xiangnu Xiao Xiao (A Girl from Hunan, 1986)* and Zhang Yimou's *Hong gao liang (Red Sorghum, 1987)* break with the canonical tradition. They programmatically return to tribal cultures, celebrate the body as a site of primitive origins, and offer an alternative national narrative in the form of a depoliticized humanistic myth. Yet, the invigorating power of this creative humanistic mythology is also susceptible to nostalgia and a national self-exoticization. For Zhang Yingjin, *Red Sorghum* stands in between “a critical mode of reflection and the exhibitionistic mode of visualizing China” (2002, 223) that supplies the global market's demands for self-satisfied tourist fantasies (cf. 2002, 250).¹¹

POST-HUMANIST AESTHETICS AND CINEMATIC CARTOGRAPHY IN *BEHEMOTH*

The inversion of such cultural historical travelogues in *Behemoth* can be seen as a response to contested humanist aesthetics. I propose to see this as a characteristic post-humanist strategy in digital global art documentaries. This includes re-affirming aestheticization as a strategy of affective dissonance that goes beyond a cynical mode but re-affirms the body as a sensory political site. *Behemoth* can be placed in a group of recent artistic documentaries that—like the ones mentioned at the beginning of this chapter—experiment with hybrid forms of observational documentary and poetic or essayistic forms that integrate participatory and dramatic modes and programmatically blur the border between art, documentary, and fiction.

Throughout Zhao's work one can observe a persistent inquiry into the ethics and politics of form that focuses on affective dissonances. In this sense, *Behemoth* is not a radical departure from his earlier documentary films, but perhaps better understood as an attempt that synthesizes his documentary and artistic work. Like Salomé Lamas's *Eldorado XXI (2016)*, *Behemoth* exists in different versions: One uses voice-over narration and is geared toward both theatrical and TV release; the other, closer to the director's intentions, is made for art exhibitions and uses on-screen titles.

The lack of spoken words in *Behemoth* underscores Zhao's intentions to “communicate a sense of conflict within the quiet image” (interview with Lu

Yangqiao 2015). It is stirred by distrust of language, narrative, and drama to coopt our sympathy and compassion for calculated rhetorical effects. Zhao's attempt to resist a ready conversion of feeling into sentiment recalls the distinction between "eloquent pity" and "mute compassion" (Arendt 1990, 85). Pity projects a grammatical subject, whose verbose articulation imposes a sense of superiority of the speaker while depersonalizing suffering into a generalized other. Hannah Arendt describes pity as a perversion of passion; passion rendered in words, which she contrasts with reasonable and dispassionate transformation of compassion into political acts of solidarity (1990, 88). Zhao's move toward a dispassionate aesthetics is motivated by a search for deeper understanding and increased awareness; yet, he also distances himself from activist aspirations.¹² Perhaps illustrated best in the use of the naked model and its manifold associations with colonized landscapes, human and environmental vulnerabilities, Zhao is interested in creating feelings, orchestrated by new bundles of affect, which he compares to finding a new visual language that revives "a more ideal form of cinema, a more pure mode of viewing [...] [that] allows more space of imagination than language" (Lu Yangqiao 2015). In contrast to Reggio's invocation of a visual language that is technologically up-to-date and in tune with the zeitgeist,¹³ Zhao's language of an ideal cinema is closer to an (earlier) understanding of film language as an alternative to language that explores new sensory forms.

This accounts for the overall hybridity of the film that combines mythical frames and highly crafted tableaux with investigative and activist impulses by juxtaposing a personal dreamlike vision with a world-literary narrative. The push-and-pull effect created by mythically framing such aestheticized images pervades the film as an overall aesthetic strategy and complicates both a critique of humanist cinema and its Eurocentrism. By adopting Dante's device of a dreamlike vision to capture the apocalyptic atmosphere of the mining landscape, Zhao erodes inner and outer realities, which Kracauer diagnosed as a narcissistic fallacy of humanism.

Zhao's post-humanistic approach entails a spatial critique of geographic governance (Crampton 2004) that challenges the coordinate system of orthodox cartography and invites us to rethink the relationship between cinema and cartography in the context of contemporary geospatial technologies. As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, Zhao's anecdote about discovering his cinematic expedition through smog-colluded territories on a satellite map inverts the classical exploration narrative. *Behemoth* explores "new varieties of terrae incognitae" (Wright 1942, 2), which in John K. Wright's vision of geosophy call for forms of aesthetic imagination and compel us to reassess the scientific and political role of affect and imagination. The film speaks well to Wright's geosophic interventions that call for the transdisciplinary (1947, 12) "study of geography from all points of view." Responding

to the climate of scientific objectivism, Wright particularly emphasized the role human subjectivity and aesthetic imagination assume in geography and called for a synoptic view of critical and imaginary cartographies. Wright's work became a key inspiration for humanistic geography of the 1960s and 1970s and its foray into existentialism and phenomenology¹⁴ and had a lasting impact on feminist geographers, who contested the alleged incompatibility of quantitative and qualitative methods by promoting situated and context-sensitive methodologies.

In the wake of computer-based geographic information systems in the 1990s, we can observe a similar debate about the compatibility between positivist productions of knowledge and disembodied (masculinist) forms of representation that have become associated with GIS practices (see Mei-Po Kwan 2002 and 2007). Similarly, the boom of policy-driven geographic research that accompanied methods of remote-sensing has been criticized for its affective dissonance and a surprising resistance to "post-rationalist styles of thinking" (Anderson & Smith 2001, 8). This is above all a critique of digital practices and not of digital technologies themselves, as feminist geographers promote embodied uses of geospatial technologies.

As in film studies, the digital turn in geography also generated a series of critical reflections that challenged orthodox assumptions of the discipline.¹⁵ In an essay published in 1990, Philip C. Muehrcke (9) compares the meta-cartographic potential of GIS to the cubist's experiments with perspectivism. A cubist perspective, Muehrcke suggests, can help us to better appreciate the improvisational and experimental dimension of cartography:

We are free to make various cartographic assumptions, and then see what the environment looks like. We are seeking cartographic effect, not geographic truth. If the effect is uninteresting, the map can be discarded (or erased from the screen), since it has little inherent value. We can get at pressing environmental issues from different angles and dimensions merely by trying different combinations of cartographic assumptions. (9)

By favoring the cartographic effect (and, one may add, cartographic affect) over geographic truth, Muehrcke underscores the mapping experience: the use of maps as explorative tools and instruments for experimentation.¹⁶

Behemoth helps to visualize the unseeable. Like a map, it is not simply presenting a reality but actively creating one. More importantly, it offers a spatial critique of geographic information systems. In placing a naked model on the edges and boundaries (see Figure 4.1), Zhao emphasizes the human scale and embodied dimension of filmic mappings. Instead of figuring merely as a symbolic self-locator, the naked model embodies a sensing device in an area of radical land change. As a spatial practice of gauging environmental

relations, cinema covers a mid-range between close and remote sensing. This is essentially a humanistic conception of cinema as world-picture that offers, as Hauser puts it, a “simultaneous nearness and remoteness of things” (1958, 243).

As a creative geography in the realm of documentary cinema that aestheticizes “referential mappability” (Stockhammer 2017, 79), *Behemoth* represents an inverse case of imaginary mappings found in narrative fictions. Instead of inserting points of referential mappability into a fictional world, *Behemoth* adds a literary frame to the referential world. This makes it particularly instructive for understanding conceptual exchanges between a cartographic understanding of maps and its metaphorical transpositions in other disciplines. While cinematic mappings have been predominately approached as (metaphorical) transpositions of cartography, a recourse to humanistic and feminist geography allows us to approach cinema from a cartographic perspective and review the symbolic, imaginary, and referential dimensions of mappings.

On a symbolic level, Dante’s poem quite literally serves as the *legend* of the map in a cartographic and narrative sense. It provides the wording of a map that is framed by Christian and humanist literary traditions. The exchange of Western and Eastern cultural legends is addressed early in the film in a conspicuous nesting of dreamlike visions. The guide who ushers the film’s lyrical I explains that the coal-mine owner erected a Buddha statue because he had a dream in which the mountain god blamed him for blowing up a mountain. The striking use of color in *Behemoth* and its twofold function as affective expressions and topographical codes underscore the imaginary transaction in the film’s orientation. It draws attention to the cartographic principle of color coding, which is also a way of collocating topographical features with affective states. Finally, in regard to the referential dimension, the film’s symbolic mapping on the basis of the *Divine Comedy* and extra-reference simultaneously affirm and undermine each other. When we finally arrive at the ghost city Ordos, the on-screen text reminds us that this is not a dream but reality. The toponym Ordos, which in Mongolian means palaces, is invested with the meaning of its internal mapping. In an interview, Zhao claims that it translates as the “palace in heaven”—forging a correspondence to the film’s internal mapping.¹⁷ We are reminded that the geo-referential function is only one dimension of toponyms.

Behemoth’s exploration of liminal spaces through a world-literary frame addresses a tension characteristic of endeavors in digital world cinema that reinvestigate colonial archives from ecocritical perspectives. In *Mined Soil* (2014) as well as in *Mangrove School* (2022, co-directed with Sónia Vaz Borges), the Portuguese filmmaker Filipa César revisits the anti-colonialist struggle in Guinea Bissau by exploring the soil and tree roots as repositories of exploitation and networks of resistance. Glawogger’s *Workingman’s*

Death (2005) not only traces the loose ends of national and global industrial networks but also reveals the uneasy co-presence of tourism and mining industries. If Dante's *Inferno* and *Behemoth* are Eurocentric projections, then they are also reminders that the excessive rare earth mining in Inner Mongolia is the result of a concerted international effort that parallels the history of cinematic humanism.

NOTES

1. For a brief survey of historical approaches to exploration cinema, see Cahill and Caminati (2020).
2. All translations from French in this chapter are mine.
3. See also Cubitt (2021, 30).
4. On the geo-political history of rare earth mining of this area, see Julie Michelle Klinger's *Rare Earth Frontiers* (2018, 67–136).
5. Both Reggio and Zhao have variously commented on their endeavors to develop a new visual language; see MacDonald (1990), Lu Yangqiao (2015), and Yu (2019).
6. Notably, the idea of structuring the filmic travelogue according to Dante's long poem was itself the product of a transnational dialogue between Zhao and his producer Silvie Blum, who is credited for the narrative script.
7. For Hauser "[i]t is the simultaneous nearness and remoteness of things—their nearness to one another in time and the distance from one another in space—that constitutes that spatio-temporal element, that two-dimensionality of time, which is the real medium of the film and the basic category of the world-picture" (1958, 243).
8. Kracauer (1946), "Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?" in *Commentary* 2, 132–36, reprinted in von Moltke and Rawson (eds), *Siegfried Kracauer's American Writings*. See Schoonover (2018), "When Cinema Was Humanism."
9. See Sobchack's critique of "Baudrillard's Obscenity" (1991).
10. For a critique of Sekula's position, see Linfield (2010), esp. 30.
11. Zhang: "Moving gracefully from the revolutionary history to the myths of a timeless China, Zhang has transformed, with Ju Dour, an Oriental story of repression, abuse, and patricide into a beautiful legend subjected to the intense gaze of the Western audience" (2002, 223).
12. Like Glawogger, he opposes "the attitude of 'I want to change the world with my movies.' [...] I fancy the thought that if an alien comes to this planet and sees the three films, he will know something about the time when I made them on Earth. That's enough." (Cynthia Lucia (2012), "'Some Friends You Have!': An Interview with Michael Glawogger," in *Cineaste* 38, no.1: 28–38.)
13. See MacDonald (1992, 382).
14. For a mytho-poetic survey of humanism and geography, see Buttimer (1990).
15. In a similar way that the digital turn generated a series of critical reflections on the virtue and history of cinema that challenged orthodox assumptions (Manovich 2001, Rodowick 2007), the revolution of geographical information systems (GIS) in the 1990s led scholars to rethink received notions and practices in cartography.
16. Rob Kitchen and Martin Dodge pushed the envelope even further by proposing a broad definition of cartography that goes well beyond professional definitions of maps. Instead of thinking of maps in categorical or constructivist terms as representations or performances, they advocate an ontogenetic or emergent conception of maps as embodied, social, and technical practices: "Maps are of-the-moment,

brought into being through practices [...]—they are always *mappings*; spatial practices enacted to solve relational problems” (2007, 335). See Les Roberts (2012) for a map of cinematographic cartographies, “Cinematic Cartography: Projecting Place Through Film.” On the deep-structural relationship between maps and films, see Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*.

17. More generally, Zhao remarked that he only marginally modified Dante’s adaptation to fit his film.

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PART II
NATION

5. CREATIVE GEOGRAPHY AND VOLCANIC MOUNTAINS: ARNOLD FANCK'S *DIE TOCHTER DES SAMURAI* (1937) AS MOUNTAIN FILM

Qinna Shen

When the opportunity arose for the internationally known *Bergfilm* director Arnold Fanck to make a Japanese-German coproduction, he capitalized thematically and dramatically on Japan's numerous volcanoes, some of which were active during his eighteen-month sojourn in the country. Fuji, the icon of Japan, is not the only volcano featured in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (*The Samurai's Daughter*, 1937). In fact, a few other volcanoes in Japan—Mt. Aso, Mt. Asama, and Mt. Yake—play equally important roles, but Fanck depicted these volcanoes without naming them explicitly. Thus, there is some confusion among scholars over the identity of the mountain on which Fanck shot his climactic chase sequence.¹ The confusion results from Fanck's creative geography and his free combination of footage from different volcanoes. Hayashi Bunzaburo, who was the Berlin contact for Kawakita Nagamasa, the producer of the film, and participated in the co-production as translator and supervisor for Fanck's version, defended Fanck's "geographic artificiality" on aesthetic grounds: "there is just too much great scenery in Japan" (Haukamp 2021, 42, 145).

Despite the attention that Fanck lavished on Japan's mountainous landscape, *Die Tochter des Samurai* is not usually regarded as one of his mountain films. The reason may very well lie in the fact that no action in the film takes place on a mountain until the chase sequence, unlike in Fanck's European mountain films, where most of the storyline unfolds on the peaks. However, owing to Fanck's avid editing, the mountains are always present and portending.

Building on other studies on the orientalist and fascist ideology of this film, this essay focuses on the aesthetic and technical construction of *Die Tochter des Samurai* as a *Bergfilm*, which has generally been neglected in scholarship so far. To be sure, Valerie Weinstein has discussed the thematic and aesthetic continuities between *Die Tochter des Samurai* and Fanck's earlier Alpine pictures. She identifies the generic conventions of the *Bergfilm* in *Die Tochter des Samurai* and demonstrates how Fanck inserts Japan and Japanese characters into an internationally recognized generic framework. But whereas Weinstein focuses on the chiral, seemingly alike yet subtly different experiences of modernity for Germans and Japanese that explain the film's transnational appeal to both audiences in the mid-1930s, my essay offers a film historical and film aesthetic analysis of Fanck's creative geography, paying special attention to the nationalist, allegorical, and religious perceptions of the mountains.

This essay teases out the aesthetic details that can make viewers more conscious of the material conditions of the film's production. Incorporating information from the memoirs of Fanck and the cameraman Richard Angst, the essay attempts to reconstruct and clarify where in *Die Tochter des Samurai* Fanck utilized footage shot at four volcanoes: Mt. Fuji, Mt. Asama, Mt. Aso, and Mt. Yake. The identification of the origin of those shots demonstrates how this *Bergfilm's* narrative and characterization of the protagonists necessitated the conflation of various volcanoes: Although Fuji is the iconic Japanese volcano, it is inactive, and the film crew was compelled to seek active volcanoes to represent the volatile Mitsuko, who, as described by her German teacher, is serene outside and volcanic inside. The essay demonstrates that Fanck closely associates Teruo with Mt. Fuji and Mitsuko with a synthetic volcano consisting of Mt. Aso, Mt. Asama, and Mt. Yake.

HEIMKEHR, RE-JAPANIZATION, AND FUJI AS A NATIONALIST AND ALLEGORICAL MOUNTAIN

Right at the beginning of the film, to the accompaniment of Japanese drum and flute music, a *Japonisme* gouache painting of Mt. Fuji and then another gouache painting of a house in the foothills of Fuji are shown while the credits roll. Next, an aerial view of a model of the islands of Japan with a few pockets of rising smoke is seen. This trick shot is the only depiction of Fuji emitting smoke in the film (Hansen 1997, 18). Fanck originally intended to depict a more volatile Fuji that would erupt. The cameraman Richard Angst, in his unpublished memoir, wrote about a huge model of Japan that was constructed in the special-effects studio. The team built a miniature of the still active volcano Mt. Asama² and a giant, 8-meter-high device that allowed vertical camera movement. The construction, however, collapsed and the artificial volcanic eruption did not materialize (Angst, Chapter 8, 5).

From his predeparture research, Fanck learned that there were “only two active volcanoes left in Japan”: Mt. Aso, which erupts once every few years, and Mt. Asama, which erupts once a year (Fanck 1973, 345; my translation). Since no one could precisely predict when Asama would erupt, Fanck sent two Japanese cameramen to wait for the eruption soon after his team arrived in Japan in January 1936, before the script had even been written. He gave them his third camera, plus a teleobjective with a 600-millimeter focal range. The two Japanese cameramen stayed in a very primitive mountain hut about five kilometers away from the Asama crater. They waited dutifully from February to mid-July, when Asama finally erupted. Fanck interpolated extensive footage of a progressing volcanic eruption of Mt. Asama to create a visual parallel to the plotline as it progresses to an emotional eruption.

In the finished film, the opening sequence transitions from the island model to Mt. Asama, from which rises a single column of dark volcanic gases, then to Mt. Yake, as explained below, where hissing steam gushes from fumaroles, and finally back to Mt. Asama, this time seen in eruption. The montage ends with a view of placid, snow-capped Fuji; windblown snow creates the illusion of steam and vapor surrounding the peak. The opening sequence thus gives a glimpse into how Fanck constructed the visuals of the film. These are not gratuitous nature scenes. They not only intimate the way in which Fanck composed the entire film, but also serve to establish the inhospitality of the Japanese islands and the need for new land, a topic central to the film's ideological and political justification of Japan's colonization of Manchuria.

In the episode of Teruo's homecoming and re-Japanization, Mt. Fuji is featured prominently. The accentuation of Mt. Fuji in this episode foregrounds the nativist and nationalist perception of Fuji. In the 1930s, as Japan became more militant and fascist, Mt. Fuji was instrumentalized to support imperialistic propaganda, colonialism, and chauvinism. According to H. Byron Earhart, “The nationalistic or patriotic ‘mantra’ of Fuji will be encountered during the modern epoch, when Fuji too was pressed into service to shore up essentialist views of Japanese ‘naturalism’ and ultra-nationalism” (Earhart 2015, 4–5, 126–30). This episode opens with Teruo's sister chirpily whistling, obviously happy that she has reawakened the “blood of [his] ancestors” within Teruo. Then the scene cuts to a tracking shot of Fuji that gives us Teruo's perspective from the train. In a long take, the train itself is seen through a screen of cherry blossoms framed against the backdrop of Fuji and of two figures poling *hozugawa ayubune* (traditional Japanese riverboats). Next, Teruo emerges from the left side of the screen, appearing for the first time in a kimono. The camera pans quickly to the right to aim at Fuji. Teruo walks into the scene and pauses, apparently to dwell on the grandeur of Fuji. It cuts to a panoramic shot of a distant Fuji under a vast sky, then cuts back to Teruo, followed by a point-of-view shot of Fuji, with the camera placed behind cherry blossoms again.

The next day begins with a landscape shot of the snowy cap of Mt. Fuji. Then Teruo, asleep on a tatami, is superimposed in double exposure onto a shot of Fuji to suggest that he is sleeping at the foot of the mountain (Figure 5.1). In this fabricated shot, the walls of the parental house become transparent so that Teruo blends into nature and is embraced by Fuji. While on the aesthetic level Fanck creates a visually intriguing shot, on the narrative level this shot is embedded in Teruo's re-Japanization and re-nationalization, thus accentuating yet again the nationalist and allegorical signification of Fuji. Fanck then fades to a close-up of the resting Teruo looking resolutely toward his new life in Japan, hands folded behind his head. The shot dissolves to show a fishnet outside the window with Fuji visible in the background, and then a lake near Fuji, probably the famous Lake Kawaguchiko, which is the most easily accessible of the Fuji Five Lakes, with waves rushing to the lakeshore. This episode shows Teruo re-embracing his native culture and re-evaluating life as a farmer; its depiction of him picking up a pitchfork and going to the rice field anticipates his eventual agricultural life in Manchukuo, Japan's colony in China.



Figure 5.1 Teruo's parental house and Mt. Fuji are conflated in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

MT. ASO "WITHIN SIGHT" AND MT. ASAMA "WITHIN EARSHOT"

Whereas Teruo's biological parents, the Kandas, live at the foot of Mt. Fuji, the Yamatos live near a different, unidentified volcano, and from their residence they can sense its rumblings and see it from Mitsuko's window (Figure 5.2 left). This shot recalls a similar shot in *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, Arnold Fanck, 1926) where the dancer Diotima, played by Leni Riefenstahl, rushes to the window to look at the distant icy mountain to which "the friend" escapes to savor his overwhelming feelings for her (Figure 5.2 right). This detail illustrates how easily Fanck transferred motifs from his mountain films to his "volcano film."

When viewers first met Mitsuko at her residence earlier, however, there was no volcano in sight. That sequence was primarily shot in Miyajima in Hiroshima Bay, where the giant orange Great Torii Gate, the landmark entrance to the Itsukushima Shrine, stands in the water (Haukamp 2021, 63; see also Angst, Chapter 8, 3–4). A viewer unfamiliar with the geography of Japan is led to conclude that the Yamato family lives near a volcano. Fanck obviously sacrificed dramaturgical consistency in the interest of a dramatic narrative: The volcano's rumbling should be audible from Mitsuko's home so that she could hear it "calling" to her. Mitsuko's father, Iwao Yamato, has invited Gerda to be a guest at his house. Mitsuko's German teacher has also come to give her German lessons. He tells his compatriot Gerda that Japanese women have a volcanic temperament and they either erupt like a volcano or leap into one—a clear indication of Fanck's intention to use the volcano as an allegory. These words are immediately followed by a shot of a crater, out of which voluminous incandescent clouds of vapor rise while the camera climbs upward to the left (Figure 5.3 left). An immediate question arises: At which volcano was this shot filmed? And which volcano do we see from Mitsuko's window?



Figure 5.2 Mountain views through a window in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937) and in *Der heilige Berg* (1926)



Figure 5.3 Crater shot of Mt. Aso and of the Mt. Yake crater in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

This tracking shot moving upward along the volcano matches what Richard Angst described in his memoir.³

—One day we had to film a still active volcano—this uncanny natural phenomenon should be captured as truthfully as possible—in order to achieve this, I let myself be rappelled down into the inside of the volcano together with my camera—the hot sulphur fumes from the rock cracks and from the volcano constantly hit my face—it was really a dicey task, because I could not speak for two weeks as a result of these fumes—the Japanese side was amazed at the courage I had to muster, but they could not understand why anyone would risk his life for the film—they will be images that Europe has not yet been able to see—maybe this is where the great value of this film lies.

The fact that Angst mentioned rappelling down while the film clip shows an upward camera movement may indicate that Fanck played the film backward, or that it was shot when Angst roped back up the volcano. In any case, this shot reflected Angst's position in the fuming volcano with his camera. But Angst did not mention which volcano it was.

Luckily, Fanck wrote in his memoir that his film team went to Mt. Aso: “Although Richard Angst was able to take a stunning shot in the vast but barren landscape of Aso, looking into the faintly smoking crater, for Teruo's pursuit of Mitsuko there was not a single beautiful shot” (Fanck 1973, 346). Fanck did not mention where in *Die Tochter des Samurai* he used Angst's amazing shot. One could, however, safely assume that Fanck would not leave such a shot unused. Now, in light of Angst's own memoir, it can be concluded with certainty that Fanck placed this “stunning shot” right after Mitsuko's German teacher foreshadowed the manner in which Mitsuko

plans to end her life. The visual of this volcano also excludes the possibility that it is Fuji, Asama, or Yake. As the film shows later, the crater on Mt. Yake does not emit a white column of steam (Figure 5.3 right). Furthermore, Angst did not go to Asama, and Fanck only sent two Japanese cameramen there. This leaves Mt. Aso as the only possible candidate for the volcano that is located within the film near the Yamato residence, and the volcano's appearance also matches that of the actual Aso. Moreover, Mt. Aso is located on the island of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's large islands, and Angst mentioned in his memoir that the film team traveled the full length of the island.⁴

..., and not until location shooting was it possible for me to see some of Japan, its life, its customs and traditions—we went to the southern tip of the Japanese island, to the romantic Hiroshima, where the atomic bomb was dropped on August 6, 1945,—to the Japanese Alps, to Sakhalin, we saw really everything there was to see.

Therefore, it was not too far-fetched for James King to write that Mitsuko plans to jump into Mt. Aso (King 2012, 20).

Unaware of Teruo's change of heart, Mitsuko reluctantly comes out to meet the two guests. Speaking to Gerda, Mitsuko ominously implies that on the following day she may wear the wedding kimono for once in her lifetime. At the same moment, the rumble of an imminent volcanic eruption startles Gerda. Then a single columnar cloud of volcanic ash and sulphurous gases pours from a vent, illustrated using footage of Mt. Asama (Figure 5.4). The scene cuts to Teruo driving to the family council meeting that will decide whether to dissolve his adoptive relationship after his refusal to marry Mitsuko. While Mr. Yamato and Gerda are eating a meal served by Mitsuko, the rumbling of the volcano is combined with a shot of a trembling vase. Whereas Gerda looks anxious, Mitsuko lowers her eyes, sensing it is time for her to head to the volcano. A close-up of a pillar of rising volcanic smoke from Mt. Asama is inserted, as well as another shot of Teruo driving. Thus, in the episode at the Yamatos, Fanck used the sound recorded from Mt. Asama, while the volcano visible from Mitsuko's window is Mt. Aso.

As the meal continues, a more persistent rumbling is now audible. Mitsuko has already quietly retreated to her room. Gerda tells the calm Yamato, who is undisturbed by the volcano, that she finds the volcano "a little scary" ("ein bisschen unheimlich"). Now the shot is not merely a plume of white volcanic gases but includes black ashes, with incandescent steam and gases pervading the screen. After the scene of Yamato and Gerda standing at the cliff overlooking the ocean, the film cuts to Teruo driving and Gerda arriving at the same crossing by car. But Teruo does not see Gerda, as he did not see Mitsuko



Figure 5.4 Eruption of Mt. Asama in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

earlier in the Hotel Europa in Tokyo. The missed encounters indirectly express the change in Teruo's love interest. But it would be hard for Teruo not to see Gerda, since she was the only person on the road. Here the legendary "Fanck luck" ("Fancksche[r] Dusel," Fanck 1973, 345) struck again: Out of the blue, a group of Buddhist nuns whom Fanck had actually met the day before in the hotel's sauna walked down the road in white robes, beating pellet drums with a wooden handle. Fanck took advantage of this coincidence by having the nuns block Teruo's view of Gerda on the other side of the street (Fanck 1973, 348–49).

Mitsuko first looks at the *shoji* (sliding door) behind which the family council is convening. Another shot of the plume of smoke on Mt. Asama ensues, followed by the window shot with Mt. Aso in view. Then the scene cuts to the suicide note Mitsuko leaves behind, in which she compares herself to tender cherry blossoms and Gerda to the thronging fruit that replaces the withered and fallen blossoms. Echoing Mitsuko's words, cherry blossoms are seen falling into the water, and then Mitsuko herself heads to the volcano in a drawn-out sequence. It is the *hanami* season and the Japanese are shown enjoying the beauty of cherry blossoms. From the soundtrack comes a sweet voice singing the famous folk song "Sakura, Sakura" as Mitsuko encounters

a little girl. Fanck seems in no hurry to advance the plot: He creates scenic tableaux of disjointed images or breaks up a scene by inserting ethnographical, documentary-style images about life in Japan. This is understandable since *Die Tochter des Samurai* was also a propagandistic and ethnographical *Kulturfilm* that was meant to showcase Japan for an international audience.

Finally, Mitsuko looks up, presumably at the smouldering volcano near her home, Mt. Aso, which is, however, illustrated by a shot of Mt. Asama with more dense clouds of fumes. After Mitsuko boards the train, viewers see another shot of Asama before she exits the train and heads toward the mountain. Teruo arrives to find the note Mitsuko has left behind and realizes Mitsuko's self-destructive plan. A point-of-view window shot of Mt. Aso from Teruo's perspective repeats an earlier point-of-view window shot of Aso from Mitsuko's perspective. It is followed by a plume of dark sulphur gas on Mt. Asama, with Mitsuko's non-diegetic whisper to Teruo: "Teruo ... the volcano. I hear the volcano. The volcano is so close" ("Teruo ... der Vulkan. Ich höre den Vulkan. Der Vulkan ist so nah").

THE CHASE ON MT. YAKE

Although shots of Mt. Asama's escalating activity signal the pending outbreak before Mitsuko's departure, the shots that record her ascent no longer show a plume of thick black smoke but instead the anti-climactic emission of steam and gases from fumaroles. In fact, the climbing sequence was shot on a different volcano, a choice that guaranteed a realistic depiction of climbing an active volcano and at the same time ensured the safety of actors and film crew. Neither Asama's "monotonous volcanic cone of ejected ash" nor Aso's "barren landscape" could produce the aesthetic effect Fanck desired for his climactic chase sequence (Fanck 1973, 346). But the "Fanck luck" did not abandon him. In a store, by chance, he saw a postcard with a distant view of a mountain topped by small clouds. It immediately occurred to him that they could be volcanic gas. The mountain was Mt. Yake, literally "Burning Mountain," an active volcano near Matsumoto, Nagano, in the Northern Japanese Alps. Mt. Yake was not well known then, but it had a grand hotel at an altitude of 1,500 meters where Fanck and his team stayed while filming the crucial sequence (Fanck 1973, 346).⁵ The serendipitous discovery of Mt. Yake was a breakthrough for the film project:

Sulphurous fumes raged from hundreds and thousands of holes in this wildly torn lava rock—from small holes, making a shrill whistling, as well as from huge holes, up to two meters in diameter, with such a roar that we had to shout into each other's ears in order to be heard. Everywhere a fuming hell—I could have shouted with joy for having

found such a grandiose landscape. After all, now I could also make something sensational out of my volcano plot, something that had never been seen before in film. (Fanck 1973, 346)

The shots on Mt. Yake are spectacular and breathtaking, showing the delicate, graceful Mitsuko, wearing a kimono and carrying her wedding kimono in a bundle, surrounded by barren trees and hot gases billowing out of holes in the ground. With an *onsen* (hot spring) visible behind her, Mitsuko pauses to look ahead, and a point-of-view shot of thick smoke rolling out of the vent on Mt. Asama follows. As illustrated above, Aso, Asama, and Yake are creatively synthesized to construct the volcano that Mitsuko intends to throw herself into.

Fanck repeatedly cuts between Mitsuko climbing and Teruo driving to the volcano. The camera placed on the edges of the car captures Teruo from different angles and illustrates the dangerous terrain that he drives through: a narrow, elevated path on the edge of a steep slope. The path apparently winds along the Azusa River; when Mt. Yake last erupted in 1915, the volcanic mudflow blocked the flow of the river and created Taisho Pond in Kamikochi (“Mt. Yake-dake,” n.d.). Here Teruo’s car breaks down and he prepares to swim across the pond. The camera films a succession of close-ups of dead trees, then pans left to show a leafless forest in the pond. The sequence is interspersed with shots of Mt. Yake, veritably a “burning mountain” (Figure 5.5). The desiccated trees in and around the pond add a special ambience to the scene and serve as a reminder of the destruction wrought by volcanic activity. When the film was made, about twenty years after the pond was formed, there was still a dense mass of decayed trees in the pond. The film became a rare historical document of the condition of the pond in 1936. Since the pond was filled with river water, Teruo could swim in it, but the hotbed underneath the lake generated steam and mist that floated above the water, creating unique scenes of Teruo, fully dressed, swimming, and resting on the dead tree trunks. Even today, a few submerged trees can be seen in the pond.

The camera tracks Teruo from different angles, capturing how he reaches shore and crashes due to exhaustion, and then immediately pans left to capture the fumaroles gushing out steam. While Mitsuko climbs Mt. Yake slowly, via an easier path, Teruo hurriedly scales a shorter but steeper route on the other side of the mountain to reach her in time (Fanck 1973, 346). He has to scamper because of the hot ground and, while climbing, his socks are burned by the scorching rocks and fumaroles. The two protagonists are often seen enshrouded in thick volcanic vapor. This rescue sequence aligns *Die Tochter des Samurai* most obviously with the pathos of Fanck’s earlier mountain films: The protagonists exhibit consuming passion, deadly love, superior courage, and loyal heroism while mountaineering.



Figure 5.5 The fuming Mt. Yake in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

Fanck wrote about the scorching conditions of filming on Mt. Yake or, in his German spelling, Jackedacke:

The ground was at places very hot and caved in for a few centimeters with a crackling sound, so that my people, above all the Japanese, were taken aback at first, afraid of stepping into this hell and breaking through down into the fire. Fortunately, I was a geologist and could laugh at them for such an impossible idea. Anyhow, my little Hara almost burnt her feet in her Japanese sandals, when she once broke through a few centimeters in the hot rock crust. Therefore I immediately had asbestos sandals made for her, and socks of asbestos mesh for Kosugi. (Fanck 1973, 346)

Filming Teruo chasing after Mitsuko, Fanck pursued stunning visuals whose value was primarily aesthetic rather than narrative (Figure 5.6). In another example of aesthetically motivated choices, the camera closes in to show Teruo putting his hand and then his foot next to a fumarole (Figure 5.7).

Fanck remembered the team's high spirits while shooting this sequence on Mt. Yake, exhausting as it was:



Figure 5.6 Teruo chasing after Mitsuko in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

Nevertheless, with great enthusiasm we worked up there, aware that something extraordinary was being made here. It was only the endless climbing of about 1,500 meters of altitude difference that we continually cursed—all the more so because most of the time we climbed for no purpose, as the weather tended to change with fiendish frequency at noon. Yet without sunshine these steam columns did not work. (Fanck 1973, 347)

Fanck recalled that they finally had nice weather one day. He set up his camera before two steam columns that were only one meter apart. Hara Setsuko was supposed to walk between them, which he envisioned would yield an unforgettable image. However, he could not find Hara in the viewfinder. It turned out that Hara had abruptly decided to run downhill because the steam column blew up her kimono and revealed her knees. Fanck was in despair about the unnecessarily squandered opportunity, especially because he saw Japanese women in trams with naked legs all the time, and naked mixed-sex saunas were also common in Japan. In fact, he came back to the hotel that afternoon only to find Hara sitting stark naked in the hot tub. Now it was Fanck's turn to be embarrassed for his nudity. Hara however invited Fanck to join her: "Come

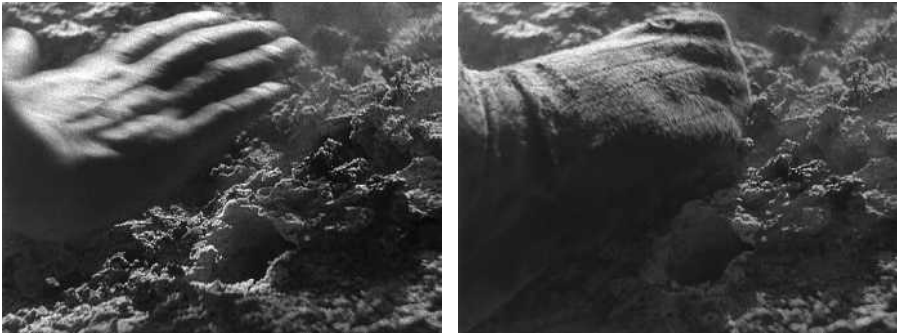


Figure 5.7 Teruo's hand and foot close to a fumarole in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

on, Dr. Fuancku, why feel embarrassed?" ("Kommen Sie doch, Dr. Fuancku, warum genieren?" Fanck 1973, 347).

In Fanck's earlier mountain films, snowstorms and avalanches were frequently the source of physical danger, but volcanoes posed a different threat. Fanck put his crew right in the middle of gases composed of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, hydrogen sulphide, and sulphur dioxide. As mentioned earlier, Richard Angst remembered losing his voice for two weeks after inhaling the fumes (see also Bieber 2009, 363). Isamu Kosugi, who plays Teruo, is obviously losing his voice when he repeatedly calls out to Mitsuko. Since every scene had to be shot twice, for Fanck and for Itami Mansaku,⁶ Hara was completely exhausted by all of the repeated climbing up and down the mountain. Haukamp mentions a comparison drawn between Leni Riefenstahl and Hara Setsuko by a Japanese reporter named Tsuneo Hazumi: "And indeed, writing about the hardships of shooting on location, a Japanese reporter notes contentedly that 'the Japanese Hara Setsuko does not lose out to [Fanck's mountain film actress] Leni Riefenstahl'" (Haukamp 2021, 130).

In scripting Mitsuko's suicide attempt, Fanck cashed in on a mid-1930s Japanese trend of disappointed lovers committing suicide by throwing themselves into an active volcano. In his memoir, he mentioned that using footage of the eruption of Mt. Asama would not be sufficient for the volcano plot. He wrote that instead, "the samurai's daughter should go up a volcano on account of her wounded honour and plunge herself into a crater, which, by the way, many girls did annually at that time, thus meeting a gruesome end" (Fanck 1973, 345). On May 10, 1932, a Japanese student, Choso Goro, and his girlfriend Yaeko jumped into the volcano on Mt. Sakata in Kanagawa Prefecture because their families opposed their relationship (High 2003, 28; Galvan 2020). The volcano that was most frequently associated with such

suicides was Mt. Mihara, on the island of Izu Oshima. On February 11, 1933, a twenty-one-year-old lesbian student, Kiyoko Matsumoto, threw herself into the crater of Mt. Mihara because lesbian relationships were taboo in Japan at the time. Her action started a suicide epidemic in Japan: In 1933 alone, 944 people (804 men, 140 women) jumped into the crater. In the following two years, another 350 suicides and 1,386 suicide attempts on Mt. Mihara were recorded, and the place even became a tourist attraction (“The Volcano Suicides,” 2016). The suicide wave peaked in 1936, with 619 people dying in this fashion. From 1932 to 1937, over 2,000 young Japanese chose to end their lives in this volcano:

The sulphurous pit of Mt. Mihara, on “Suicide Island,” is still, despite elaborate precautions, the mecca today of despondent lovers in Japan. Police at the docks in Tokyo have increased their vigilance and a barricade has been erected around the pit itself but the suicides continue. There were 619 last year There have been more than 2,000 suicides in Mt. Mihara’s smoking pit in the last six years. (“Japan’s ‘Suicide Island’ Popular,” 1937)

In a forest grove midway up the peak of Mt. Mihara, Buddhists erected a series of statues of the *bosatsu* (bodhisattva) Jizo as memorials to the lives lost (“Spooky Izu” n.d.). The association of the cult of Jizo with suicide by volcano makes Fanck’s decision to include Buddhist iconography in his depiction of Mitsuko’s suicide attempt seem coherent and justified.

BUDDHIST ICONOGRAPHY FROM UNKNOWN MOUNTAINS AND THE ERUPTION OF MT. ASAMA

As Mitsuko prepares to jump into the crater, scenes of her on the crater’s rim are intercut with a succession of elusive and surreal Buddhist images under the gray and sulphurous sky. In Japan, *kami* (divinities) are believed to dwell in the sacred or *kannabi* mountains (the term *kannabi* refers to a revered natural phenomenon such as a sacred forest or mountain), and therefore pilgrims, often white-clad, climb to the summit and perform rituals along the way (Yano 2008). Earhart, a specialist on *sangaku shinko* (the Japanese mountain creed), writes, “[C]limbing a sacred mountain was analogous to passing from hell to heaven, from profane to sacred” (Earhart 2015, 8n16). It is apparent that Fanck associates Mitsuko’s choice of death with her assumed Buddhist and Shintoist enculturation. I argue that the apparitions of Buddhist demons and deities that visit Mitsuko near the edge of the volcano represent her mental and psychological projections and her gradual acceptance of death as religious deliverance.

When Mitsuko arrives at the rim of the crater, a horned demon, or *oni*, appears out of the smoke and vapor, accompanied by enchanting orchestral music in the soundtrack (Figure 5.8). A similar image of an *oni* appears on the cover of "How to See Beppu," a visitor's guide published in 1935 (Figure 5.9). An *oni* is a warden of *jigoku* (Hell), sent by Enma to fetch the living ("Oni," n.d.; "Children's Parody," n.d.). An image of Enma himself appears next in the right foreground of the frame; he is balanced by the silhouette of a Buddha with a spiky corona in the distance. The corona identifies this figure as Amida Buddha, who leads the souls of the dead to the Pure Land. The split mise-en-scène places Amida in the light and Enma in the dark (Figure 5.10).

The next Buddhist-themed image shows Amida with the *bosatsu* Jizo on the left, looking up to him (Figure 5.11). Jizo is closely associated with Amida Buddha and sometimes attends him as he escorts the pious to the Western Paradise ("Jizō Bosatsu," n.d.). As a *bosatsu*, Jizo is one who has achieved enlightenment but has postponed his nirvana or Buddhahood so that he can devote himself to aiding humans, and his cult has existed for many centuries in Japan. He is known as the bodhisattva of compassion and mercy, a savior who delivers the greatest sinners from Hell (Graham



Figure 5.8 Horned devil holding a noose in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

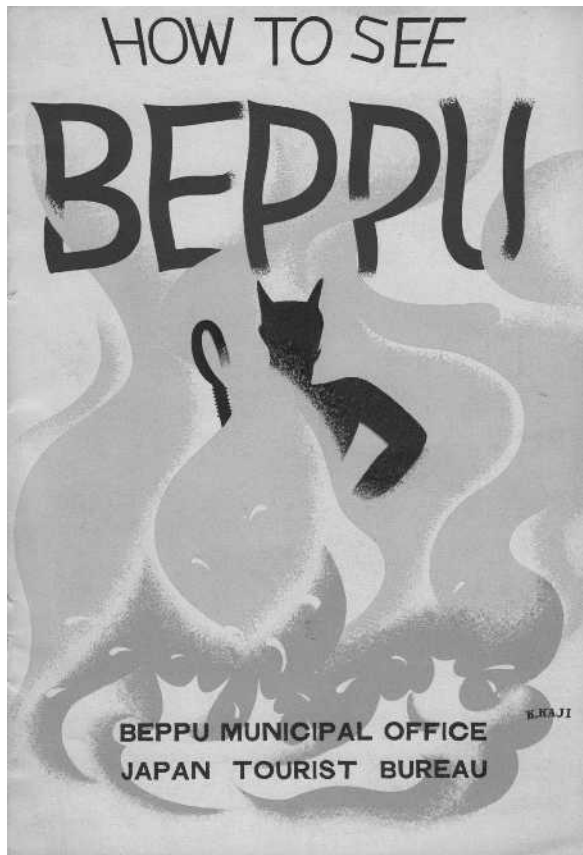


Figure 5.9 Cover of the tourist guide “How to See Beppu,” Beppu Municipal Office 1935

2007, 98; Trainor 2001, 116). It makes sense that Mitsuko would see or imagine seeing this savior and guardian figure just as she is struggling with the decision to end her life.

After shots of hellish, devouring, and engulfing smoke taken from Mt. Asama, the sequence of Buddhist apparitions ends with a close-up of Amida (Figure 5.12). In Fanck’s film, the succession of Buddhist iconographical images progresses from the malignant-looking harbinger of death to the *bosatsu* Jizo and Buddha, revealed gradually between shots of rising smoke and bubbling lava. On closer scrutiny, this sequence of phantoms expresses Mitsuko’s psychological and mental state as she prepares for death. At first, she is frightened and hesitates. Then she gradually calms down and reconciles herself to jumping to her death. The appearance of Jizo, who guides the dead out of the



Figure 5.10 Buddha juxtaposed with Enma, King of Hell, in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)



Figure 5.11 Amida Buddha accompanied by the *bosatsu* Jizo in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

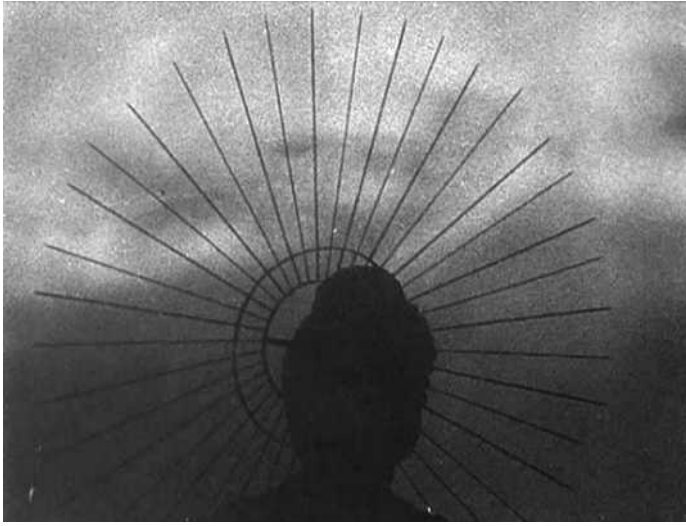


Figure 5.12 A close-up of Buddha with a spiky corona in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

underworld, seems to comfort her. The series of Buddhist images represents her gradual acceptance of death, which she comes to view as an opportunity for spiritual redemption. Fanck takes geographic liberty with these Buddhist statues, as he did with his shots of volcanoes. It is unclear where he filmed these various shots since Japan boasts many mountains that have Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and religious monuments, such as Ontake, Aso, Mihara, Hakusan, Chokaisan, Gassan, Kurikomayama, Tateyama, Myoko, Mitake, and Daisen (Yano 2008, 4). Fanck has obviously attached religious significance to the volcanic mountains: The mountains are not only beautiful, treacherous, and inviting, but also sublime, mystical, and sacred.

Just as Mitsuko, who is by now reconciled with death, puts on her wedding kimono, Teruo reaches her and gently touches her shoulder. Here Fanck made an error with costumes. Mitsuko wears a dark-trimmed kimono with a floral pattern while climbing. When she puts on the wedding kimono, she is still wearing the same kimono underneath. However, when she turns around to face Teruo, notices his feet, kneels, and uses the wedding kimono to cuddle them, she is wearing a white kimono (Figure 5.13). Obviously, this scene was shot on a different day. Interestingly, when Teruo carries her downhill, she is again wearing the dark-striped floral kimono. It is clear that the scene where she subserviently kneels to care for Teruo's feet was added.

At that moment, an explosive eruption occurs: Viscous clots of magma are hurled into the air; thick volcanic ash plumes roll up; fire spews from



Figure 5.13 Mitsuko wearing her wedding kimono in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

the volcanic opening; the “Taisho Pond” effervesces; and debris shoots into the nearby “Taisho Pond” filled with dead trees, which is obviously not the real Taisho Pond near Mt. Yake. Instead, the two Japanese cameramen awaiting the eruption of Mt. Asama had turned on their cameras at the instant when it erupted. Fanck wrote in his memoir: “The two sat ironclad from February till mid-July—then the eruption happened! They filmed in the same second. Even had the ‘Fanck luck’ that the gigantic cloud was illuminated with back light—the footage was splendid” (Fanck 1973, 345). The telephoto lens provided by Fanck enabled them to capture Asama’s eruption in close-up. Fanck noted, “To my knowledge it was the first time that anyone succeeded in filming a large volcanic eruption” (Fanck 1973, 345). Cross-cutting between footage of Yake and Asama makes viewers think that the lovers barely escaped from being engulfed in the inferno. Fanck uses double exposures, superimposing images from Asama onto those of Yake, or vice versa, to create the illusion that Teruo is carrying Mitsuko downhill while the volcano is erupting. Furthermore, Fanck adds a third layer to this sequence, namely, a triple exposure that shows an unconscious Teruo, asleep after his ordeal, restlessly dreaming of his escape from the volcano while carrying Mitsuko to safety, and of looking at Mitsuko resting on a tatami and stroking her (Figure 5.14).



Figure 5.14 A triple exposure rendering Teruo dreaming of the rescue in *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937)

CONCLUSION

Although the plot of *Die Tochter des Samurai* is not bound to a mountainous setting to the same extent as in Fanck's earlier Alpine pictures, mountains are constantly present. In fact, Fanck applies the hallmarks of his Alpine pictures to the Japanese material, replacing ice with fire. He cuts freely and frequently from one volcano to another, in a way that is barely noticed by the audience. Due to their distinct visual profiles and physical characteristics, each volcano serves a specific function and advances the plot in its own way. On the artistic level, Fanck's syncretic use of creative geography produced a visually appealing mountain film. In order to represent Mitsuko allegorically as a volcano—a seemingly calm appearance concealing unexpected force—Fanck combines Mt. Aso, Mt. Asama, and Mt. Yake into one fictional volcano that Mitsuko would leap into. The merging of two mountain sequences, especially—of rescue on Mt. Yake and of eruption on Mt. Asama—creates a suspenseful storyline and the illusion of simultaneity and co-locality. The inconspicuous blending of mountains allowed Fanck to transcend temporal and spatial limits and to maximize the aesthetic, ethnographic, and dramatic potency of the Japanese landscape.

On the ideological level, Mt. Fuji embodies nationalistic pride and is visually linked to Teruo's repatriation and re-immersion in his native culture. To this end, Fanck drew on Buddhist iconography as a reservoir of visual images that communicate Japaneseness, and he infused his representation of Buddhism and Shintoism with Nazi-compatible ideology. In the much-discussed sequence at the Shinto temple, Fanck exploited the Buddhist use of swastikas and turned a Shinto priest into a propagandist who convinced Teruo to reject Western ideas of individual choice in favor of traditional Japanese values. These traditional values negate the self in service of the nation and the people, which concurred with National Socialist values. Teruo's rekindled affection for his Japanese bride is concomitant with his regained patriotism. Therefore, the athletic mountaineering by which he professes his reawakened love is likewise predicated on his acceptance of individual subordination to the nation's expansion and militarization. When Fanck called *Die Tochter des Samurai* "the most beautiful film" he ever made in his 1973 memoir (363), he was still oblivious to the ideological problematics the film entails. His memoir revealed that he showed little understanding for the postwar criticism of his film as nationalist and fascist. His arguments that audiences loved the film and that contemporary critics raved about it in the late 1930s sound hollow.

NOTES

1. James King wrote that Mitsuko tries to kill herself by jumping into the crater of Mt. Aso (King 2012, 20). Karl Sierek claimed that the crater Mitsuko plans to jump into is on Mt. Fuji (Sierek 2018, 307, 311, 312, 350). Others, including Janine Hansen and Valerie Weinstein, did not specify which volcano the female protagonist would leap into (Hansen 1997; Weinstein 2014).
2. Instead of a smoking Mt. Fuji, Angst only mentioned an active Mt. Asama in miniature. Hansen, however, correctly pointed out that the location of the smoking mountain in the model corresponds to Mt. Fuji and not Mt. Asama, which lies 225 km/140 miles to the north, near the center of the island.
3. Angst's memoir is not published, therefore I will provide the German original in this chapter's endnotes. Fanck's memoir is published, and therefore only the English translations will be quoted throughout this chapter.

—es gallt [sic] eines Tages Aufnahmen von einem noch tätigen Vulkan zu machen—dieses unheimliche Naturereignis sollte möglichst getreu erfasst werden—ich ließ mich, um dies zu erreichen, mit meiner Kamera in das Innere des Vulkans abseilen—aus den Felsritzen und aus dem Vulkan schlugen mir ständig die heißen Schwefeldämpfe ins Gesicht—es war eine nicht ungefährliche Aufnahme, denn 2 Wochen lang konnte ich infolge dieser Dämpfe nicht mehr sprechen—diesen Mut den ich ja aufzubringen hatte, wurde mir mit einem Erstaunen japanischer Seite notiert, doch für den Film sein Leben einzusetzen, dies konnten sie nicht verstehen—es werden Aufnahmen sein, wie sie in Europa noch niemals zu sehen waren—vielleicht liegt darin der grosse Wert dieses Filmwerkes . . . (Angst, Chapter 8, 6–7)

4. . . ., und mit den Aussenaufnahmen war es mir erstmals möglich, von Japan, seinem Leben, seinen Sitten und Gebräuchen etwas zu sehen—wir fuhren zur Südspitze der japanischen Insel, nach den romantischen Hiroschima, dem Ort wo am 6. August 1945 die Atombombe fiel—in die japanischen Alpen, nach Sachalin, wir haben wirklich alles gesehen was zu sehen war . . . (Angst, Chapter 8, 5–6).
5. Among scholars who have written on this film, Iris Haukamp, as far as I know, was the first to cite the testimony of Kawakita Kashiko, the wife of the Japanese producer, who mentioned that the climactic rescue scene was filmed on Mt. Yake (Haukamp 2021, 1).
6. It is well-known that, due to artistic and ideological differences between Fanck and the Japanese director Itami, the first major German-Japanese co-production yielded two different versions (Shen 2022).

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6. SCALING THE MOUNTAIN, ELEVATING THE NATION: THE “GOLDEN AGE OF HIMALAYAN CLIMBING” ON FILM

Harald Höbusch

Between 1950 and 1954, the first half of what Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver have termed the “golden age of Himalayan climbing” (Isserman & Weaver 2010, 295), four of the fourteen hitherto unscaled 8,000-meter peaks were climbed in quick succession—Annapurna in 1950, Mount Everest and Nanga Parbat in 1953, and K2 in 1954—by French, British, West German, and Italian mountaineering expeditions, respectively. Occurring during a period of political, economic, and psychological reconstruction in the aftermath of World War II, these expeditions, as Isserman and Weaver point out, were of “national importance” (276), covered extensively in the media, and “followed by the general public with an interest second only to soccer” (234). In short, they provided these four nations, as the American climber Charles Houston observed in connection with the Italian K2 expedition, a “great shot in the arm at a very necessary time” (qtd. in Isserman & Weaver 2010, 318).

Taking its cue from Isserman and Weaver’s general observation about the popularity and importance of post-World War II Himalaya expeditions in these four nations, this article will explore how cinema and in particular expedition films inscribed the exploits of the successful mountaineers into the national imagination in four widely screened documentaries—*Victoire sur l’Annapurna* (*Victory over Annapurna*, Marcel Ichac, 1953), *The Conquest of Everest* (George Lowe, 1953), *Nanga Parbat 1953* (Hans Ertl, 1953), and *Italia K2* (Marcello Baldi, 1955)—and, more importantly, how, each in their own way, these documentaries contributed to the reconstruction of a French,

British, West German, and Italian (self-)image in the trying decade after World War II.¹ The analysis of these films from a transnational perspective will not only allow us to identify the specific contemporary ideological desires and concomitant renegotiations of the past in these four nations, but also to elucidate Roberto Mantovani's claim that in the postwar years "[o]n the big screen, mountains and ascents were recounted in a completely different way" (Mantovani 2020, 71), in these specific instances via the creation of new mountain hagiographies, the reimagining of human interrelations, the internationalization of nationalism, and the scientification of mountaineering.

VICTOIRE SUR L'ANNAPURNA

In Marcel Ichac's account of the successful French Annapurna expedition, the "Victory over Annapurna" is due to one man, and one man only: Maurice Herzog, the expedition leader. While at first glance Ichac's film contains all the traditional elements of a documentary about a mountaineering expedition, it is the specific framing and distribution of these individual elements within Ichac's film that sets it apart from the other documentaries explored here. In fact, *Victoire sur l'Annapurna* contributes to what Gilles Dhers, in a November 2, 2019 *Libération* article on the 1950s French press coverage of the expedition, identifies as the "hagiographiz[ation]" of Herzog in a time of "Annapurnamania" in 1951 and the establishment of the expedition leader as "the hero of a France that had set out to regain its grandeur" (Dhers 2019). This happened at a time when the country "still lay mired in the humiliation of World War II" (Roberts 2000, 30) and the Fourth Republic (1946–1958) "presided over the decline of the French Empire," suffered from "political crisis and ministerial instability," and experienced "twenty-six governments between 1944 and 1958" (Gildea 1996, 35). By focusing solely on Herzog's "heroic" deeds, his suffering, and his sacrifice, *Victoire sur l'Annapurna* reflects (and plays into) the nation's desire for a specific kind of leadership that would arrive seven years later in the person of another national hero, General Charles de Gaulle.

Herzog's "hagiographiz[ation]" in Ichac's film begins with the help of a frame narrative that focuses exclusively on the expedition leader. Prior to recounting the story of the expedition proper, the first words spoken are those of Herzog, who is depicted leading a rope team in the Mont Blanc region. Even when later in the film he is shown following on the rope during several rock-climbing scenes, the camera focuses exclusively on him. The opening frame concludes with Herzog speaking directly into the camera, as if to place his imprimatur on the remainder of Ichac's film. The pronoun "I" dominates the sequence, and only once does Herzog mention his "companions" and his former climbing partner, Louis Lachenal, respectively. There is no mention of the suffering and sacrifice of others, as if they simply were not part of the expedition.

The story of the expedition proper that follows reinforces the initial impression of Herzog at the center of victory, suffering, and sacrifice. Narratively speaking, Herzog is clearly "in the lead": during the approach to the mountain, during the "assault" phase, and during the "attack" on the summit when Herzog once again speaks directly to the viewer (albeit in the form of a voice-over), thereby tightening the grip on his version of Annapurna's ascent that began with the opening (frame) sequence. Even, and especially, on the summit itself it is yet again Herzog who dominates, this time in visual terms: He triumphantly raises the French flag over his head; his partner, Louis Lachenal, is literally out of the picture.

But it is not just in victory that Herzog is first; more importantly, he is also first in terms of suffering and sacrifice. Two sequences, together almost fifteen minutes in length (and thereby occupying almost a third of the film), document Herzog's and Lachenal's painful and protracted descent, first from the summit into base camp, then back into civilization. Already when returning from the summit, the focus is on Herzog's (and not Lachenal's) injuries:

The first one to come towards us, at the top of the avalanche cone, is Maurice Herzog. He walks very straight, like an automaton. His face is ravaged by fatigue. We can guess that without his iron will, he would have been lying for a long time in the snow, giving up fighting. His first words are to tell us: "We bring a beautiful victory. We did the Annapurna, Lachenal and I did the Annapurna the day before yesterday, but my feet and hands are frozen."

Herzog's injuries are also the focus of the portrayal of the second stage of the descent, the return to civilization. During this "endless return journey" the true nature of Herzog's and Lachenal's injuries becomes clear: "Our doctor is looking at those who have been badly affected by the frost. Lachenal, who will have to have all his toes amputated, and Herzog, who will lose not only the tips of his feet but also almost all his fingers." Herzog, this passage reveals, trumps Lachenal even with respect to the degree of their injuries. A bit further on (both during the return trip and in the film), the state of health of the wounded is assessed once more. According to the narrator, "The wounded are getting worse. Herzog's weakness is extreme." The story of the expedition proper in Ichac's film concludes by putting Herzog's (current and future) suffering and sacrifice above everyone else's—he is the very embodiment of it (see Figure 6.1):

After forty days of walking, we reach the Indian border. For the first time, a smile appears on Herzog's devastated face. That day, we understand that he is saved. Feverishly, he talks about his plans. He knows that



Figure 6.1 Maurice Herzog in *Victoire sur l'Annapurna* (1953)

on his return to France, other trials await him; months in hospital and further suffering. But his thoughts go further, towards a future that is still chimerical, and Lachenal keeps the same hope; [...].

The fate of Lachenal in this passage, it seems, is nothing but an afterthought.

Victoire sur l'Annapurna concludes the way it began, by returning to its frame narrative and thereby the face and voice of Maurice Herzog himself, who has the last word on the meaning of past suffering and sacrifice for the future: “Despite our injuries, we returned to the mountains. It was a natural arena where we fought to the limit of our strength for the accomplishment of a freely chosen adventure. A new existence begins, where it still has its place. There are other Annapurnas in the lives of men.” In other terms: Our ordeals have prepared us for the challenges that lie ahead. With this message, the hagiographization of Herzog is complete.

The story of a triumphant return after a devastating defeat and several years of forced exile (from the mountains) as told by Herzog in *Victoire's* frame narrative, of course, would have recalled for his contemporary audience the story of another French national hero, General Charles de Gaulle. Defeated by the Germans during the Battle of France in June 1940 and forced into British exile in London, De Gaulle had returned to a liberated Paris in late August 1944 as leader of the “Free French,” a government-in-exile opposing the Vichy regime. In April 1947 he launched the “Rassemblement du Peuple Français,” a movement conceived as an “extension of the wartime

France Combattante, offering salvation from the 'degradation' of the country and its Empire" and guided by three themes: "to reform French institutions, strengthen the Union, and restore French grandeur" (Gildea 1996, 37). During the elections of 1951, the year of *Victoire's* release, de Gaulle's "Rassemblement" emerged as the country's largest party, and de Gaulle subsequently "demanded the right to form a government, insisting [...] that he would change the constitution" (Gildea 1996, 38). The constitutional change envisioned by de Gaulle was revealed in 1958, when he was finally elected president of the Fifth Republic. Pursuing "a highly personal and presidential regime" (Gildea 1996, 45), he proclaimed in December of that year that as "Guide of France and head of the republican state, I will exercise supreme power over the whole range that it now encompasses and according to the new spirit that entrusted it to me" (qtd. in Gildea 1996, 45). His subsequent claim in January 1960 of "the national legitimacy that I have embodied for twenty years" (qtd. in Gildea 1996, 45) underscores this vision of leadership; for Robert Gildea, in de Gaulle's mind "the authority to speak for France he had asserted on 18 June 1940 ["Appeal of 18 June"; the first speech made by de Gaulle after his arrival in London and considered the origin of the French Resistance] had never been interrupted" (Gildea 1996, 45). The kind of leadership envisioned by de Gaulle as the ultimate "Guide of France" and the exclusive voice of the nation, however, bears an almost uncanny resemblance to Herzog's self-portrayal in *Victoire sur l'Annapurna*: It is Herzog who leads the expedition from the front, and it is Herzog—and exclusively Herzog—who speaks for it. The story of Annapurna, as David Roberts correctly observes, is "the property of the expedition's patron [Lucien Devies] and its leader [Maurice Herzog]" (Roberts 2000, 43), not surprisingly two "staunch Gaullists" (30).

The story of Herzog's suffering and sacrifice (for the French nation) that dominates the portrayal of the expedition proper in *Victoire sur l'Annapurna*, too, would have rung familiar for the film's contemporary audiences. As Robert Gildea explains in his chapter "The Myth of the Resistance," 1951 not only saw the emergence of several Resistance organizations (Committee for the History of the Second World War, National Association of Ex-Servicemen of the French Resistance) and hundreds of local Resistance associations, but also marked the beginning of a "cult of the Resistance" (a cult actively supported by de Gaulle) that "rested on four key articles of faith," chief among them the belief that "the Resistance had been a heroic struggle, with a long roll-call of martyrs" and complemented by the claim that "though active resisters were a minority, they had been able to operate because of the support of the nation" (Gildea 1996, 64). The Resistance, Gildea concludes, "recreated national unity, and in turn imparted the grace of having participated in the Resistance to the nation as a whole" (65). The story of Herzog's own suffering and sacrifice,

then, indirectly inscribes the 1950 expedition leader (who had indeed been a captain in the Resistance) into this grand, “redeeming, unifying, heroic story of the wartime years” (Gildea 1996, 65) via his own “guided myth” (Roberts 2000, 24) of the expedition. Herzog’s appointment in 1958 by de Gaulle to the post of Minister of Youth and Sport would eventually join the two national “heroes” and these two national myths.

These surprising parallels, then, reveal that *Victoire sur l’Annapurna* is more than simply an account of the first successful ascent of an 8,000-meter peak by the French in 1950; through its symbolic hagiography of the expedition’s leader, Maurice Herzog, it is very much also a political vision for the return of the French nation to its old “grandeur” by way of a “strong presidential regime” (Gildea 1996, 32).

THE CONQUEST OF EVEREST

A hagiography of a very different kind marks the opening sequence of George Lowe’s *The Conquest of Everest*. It depicts the newly crowned Queen of England, Elizabeth II, returning from Westminster Abbey in her golden carriage, surrounded by all the pomp and circumstance of nearly a thousand years of British history and cheered by adulating citizens. Interwoven into this celebration of the supposed beginning of a new chapter in the history of the British Empire—“everything was new and exciting”—is, both visually and narratively, the news that “men had climbed Everest!” British newspapers depicted in this sequence headline “The Crowning Glory—Everest Is Climbed” (*News Chronicle*) and “The Crowning Glory—Everest Conquered” (*Daily Mail*), thereby interweaving royal and mountaineering news. Further on in the sequence, the narrator tells the viewer that there was “[t]he procession in London, another in Central Asia,” the latter showing the successful mountaineers on their trek down the mountain. But the parallels extend even further: Tenzing Norgay, just like the Queen, is shown “riding in state,” so the narrator, in a flower-adorned coach surrounded by cheering crowds; and John Hunt, Edmund Hillary, and Tenzing are “throned on a balcony,” very much like the new Queen presented herself on the balcony of Buckingham Palace with her family on June 2, 1953. The story of the first ascent of Everest, therefore, is intricately linked to the story of Empire: British subjects had “conquered the peak that we now call Everest,” and “Britain had won a new victory”; “after 30 years of defeats, men have achieved the impossible” [all emphases mine]. The story told in *The Conquest of Everest*, then, is not just an account of a memorable mountaineering expedition, but also an idealistic vision for the British Empire in a “new Elizabethan age”² at a time when that very Empire was already in steep decline, a decline forever symbolized by the loss of India, the former British Raj, to national independence on August 15, 1947. This

vision focuses on three clearly identifiable ideas: exploration, innovation, and cooperation.

The notion and language of exploration form the center of the film's introduction to the mountain. "When men were first drawn to Everest," the narrator tells us, "it was an unknown quantity." The first climbers "hardly knew where it was, and what it was was something entirely beyond them." Over time, "the early expeditions [...] did make the picture much clearer," and Shipton's 1951 reconnaissance expedition provided "new knowledge" about it. In 1953, Hillary and Band "discover the route" through the icefall, and the Western Cwm is a "strange high world," its floor consisting of "frozen snow to a depth no one can guess," the heights above it yet "unknown." Higher on the mountain still, the South Col is "a place that is outside man's experience," and Bourdillon and Evans conduct a "reconnaissance" of the South summit and try to "see what lay beyond it."

Through this focus on and language of exploration, the 1953 Everest expedition is connected not only to the previous British attempts on the mountain, but also the British exploration of cold places in general: Everest, after all, was the "Third Pole," and its conquest the declared goal of the British after they had "lost" both the North and the South Pole. The notion of a mysterious and undiscovered world, finally, ties the explorers of Everest to yet another generation of British explorers, those of the Victorian age, first and foremost the men engaged in the search for the elusive source of the Nile: Speke, Burton, Livingstone, and Stanley. In those "boom days of Empire," as James Morris has observed, "[e]very adventurous taste was provided for," among them the "frissons of expedition" (Morris 1978, 410). But by the time of the first attempts on Everest—the "supreme remaining earthly objective of exploration and adventure" (Morris 2003, 1)—in the 1920s and 1930s, "self-doubt, self-recognition had [...] become part of the imperial condition" (Morris 1978, 419). Twenty years later still, when the remaining power of the Empire was rapidly fading, the suggestion in various parts of Lowe's film that the British—attested to by their most recent expedition to a mountain that had become, in Morris's words, an "Empire-substitute in itself" (Morris 1978, 421–22)—are still a nation of explorers, then, must be read as yet another attempt at reclaiming the past greatness of the Victorian explorers and their expanding Empire, a virtual "rebirth of Britain" (Morris 2003, 5). According to Lowe's film, the imperial impulse is still alive in Britain, waiting to be rejuvenated and carried into a "new Elizabethan age" by the next generation of explorers.

But what does it mean to be explorers in the mid-twentieth century, an age when virtually all blank spaces—and now even the "Third Pole"—on the world's geographical map have been filled in? Lowe's film provides a possible answer: The explorers of today are (once more) masters of innovation,

specifically scientific innovation. *The Conquest of Everest* makes this point in an extended sequence that focuses on the challenge to “equip [the] team with the very best possible equipment.” The viewer is presented with images of climbers, scientists, and technicians in various laboratories in Farnborough, complemented by images of the laboratory equipment itself, including gauges and dials in close-up (see Figure 6.2). During this “planning and testing phase,” innovation, the viewer is told, was a must: “What most needed checking and double-checking was oxygen, for *no apparatus hitherto* had filled the bill upon Everest.” Innovation was also required as regarded the matter of tents: “[T]ested at Farnborough was a *new material* for tents, extremely light and 100% windproof, a kind of nylon-cotton.” But the ingenuity of British scientists, the film tells (and shows) the viewer, extended even further. It extended to boots—“known” ones were tested against “unknown” (i.e. new) ones, and it extended to the all-important rations: “[F]or this expedition, something *quite new* was used: a method known as vac-cooking” [all emphases mine]. As this sequence implies, scientific innovation was key for the expedition to succeed on Everest (and, in extension, for Britain in the “new Elizabethan age”).

Lowe’s focus on scientific innovation and the attendant suggestion that this kind of innovation was key to the renewal of the British Empire in the second half of the twentieth century recalls for the viewer the era of scientific innovation in the nineteenth century, the so-called “steam age.” As Morris observes, “[t]heir original mastery of steam, and all that came from it, had given them [the British] a technological start over all other nations, an advantage they put to imperial uses” (Morris 1978, 27) as “the mastery of technique was the key



Figure 6.2 Science in *The Conquest of Everest* (1953)

to authority” (53), the “truest foundation of British power” (344). During the first half of the twentieth century, however, “[t]he British were paying for their old success. The overwhelming superiority of their Victorian technique had made them complacent, even timid of new ideas” (345). According to Morris, it was all a matter of attitude: “It was not that invention had failed. [...] [T]he nation seemed to lack the flair, the will or perhaps the incentive to translate ideas into solid achievement” (345). This and other factors led to the result that, “when peace came again [in 1945] British technology could not compete with American” (466). In order to regain British power, so Lowe implicitly suggests in his film, Britain once again needed to take the lead in scientific innovation and technological development and actively apply them for the good of what remained of its Empire.

There is, however, a third—and most consequential—element that completes *The Conquest of Everest*’s vision of the British Empire in a “new Elizabethan age”: the human element. As the narrator observes, “[y]et however good the equipment, and however meticulous the plans, the Goddess Mother of the World, as the Tibetans call her, can only be conquered by man.” Key to this conquest is a new kind of collaboration, a collaboration hinted at in a sequence depicting the expedition members gathered at the British embassy in Kathmandu. Here, two “milestones” are identified in connection with the first meeting between climbers and Sherpas:

1. The meeting between “Major Charles Whiley, who, being an officer of the Gurkhas, can speak to the Sherpas in Nepali”;
2. The meeting between Tenzing and Hillary, the two individuals who would eventually reach the summit of Everest.

What is suggested here is the idea that the conquest of Everest was possible only through communication and collaboration between mountaineers from the West and the East who overcame their cultural differences to pursue a common goal—truly a new vision for a revamped British Empire that had recently lost its greatest possession, the subcontinent of India, and therefore was in dire need to redefine its relationship with its former colonies in a new era. This theme of collaboration carries through the remainder of the film, both visually and narratively. Hillary and Tenzing, for instance, are repeatedly shown together in one frame, and upon reaching the village of Namche Bazar, the narrator informs us that “every one of the climbers knew that he was among friends. Lowe from New Zealand knew that, and Gregory from Blackpool knew it, too. Yes, they are all pleased to meet the Sherpas.” Again and again, Western and Eastern mountaineers are depicted working together, especially during crucial stages of the expedition, a fact reinforced by the narrator: “Lowe and Ang Nema [...] spent nine days on the Lhotse face and

pioneered a large part of the route [...]”; Noyce and Sherpa Analu assured that “the way [up the Lhotse face] was open” and “the great lift [to the South Col] was on”; and “Hunt and Anamgal” carried important loads up the last stretch towards the South summit. In the end, and through this collaboration, the narrator concludes, “[t]he top of the world has been reached. Sherpas and British alike, all had their share in this. [...] Only two men in the world have reached that height [29,000 feet] on their feet, one of them born in New Zealand, the other born under Everest.”

A new kind of collaboration has secured the victory; a collaboration defined by Queen Elizabeth II in her 1953 Christmas message as a “world-wide fellowship of nations [...] [in which] the United Kingdom is an equal partner with many other proud and independent nations” (qtd. in Stewart 1980, 29) and confirmed in 1961, eight years into this “new Elizabethan age,” during her visit to Ghana, as one between “[a] group of equals, a family of likeminded peoples, whatever their differences of religion, political systems, circumstances and races, all eager to work together for the peace, freedom and prosperity of mankind” (qtd. in Morris 1978, 557).

NANGA PARBAT 1953

Whereas George Lowe in *The Conquest of Everest* had used the story of the first ascent of the world’s highest mountain to provide a vision for the British Empire in a “new Elizabethan age” and a way to write forward nearly a thousand years of British history, Hans Ertl, cameraman and director of *Nanga Parbat 1953*, had to do the exact opposite: to find a way to separate the story of the first ascent of Nanga Parbat from a National Socialist regime that itself aspired to last a thousand years but met an inglorious end only twelve years after its rise to power. For Ertl, this challenge was threefold:

1. How to distance Dr. Karl Maria Herrligkoffer’s *Deutsch-Österreichische Willy-Merkl-Gedächtnis-Expedition* from the troubled legacy of previous German Nanga Parbat expeditions;
2. How to provide a new path of access to Germany’s “mountain of destiny” for a post-World War II audience during the time of the West German *Wirtschaftswunder*;
3. How to distinguish his own film from the documentaries of previous Nanga Parbat expeditions.

As I have detailed elsewhere,³ Ertl, in trying to distance himself from the troublesome history of previous German Nanga Parbat expeditions and the subsequent appropriation of its documentary film material for propaganda purposes, can do so only with the help of a cinematic language that today is

recognized as (pre-)fascist. Furthermore, Ertl, in trying to present the first successful ascent of Nanga Parbat in an international context via repeat references to British mountaineering as well as the shared format of the western free market economy, can only do so via a mystification of the mountain; that is, via a uniquely national, German concept. Ertl’s film therefore marks a position that, among others, Georg Seeßlen has identified as symptomatic of the years of the West German *Wirtschaftswunder*; a position at once characterized by the partial adoption of the “new” (the new economics, the new role of the individual, the new power of the product [see Figure 6.3]) and the partial retention of the “old” (the old relationships, the old language, the old ways of seeing) (Seeßlen 1989, 140). Viewed from this angle, *Nanga Parbat 1953* not only documents the successful ascent of one of the world’s highest mountains in 1953 but also reveals the central identity problem of the young West German republic: Despite focusing on the present, it simply cannot escape the past.

ITALIA K2

The categories of the “old” and the “new” found in Seeßlen’s cogent analysis of 1950s West Germany prove illuminating also in regard to the last expedition film discussed here, Marcello Baldi’s *Italia K2*.⁴ Here, too, the “old” and the “new” play a prominent role: In fact, the film makes the argument that it was only through the deliberate combination of traditional Italian values such as family, faith, and the connection to one’s home (the “old”) with modern concepts such as a focus on science, technology, and efficiency as well as a



Figure 6.3 Celebrating the German ascent in *Nanga Parbat 1953*

unified nation (the “new”) that the Italian mountaineers were able to scale K2 and, by extension, Italy itself may chart a course into a successful post-World War II future at a time of “national rebirth” when the country suffered from a national “memory divided by a civil war” (Serafin 2004, 217) and “was still, in many respects, [...] underdeveloped” (Ginsborg 2003, 210).

Italia K2 sets up its argument via a carefully crafted, three-part exposition. The first part introduces climbing as a sporting activity, its territory as well as its risks. It also poses the question as to why men engage in this dangerous activity, a question it revisits and answers in part two of the exposition, which provides a brief history of mountaineering, both in the European Alps and the Himalayas: “It’s in the natural order of things [...]. One is born with the passion of the mountain, thus, by destiny.” Part three, finally, introduces the viewer to K2 via its mountaineering history, a history indelibly linked to Italy itself via two previous expeditions—the 1909 expedition of the Duke of the Abruzzi and the 1929 expedition of the Duke of Spoleto—and engrained into its visual memory by the photographic images of Vittorio Sella. Together, the three parts of the exposition suggest to those Italians whose attitude toward the expedition is being characterized by the film’s narrator as “ignor[ance],” “normal indifference,” and “skepticism” that they should in fact take an interest in the exploits of the mountaineers on K2, for two reasons: One, at least for some of their fellow Italians, the activity of climbing is in their “blood,” i.e. part of the Italian national identity; and, two, K2 is essentially an Italian mountain, albeit in the Himalayas.

Italia K2 then proceeds to present its argument proper. Several key (modern) concepts comprising the “new” in Baldi’s film are featured prominently in an extended sequence documenting the scientific groundwork for the expedition conducted in various human physiology labs at the University of Milan and underscored via several additional scenes in the film. Preparing the expedition, the narrator informs us, was “a difficult assignment, complicated by the brief length of time available,” only to conclude that the Italians addressed this challenge in a fast and efficient manner with “surprising speed,” countering the oft-repeated commonplace about Italian inefficiency in the eyes of the world. Key to preparing the expedition was identifying “the men [...] to be chosen from the numerous Italian climbing experts,” and it is this science-based selection process the film depicts at great length. First is a scene featuring a “*camera di compressione*,” in which two climbers are exposed to ever-increasing altitudes. This scene is characterized by frequent intercutting between the two climbers in the pressure chamber; the scientists in their white lab coats outside the chamber; and the hands, dials, and graphs that conduct, control, and record this altitude experiment. This type of intercutting between test subjects, scientists, and lab equipment, suggesting the importance of science for the Italian mountaineering success on K2, can also be observed in the portrayal

of two additional experiments in this sequence: a man writing while exposed to decreasing oxygen levels, and another man walking to exhaustion on a treadmill. The sequence ends with an example of materials testing, part of a series of experiments designed to “perfect the gear used for this [expedition].” The result of this rigorous and efficient scientific selection and testing process, the narrator proclaims at the end of this sequence, is “almost the definitive national team.”

Other scenes dispersed throughout the film aid in promoting this message of national success through reliance on science, technology, and efficiency. Prof. Ardito Desio, the expedition leader, reacts “coolly and objectively” to a porter strike that threatens to halt the Italians’ approach march to K2; once on the mountain, the Italian climbers are referred to as “*accademici delle montagne*”—scholars of the mountains. The expedition itself is characterized as “well organized,” the crates containing its equipment all have a “precise destination,” in the base camp “everything works perfectly” and “nothing is lacking,” not even a fast and reliable mail service. High on K2 the climbers check the fixed ropes quickly, but carefully (“*un controllo minutioso*”); ascend via a “methodical advance”; and, like true innovators, are the first to capture “images of themselves” on an 8,000-meter summit.

The “new” in Baldi’s film also extends to the concept of a truly unified Italian nation, a nation above and beyond the traditional *campanilismo*, the ancient regionalism typical of all Italy. This can be seen most clearly in a scene immediately following the previously observed pronouncement of an Italian “national team” in which the team members and their hometowns are introduced to the viewer. Although from different mountain regions and towns, they have joined together in support of this national enterprise. On the mountain itself, their interactions are characterized by collaboration and mutual support: More than once the narrator informs the viewer that “no one stands around idle,” “each one strives to his own ability,” and “everyone will dedicate themselves.” The traditional, culturally important acts of collaboration, cooperation, and community among the Italian climbers are now instrumentalized to create what is commonly referred to as “horizontal solidarity,” i.e. wider social participation beyond individual or family interests. The notion of Italian unity reaches its most visible expression in a scene—about halfway through the film—that shows the tent of the expedition leader, Prof. Ardito Desio, adorned with the flags of various Italian cities, and even more so in a similar scene at the very end of the film where the camera moves up a line of Italian city flags suspended on a pole, all the way to the Italian “*il Tricolore*” at the top, a clear expression of the “nation united” theme (see Figure 6.4).

But it was not the “new” alone, the film suggests, that made the Italian success on K2 possible. In fact, it was only the combination of the “new” with the “old”—family, faith, and the connection to one’s home—that enabled



Figure 6.4 Italian unity in *Italia K2* (1955)

Lino Lacedelli and Achille Compagnoni to get to the top. The importance of family, this traditional Italian “basis of solidarity” (Dunnage 2002, 2), can be discerned in yet another extended sequence following the low point of the expedition: “awful weather,” “violent storms,” and the death of Mario Puchoz. Acknowledging the dwindling public interest in the expedition and the real possibility of its failure, the narrator asks poignantly: “Who still believes in the conquest of K2?” As if on cue, the following scenes provide the answer—family and friends—by depicting, among others, Mrs. Desio, the wife of the expedition leader, who “writes [to her husband] every day” despite “the ephemeral possibility that her husband will reach the top;” the parents of Enrico Abram, the “two old folks [who] don’t give in to discouragement” even when they receive “discouraging news” on the radio; the sons of Achille Compagnoni who “in their evening prayer [ask] that their father returns to them soon”; and, finally, the friends of Lino Lacedelli who “are so sure that [he] will do it that they swear to climb the parish church spire to attach the flag the day of the great news.”

The second, equally important reason for the Italian climbers’ success on K2, the film suggests in several scenes that recall the two religious references identified in the preceding discussion, was their Catholic faith, another traditional mainstay of Italian identity. Not by accident, the segment documenting the preparation phase of the expedition opens with an image of the Duomo di Milano, as if to put the entire enterprise under the protection of the Divine. Again and again, the film’s narrative relies on religious references to tell its story, utilizing a language that every Italian could understand: The local Balti porters prepare their food by “perpetuating an ancient rhythm that belonged to

the fishermen of Galilee," they conduct their prayers "in a dissonant psalmody of voices," the mountains lining the Baltoro glacier are likened to "cathedrals," and the Italian climbers high on the mountain are sustained by "manna from Heaven." But nothing suggests the reliance of the Italian expedition and its members on the Catholic faith more than the depiction of "la Madonnina," a Virgin Mary statue donated by the Archbishop of Milan, Alfredo Ildefonso Schuster, in a little ice shrine in the base camp. Finally, there is the sound of Italian church bells rung all over Northern Italy announcing the success of the expedition, a sound that carries over into the base camp on the Baltoro glacier at the end of the film, enveloping the expedition in far-off Pakistan in the familiar sounds of home.

This connection to one's home, then, is the third reason given in *Italia K2* for the expedition's success. The crucial and ever-present link between "this world"—the base camp on the Baltoro glacier—and "that world"—Italy, the home country—is represented in various ways: repeatedly in the form of "hoped-for mail," the letters and packages sent by the climbers' mothers, wives, and children; in the form of the "smell of home" in the climbers' clothing; in the form of food—*prosciutto*, the quintessential Italian meat; and, most importantly, in the form of the base camp itself in which "nothing is lacking" and all the amenities of home are present, together creating a "home away from home." Even the sounds of home are present, if only in the director's imagination: The bells of Italy also ring in the base camp.

Marcello Baldi's *Italia K2*, then, is not just a film that documents the exploits and success of Italian mountaineers on the most difficult 8,000-meter peak in the world, but it also poses and answers, in the most detailed and surprising fashion, the question of why the average Italian should take an interest in the expedition. *Italia K2* is as much a film about a successful Italian Himalayan expedition as it is a vision for the future of the Italian nation—with all its evident contradictions. In the words of Enrico Sturani, it occurs at a "pivotal point of our national appearance: it is the culminating point of a heroic-military-national tradition, dating back, through Fascism and D'Annunzio, to the fathers of the Fatherland. But it is also located at the start of the new Italy which, with the economic boom, is becoming a modern nation" (Sturani 2004, 140).

The preceding comparative analysis of *Victoire sur l'Annapurna*, *The Conquest of Everest*, *Nanga Parbat 1953*, and *Italia K2* demonstrates that Charles Houston's observation about the Italian K2 expedition—that it provided the nation "a great shot in the arm at a very necessary time"—is clearly applicable to the French, British, and West German Himalayan expeditions of the early 1950s, as well. As sporting achievements, they elevated their nation's (self-)image in very much the same way as any other major sports victory of the period; the "Miracle of Bern," the unexpected German triumph in the

1954 World Cup final, immediately springs to mind. But while these sporting achievements may have provided a powerful but temporary lift, it was their subsequent portrayal in the four expedition films discussed here that truly elevated these nations by providing their respective audiences—both in the home country and abroad—with a lasting vision for their country’s future. By placing the four films side by side for the first time, we were able to specify Isserman and Weaver’s general observation about the “national importance” of these expeditions: The “golden age of Himalayan climbing” triggered powerful visions for a new “golden age of the nation” that ranged from one man’s longing for strong national leadership all the way to a Queen’s demand for revised relations among her Commonwealth’s subjects. Furthermore, the analysis of these films from a transnational perspective revealed to us the paths shared across national borders into a new chapter of mountain film cultures: the creation of new mountain hagiographies in *Victoire sur l’Annapurna* and *Nanga Parbat 1953*; the reimagining of human interrelations in *Conquest of Everest* and *Italia K2*; the internationalization of nationalism in *Conquest of Everest* and *Nanga Parbat 1953*; and the scientification of mountaineering in *Conquest of Everest* and *Italia K2*.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank my colleague in Italian Studies, Dr. Gloria Allaire, as well as Dr. José Lauerndorf for their translation/transcription of *Italia K2*’s and *Victoire sur l’Annapurna*’s voice-over, respectively.
2. I am borrowing this term from James Morris, the London *Times* correspondent who accompanied the 1953 expedition to Everest and relayed the news of its summit success back to England (Morris 1978, 498).
3. Space considerations permit only an abbreviated discussion of Ertl’s documentary here; for a detailed treatment see Höbusch 2016, 207–18.
4. I would like to thank Aldo Audisio, former director of the Museo Nazionale Della Montagna “Duca degli Abruzzi” (Turin, Italy), for providing me with a viewing copy of the film.

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7. UNSHAMING *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*: ROCKING *HEIMAT* IN TRANSNATIONAL COMING-OUT MOUNTAIN MOVIES

Ralph J. Poole

Home can mean many things. Most would presumably associate home with a place such as one's homeland or the house where one grew up in. But a home is much more than merely a physical location; there is a special kind of relationship with a place called home. "Home-as-a-relationship is something actively pursued and oriented to distinctive material and social settings, which affect it in turn," as Paolo Boccagni points out (2017, 4). Many movie audiences of the past two decades have associated *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) with the film's protagonists, Ennis and Jack, as illegitimately paired significant others who claimed and over the course of their lives reclaimed "their" mountain as home. In this, *Brokeback* has not only affected them; the film has affected us. The male couple, beset by restrictive social norms, created for themselves a mythic place that has entered our cultural imaginary, signifying a space freed from civilizing constraints, a space affected by and affecting queer desire. As such, *Brokeback Mountain* partakes in mythic place constructions that, as David Bell argues, "[free] up sex from social norms, marking same-sex desire as 'natural' and even as spiritual" (2000, 553). And arguably, it is above all *Brokeback's* mountainscape that "forms the perfect backdrop for the unrestrained passions of 'manly love' to flow" (Bell 2000, 553).

Beyond the mythic, queer life amidst mountainscapes also is a reality, full of contradictions and complexities. Whether located in Wyoming's Rocky Mountains or Yorkshire's rolling hills, queer mountain culture is rich and

nanced in its nonmetropolitan spatial scale and “provides a corrective to the assumptions that urban spaces are the only utopias for LGBTQ individuals” (Eaves 2016, 149). Claiming home in a region that is commonly thought to be unsociable, queerphobic, and backward may not always provide the utopia that LaToya Eaves describes for communities such as North Carolina’s Asheville, the Blue Ridge Mountain community that is “racially, socioeconomically, and sexually diverse” and “welcoming travelers seeking respite from urban life” (149). Accordingly, accounts of queer mountain life resonate with recent queer critical ruralism works that aim to counter the cherished cultural truism “that lesbians, gay men, and members of other sexual subcultures somehow belong in cities in a way that they don’t belong in suburbs, small towns, or the rural recesses of the [...] hinterlands” (Johnson 2007, 5), or what Jack Halberstam has described as the metronormative construction of queer subjectivities that maps the story of migration from country to town onto the coming-out narrative (2005, 36).

The films I have chosen to discuss with regard to gay male homesteading in the mountains address and problematize antipathies against foreigners, deep-rooted apprehensions against non-normative sexualities, and the burdens of solitary, agronomic lives. The films speak of the difficulties and sometimes impossibilities of overcoming shame and coming out of the closet within such a setting. Michael Brown’s definition of the closet as space captures the vagaries of presence/absence for LGBTQIA+ persons and is particularly pertinent for queer ruralities:

The closet is a term used to describe the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men. It describes their absence—and alludes to their ironic presence nonetheless—in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be. (2000, 1)

This closeted and invisible feeling attests to the lasting effects of queer rural experiences of isolation and intolerance, even or especially after returning from urban areas where queer life might or might not have been a less shaming encounter. In her ethnography of rural queer youths, Mary Gray speaks of how young people negotiate the tension between asserting queer difference and claiming status as a local, and she highlights a governing private/public split and the challenge of in/visibility for coming-out efforts since

discovering a sense of one’s queer self requires three things: the privacy to explore one’s queer differences [...], a visible community able to recognize and return one’s queer gaze; and the safe space to express queer difference without fear of retribution. (2009, 5)

The films I discuss are set in rural mountainous locations and show that a sustainable community of like-minded persons is mostly missing completely (with the notable exception of *Big Eden*) and that expressions of queer sexual desires remain relegated to a “world-excluding privacy” (Warner 1999, 177) of either open nature or enclosed rooms. Such privacy of discovering and exploring queerness, required for sustainable coming-outs, mostly proves to be problematic and ambivalent. Katherine Schweighofer argues that the creation of spaces in the case of rural farm life is

simultaneously extremely public and private. A wide-open back pasture, with no one watching but a few grazing horses or cows, is a space that defies clear public/private divides. These places are always available, yet must be sought out by the queerly desiring subject. They are both far from the hustle and bustle of everyday family life, yet structurally central to that world. (2016, 230)

Therefore, claiming sexual possession of landscape is significant. Especially when marginalized persons such as queer people and migrants recruit nature to realize their sexual desire, they move beyond the purely private and into a “world-making publicness” (Warner 1999, 177). This can be dangerous, even deadly,¹ but it can also lead to real utopias. Ennis and Jack of *Brokeback Mountain*, and Johnny and Gheorghe of *God's Own Country* (Francis Lee, 2017) are excellent illustrations of the ways that queer people can explore their sexual passion only in times and places remote from their ordinary family life. And while the former example ends in death and solitude, the latter offers a utopian model of queer mountainous homesteading. In each case, claiming rural home as a queer space does not come easily, if at all. In contrast to the coming-out paradigm of urban queer visibility “with dominant notions of LGBT community centers and pride parades” (Schweighofer 2016, 231), rural queer visibility thus may be much more governed by the urge to blend in, to belong, to be “different-but-similar” (Baker 2011, 50).

Arguably, the rural closet that we still can see in *Brokeback Mountain* is gradually breaking apart, possibly through the omnipresence of the internet, social media, dating apps, and popular culture streams, through which young queer people can connect to the world beyond their immediate physical reach and which significantly reduces the former information gap that queer adolescents had to suffer from growing up in remote rural spaces. This connecting to a translocal queer community has the countereffect, however, that in this age of hypervisibility everybody else also knows a lot more, consequently making young queer people more vulnerable in their visibility. The result is an even greater lack of privacy and, as Gray maintains, despite or rather because of this increased level of visibility where “everyone knows about them,” often

queer youths are expected to remain “functionally invisible” (2009, 96), that is, not to be or act “too gay.” This protective behavior, in turn, may well result in continued internalized homophobia heightening feelings of shame and guilt, but also in amplified fears of being out. Comparing dimensions of the “closet” in the city and at home in the mountains in 1995, for instance, gay Appalachian men still stated that they “experienced much more physical aggression at home and seemed to have a limited definition of the term ‘fear,’ equating it with the threat of physical violence” (Black & Rhorer 1995, 21).

In the depiction of the vagaries of queer homesteading and the hazards of homophobic violence, *Brokeback Mountain* can be linked to several film genres, the Western melodrama being the most obvious. Historically, however, the cinematic representation of forms of male-on-male violence within mountain settings reaches back to the silent era and the Southern mountain melodrama beginning with *The Moonshiner* (Wallace McCutcheon Sr., 1904). J.W. Williamson describes the great majority of these spectacular melodramas as “featuring assaults of all kinds: woundings, murders, abductions, attempted rapes and successful seductions, ambushes, desperate chases, and hand-to-hand combat with fists, knives, and axes” (1994, 8). Crucial for understanding how mountains mattered in these melodramas was that “almost always the mountain brutes were bested by the law in the final reel [...]. In other words, mountain nature was officially *un-natural* more often than not” (Williamson 1994, 9). Although by 1920, the genre became “box office poison,” the appeal of crude masculinity in action did not, but “shifted to other social types in other landscapes” (Williamson 1994, 10–11). And while the gangster type soon thrived in urban cinematic settings, the true successor of the Southern mountain melodrama would become the Western, especially with the film industry’s relocation to Southern California having already started a decade before, so that there was an “early blurring of the mountain melodrama into the Western” (Williamson 1994, 10). To be sure, the shift in geographics brought along a shift in the relation of landscape and character, or as Jane Tompkins writes: “Not just any space will do. Big sky country is a psychological and spiritual place known by definite markers. It is the American West, and not just any part of that but the West of the desert, of mountains and prairies” (1992, 4).

While there certainly is no lack of violence in Western films, showing off violence became a matter of balance, between the hero and villain as well as between feminine and masculine traits, since “the terms of masculinity are always essayed if never quite resolved in the Western, a lack of resolution that itself contributes to the genre’s appeal” (Mitchell 1996, 183). Robert Warshow’s assessment of the Western hero, originally published in 1954, famously captures the classical Western hero as a lonely man, the last gentleman with honor and style, his presumed moral clarity reflected through his

physical image against the landscape; and yet this hero is morally ambiguous: He kills, after all (1999, 659–67). Warshow's essay was published at a crucial turning point in the Hollywood Western tradition, a turn toward an increasing melodramatizing of the genre, which led to an erosion of hegemonic masculinity and the rise of a softer and neurotic rebel hero played by actors such as Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando (Seeßlen 1995, 105; Hamilton 2016, 46; Cohan 1997, 204; Mitchell 1996, 158). The figure of the hillbilly, prominent in the Southern mountain melodrama as a caricatured stereotype of crude masculinity, survived in even more exaggerated versions in films such as *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), which entails perhaps the most disturbing cinematic male rape scene to date. But the threat of sexualized male-on-male violence remains a key subtext to the Western film genre, palpable in classic Westerns like *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) and moving to the surface in Spaghetti Westerns such as *Django Kill ... If You Live, Shoot!* (Guilio Questi 1967).

Brokeback Mountain, and most recently *The Power of the Dog* (Jane Campion, 2021), critically treat such violence as detrimental for young sexually non-normative men, forcing them into a life of closeted shame and lethal assault. Both films are set in a pre-Stonewall past—the 1960s and 1920s, respectively—but reflect on the present situation of LGBTQIA+ persons struggling to make home in rural mountain regions. Facing fears and dealing with shame have hopefully changed since then, given that a significant amount of narratives of rural coming-outs have moved beyond the framework of formula stories that, according to Emily Kazyak, rely on stock characters such as the “oppressed rural gay [...] who must flee to the city to come out, find a queer community, and become liberated” and “the rural heterosexual who is homophobic (thus necessitating the need for gays and lesbians to flee” (2011, 562). In my film readings I follow her suggestions of taking note of diverse cultural narratives and popular representations of queer sexualities as they are embedded in particular geographies, and supersede those formulaic rural stories “where gay and lesbian sexualities are unclaimed, stunted, or destroyed and, in contrast, urban spaces are where those identities are constructed and made visible” (561). Reassessing *Brokeback Mountain* through the lens of other queer films set in other mountain regions allows me to skirt seeing the film primarily as a formulaic Western melodrama and regard it from the angle of the *Heimatfilm*, instead.

A major factor playing into the politics of privacy and visibility of the films I discuss with regard to queer homesteading lies in the complicated social structures of rural mountain regions. Arguably the key generic framework to address questions of home is the *Heimatfilm*. While many critics such as Thomas Elsaesser insist on the Germanness of the genre (1989, 141) peaking in popularity during the 1950s and replacing the attraction of the *Bergfilm* of

the preceding decades (Martin 2017, 34), the *Heimatfilm* has survived and currently thrives with a transnational outlook. Already the trendsetting Austrian film *Echo der Berge* (*The Forester of the Silver Wood*, Alfons Stummer, 1954, popularized in Germany under the title *Der Förster vom Silberwald*) was compared at its release to the American Western, arguing that the Alpine mountains were as vibrant as the Westerns' landscapes (Peterson 2010, 130). Typically depicting an idealized version of rural life in picturesque landscapes, and with archetypal characters such as the hardworking farmer, the virtuous young woman, and the troublesome outsider, these formulas have since been adapted, updated, and often queered along with the genre's transnationalization. Films such as the Hungarian-German *Land of Storms* (Ádám Császi, 2014), the British-Finnish *A Moment in the Reeds* (Mikko Mäkelä, 2017), and the Georgian-Swiss *Wet Sand* (Elene Naveriani, 2021) deal with queer returnees struggling to face their forefathers' inherited homes, whereas the German *Neubau* (Johannes Maria Schmit, 2020), the Austrian-Belgian *Hochwald* (*Why Not You*, Evi Romen, 2020), and the Polish *Elephant* (Kamil Krawczycki, 2022) are amongst those films that feature queerly resilient characters unsure whether to remain home under potentially precarious circumstances. In these films, a queer romance is often being played out between a local who does not quite fit into the traditional community and a foreigner, such as a migrant worker, who seems even less able to integrate into the close-knit village living. The ensuing dynamics of power and hierarchy based on status and nationality might be even more relevant in the drama of acceptance than any particular gendered or sexual behaviour, which suggests that some rural queer people do not position sexuality as the principal characteristic of their identity, "because doing so could easily negate other parts of their identity, such as ethnicity, class, and local familial history" (Baker 2011, 45).

One is tempted to ask: Why stay or even return to a life that seems so predictably restricted? What are the benefits? As most of the mentioned films and their featured gay couples show, a life beyond the rural is neither desirable nor realizable. Even while the gay men may feel like outsiders in their rural communities and despite repeated shaming experiences and endured injustices, they still loathe the metronormativity of a queer urban lifestyle and continue "the work of making home, affective and physical, [as] an ongoing process" (Ahmed et al. 2003, 9) away from the city. Recent backlash developments in the United States and in several European countries notwithstanding, such a turn to political conservatism, especially in rural areas, has nevertheless "not stopped minorities from speaking up or moving in" (Hagstrom 2015, 160), thus asserting the rural their rightful home as "spaces of otherness and belonging" (Mhurchú 2021, 413). I appreciate the discussed films as partaking in the move against ongoing queerphobic pushbacks by advocating—rocking—rural coming-outs and queer homesteading.

CLOSET AND UTOPIA IN THE MOUNTAINS OF WYOMING AND MONTANA

“Old Brokeback got us good, don’t it?” whispers Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) into the ears of Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) when the couple reunites years after their first encounter on Brokeback Mountain. This memorable utterance testifies both to the endurance of love and the prominence of location. “Mountains loom large in the realm of our imagination,” writes Sabine Sielke (2023, 53), and she asks how mountains matter in *Brokeback Mountain*, wondering why Ang Lee’s film does not make it into hit lists such as “100 Best Mountain Films” compiled by IMDb users. The film’s Rocky Mountains setting is crucial, both in its physicality and symbolism, especially if we recall that the Rockies are named “the backbone of the continent” (see, for instance, Schmidt 1990). “What is Brokeback-ness?” rightfully asks Jim Kitses (2007, 25) in view of Brokeback’s sublime mountainous grandeur encompassing beauty and wilderness, romanticism and isolation.

Brokeback Mountain has certainly left its mark on our cultural imaginary, not least by establishing “Brokeback” as a lexical term to describe things pertaining to homosexuality or being of questionable masculinity, and also more specifically, a secret relationship between two closeted gay men (“Brokeback”). Already in 2006, a *New York Times* article adapted the term to discuss “Brokeback” marriages and a research study compared the differences in the treatment of such Brokeback marriages between white and black men who carry on clandestine sexual affairs with other men, finding “that white bisexuality is described using pitying language, garnering sympathy for white men who are in the closet while black bisexuality is described using pejorative language, painting black men as a ‘threat’ to black women” (Han 2015, 233).² Although Ennis Del Mar’s name is of Gaelic-Hispanic origins, thus suggesting a hybrid ethnicity, the film never addresses this explicitly, installing “Brokeback” as a “site that teaches its viewers about homosexuality and White masculinity” (Esposito et al. 2007, 95), instead. And whereas his name translates as “island of the sea” or, as Richard Block suggestively adds, “queer to mountain country, [...] the one Hispanic who remains forever removed by a border of a different kind” (2009, 254), Ennis ultimately learns that no man is an island, leaving him angry and bereft. “I wish I knew how to quit you,” complains a frustrated Jack in another later haunting scene, to which Ennis retorts: “Then why don’t you? Why don’t you just let me be, huh? It’s cause of you Jack, that I’m like this. I’m nothing, I’m nowhere.”

Would it have been possible for the two of them to live together and set up a permanent home in the mountains, as Jack suggests at some point? “Two guys living together? No way,” Ennis answers. The film resolutely says no to a queer home as it negotiates and confirms the closet as a love between two men that is “marked with shame and fear, and ultimately they chose to keep

it hidden instead of celebrating it” (Esposito et al. 2007, 96). For Ennis, the closet remains the term for this prison, metaphorically describing a closet where hidden secrets are kept under lock and symbolically reducing *Brokeback Mountain* to Jack’s postcard pinned inside Ennis’s restricted trailer space. But nowhere is this image more physically evident than in Ennis and Jack’s shirts folded into each other and kept in a back corner of Jack’s closet for twenty years and until after his violent death.

Ang Lee’s film has been celebrated variously for its audacity and criticized for its reticence in showcasing a love story between two men. Annie Proulx, the author of the original short story, recalls that “urban critics dubbed it a tale of two gay cowboys. No. It is a story of destructive rural homophobia” (Proulx 2005, 130). B. Ruby Rich, who famously coined the term *New Queer Cinema*, praises *Brokeback Mountain* in this context as turning the homoerotic subtext of classic Westerns inside out,

reading back the history of the West through a queer lens. Not only does *Brokeback Mountain* out its own cowboys, but it outs the Wyoming landscape (actual Alberta, Canada) as a space of homosexual desire and fulfillment, a playground of sexuality freed of societal judgment, an Eden poised to restore prelapsarian innocence to a sexuality long sullied by social shame. (2013, 187)

Whether the film overcomes shame or rather reinstalls it seems to remain within the affective and critical responses of its viewers. Certainly unforgettable is the scene when the summer in the mountains, which brought the two strangers together, comes to an abrupt and premature end, due to the sudden onset of winter, but not least because their boss had observed the sexual affair between the two men. Ennis says goodbye to Jack in his usual barely intelligible way, makes no concessions or offers of a possible future, strolls down the street seemingly untouched, and then has to take refuge in a gateway, where he violently vomits all his pent-up and unexpressed feelings out of his body. If the boss’s “[s]eeing is the agency of shaming,” Ennis’s reaction accounts for “being seen as shameful” (Pajaczowska & Ward 2008, 9).

While it can be argued that *Brokeback Mountain* serves as a space of escape and freedom, as Rich’s take on the film from the perspective of *New Queer Cinema* suggests, the mountainscape at the same time is the location of the couple’s enduring closet. Thus, on the one hand, the isolated space offers the lonely lovers a chance for love in the wilderness. But in fact, the mountain is just deceptively free of civilizing restraints; in truth it is subjected to being scrutinized and policed by a homophobic supervisor who controls not only the allotted land sections but also his employees. Shame, seemingly absent in open range, is never far away when Ennis and Jack meet on *Brokeback*

Mountain, or, as Kitses quips, “[t]he men soon find themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place” (2007, 26). Whether Kitses had the slang meaning of “rock” as aroused male genitalia (“Rock-Rock”) in mind or not, Ennis and Jack’s first “hot queer sex act” certainly plays on the closet as part of “manipulative Hollywood magic pressed into the service of gay romance—particularly in rural space” (Howard 2007, 101). Although happening high up in the mountains, the act itself takes place inside the shelter—and protective privacy—of a tent. They have been drinking out of boredom and loneliness, the night is cold outside and warm inside the tent, the physical closeness after weeks of withdrawal feels good and so instinct seems to guide the action and the sexual act is determined above all by the discharge of urges. John Howard even goes as far as suggesting that the film’s sex scenes stigmatize rather than normalize queerness: “*Brokeback* admits associations of homosexuality and bestiality. Animal passions. Rural queers ostensibly closer to nature. Grunting, squealing, if not exactly like a pig” (2007, 101). Still, feelings arise in the process and they are unintentional and frightening, especially for Ennis. The film might therefore have queered the landscape of the traditional Western, but it has also crucially brought the closet to the mountains, “disrupting our conventional understanding of inside and outside space [...] brought about by the ‘placing over’ of the metaphor of the closet onto the Western landscape” (Todd 2009), or, as Jack puts it more simply, yet more painfully: “You have no idea how bad it gets! I’m not you. I can’t make it on a couple of high-altitude fucks once or twice a year!”

Even if the film refuses the radical aesthetics and affirmative identity politics that the *New Queer Cinema* called for ten years earlier, relying on well-trying pathos formulas established in melodrama instead, it must also be said that the film set new standards for Hollywood conventions in its addressing gay role clichés and the visualization of gay sexuality, which made at least parts of straight audiences uneasy (see Cooper & Pease 2008). The film has been compared to Douglas Sirk’s 1950s melodramas—although without his bittersweet, tearful finales (Kitses 2007, Holleran 2011, McCabe 2011)—as well as linked to the queer tongue-in-cheek practice of recognizing the homoerotic subtexts in many classic Westerns (e.g. Brower 2010; Halberstam 2011; Warren 2011; Piontek 2012), but there is especially one film that played with the fascination of the queer cowboy within remote mountainscapes: Thomas Bezucha’s 2000 film *Big Eden*. The film is set in the idyllic Montana mountains with a utopian community of elderly gay-friendly people who try to make Henry Hart (Arye Gross) realize that Pike Dexter (Eric Schweig), a local Native American, has long been in love with him from afar. While Rich writes that “[t]he two-step has never looked sexier than it does when danced by two men in love, celebrated by their whole Montana clan” (Rich 2013, 188), other critics may list it besides *Brokeback Mountain* as an important

film dealing with rural homophobia, but still call it a flawed attempt to imagine a small mountain community in rural USA without homophobia (Clarke et al. 2010, 274). While the film's seemingly formulaic narrative taps into various generic traditions such as the Western melodrama and the romantic comedy, *Big Eden* can also be more productively viewed from the perspective of the transnational *Heimatfilm* addressing queer homesteading: the long-lost village son, who has favored the big city over his rural home-stead but returns due to a calamity, here Henry's father, who suffered a stroke and needs assistance. Troubling himself with adapting to rural customs again, which above all entails his official coming-out, Henry does not realize that he has become as much a stranger as the "real" village outsider Pike, who is the sole non-white person of the film. What makes this film stand out is the unabashed depiction of a queer mountain haven. With this, *Big Eden* also touches on cinematic traditions such as the *Heimatfilm* and its complex ideology of serving a "compensatory function in providing images of settled, rural existence seemingly far removed from the concerns of everyday life;" but the *Heimatfilm* has always also been concerned "with the various tropes of mobility and displacement that mark the eruption of the present into *Heimat* as 'uncontaminated space'" (von Moltke 2007, 43–44). *Big Eden* integrates both aspects of the seemingly eternal far away and the intrusion of the here and now. It is true "that the film subsumes indigenous subjectivity within its anglicized version of a queer small-town utopia" (Tatonetti 2010, 157), since Pike's tribal affiliation remains unclear and the narrative's outcome hinges on the rom-com-like happy ending for the lovers. Viewed critically, this representation of disconnected and detribalized Native Two-Spiritedness stands in the tradition of representing "the white man's Indian" (Berkhofer 1979) whose othered racial identity merely serves to highlight and intensify the white hero's desire, or, as bell hooks put it in culinary terms that are particularly apt in his scenario, since Pike secretly cooks meals that might well be called love potions for Henry: "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (1992, 14).

It is also true, however, that such white-washing of queerness is a staple in many other, non-American films with different histories of racial and ethnic subjugations. If *Brokeback Mountain's* "closet has never seemed more cruelly constricting than in comparison to the wide open spaces of what Americans are pleased to call 'God's country'" (Hoberman 2005), the British film *God's Own Country* and the Spanish film *Ander* (Roberto Castón, 2009) are amongst the wave of contemporary queer films on *Heimat*, opening and redefining the rural closet as well as featuring ethnically marked migrant workers who function as saviors for the white protagonists.

MUCH MORE THAN JUST BROKEBACK IN THE YORKSHIRE HILLS
AND THE BASQUE PYRENEES

Francis Lee's 2017 feature debut *God's Own Country* has been saluted as Yorkshire's *Brokeback Mountain*. But whereas *Brokeback Mountain* was understood as representing a pre-Stonewall era of enforced and unescapable rural closetedness,³ *God's Own Country* is called "post-gay": "Fifty years after the Sexual Offences Act partially legalised male homosexuality in Britain, the parallels with *Brokeback Mountain* show how far attitudes towards LGBT people have changed—the sensibility of *God's Own Country* is decidedly post-gay" (Davidson 2017).⁴ Moreover, it strikingly differs from its predecessor in the ways the film depicts "the unsparing drudgery of agricultural life in contemporary Britain" and the "stereotypical image of Yorkshire masculinity [...] with an attitude that's as hard and flinty as the constituent parts of the dry-stone walls lining the hills hereabouts" (Lawrenson 2017).

This indeed describes the situation of the film's protagonist Johnny Saxby (Josh O'Connor), a gruff gay man obliged to look after the family sheep farm because his father is disabled after a stroke, his mother fled the farm, and his grandmother feels overburdened. He finds relief in binge-drinking and casual sex, but otherwise his emotional privation mirrors the dreary and black moor of the Yorkshire countryside—hardly a promising "God's country." But, as John Wylie notes, "landscape is not only something we see, it is also a way of seeing things, a particular way of looking and picturing the world around us" (2007, 7). Director Lee (2017) asserts that it is the world from Johnny's perspective we see, "the effect the landscape had on [him] rather than the landscape itself." With the arrival of the Romanian migrant worker Gheorghe Ionescu (Alec Secăreanu), Johnny reluctantly starts to see and feel the landscape with the foreigner's eyes. "It's beautiful here, but lonely, no?," says Gheorghe, and his "entering Johnny's life transforms this landscape of desolation and stagnation," brings to the forefront Yorkshire's wild beauty beyond its agricultured topography and even a sense of "divinity, which reminds us of the title of the film" (Yamaguchi 2019, 164, 166).

In its thematizing an ethnically marked migrant worker and his romantic involvement with a local farmer, the film was hailed as revolutionizing the (British) migratory film that had centered on urban and heterosexual scenarios with migrants being either chaste, or abused, or invisible ghostly presences, notably exemplified in Stephen Frears's immigrant film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) (see Williams 2021, 72–73). *God's Own Country* not only sexualized the migrant film, but also queered it, even verbally. Johnny, who joins the villagers in their discriminatory demeanor against Gheorghe by using racist slurs such as "Paki" or "gyppo," in the end has to humble himself and beg: "I want us to be together. I don't want to be a fuck-up anymore." Gheorghe,

after yet another of Johnny's behavioral glitches, left to work on a potato farm in Scotland, but relents and, before sealing the reunion with a tearful kiss, rekindles the earlier playful banter between the two:

Gheorghe: "You're a freak."

Johnny: "So are you."

Gheorghe: "Faggot."

Johnny: "Fuck off. Faggot."

Together, they set up home at Johnny's family farm, with the blessings of both his father and his grandmother. A queer mountain film with a happy ending, for once. *God's Own Country* herewith relates to other contemporary *Heimatfilme* in exploring identity and migration through "stories of the often less represented life and structural change in rural and remote areas" ("Der Neue Heimatfilm"). Although Francis Lee sees as a major difference between his film and *Brokeback Mountain* that *God's Own Country* is not set in a homophobic society (quoted in Crummy 2017), there are other voices who state that the region, the Silsden area of Keighley in West Yorkshire, is still often "regarded as a site of gay oppression and repression—an isolated, hostile zone where both gays and migrants can be invisible figures" (Williams 2021, 75). As the plot follows Johnny's development and he learns to resist the "violently hetero-patriarchal spaces" and starts to relate to the world around him in an alternative, queer mode "based on the empathetic embodied communications between human and animal" (Pember 2018), the film revises such hostile rural spaces and offers a home in the hills for its queer protagonists.

Although the "fairy tale-like ending" (Feldmann 2021, 114) has been criticized, specifically because of its reliance on the queer, darkly exotic, and sensually open migrant as savior of the repressed pale local (White 2017; Williams 2021, 77), it is politically relevant that the film leaves behind *Brokeback Mountain's* melodramatic "air of martyrdom" (Gilbey 2017) and celebrates queer ruralism. This decidedly is not a failed coming-out story; in fact, it is not a coming-out story at all. The characters and their environment know about their queerness and—if grudgingly—accept it. Conceived before the Brexit referendum, the film nevertheless contributes to a post-Brexit discourse of (il)legal migrancy with a bi-national romance that nowadays would be well-nigh impossible. Negotiating the terms of their homesteading, Gheorghe, of whose background we otherwise know pitifully little, offers a reason for his migrancy: "My country is dead. You can't throw a rock in most towns without hitting an old lady crying for her children who have gone," he says. "I've been through this before. On my farm. I can't go through that again. I would not survive, believe me." Gheorghe's existential concerns are heightened by his already broken heart, and yet he is willing to seek home anew with Johnny in England,

which he can only do by leaving behind an undesirable place to migrate to a more desirable place hopefully offering escape, safety, and the freedom to pursue his queer sexual desire.

The traditional *Heimatfilm* has always balanced the precariousness of an escape destination against the impossibility of including foreigners and sexual, ethnic, and other minorities (see, for example, Hudelist 2017).⁵ Unrestrained, unpoliced, and unpunished outdoor sex between men has not been part of such a repertoire up until recently, including *Brokeback Mountain*. This is why the explicit sex scenes in *God's Own Country* matter, because such *Heimatfilme* traditionally endorsed “clear-cut gender roles and unambiguous sexual identities” (Fritsche 2013, 116) and thus stood for guaranteeing an “eternally promised” straightness. This space, however, becomes “the field for the (utopian) reinvention of the world,” as Cante and Restivo (2004, 143) suggest, when the space opens up for other—queer—agendas. Continuing the aesthetic politics of the *New Queer Cinema* of the 1990s and the “New Gay Sincerity” trend of the 2010s⁶ in revolutionizing the screen by refusing to shame the queer subject, *God's Own Country* employs an emphatic naturalist style that embraces explicit rough sex in muddy fields among Yorkshire's hills and unusually extended casual static post-coital scenes with full-frontal nudity that feature “John's personal revelation in a phallically graphic way” (White 2017). While a staple in these queer cinema movements, the overt move against the *Heimatfilm*'s starkly heteronormative gender politics is recent and particularly conspicuous regarding critiques of rural practices of naturalizing bodies, families, and homes, thus calling for assertions of belonging and defiance against ostracism.

God's Own Country joins other films in such explorations of multiple understandings of queer rurality and its political aspects, since “for all the fun and playfulness that can come with a romp in the hay, [we should not] assume that same-sex desire and LGBTQIA+ individuals are incompatible with rurality” (Keller & Bell 2014, 518). The earlier 2009 Spanish film *Ander* by Roberto Castón, set in the mountainous region of the Pyrenees, is another example worth mentioning, not least for the fact that it was financed by the Basque government, who specifically asked director Castón, a Galician film director, for an LGBTQIA+-related film set in the Basque region (Izurieta 2021, 139). By having *Ander* (Josean Bengoetxea), a closeted and hardly attractive Basque farmer in his forties, sexually engage with his hired help, the young Peruvian migrant worker José (Cristhian Esquivel), the film challenges traditional Basque hypermasculine and heteronormative expectations. This is explicitly articulated by Reme (Mamen Rivera), a Galician prostitute, after one of *Ander*'s violent outbursts that signify his internalized homophobia: “How afraid you men are of each other.” The film ends with a most remarkable scenario: *Ander* opens his house as a home for José, Reme, and her fatherless

son. As a neighbor insultingly jests: “Vaya trío, dos maricones y una puta” (“What a threesome, two faggots and a whore”). The film’s last scenes show the newly assembled family in the kitchen, eating lunch that José has prepared, and then the male couple in their bedroom, not having sex but cuddling and smiling, listening as a small transistor radio announces the New Year.

Ander uses “talking silences” (Izurieta 2021, 145) throughout the film, just like *God’s Own Country* does, to produce a documentary feel and an overall atmosphere of rural loneliness and ennui that eventually shifts to indicate longing and belonging. This entails a resignified meaning of landscape as *Heimat* in a social and emotional sense, since the isolated mountain space becomes instilled with positive, sexual life. Furthermore, the human space has also been invigorated and transformed into a new, perhaps even utopian mode of idyllic homeliness.⁷ This cinematic queer revision of mountainscapes and the way they offer a home for gay protagonists resists assigning the urban queer scene with a superior status and relegating non-metro queer people to an unwelcoming space. As a consequence, this upends a logic that equates the geographical marginality of mountainous rurality with a social negligence by placing the rural, as Rob Shields notes, “on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other” (1991, 3). Films such as *God’s Own Country* and *Ander* have taken on the rural space and deliberately queered its connotations of inferiority and backwardness alongside toxic notions of hegemonic masculinity, queerphobia, and heteronormativity. They offer a “homing desire” that combines the migrant seeking hominess elsewhere and the local staying put in productive ways that “remove the sentimental and fetishist cloak that wraps the ideal of home” as inherently not-queer and redefine home as “queer,” or more broadly “as a space of differences rather than home-as-sameness” (Fortier 2003, 129, 131). Such films radically resignify and queer rurality, and excel in visual appraisals of mountainous landscapes. But more importantly, the appeal of the beauty of such rurality is intimately connected to the protagonists’ affective search for a shared *Heimat* in a world increasingly threatened by de-democratizing backlashes against LGBTQIA+ communities. The films’ outspoken advocacy of rural multicultural queerness counteracts discrimination, homophobia, and other forms of violence that prevent queer people in rural areas from fully participating in the civic lives of their native or chosen homeland.

NOTES

1. The 2017 Finnish-British film *A Moment in the Reeds* (Mikko Mäkelä) is an example of the former, the 2014 Hungarian-German film *Viharsarok* (*Land of Storms*, Ádám Császai) of the latter.
2. On Ennis and Jack’s bisexuality, see Brod 2006, on their straightness, see Leung 2008.

3. *Brokeback Mountain* was heavily criticized for ignoring gay history, since the plot starts out before the Stonewall Riots, where in 1969 patrons of the Stonewall bar in Manhattan resisted police raids and queerphobic attacks and which generally are considered a milestone for the gay, lesbian, and transgender movement, and ends in 1983 marking the beginning of the AIDS era. It is as if the *Brokeback* world has nothing to do with these events. See Chamberlain & Somogyi 2006; Liebrand 2008; Manalansan 2007; Dale 2011; Morrison 2011; Krass 2016.
4. In their assessing the utility of the concept “post-gay,” Benjamin Kampler and Catherine Connell (2018) contend that “the two most enduring characteristics of post-gay politics or discourse are (a) a de-emphasis of the centrality and necessity of nonheterosexual identities and (b) an assumption that anti-gay sentiment is rapidly disappearing in most Western contexts.” *God’s Own Country* can be said to reflect both tendencies.
5. Keller and Bell (2014, 513) succinctly point out that as far as cultural representations of sexual minorities go, an easy recourse is the violent murder of Jack Twist in *Brokeback Mountain* and the actual murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, or the rape and murder of Brandon Teena in Nebraska, recounted into Kimberly Peirce’s film *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) (See also Hunt 2011). The two most significant examples of the German so-called critical or anti-*Heimatfilm* repertoire are Peter Fleischmann’s *Jagdsszenen aus Niederbayern* (1969) and Uwe Brandner’s *Ich liebe dich, ich töte dich* (1971), both of which feature a homo- or bisexual character, who is publicly chased down for his sexual behavior. More recent and more optimistic examples of a subgenre that has been called urban *Heimatfilm* or *Stadt Heimatfilm* (von Moltke 2003, 121; Halle 2013, 175), featuring queer exiles coping with homo- and xenophobic environments in their efforts of queer homesteading, include Guy Lee Thys’s *Mixed Kebab* (2012) and Faraz Shariat’s *Futur Drei* (2020).
6. This trend in current independent queer British cinema is characterized by low-key depictions of quotidian and non-metropolitan gay life. Films such as *Weekend* by Andrew Haigh (2011) resort to an “earnestly non-judgmental and naturalistic style” (Moor 6) and are particularly known for sex scenes that “are not overly eroticised and neither do they adopt an explicitly pornographic grammar” (Moor 14).
7. This would also explain the choice of Ander’s name, which has Greek roots meaning “man,” “husband,” “warrior,” and “hero.” In stark contrast to a customary heteronormative understanding of “Ander,” the name here represents an “oxymoron outside of that custom: to be a man (ἀνήρ) and to be gay” (Izurieta 2021, 148).

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8. TRANSCULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS OF MOUNTAIN AESTHETICS IN *TIGER ZINDA HAI* (2017)

Sophia Mehrbrey

INTRODUCTION

Tiger Zinda Hai (Ali Abbas Zafar, 2017) is a controversial Bollywood action thriller banned in Pakistan by the Ministry of Information. According to CBFC's (Central Board of Film Certification) chief Mobashir Hasan, the movie has been refused the No-objection Certification, as it portrays "[Pakistan's national] security and law enforcement institutions, agencies, individuals and certain state symbols [...] in a demeaning manner on which [they] have a "no-compromise policy."¹ At first glance, the political dimension of this mass media production, however, seems limited—while ISC terrorism constitutes the frame for the heroes' action skills, the question of binational Indian and Pakistani rivalry mainly serves to spice up the relationship between the two protagonists Tiger and Zoya, known from a previous film (*Ek Tha Tiger*, Kabir Khan, 2012). Before the actual mission begins, Tiger and Zoya's love and family life are shown in an idyllic episode in the Austrian Alps, which seems entirely apolitical: To combine an action-thriller with one of the main selling points of Bollywood cinema—its hyperbolic love imageries—the film-makers opted for this twenty-minute romantic intermezzo.

However, *Tiger Zinda Hai*'s mountain idyll points out a self-reflexive dimension, as the scenes shot in the Austrian Alps are not set in an imaginary mountain landscape but integrated into the intradiegetic reality. The decision to situate the mountain idyll within the primary diegetic world results in an

original renegotiation of mountain aesthetics in a field of tension between modernity and tradition: It contrasts typical romantic tropes with intimate insights into the everyday life of a binational family. By doing so, the movie interweaves different layers of socio-cultural challenges—the representation of Indian family life is confronted with the challenges of Indian-Pakistani biculturalism and the idea of Austria as equally idyllic and progressive. I suggest that the Alpine episode constitutes a major contribution to the negotiation of socio-political problematics within *Tiger Zinda Hai*. My study will focus on how traditional Bollywood aesthetics on the one hand and innovative tendencies in Indian Cinema on the other combine with a reinvestigation of Austrian perspectives from an external (Indian) point-of-view to address socio-political dynamics. I will first analyze the cinematographic construction of the Alps before discussing transcultural perspectives on both India and Austria in the mountain sequences. In the final part, I will examine how the cinematic construction of the Alpine microcosm addresses social transformation processes in twenty-first-century India.

As the Alpine episode is connected in many ways to the rest of the three hour-long story, it seems necessary to begin with a short summary of the main plot lines, which intertwine post-9/11 terrorism and questions of transculturality. After an ISC attack on a hospital in Ikrit, Iraq, the terrorists hold twenty-five Indian and fifteen Pakistani nurses of the hospital hostage. The fictional city “Ikrit” probably refers to Tikrit, Iraq, as the plot is vaguely based on a real-life incident in July 2014, when ISC troops attacked Tikrit, taking forty-six Indian nurses hostage. Unlike other victims, the nurses were released after negotiations between the ISC and the Indian government.² Besides the movie turning this diplomatic arrangement into a dramatic rescue mission, one of the major changes concerns the choice to divide the nurses into Indian and Pakistani groups, thus introducing a transnational dimension. The respective governments each send a secret agent to free the women—a mission for which they are only granted seven days by the American Army, which, after this delay, plans to bomb Ikrit to regain control over the city. The American authorities are thus ready to sacrifice the nurses as well as a group of American soldiers stationed in the city. At this point, Tiger, who is Indian, and Zoya, who is Pakistani, are contacted by their governments. The two secret agents, officially declared dead at the end of *Ek Tha Tiger*, are actually happily married and living in the Austrian Alps. After a short prologue, the viewer gets an insight into Tiger and Zoya’s exile in Austria. The episode is divided into three thematic sequences: (1) father and son chopping firewood in the mountains and being attacked by a pack of wolves; (2) Zoya shopping in a local grocery store and preventing a robbery; (3) the family at home with Tiger and Zoya celebrating their anniversary. The episode terminates when Tiger, visited by his former superior Shenoy, leaves for Iraq. It is only after another thirty minutes

that viewers learn Zoya has also been mobilized by her government. While the Indian and Pakistani governments insist on saving only “their” nurses, Tiger and Zoya decide to join forces and successfully rescue all nurses. In the film’s last scene, Zoya and Tiger have found a new refuge in Greece.

MOUNTAIN AESTHETICS BETWEEN BOLLYWOOD AND *BERGFILM*

Mountains are classical chronotopes of Bollywood cinema, filled with the traditional symbolism of Hindi culture (Pestal 2007, 53) and often found in the construction of “remote or even fantastic places” (Dwyer & Patel 2002, 58). Central to many mountain scenes in Bollywood are dance choreographies that emphasize the imaginary geography of romantic relationships, “cognitive maps” (Mikunda 1998), which are not meant to be realistic but “create a structure of feelings and looks” (Dwyer & Patel 2002, 56–57). Due to the political tensions in Kashmir, Bollywood productions started filming in other mountain areas without pointing out that the romantic love scenes are often shot in European landscapes (Pestal 2007, 54): Alpine (Swiss or Austrian) shooting locations typically “form the idyllic backdrop to what is, in fact, an Indian story” (Banerjee 2011, 83). In *Tiger Zinda Hai*, however, the relation between India and the Alpine universe is more complex. While it indeed constitutes a closed microcosm of love and family harmony, it is also integrated into the primary intradiegetic reality.

The movie starts with the terrorist attack and the Indian foreign intelligence agency (R&AW) searching for a way to free the Indian nurses.³ The R&AW chairman Shenoy finally decides to contact Tiger, whom most of the agents believe dead. A long dissolve marks the transition from a close-up of Tiger’s file on Shenoy’s computer screen to a mountainous landscape described as “somewhere in the Austrian Alps, Innsbruck.” This break is emphasized by several cinematic means. The slow dissolve showing a white surface before revealing the Alpine winter landscape, accompanied by a change in the music from an intense, dramatic theme to an epic, yet calm melody, stages a cooling down of the politically tense atmosphere in the R&AW headquarters. The audience then gets an overview of the picturesque and peaceful expanse of the mountains, which contrasts with the previous violence.

For creating landscape in Hindi cinema, the notion of *Darśana*, an act of viewing based on mutual exchange, is crucial. In the Hindi tradition, *Darśana* describes the confrontation with a spiritual or divine entity; when it comes to cinema, it refers to the idea that the camera allows an encounter between the viewer and the cinematographic landscape. It involves “frontality as a signifying act” (Deshpande & Mazaj 2018, 168), as the frontality of the depicted—and spiritually animated—landscape is in an exchange with the intra- and extradiegetic viewer. *Tiger Zinda Hai* portrays the mountains as an

animated entity, a process that shows parallels to the classic *Bergfilm*, in which the mountain regularly takes over the role of agent (Martin 2017). Examining the implication of the aesthetics of frontality, Vasudevan distinguishes two techniques of framing in Hindi cinema: the iconic and the tableau mode. The mountain sequence seems to involve both. On the one hand, there is a “mythic dimension,” characteristic of iconic framing: The first minutes of the episode not only attribute the function of a spiritual teacher to the mountains, but also stage them as an equally vital (wood chopping) and threatening (wolves) environment. On the other hand, it gives an “illustrative summary” of the situation typical of the tableau mode (2001, 105), which familiarizes the viewer with the Austrian mountains (Figure 8.1).

The following scenes, focusing on a chase between the wolves and the snowboarding Tiger, progressively abandon the frontality of *Darśana* filming. After the first panoramic overview, the camera reveals several extreme close-ups of different parts of Tiger and Junior’s bodies and their equipment. The cubist vision of father and son illustrates on a metonymic level the Alpine atmosphere the director seeks to create: The boots and the ax stand for an experienced outdoor and survival hiker; his bare hands—in contrast to the child’s gloved hands—mark virile robustness. The snowboard refers to the Alps as a stereotypical environment for winter sports, while the close-up of the child’s hand taking his father’s suggests a harmonious, well-protected family atmosphere. The viewer can also observe how Tiger and his son integrate into the surrounding environment, their bodies interacting with the winter landscape (Figure 8.2): The filmmakers thus use classic *Bergfilm* techniques to dynamize and dramatize the landscape by means of the moving body (Rapp 2003, 81). Based on Bollywood aesthetics, the producers also imitate *Bergfilm* traditions,



Figure 8.1 Austrian Alps in *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017)



Figure 8.2 Snowboarding in *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017)

intertwining Indian and Western landscape imageries, and combining the cultural perception of the protagonists with aesthetic traditions of Alpine landscape constructions.

Particularly interesting in this aesthetic dramatization of the mountain idyll are the many intermedial references to other typical mountain genres. As the episode is part of the intradiegetic primary reality, the romance and hyperbolic idyll of the mountain scenes cannot rely on established Bollywood strategies, where romantic landscapes are “accessed in dream sequences or without diegetic explanation” (Dwyer & Patel 2002, 58). The production, therefore, refers to other genres that emphasize the mountains as a peaceful and idyllic landscape. Beside the references to the *Bergfilm*, there are interesting correlations between *Tiger Zinda Hai* and the aesthetics and narrative structures of the *Heimatfilm*. In the traditional *Heimatfilm*, the mountainous landscape, in the sense of both a cultural and natural space, is filled with meaning. Tropes like the countryside versus the city, the importance of a closed homeland, or the interpretation of the represented action as “addition and cumulation of faith” (Rossbacher 1975, 156) create the Alpine landscape as a protected, reliable space serving the identity development of its inhabitants. As Johannes von Moltke argues, the spatial dimension in the *Heimatfilm* is defined by the relation between the represented space and people claiming this space as their home (2005, 9). He points out that the geographical place thus becomes a metaphor for an “imagined community” (2020, 10). In *Tiger Zinda Hai*, the Austrian Alps in this sense become a safe space for Tiger and Zoya’s relationship. The establishment of their home in the Alpine space is emphasized during their romantic date. While the scenes in Innsbruck (featuring a restaurant as well as the castle’s dancing hall) bring the public sphere to the forefront, the couple explores the mountains as a private space, where they position their breakfast table on a snow-covered mountain



Figure 8.3 Domesticating the exotic Alps in *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017)

and their living room (including a home cinema) in the middle of the forest (Figure 8.3).

Tiger and Zoya can also be analyzed as original representatives of Moltke's category of "exiles" (2020, 259) or Rossbacher's category of the "Verzichtende," meaning people who renounce their old life and home for a new life in the solitude of the Alps (Rossbacher 1975, 195–98). While it was not the couple's free decision to hide in the mountains in the first place, they seem to feel comfortable in their new life. Even if the other villagers still perceive their cultural differences, they appear to be completely accepted, as the friendly conversation between Zoya and a sales assistant in the supermarket shows.

This harmonious community is typically disturbed by trouble coming from outside, in this case the visit of the R&AW agents. *Tiger Zinda Hai*, of course, is far from containing all elements of a typical *Heimatfilm*. It is, however, interesting to observe that the opposition of the violent and risky secret mission and the peaceful family life is reinforced by the *Heimatfilm* antithesis between city and countryside, as most of the upcoming action takes place in the center of Ikrit. Nevertheless, the mountain landscapes in *Tiger Zinda Hai* also contribute to deconstructing the idea of *Heimat*, as they build a somehow universal framework within the movie: The last scene shows Zoya, Tiger, and Junior on the Greek coast, surrounded by a mountainous landscape, reminding the viewer that their home is less connected to a determined geographical place than to their family union.

Another interesting point of reference could be the genre of the *Alpenkrimi*, a variant of the *Heimatgenre* (Knaup 2014; Löffler 2017). With a wolf attack and a robbery in the supermarket, *Tiger Zinda Hai* introduces two moments of action that remind us of the *Alpenkrimi*'s dynamics, where the Alps appear as a homeland on the one hand and as a threatening natural and social space

on the other (Knaup 2014, 357). By different aesthetic and narratological means, the *Alpenkrimi* intertwines human criminal energy and the raw natural forces of the Alpine landscape (Klingenböck 2014, pp. 323–24). In the first part of *Tiger Zinda Hai*'s Alpine episode, the Alps are also depicted as a *locus horribilis*: In this sense, the pack of wolves—*homo homini lupus est*—and the gang of criminals in the supermarket are linked on a symbolic level by a mirroring effect. Nature and civilization thus appear equally threatening but luckily controlled by the two protagonists, Tiger and Zoya. In this context, it is important to underline that in both scenes, the heroes not only have to defend themselves but also act for the protection of others.

Despite the narrative break, the episode transports subtle subtexts about the main narrative and creates continuity between the two universes. When Tiger tells his son Junior to run from the wolves while he fights them, Junior asks his father whether he will kill the animals. The father first confirms this, but Junior, who pities the wolves, proposes a deal: “If you save me, without killing the wolves, then I’ll believe you, *that you are the real Tiger*.”⁴ Of course, Tiger accepts the deal, increasing the suspense of the upcoming pursuit. More important here is the implicit, proleptic subtext of Junior’s words, reminding “Tiger” that his strength does not allow him to kill without considering other solutions. “Tiger” is more than the character’s (sur)name. It describes his personality as much as his fighting prowess and strategic thinking, which are also pointed out by other characters. In this context, Juluri’s thoughts on the representation of violence in modern Indian cinema are of particular interest. Discussing narratives of violence in post-9/11 Indian films in the context of cultural difference, he argues that although the political enemies of India “are depicted in ways that are far from sensitive or politically correct,” violence is “refuted as unethical, evil, and cruel when it violates the expectations of duties and obligation” (Juluri 2008, 118 and 128). In this sense, Junior’s words set the moral bar for the subsequent mission.⁵ On an aesthetic level, too, at the end of the Alpine episode, the camera emphasizes continuity. Once again, a slow dissolve marks the transition back to the Iraqi desert: The colors are as bright as those of the snowfields, and the rolling hills in the background are reminiscent of the Alpine summits.

TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON AUSTRIA AND INDIA

While the Alpine episode contrasts the action plot with a harmonic vision of Tiger and Zoya’s successful transcultural family life, the cinematographic construction of the mountains echoes the cultural encounter of India and Austria as a central theme of the Alpine episode. As *Tiger Zinda Hai* is mainly addressed to Indian viewers, it reproduces a widely stereotypical representation of Austria that meets most of the Asian clichés of Austria or, more generally,

of the Alps. The episode is set in winter, including snow, snowboarding, a traditional wooden sled, open fireplaces, and wood-chopping. It is, however, warm enough to have breakfast outside in short pajamas, and even though it is winter, there are local fresh raspberries and strawberries. This Austrian collage reproduces and multiplies idyllic tropes of both Bollywood (Dwyer & Patel 2002, 59)⁶ and the *Heimatfilm* (Beindorf 2001).

However, there are also less expected or less conventional elements that contribute to the Indian image of Austria. First there is the opposition between civilization and wilderness. In *Tiger Zinda Hai*, the mountains are not portrayed as a perfectly romantic and peaceful dreamland. Nature is not only a picturesque décor but also a dangerous environment. The episode of the wolves probably refers to occidental ancestral anxiety, which finds its expression, for example, in the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*, which is widely read in Indian primary schools (Brinker-von der Heyde 2015). Another unconventional element concerns the scene in the supermarket. Instead of buying her fresh vegetables at a local market, Zoya prefers a modern supermarket. This preference may indicate Indians' vision of Europe as a developed continent. According to Claus Tieber, Indian cinema associates European civilizations with abundance (2007, 129). In this sense, the Austrian countryside becomes some kind of dreamland, where the binary between city and village, also emphasized in Bollywood but filled with different sememes, is partly deconstructed: The "romanticized view of the village [...] as representative of a pure, unsullied" society and the conception of the city "as an icon of modernity" (Dwyer & Patel 2002, 63) intertwine in the representation of the Alpine everyday life. While *Tiger*, on the one hand, goes chopping firewood in nature—a common place of European idyll—the close-up of a pressure cooker reveals his preference for quick and easy cooking.

The movie thus develops an interesting image of Austrian culture between tradition and modernity. Referring to Bianca Bosker, Gundolf Graml shows how the Chinese perception of Austria contains what the Chinese middle class considers "most 'iconic, attractive, and desirable' in the European culture" (2020, 270). While the Chinese conception of "Austrian-ness" (Graml 2020, 268) is mainly based on clichés of traditional tropes, the Indian ideal of Austria as it is revealed in *Tiger Zinda Hai* oscillates between a picturesque décor and modern development. In this sense, the movie connects to current Indian debates (Ganti 2004, 3), but also takes a self-reflexive and sometimes self-ironic look at Indian culture and Indian cinema.

The supermarket scene, for example, ironically points out the stereotypical perception of the cultural other. Sophia, the sales assistant and a friend of Zoya, greets her in Hindi with a dictionary in her hands. Zoya, in turn, praises her language skills in Hindi. Sophia then euphorically tells Zoya that she and her husband are planning a trip to India because her husband always

dreamed of visiting the Taj Mahal, the “monument of love.” This expression refers to a strategy of projecting positive feelings into a far away, nearly imaginary dreamland: While Indians dream of romance in the Alps, Austrians dream of the Taj Mahal.⁷ It is also interesting that Sophia refers to Zoya as a representative of India and an expert on Indian culture. This attitude shows the Austrian ignorance of the complexity of South Asian history. However, as Zoya does not seem to feel offended by being associated with India, it may emphasize the idea that the similarities between India and Pakistan are after all more important than the differences. Sophia continues questioning Zoya about vaccinations, listing dengue fever, malaria, yellow fever, and bird flu, though the Austrian embassy does not recommend any vaccinations.⁸ Sophia’s uninformed concerns reflect the perception many Europeans have of India as a disease-ridden country. Zoya, barely listening and already distracted by the robbers in a mirror (a subtle reference to the self-reflexivity of the scene), responds “Police.” Instead of calling the police, Sophia expresses her confusion as she has never “heard of that disease.” The miscommunication between the two characters concerning two different sources of danger ironically reveals Sophia’s fears as hypochondriacal. Zoya’s indifferent reaction reveals them as an Austrian cliché of India, while the interruption of the conversation by a robbery inverts the stereotypical relation of safe country/dangerous country in a humorous way.

Another crucial moment is the implementation of Tiger and Zoya’s date in the primary diegetic reality. As Dwyer and Patel put it, Indian couples in Bollywood movies often construct “remote and fantastic places” to gain “some sort of privacy [...], a private space in the public domain, where they are away from the surveillance of the family” (Dwyer & Patel 2002, 59). The romantic sequence in *Tiger Zinda Hai* has everything one expects from a classical Bollywood love scene, except that Tiger and Zoya are already married and therefore the fairytale-like places that they claim, such as the snow-covered high mountains, the Hofburg, and the deserted medieval center of Innsbruck, are purely accessory. The preparation process emphasizes two other aspects that break with the ideal of romantic and immaculate love. First, it was Tiger’s son, proof of the lovers’ sexual relationship, who prepared everything when he realized that his father had forgotten the couple’s wedding day. As a consequence, the hero turns from the perfect gallant lover into an overtaxed husband and family father seeking forgiveness. Second, Junior’s affirmation, “I used your [credit card] six times yesterday. You have to increase the *credit limit*,” refers to the important material dimension of romantic dates in the primary diegetic world. Where other Bollywood movies create the illusion of romance situated in a fantasy land made of love and happiness only (Kabir 2007, 55), *Tiger Zinda Hai* transgresses the separation of “real” family life and idyllic (or perhaps illusory) romance.

THE ALPINE MICROCOSM IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL-POLITICAL DEBATES

The Alpine episode not only reevaluates the stereotypical perspectives of India and Austria; it articulates transcultural negotiations of gender relations and family structures within the framework of international political cooperation and thereby addresses innovative tendencies within Indian society. The scenes in and around the family home are dominated by an intimate atmosphere of harmony and unity, including even the moments of gentle arguments, which turns the Alps into what Nasreen Munni Kabir ironically describes as a “Disneyland of love” (Kabir 2007, 55). This comment points out Bollywood’s capitalist dimension as a mass media phenomenon that contrasts with the intradiegetic ideal of pure and unique love, and the formulation suggests a comparison between Bollywood love stories and Disney’s fairytales. In this sense, the harmonious relationship of Tiger and Zoya living in the Austrian Alps represents a counterpoint to their cultural rivalry as Indian and Pakistani. As a consequence, the episode is more than a romantic dreamworld, but implies thoughts on transcultural understanding, which will be crucial for the rescue mission where the two nations have to cooperate to succeed. Junior’s comment about his bilingualism and bicultural identity is interesting in this context. When his father reminds him to speak Hindi instead of English, as native language reflects nationality, Junior cleverly responds to his father’s patriotic speech with a bicultural statement: “[I’m] Indian on your side, Pakistani on mother’s side.” His father’s answer, “as long as you are with me, you are entirely Indian,” points out the challenges of a binational family. The relationship between India and Pakistan is crucial for the movie and responsible for its controversial reception. Both decisively patriotic, Tiger and Zoya, as well as their respective teams, rethink the rivalry between their countries and emphasize the commonalities of the two nations. On a symbolic level, this evolution is staged by the motive of the two national flags, taking its starting point within the Alpine episode: When the R&AW arrives at Tiger’s home, Karan, one of the R&AW agents, separates a small Indian flag from a Pakistani flag, the two flags having originally stood side by side on a bookshelf. During the entire film, the two flags are a recurrent motif to thematize the relation of the two nations. After the successful end of their mission, the team hoists both flags on the top of the bus they escape in. A camera shot focused on the rearview mirror of the car in front shows the two flags side by side again—a strong visual statement of their transnational cooperation.

The movie not only emphasizes this binational understanding; it implicitly transports the ideal of cultural cosmopolitanism, as Zoya and Tiger are not the only “internationals.” The Indian and Pakistani nurses work and live together in mutual respect, sharing even their religious practices. In a silent sequence at the hospital, a contemplative pause before the upcoming action, Tiger observes

the nurse Poorna worshipping: A close-up of the shrine emphasizes the unity of Hindi, Christian, and Muslim symbols. Minutes before, another female ISC victim told Zoya that she had moved from her village on the Pakistani and Afghan border to Ikrit to study medicine. Even the ISC leader Abu Usman grew up in Delhi, studied in Oxford, and then taught “the poetry of the world” in New York. After 9/11, his cosmopolitical ideal is shattered when he is arrested “only because of [his] name” and sent to Guantanamo. This ambiguous representation of the terrorist leader can be surprising in an action-thriller based on a clear opposition of good and evil. Several scenes, like the preceding one, destabilize the image of the Islamic terrorist as an incarnation of pure evil. The movie also draws a derogatory image of the ISC’s opponent, America. Not only is America revealed as the true culprit for the situation in Iraq; the CIA is portrayed as devoid of empathy, accepting the killing of the nurses and incapable of protecting their compatriots. In the end, it is Tiger and Zoya’s team, in other words an Indian-Pakistani alliance, that also frees a group of American hostages before leaving the zone. Although the Iraqi terrorists are portrayed as cruel fanatics and serve the function of the main antagonist, the movie’s moral-political message diverges from occidental, postcolonial perspectives and deals with issues of the Indo-Pakistani present in the context of international political tensions.

Another controversial social topic discussed within the movie, and more precisely in the Alpine episode, concerns gender roles. The negotiation of female emancipation in this episode is crucial for the construction of the female protagonist Zoya, but also, by a mirroring effect, for the hero Tiger. The discussion of femininity and masculinity between tradition and modernization is one of the structuring elements of Bollywood cinema (Anujan, Schaefer, & Karan 2012), especially since Bollywood pays more attention to its non-resident-Indian (NRI) viewers living in the United States and Europe, who are constantly exposed to the tensions of Indian and Western gender conceptions (Tieber 2007, 127).

It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the negotiation of gender roles in *Tiger Zinda Hai*, and particularly within the Alpine episode, the only moment where we see the characters’ daily routines. Directly after Tiger fights the wolves, the movie presents Zoya defeating three armed men in the supermarket; the parallelism being not insignificant. Zoya and Sophia are then shown in a close-up low-angle shot that imitates the men’s view looking up at the two women. Sophia is holding the gun Zoya gave her and declares in a partly humorous, partly challenging tone: “*That’s what we call women’s empowerment.*” The affirmation has a bitter aftertaste in the next scene when we see Zoya in an apron in the kitchen complaining that Tiger is never satisfied with her cooking skills and never helps in the kitchen. In this scene, Zoya seems to be transported back to a traditional gender role (including typical household

tasks and the complaints about it) much more in line with Bollywood and *Heimatfilm* stereotypes (Binz 2012, 67). Just like in the *Heimatfilm*, where housewives' complaints are generally not taken seriously and even add to the genre's comic register, Tiger shows himself amused. When we learn in the next scene that Zoya's outrage is not actually about equal distribution of the housekeeping tasks, but about the forgotten wedding anniversary, there does not seem to be much left of the emancipated secret agent. Even if Zoya at different points shows her dissatisfaction, she and Tiger seem to stick to a traditional family model, in which he goes chopping firewood in the mountains and she does the cooking, and where romance still means he has to make her feel special⁹—at least once a year.

However, at the end of the Alpine episode, one scene questions the traditional gender role in view of the upcoming mission. After bringing his son to bed, Tiger tells his wife that he is unsure about leaving his family to go on his mission. Zoya responds: "Everyone believes that you love me more than everything in the world. But I know that the one thing you love even more is India. *And that's the thing I respect about you the most.*" With her advice, Zoya encourages Tiger to leave and, more critically, implicitly justifies her participation in the same mission, as she argues that patriotism trumps family love. What is interesting in this context is that while Tiger feels guilty about leaving his family behind, Zoya's involvement does not need explicit moral approval in the cinematic narration. Her contribution to the rescue mission is emphasized as essential in the following: During her first appearance in *Ikrit*, she saves her husband's life, just as he will save her life at the end of the film. When it comes to their profession, the two lovers appear to be entirely equal and complementary partners. From this perspective, the stereotypical representation of their married life in the framework of a clichéd mountain idyll gains an ironic undertone.

More generally speaking, Sophia's humorous affirmation concerning "women's empowerment" is picked up in a much more serious register in the rescue mission. After joining forces with Tiger, Zoya leaves for a single mission to find a floor plan of the hospital. Hidden within a group of foreign female prisoners, Zoya manages to enter the city hall. The preceding scene shows the emotional report of one of the victims forced into a violent daily ritual where the women have to scrub the floor of the city hall before being raped by the ISC men. After finding the plan, Zoya frees the women. The scene confronts collective dynamics and moments of individual action. Accompanied by a Hindi song, the group of women scrub the floor with synchronized movements reminiscent of choreography before beating a steady rhythm with the bucket handles to warn Zoya: The Pakistani agent, fighting the terrorists one by one, stands out against the group. However, two hostages also get the opportunity to affirm their individuality and fulfill an act of personal liberation

by killing their aggressors. While Zoya fights her enemies with choreographic martial arts, one of the women kills an ISC soldier by brutally sticking a knife into his body several times, emphasizing a realistic register. Another woman kills her abuser in his bathroom. This act of revenge could be read as a cinematographic hypotyposis, a reinterpretation of Jacques-Louis David's painting *The Death of Marat* (1793) showing the Jacobin's assassination in his bathtub: The song line "Long live the Revolution" as well as the city hall's neo-baroque architecture underpin this highly symbolical interpretation. In summary, the negotiation of gender roles is anything but one-dimensional and the mountain episode in particular helps to explore Zoya and Tiger's relationship between traditional family image and women's empowerment.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, I would like to emphasize once more that the creative decision to situate the Alpine episode within the primary diegetic reality of the plot appears to be crucial for the conception of the film. I argue that this difference forms the foundation for a complex network of transcultural dynamics and mirroring effects. The Alpine episode introduces a narrative break, which allows a humorous reflection on Austrian and Indian stereotypes. More importantly, Zoya and Tiger's romantic date, as much as their harmonious family life within the hyperbolically idyllic environment, creates a closed microcosm, a fairytale bubble which is reminiscent of Bollywood's romantic dreamlands. In this sense, the Alpine episode constitutes an independent micro-narrative where the binational relationship between Tiger and Zoya and their transcultural family model become possible, partly because the Austrian population is not aware of the difference between Pakistan and India. The episode also provides a highly effective counterpoint to the main plot in *Ikrit*, articulating multiple subtexts concerning processes of cultural hybridity, transgression, and transformation in Indian Society. Via different aesthetic means and discursive mirroring effects, the filmmakers succeed in closely connecting the Alpine episode to the rest of the story. Referring to different cinematic genres like the *Heimatfilm* or the *Alpenkrimi* and combining them with aesthetics of Indian filmmaking, the Alpine episode explores classical Bollywood themes like family boundaries, home, identity, and gender models in an original way. It also plays an essential role in negotiating the complex political and cultural relations between Pakistan and India. The cooperation of both cultures, which constitutes one of the movie's central messages, finds its origin in the Alpine landscape.

NOTES

1. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/pakistan-bans-tiger-zindai-over-demeaning-content-117121400821_1.html (Accessed February 28, 2023).
2. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-28173993> (Accessed February 28, 2023).
3. For further information on the representation of Islamic terrorism in Bollywood, see Chadha, Kavoori 2008; Juluri 2008; Banerjee 2011.
4. In the following quotations of the movie's dialogues, those printed in italics mark the sentences spoken in English in the original version, while the rest are in Hindi.
5. It also demonstrates the moral inferiority of the ISC terrorists' leader, who describes himself as a wolf in the opening scene of the film: "Once, Uncle Sam came to our land, said the Middle East needs a new world order, and the real reason behind it was business and Imperialism. For that, he hired a pack of local wolves and made them hunt their own countrymen. And when his job was done, he betrayed the pack leader of all his promises and fled with the money. I'm that pack leader, and now I will hunt and take control of my land."
6. The sequence culminates in Tiger drawing a colorful portrait of Zoya by throwing paint onto the snow, a perfect union of Austrian winter and Indian color traditions. The next scene shows the couple enjoying a home movie in the woods, suggesting a meta-reflective dimension, as the movie figures Zoya's actress, Katrina Kaif, as the main character.
7. We can find in this passage another reference to the *Heimatgenre*, as the Bollywood imagery satisfying the audiences seeking a virtual *dreamscape* and the protagonists' (Tiger and Zoya) idyllic sensation of a natural and secure homeland intertwine (Klose 2013, 398–99; Kordecki 2020).
8. And there is no vaccine for malaria. Most travel platforms recommend vaccination against dengue fever. See <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/reise-services/reiseinformation/land/indien> (Accessed February 28, 2023).
9. Tiger's son Junior reminds his father, "And make sure you make her feel special tomorrow."

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PART III
ENVIRONMENT

9. LENI RIEFENSTAHL'S MOUNTAIN FILMS: ECOLOGIZING THE GENRE

Kamaal Haque

Surely, the genre of the classical German mountain film (the *Bergfilm*) counts as the most well-known exemplar of a mountain cinema. Developed in the 1920s by Arnold Fanck, these films, composed of soaring atmospheric on-location camerawork and melodramatic love triangles, achieved great popularity in the 1920s and 1930s. The history of the *Bergfilm* has often been told. Fanck's need for actors to complement his stunning nature cinematography led to the duo of Luis Trenker and Leni Riefenstahl becoming the stars of the genre. Both left Fanck to pursue their own directorial careers. Several critics have noted that Luis Trenker went on to historicize the *Bergfilm* (cf. Rapp 1997, 159; König 2001, 45–46). By combining the iconography of the Fanck mountain films with historical topics (the first ascent of the Matterhorn in *Der Berg ruft* or the Tyrolean Rebellion against Napoleon in *Der Rebell*, for example), Trenker expanded the genre by widening its historical scope. Less has been said about the generic implications in the mountain films directed by Leni Riefenstahl, *Das blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*, 1932) and *Tiefland* (*Lowlands*, 1944/1954).¹ While Arnold Fanck created the *Bergfilm* and Luis Trenker historicized it, Leni Riefenstahl “ecologized” it, by which I mean she focuses on the scarce natural resources at risk in both *Das blaue Licht* and *Tiefland* at a time before a broad environmental movement existed. This focus differentiates these two Riefenstahl films from those of Fanck, which were centered around mountaineering and ski exploits, as well as from Trenker's historical mountain films. This essay will examine Riefenstahl's two mountain

films beyond the usual critical attention on her as a pioneering female director or as a filmmaker spreading Nazi propaganda. I will argue that the different endings of the films—one happy, the other one less so—depend on the natural resources at stake in the films: crystals in *Das blaue Licht* and water in *Tiefland*. This ecological awareness is deeply problematic, however, for the changes that come to the village of Monte Cristallo and the Spanish plains rely on economic systems that cannot be easily remedied by the deus-ex-machina endings proposed by Riefenstahl.

Das blaue Licht is the story of the village of Santa Maria in the shadow of Monte Cristallo. Every full moon, the eponymous blue light emanates from a cleft high up on its face. The young men of the town are driven wild by this light. Although restrained by the town's elders, occasionally one attempts to ascend to the mysterious blue light. Invariably, he fails, and his broken body is found at the base of the mountain the next day. The only person capable of reaching the light source is Junta, a reclusive young woman who lives above town in the mountain pastures. Given her seemingly preternatural climbing ability and her outsider status, Junta is despised by the villagers. When the painter Vigo arrives in town, Junta becomes enamored of him. Eventually Vigo follows Junta to the grotto from where the blue light comes. Returning to Santa Maria, Vigo shows the villagers the way. They ascend safely and remove all the crystals in the grotto. When Junta discovers this, she falls from the mountain. Vigo finds her body at the bottom of Monte Cristallo. The entire "Berglegende," as the story is called in the opening credits, is embedded in a framing story in the village. A young couple arrive in town. Children try to sell them crystals. They ask about a picture of Junta in the inn. The innkeeper brings an album telling the story. At the end, the final page of the album says, "This was the sad end of the poor Junta from Santa Maria. Her memory lives on in the village that once so persecuted her and to which such wealth came from the wonderful cave of Monte Cristallo."

The crystals of Monte Cristallo and the act of mining them play a larger role in the film than generally noticed. The mining of the gems in the blue grotto and the consequences of that excavation situate *Das blaue Licht* within a long tradition. While the film may be from 1932, in many ways it is indebted to Romantic aesthetics, as indeed is much of the genre of the classical German mountain films (Peabody 2021). Although the visual economies of the mountain film are perhaps the most obvious links to the Romantic tradition, in *Das blaue Licht* a lesser-known focus comes into view: that of mining. As Heather Sullivan has noted,

there is a plethora of other German romantic texts filled with references to mineral hearts and lost young men wandering through mines, caves, or mountains whose inorganic qualities lead them away from family or

culture—and the typical romantic ambiguity often refuses to characterize this clearly as either horrifying decline or transcendence. (2003, 22)

More recently, Jason Groves has argued for a “mineral imaginary” of German Romanticism, seeking to explore how the mine functions within a materialist framework (2017, 248–49). In the naïve epigonic Romanticism of *Das blaue Licht*, the jewel-filled mine beckons, but initially remains out of reach. Junta is the only one with access to it and its function in the early part of the film is aesthetic, only being replaced by the economic at the end. Those who try to reach it are doomed to death, just as the jewels in Ludwig Tieck’s Romantic novella “Der Runenberg” (1804) ultimately lead the main character Christian astray.

Although the villagers of Santa Maria do not know it, the mysterious and beguiling blue light, so powerful in its allure that it leads young men to their deaths, is a fictional geological and meteorological manifestation of a cave of crystals high up the slopes of Monte Cristallo. Junta’s ability to reach the blue light when no one else can is part of her outsider status. The dichotomy between the village and the crystal cave reflects the larger juxtaposition of city versus mountains often found in the *Bergfilm*. This dichotomy is gender-based, as well. The villagers treat Junta as an outsider. They chase her out of the village, call her a “cursed witch,” and the priest crosses himself when he sees her. As Carolyn Merchant has noted, women have often been called witches when associated with “unruly nature” (1980, 132). In this case, the men of the village cannot conquer the rock face of Monte Cristallo and thus ascribe supernatural powers to Junta, who can.

While in many classic mountain films the contrast is between urban residents and the mountain denizens, in *Das blaue Licht* this contrast is between the village dwellers and the local, albeit outsider, Junta. More urbane characters appear in the film, however, and demonstrate the difference between the aesthetic appreciation of the blue light and its economization through extraction that leads to Junta’s death. Early in the film, we see a mineral collector look at the small crystal brought to him by the locals. He is obviously not from Santa Maria. His dress is clearly urban and his corpulence contrasts with the gaunt bodies of the villagers. The collector has the money to buy the gems, but only chooses the best one. A few minutes later, Junta comes into town. When her basket is knocked over by children, a much larger crystal falls out. The collector immediately seizes upon it. Junta refuses to give it to him and only manages to wrestle it back from him by biting his wrist, again demonstrating her unruly nature over the civilized manners of the urban visitors. Later in the film, Junta will longingly look at that crystal while at the high pasture where she lives. For her, the crystals are simply a medium that connects the geological and human domains. They have no economic value to Junta, and thus she is not interested in selling them. Junta’s downfall comes when she falls for the

other character from the outside world: the painter Vigo. Unlike the young men from the village, he manages to follow Junta to the grotto high on the mountain and, unlike Junta, he grasps the significance of its contents beyond mere beauty: “Diese Kristalle dort sind eine Gefahr für dich und das ganze Dorf und könnten doch ein Segen sein. Das muss man den Bauern sagen.” (“These crystals are a danger for you and the whole village and yet they could be a blessing. One must tell the peasants that.”) When Junta does not understand, Vigo continues, “Das ist doch ein Schatz. Den müssen wir finden und holen. Dann brauchst du nie mehr in Lumpen und barfuß zu gehen.“ (“It’s a treasure. We have to find and retrieve it. Then you will no longer need to go about barefoot and in rags.”) Vigo’s thoughts are economic. The crystals will bring wealth and the impoverished Junta can afford new clothes and shoes. As self-evident as this is to Vigo, it is just as incomprehensible to the naïve and childlike Junta.

Vigo will reveal the route to the grotto to the villagers, who will then remove all the crystals from the cave. This extraction is too much for Junta to bear. She will die, climbing, with a remaining crystal in her hand. Whether it is a suicide or not, the proximate cause of death is the plundering of the cave. Junta’s fatal fall is juxtaposed with wild celebrations in the village. The residents of Santa Maria have come into newfound wealth. Indeed, Junta will be remembered as a source of that wealth decades later when the innkeeper shows the tourists an album containing Junta’s story. And yet, simply viewing the ending of *Das blaue Licht* as endorsing an extractive mentality where the new wealth of Santa Maria is valorized over Junta’s death is too simplistic. As Kracauer noted, “To be sure, at the end the village rejoices in its fortune and the myth seems defeated, but this rational solution is treated in such a summary way that it enhances rather than reduces Junta’s significance” (2004, 259). Rentschler, acknowledging the accuracy of Kracauer’s assessment, adds, “The townspeople of Santa Maria mine the elemental and a female outsider, place them in lucrative ornamental shapes, and create a captivating story that glosses over their instrumental activities” (1996, 43). Indeed, the beauty of the Monte Cristallo has been extracted not only from the cave, but from Junta. She is of no use to the villagers in nineteenth-century Santa Maria, though she functions as an enchanted legend for the present-day tourist industry that seems to have reached the village in the early twentieth century, represented by fashionably dressed visitors in late model cars. *Das blaue Licht* ends poorly for Junta, however, because the natural resource at the heart of the film—crystals—is not renewable. The extractive exploitation of Monte Cristallo’s crystals leads to prosperity but the unique blue light—and its keeper Junta—have been destroyed forever. The village’s newfound prosperity, however, suggests a model of Western wealth accumulation based on resource extraction.

This wealth is built on an inversion of the pilgrimage to a sacred site typical for the Alps. In this way, *Das blaue Licht* complicates the history of tourism in eco-critical ways. The blue light that turns this place into a pseudo-religious site of modern pilgrimage gives way to mineral extraction. Tourism will no longer be based on breathtaking natural beauty but a life-taking act of mining. In this regard *Das blaue Licht* historicizes and critiques tourism. The frame narrative reinforced this. The old sacral pilgrimage to an unreachable blue light has been replaced by a more materially focused tourism. This secularization corresponds to the quasi-religious attitudes toward mountaineering in the *Bergfilm*. No longer actually seen as the abode of spirits, the mountains have been secularized, and modernity in the form of the couple visiting Monte Cristallo has arrived (cf. König and Trenker 2006, 8).

Much prior criticism of the film has either dealt with its composition or aesthetics. Like all of Riefenstahl's films, the issue of composition is complicated by Riefenstahl's attempts to shape the historical narrative. In the case of *Das blaue Licht*, these revisions began early. Although it is widely known that she co-wrote the film with Béla Balázs, Riefenstahl removed his name from the credits in 1933 after the National Socialist takeover and sought to actively deny him payment for the film (Trimborn 2007, 49–51). Balázs, a Jewish Marxist, will only be credited again in the postwar releases of the film. Riefenstahl will also claim in her memoirs and elsewhere that her inspiration for the plot came from a dream. As Eric Rentschler has shown, however, Gustav Renker's popular novel *Bergkristall* almost certainly served as a source for *Das blaue Licht*. Rentschler and others have also pointed out the similarities between parts of Riefenstahl's film and F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922). These similarities begin with Vigo's entrance to the village, which parallels the beginning of *Nosferatu*, and continue through the sacrifice of both films' female leads (1996, 37–38). Other critics have focused on gender relations and the figure of Junta as a "Gypsy" figure (Barker 2010; Wieland 2012). One comparatively neglected strain of criticism has focused on the role of the crystals for Junta and the villagers. Indeed, Sabine Wilke has even downplayed this theme, stating the film "emphasizes plot and character development and diminishes the environmental dimension" (2015, 133).

Alice Schwarzer is probably the person who has emphasized Riefenstahl's environmental bona fides most prominently. In her revisionist essay "Leni Riefenstahl: Propagandistin oder Künstlerin" from 1999, she argues that if not for the Third Reich, "*Das blaue Licht* wäre ein Kultfilm der Frauenbewegung wie der Ökobewegung. Denn die damals knapp 30-Jährige hat die beiden großen Themen dieses Jahrhunderts mit ihrem Film visionär aufgenommen." ["*The Blue Light* would be a cult film for both the women's and environmental movements. The barely 30-year-old prophetically incorporated both

great themes of this century in her film.”] Although Schwarzer particularly highlighted the ecological focus of the film, Siegfried Kracauer had already referred obliquely to this theme when declaring that what is left after Junta’s death and the plundering of the grotto is “a disenchanting world in which the miraculous becomes merchandise” (2004, 259), a view echoed by Wilke, even if it is not her main argument (2015, 140). Rentschler agrees, seeing the ending of the story as an encounter with modernity (1996, 43–44). *Tiefland* provides a very different ending for the outsider from the mountains, but only because of the vagaries of the weather.

Like *Das blaue Licht*, *Tiefland* features Riefenstahl in the role of an outsider, this time the itinerant dancer² Martha. She travels into the realm of Marquis Don Sebastian, whose lands are affected by drought. He decrees that what little water there is should go toward his Spanish Fighting Bulls being raised for the bullfighting arena, and not to the peasants’ crops. As a result, famine is imminent, and the farmers cannot pay their rent on the land to the Marquis. Don Sebastian himself is in debt and marries, reluctantly, the daughter of the rich mayor in order to improve his financial situation. He has also arranged a marriage for Martha, who has become his mistress. The Marquis wants to keep her nearby. The naïve Pedro, a simple shepherd from the uplands, does not comprehend that he is part of a court intrigue. When he does, he and Don Sebastian eventually fight, and Pedro kills the Marquis. This plot is based on Eugen d’Albert’s 1903 opera *Tiefland*, although, as Riefenstahl notes in her memoirs, she and co-scriptwriter Harald Reinl (of later *Karl May* and *Edgar Wallace* film fame) introduced the critical “social theme: the uprising of the serfs against their lord” (1992, 262). *Tiefland* is a film of various social injustices. Certainly, there is the issue of serfs versus master. There is also the sexual injustice the Marquis perpetuates on Martha (and also on Pedro for his sham marriage). Finally, there is the ecological injustice of the Marquis’s actions. This injustice is tied inextricably to water.

Although *Das blaue Licht* and *Tiefland* are the only two feature films Riefenstahl directed, the latter has received much less attention than the former, except for its production history. Partially, this is because the film, although completed in 1944, was only first screened ten years later and then removed from circulation by Riefenstahl, so that it was shown sporadically for many years. More important, however, was the issue of the extras who played Spanish villagers. Although set in Spain, most of the filming took place in Germany, Austria, and South Tyrol. In order to have the villagers look appropriately “Spanish,” Riefenstahl used Roma and Sinti from a work camp near Salzburg, a fact she at first denied, then tried to minimize by claiming none of the extras came to harm since she saw them all after the war. This claim, too, has been proven false. Needless to say, the issue of “Hitler’s director” using forced labor as extras has overshadowed the response by the press and many

academics. Readers can find the history of the Roma and Sinti extras elsewhere (Trimborn 2007, 189–95, 206–08).

More deleterious to the reception of *Tiefland* have been repeated attempts by both filmmakers and scholars to read the film as an anti-Hitler allegory. Since the villagers are in conflict with the local marquis, the view that he is a stand-in for Hitler is widespread. Most prominently, Helma Sanders-Brahms states in her essay “Tyrrannenmord,” “Leni Riefenstahls Film ist ein klar lesbarer, nur wenig verschlüsselter Aufruf, die Herrschaft der Usurpatoren zu beenden” (“Leni Riefenstahl’s film is a clearly readable, only slightly encrypted exhortation to end the rule of the usurpers”) (1992, 250). Riefenstahl herself has contradicted this view, saying the film had nothing to do with Hitler, in long keeping with her custom of claiming her films have no political content. In this case, however, Riefenstahl’s words are credible. Perhaps more troubling than Sanders-Brahms’s contention—since she is, after all, speaking as a fellow female director trying to rehabilitate Riefenstahl—are those film historians who present implausible readings of the film. Both Gisela von Wysocki and Robert von Dassanowsky also argue that *Tiefland* is a film made by a woman in resistance to the Nazi regime. Indeed, Dassanowsky argues that this film is a sign of Riefenstahl’s “inner emigration” (1995, 109). Such claims seem unconvincing given Riefenstahl’s use of forced labor in the filming.

Only a few critics mention the water subplot in the film, which, as part of the general emphasis that Riefenstahl and Reinl have added to social issues, barely features in the opera that serves as the basis for *Tiefland* (Ulm-Sanford 2001, 132). Thomas Koebner views the fight over water rights as a theme also found in some Westerns: “[D]en Bauern wird im Sinne des Wortes das Wasser abgegraben von einem Rinderbaron” (“The farmers literally have the water dug out from under them”) (1997, 222).³ Kai Marcel Sicks has focused on the “water symbolism” of the film, but his discussion only hints at the role of water as a renewable natural resource (2009, 127). In what follows, I will sketch out how the role of water and its control allow for an ecocritical reading of *Tiefland*.

Water has always played a political role, especially in arid regions such as much of Spain and the American West (Swyngedouw 2015; Worster 1985). It has long become commonplace to note that the settlement of the American West depended on a water regime of damming, irrigation, and intricate water treaties, that “the region has been shaped by its advanced technological mastery of water” (Worster 1985, 11). The Spanish situation is lesser-known, however. The Spanish politician and writer Joaquín Costa notably declared, “To irrigate is to govern” (qtd. in Swyngedouw 2015, 74). Costa was active in the 1890s, at a time when the beginnings of modernization were coming to Spain. The politics of his movement, *regeneracionismo* (Regenerationism), were, unsurprisingly, opposed by the landed gentry. Indeed, we find the converse of Costa’s maxim in *Tiefland*: To refuse to irrigate is to assert control. It is no accident

that the opera is explicitly set in the Pyrenees around 1900 and the film likely around the same time.⁴ The nobleman of *Tiefland*, the Marquis Don Sebastian, uses water for his own pleasure at the expense of the peasants who depend on it. Both the peasants and the Marquis live in a state of “hydro-dependency,” as Sharae Deckard has coined the complex “relation organising the extraction, production and consumption of water” (2021, 134).

Water plays several roles in the film. Similar to *Das blaue Licht*, there is a stark geographic dichotomy in *Tiefland*. This time it is not the village versus the mountains, but rather the highlands versus the lowlands, the *Tiefland* giving the film its name. Unsurprisingly for a mountain film, the lowlands are the scenes of inequality, brutality, and also scarcity (of water and therefore of food for the peasants). In contrast, the mountains and high mountain pastures where Pedro works as a shepherd are a land of plenty. To be sure, he does not have the fancy clothes, castle, or jewels of the Marquis, but neither does anyone else in the film, except the rich mayor’s family. As Pedro declares when he is in the mountains, “Gott bin ich froh, dass ich oben bin” and “Hier oben fühl’ ich mich freier.” (“God, am I glad that I am up here” and “I feel freer up here.”) As Pedro prepares to descend to Roccabruna for his marriage, his shepherd colleague warns him, “Du kennst das Tiefland nicht. Dort sind die Menschen anders, nicht gut.” (“You don’t know the lowlands. People are different there, not good.”) The biggest contrast between the highlands and lowlands is the availability of water. This is shown dramatically twice in the film. First, with Pedro’s descent to the plains, and secondly at the film’s end.

Pedro’s world of high pastures and mountains is flush with water. As he descends to Roccabruna for the first time, the camera follows him with shots of mountain streams and waterfalls. Water is in abundance here. Once in the valley, however, we see a lack of water. The lush vegetation of the highlands is gone, replaced by the parched earth of the lowlands. As David Hinton has noted, the lowlands are “parched and barren,” while the highlands are “paradise on Earth” (2000, 72). The highlands are the land of wolves and sheep, the lowlands of cattle and, later, the metaphorical wolf (Don Sebastian). As parched as the lowlands may be in Spain—Swyngedouw as an environmental historian even uses the term “drylands” for the arid plains (2015, 54)—they do not have to be quite so dry. This is an active choice by Don Sebastian, local nobleman and, as such, master over any water rights.

As soon as the lowlands are seen in *Tiefland*—and notably this is only after ten minutes of mountain cinematography demonstrating Riefenstahl’s origins in the *Bergfilm*—the issue of water use arises. A group of peasants asks the ranch overseer to destroy the low dam, ensuring there is enough water for Don Sebastian’s bullfighting bulls but not enough for agriculture. As the farmers say, “Es ist unser aller Wasser. Es kommt von da oben.” (“It is water for all of us. It comes from above.”) The overseer’s answer makes it clear that some

animals are more important to Don Sebastian than human beings: "Das Wehr bleibt. Der Herr Marquis braucht das Wasser für seine Stiere." ("The dam stays. The Marquis needs the water for his bulls.") The peasants' critique is an articulation for a fair allocation of water rights irrespective of class or economic clout. It is a call often still not heeded today.

Indeed, the bulls are a symbol of Don Sebastian's cruelty to his subjects. He is proud that his animals are the "besten Kampfstiere des Königreichs" ("the best fighting bulls in the kingdom") and that he possesses a very large herd. It is important that these are bulls bred for the bullfighting ring. They will not provide food, but rather entertainment far away from Roccabruna, and with no benefit to the poor peasants, whose harvests are diminished because they are denied access to water so that the bulls may have enough. Don Sebastian's fixation on his prizewinning bulls is counterproductive. When the farmers try to reason with him that without a good harvest due to lack of irrigation, they will be unable to pay their rent to him for their land, he threatens to evict them rather than work with them toward a solution.

The farmers revolt. As they tell Don Sebastian, "Wir wollen unsere Rechte." ("We want our rights.") These rights include the right to an adequate water supply. The farmers destroy the dam that withholds the water for Don Sebastian's bulls. Don Sebastian seeks revenge and evicts the miller. This is symbolic, for, while farmers depend on the water, without it the miller's business literally comes to a stop as the waterwheel stops turning and he cannot mill grain anymore. This eviction suits Don Sebastian well, for it allows him to install Martha and Pedro in the mill so that Martha can always be near the Marquis. This plan goes awry, and when it does, water plays an important part in it.

On his wedding night to the mayor's daughter, Don Sebastian sneaks out to visit Martha. Uncharacteristically, the weather has changed. A storm has arisen, beginning in the mountains before reaching the lowlands. Struggling through the rain from the castle to the mill, Don Sebastian does not find a willing Martha waiting for him. Instead, Martha begs for Pedro's protection against the Marquis. Pedro calls Don Sebastian a wolf, referring to the time at the beginning of the film when Pedro killed a wolf stalking his flock. Don Sebastian seeks to flee but is blocked by the farmers, who force him back into a fight with Pedro, who kills the Marquis. The rain stops, having ended the drought in Roccabruna. Martha and Pedro leave the mill and, in the film's final shots, return to the highlands, where life is lush and water abundant. The mountains, and water, have triumphed.

Like Koebner, Hinton views *Tiefland* as trading in the conventions of the Western and transposing "the cattleman versus the homesteaders" into European social criticism. He continues, "The battle for water is only representative of the struggles of the commoners against their masters through

Europe's history" (2000, 74). Hinton also properly notes the differences in ending between *Das blaue Licht* and *Tiefland*, namely, the tragedy of the former versus the happy ending of the latter. He ascribes the difference to the "triumph of purity" in *Tiefland*, whereas in *Das Blaue Licht* the pure character Junta is ultimately sacrificed. I would like to propose an alternate reason for these different endings.

Das blaue Licht ends negatively because the eponymous blue light cannot be replaced. The nature of the extraction precludes this. The mystery and beauty of Monte Cristallo are dependent on the moonlight falling into the crystal-filled grotto at just the right time. Once the villagers of Santa Maria plunder the cave, that beauty is irretrievably lost. The framing narrative of the film may indeed state that the town came to wealth through the crystals that Junta left untouched, but as other critics noted, the ending feels quite summary. Furthermore, as tourism to the Alps increases, the village of Santa Maria only stands to lose. Indeed, the beginnings of Alpine tourism exist in the film, when the painter Vigo arrives from the big city. The frame shows us a modern man and women coming to Santa Maria to stay. No doubt the town would have enjoyed greater fame if the undisturbed grotto had become the chief attraction and children had not hawked its remains to passing tourists.

Tiefland, in contrast, has what appears to be a happy ending. Unlike the finite crystals, the rain is a renewable resource. Once the unjust feudal structures are removed (i.e. the childless Marquis is dead), the farmers will be able to benefit from the natural flow of water. The highlands will remain lush and a refuge for Martha and Pedro, but life in the lowlands will get better, too. The difference here is that the water from the mountains can be used sensibly in the valley. Indeed, we might say, speaking in terms of this volume, that the chief difference here is the nature of the circuits involved. Whereas mining is a broken circuit unless viewed over long periods of time, the water cycle is one that is renewable. All of this is true, up to a point. While the drought has ended in *Tiefland*, it is only through the deus-ex-machina of a storm. The plains of Spain are so drought-stricken that, as mentioned above, the environmental historian Erik Swyngedouw refers to them as the "drylands." *Tiefland* may appear to present an alternative to the exploitative extraction of *Das blaue Licht*, but a positive resolution comes only by an act of God. Once the temporary bounty of water has been used, the peasants will likely return to the struggle amid the arid plains, no longer supported by Pedro and Martha, who have simply removed themselves from the conflicted environment and headed to the hills.

As scholars have noted, the environmental themes in both these films are not at the forefront. Nevertheless, they are present in a degree unusual for the classic German mountain film. Alice Schwarzer's take on Riefenstahl as a pioneering eco-feminist has more to do with feminist politics at the turn of

the twentieth century than Riefenstahl's time, but a closer look at how the environment is remediated in her films is long overdue. Viewing *Das blaue Licht* and *Tiefland* through an ecocritical lens allows us to add to the complex ways in which humans and the environment interact in the classical German mountain film. Nevertheless, one can and must not ignore the context of Leni Riefenstahl's filmmaking. Environmental awareness in the films, especially *Tiefland*, is juxtaposed with a human cost—namely, the use of forced labor as extras. Exploitation of human capital is very much at odds with an environmentally aware approach to cinema—or life—and thus, as is so often the case with Leni Riefenstahl, the critic and viewer are caught between appreciation for the cinematic innovations of her films and a repulsion to how they were made.

NOTES

1. While filming for *Tiefland* was completed in 1944, because of the war and Riefenstahl's ostracized status afterward, its premiere was not until ten years later.
2. Martha is described as a "Gypsy," but in order to avoid using pejorative language, I describe her as an itinerant dancer in the text.
3. A similar plot can be found in the documentary *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (Pare Lorentz, 1936) as well as the better-known drama *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974).
4. While it is not possible to know when *Tiefland* takes place, there are no historical markers of modernity (cars, electricity, etcetera).

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10. A GLACIAL PACE? MOUNTAIN CINEMA AND THE IMAGINATION OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Alexa Weik von Mossner

Mountains are at once a deeply natural phenomenon—an elevated portion of the Earth’s crust—and the product of human intervention. As Eva-Maria Müller and Christian Quendler have noted, they “are sites of tourism and industrialization, deposits of waste, and repositories of cultural memory; their forms are shaped and reshaped through processes of cultural and geological erosion” (2021, 266). The complex ecosystems of mountain regions are also susceptible to anthropogenic climate change, and so it is no surprise that they have often been featured in environmental documentaries. This is especially true for glaciers, which, as Al Gore puts it in *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006), are the “canaries in the coalmine” when it comes to global warming because they are disproportionately vulnerable to changes in temperature. There is a whole range of films that highlight the climatic impact on glaciers, but in this chapter, I want to focus on three documentaries—Franny Armstrong’s *The Age of Stupid* (2009), Hannes Lang’s *Peak* (2011), and Jeff Orlowski’s *Chasing Ice* (2012)—which I will argue are paradigmatic in their uses of glaciers to forward a political and ecological argument about anthropogenic climate change.

Released within a few years of each other in the UK, Germany, and the US, all three films aim to give viewers a visceral understanding of the dramatic changes underway in these vulnerable ecosystems, but their strategies and styles differ, especially in terms of pacing. *The Age of Stupid* is made up of a fictional apocalyptic frame narrative and six documentary strands, one of

which focuses on an old mountain guide in the French Alps who recounts his experience of a changing environment. *Peak* is also set in the Alps, but it is a quiet and contemplative film that explores climate change's effects on the local skiing industry and what is left of the region's mountain farmers. *Chasing Ice*, by contrast, cues excitement as it follows *National Geographic* photographer James Balog on his quest to capture the disappearance of the Arctic glaciers in spectacular images and racing time-lapse photography. Where Orłowski speeds things up to raise alarm, Lang does the opposite, slowing the pace literally to a standstill and arresting the viewers' gaze on his protagonists and their relationship to the mountains through labor and leisure. Armstrong falls somewhere in the middle in terms of pacing, but uses the Alpine portion of her film to cue empathy and sympathy for an old mountaineer who mourns a disappearing landscape.

In what follows, I will explore how each of these documentaries invites viewers to engage with the depicted mountain environments to help them understand the dramatic changes that are already underway and need to be addressed. I will also consider the films' reception to shed light on the relationship between pacing, emotional engagement, and the potential impact on environmental attitudes and behavior. As Jane Stadler has pointed out, "the most powerful films have an afterlife, an influence that remains with us when we are affected by the sensory impact of films, captivated by story, character, and conflict, and left wondering about the issues they raise" (2008, 2). A better understanding of how such effects are achieved is relevant not only for the analysis of global mountain cinema, but also for climate change communication.

SLOWING DOWN FOR SOLASTALGIA IN *THE AGE OF STUPID*

Climate change documentaries often rely on a combination of emotional appeals and scientific facts to issue urgent warnings. *The Age of Stupid* is no exception in that it aims to warn its intended audiences in the industrialized nations that they must change their oil-guzzling lifestyles before it is too late and future generations will have to suffer the dire consequences. What makes the film special, however, is its use of a hybrid form of storytelling that mixes the factual with the fictional. It starts out by presenting viewers with an apocalyptic frame narrative, set in 2055, in which the biosphere of the Earth has been destroyed. One of the last human survivors is an old archivist (Pete Postlethwaite), who curates an enormous collection of artifacts. Sitting behind a transparent touchscreen, he zips through documentary material from "the period leading up to 2010," ostensibly to answer for himself two questions: "Why didn't we save ourselves when we could?" and "What state of mind were we in, to face extinction and simply shrug it off?" From

the archivist's mental journey through this "age of stupid," six documentary storylines emerge, all of them filmed between 2005 and 2008, which trace the interconnections between the social inequalities and environmental repercussions of our global oil culture. I want to single out one of them here, focusing on the eighty-two-year-old French mountain guide Fernand Pareau, because it shows how Armstrong uses pacing and scaling to highlight the fragility of glaciers.¹

From the start, *The Age of Stupid* is rife with contrasts in pacing as it tells its story about a civilization that is propelled forward by cheap oil only to hit the wall at full speed. The opening sequence races through millions of years of evolution, ending in the year 2055, the year of global ecocide. Once the archivist starts speaking, his tone is somber, the pace of editing slow. It quickens again when he zooms into the first "archival" footage, introducing Jeh Wadia, who, back in the Age of Stupid, owned an Indian low-cost airline. Not only is the sequence composed of quick cuts from one brief shot and scene to the next, it also features a loud, upbeat music score along with images that show airplanes taking off, traffic moving, future flight attendants training to extinguish fires, and screaming while evacuating planes. As James Cutting has noted, "more cuts mean potentially more saccades [eye movements] that drive attention; more motion also captures attention" (2016), and everything is in motion in this sequence. When Wadia speaks, both he and the hand-held camera are constantly on the move, either because he is in a car or because he is walking, the camera following him. In addition to the music, the audio track is filled with office and street noise, sounds filmmakers usually try to avoid during an interview. Here, however, they provide acoustic commentary as Wadia speaks about his capitalist success in the global South and his plans for further expansion, while showing no awareness of the ecological impact of his business. The archivist then quickly whizzes through several news clips showing "visible impacts of climate change leading up to 2010" around the world, along with reporters who are commenting on them frantically. When he finally calls up the footage that introduces the French mountaineer Pareau, it feels like someone is hitting the breaks while simultaneously turning the volume down.

Quiet piano music accompanies a beautiful long shot of an Alpine landscape during sunset, a slow pan revealing the white expanse of snowy mountains. Over this iconic shot, Pareau begins to speak in French, slowly and thoughtfully and thus in stark contrast to Wadia's hectic dialogue, while subtitles provide the English translation. "When I first saw these mountains," he says as the film cuts to a close-up of his withered face, "The beauty . . . It was truly love at first sight." He smiles as he recalls the time when he started training as a mountain guide in 1956 and the glacier was still healthy. This moment of remembrance cues empathetic responses through emotional contagion (Plantinga 1999, 240)

and sets viewers up for the next sequence. As Pareau gets dressed for a tour, the archivist fast-forwards the footage to when the guide meets up with the British windmill engineer Piers Guy and his family, the protagonists of another documentary strand of the film. Together, they visit a glacier near Chamonix that has lost a tremendous amount of ice, requiring them to climb down a series of long ladders to its surface, which used to be accessible just by stepping onto it at the same level. When they have finally reached it, a long shot shows viewers just how many ladders there are and how staggering the difference is: The glacier has lost over 150 meters in thickness since 1945. If the earlier panoramic shot was iconic in the Alpine tradition of mountain cinema, the visual proof of ice loss has become equally influential in the genre of climate change film. As in *An Inconvenient Truth*, the glacier is conceptualized as a canary in the coalmine, and thus as an ecosystem so vulnerable that it allows us to *see* with our own eyes that climate change has significant real-world impacts already. As Piers Guy puts it after his visit to Chamonix, “that the glaciers are melting is not really the point. The point is that that’s a signal that the earth is destabilizing.”

The film’s portrayal of Pareau as a wise old man who lives slowly and in sync with his environment, and who is pained by the gradual disappearance of his beloved glaciers, invites the viewer’s empathy and sympathy. “With global warming everything is different,” he observes. Trees now grow much higher, and birds no longer migrate for winter. Landscapes and ecologies are changing along with the climate, all of it caused by human carbon emissions. At the end of the film, we see Pareau join bicycle protests against the building of a second tube of the Mont Blanc tunnel, even as he feels that he is doing so in vain. “I think people in the future will be angry at us for not thinking to protect the environment,” he says in his last appearance, “we only thought to profit from it.” Rather than nostalgia, Pareau here exhibits what philosopher Glenn Albrecht has called *solastalgia*—a feeling of loss and mourning that accompanies the recognition “that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault” (2005, 45)—along with anticipatory guilt as he feels judged by future generations even though his own lifestyle is very simple.² Like the archivist’s regret, the portrayal of Pareau’s quiet reverence for the mountains and his slow way of life thus function as reminders that the achievements of our oil culture are treacherous: They allow those who can afford it to speed up their lives and reach every corner of the planet, but, as the apocalyptic framing of the film suggests, this capitalist time-space compression (Harvey 1990) is unsustainable on a finite planet.

Viewers of *The Age of Stupid* seem to have appreciated its message(s). A reception study conducted in the UK by Rachel Howell shows that “respondents emerged from the film with increased motivation to take action, and an increased belief that they could do something to prevent climate change getting

worse” (2011, 15). The film was thus successful in influencing viewers’ levels of concern about climate change along with their motivation to act, even as these effects were fleeting (Howell 2014). The design of Howell’s study does not allow any causal attribution of effects to specific aspects or moments of the film. One thing she recommends in her conclusion, however, is that “future communications may need to focus more on presenting positive stories of how ‘ordinary people’ (not ‘environmentalists’) have taken action” since “one of the two characters in the film who was trying to mitigate climate change ... was a windfarm developer” and thus someone engaged in a controversial issue in the UK (2011, 18). The latter is a reference to Piers Guy, but the second character who tries to mitigate climate change is Pareau, which begs the question of whether he, as a mountain guide, qualifies as an “ordinary person” or what exactly counts as mitigation. A look at Hannes Lang’s *Peak*, which is almost exclusively interested in people who, like Pareau, live and work in the Alps, allows us to consider these questions while also paying attention to Lang’s representation of “mountain time.” While *The Age of Stupid* might be seen as subscribing to a common visual rhetoric that contrasts busy city life with slow country life, although this is complicated both by its featuring of the traffic thundering into the Mont Blanc tunnel and the other three documentary strands in the film, *Peak* reminds us that modern mountains are being swiftly destroyed by the tourism industry.

A GLACIAL PACE: SLOW CINEMA ON THE MOUNTAIN IN *PEAK*

If the parts of *The Age of Stupid* that are set in the French Alps are slow, *Peak* brings viewers’ perception of the Alpine region literally to a standstill. At various points in the film, unnamed people stand awkwardly, interrupting either their skiing trip or their daily work in the mountains to stare silently at the camera for long, uncomfortable periods. At its heart, *Peak* documents how the human desire to glide on snow has shaped mountain sites as well as the lives of those who earn their living fulfilling that desire. Moreover, it contrasts its critical view of the Austrian and French winter tourism industries with its portrayal of a dying Italian mountain village and the traditional farming practices that sustain its few remaining inhabitants. However, since it was filmed at a time when the Alpine skiing industry was already struggling with massive snow and ice loss, it has also, almost by accident, become a film about climate change. Nicole Seymour has called it an “unnatural” and “deadpan” climate change documentary (2018, 4) because it “resists many of the rules of that form, especially the imperative to impart knowledge, through modes such as flat affect, irony, and awkwardness” (41) and lacks a “straightforward ethical stance” (47), making it a typical example of the *Bad Environmentalism* that Seymour explores in her book.

What the film also lacks is movement, thereby frustrating viewers who do not appreciate what has become known as “slow cinema” (Romney 2004, 20): a form of arthouse film that defies mainstream conventions of filmmaking, especially as they relate to pacing. According to James Quandt, the typical features of slow cinema include “adagio rhythms and oblique narrative; a tone of quietude and reticence ... attenuated takes, long tracking or panning shots, often of depopulated landscapes” as well as “prolonged hand-held follow shots of solo people walking” (2009, 76). In the genre of mountain cinema, Jin Jiang’s *One Day* (2020) is a typical example, as is Lang’s own short film *Riafn* (2020). But many of the elements of slow cinema can also be found in *Peak*, for example when a hand-held camera follows the heavy step of a mountain farmer as he slowly makes his way up a narrow path, when machinery moves in the distance to carve a giant water reservoir into the mountain, or when a group of workers cover a retreating glacier with long white plastic sheets to decelerate the melting. “By creating new ways of seeing the Alps,” writes Seth Peabody, “while also helping to build a culture of tourism that led viewers to visit the mountains in person, [mountain cinema] contributed to the rise of infrastructure on the seemingly natural landscapes it celebrates” (2021, 3). If anything, *Peak* attempts to do the opposite, creating a way of seeing the Alps that foregrounds human labor and that lays bare the sheer absurdity of the enormous infrastructure that is now necessary to slow the pace of ice loss and create artificial snow in the barren Alpine landscape.

Importantly, *Peak* does not reveal the identity of its protagonists, be they the workers who labor on the mountains or of those who come to ski on them. As Seymour notes,

Lang offers no title card, no identification for these individuals, not even an ensuing image that would somehow contextualize or narrativize their presence. Who are they and what are they doing here? ... Should we laugh at them? Be moved by their performance? Lang does not make any clear affective appeal. (59–60)

There is one exception, however, and that is Lang’s depiction of mountain farmers in the Piedmont (Mayr 2016). Their simple way of life is contrasted with the high-tech machinations of the skiing industry in ways that are reminiscent of Armstrong’s comparison of the mountain guide’s life with that of Jeh Wadia, the airline entrepreneur. Just like Fernand Pareau, the farmers are people who have grown old in the mountains and who mourn a form of life that will soon be lost as the young generations move away in search of better opportunities. Seymour argues that even in its depiction of the farmers, *Peak* shows a “resistance to the melancholic obsession with the past” (66) that she locates in other environmental documentaries such as *Chasing Ice*.

And indeed, the old woman who speaks at the end of Lang's film asserts that "it makes no sense to think about times gone by."³ She continues to observe, however, that "humanity has invented so many things, has come so far. But it has also destroyed a lot, the most beautiful things. Save yourself if you can." Like Pareau, then, she is painfully aware of what is being lost, and although she says these words in a medium shot rather than a close-up, her solastalgic awareness and somber tone cue feelings of loss and regret.

However, unlike *The Age of Stupid*, there is no marked difference in pacing between *Peak*'s portrayal of the farmers' traditional way of life and the world of capitalist creation and destruction. Steffen Moestrup's commentary is indicative, as the main issue he has with the film

is its eagerness to be slow. Most of the scenes in *Peak* are made using either a static camera which holds the image for a very long time or using slow tracking shots. Some scenes really deserve this aesthetic. For example, the great mountain views where the camera slowly starts to move and reveals people working in the mountain like small ants in a large nest. But many of the scenes cannot cope with the slowness. Eventually you start to ignore the depiction of many everyday things. An old man cooking. A woman taking out the trash. The wind blowing in the trees. ... The slowness becomes an attitude and feels somewhat self-appreciative in a way not always appropriate for the film. (2012)

The dominant feeling *Peak* has cued in this viewer is thus a mixture of annoyance and boredom, the latter being another typical feature of slow cinema. In her 2018 book, *Poetics of Slow Cinema*, Emre Çağlayan singles out nostalgia, absurd humor, and boredom as the three intrinsic dimensions of the genre, all three of which are present in *Peak*. Lang has explained in an interview that his intention was to offer audiences a film that invites them to discover things for themselves rather than serving pre-packed meanings and positions (Mayr 2016). He is aware that viewers who watch it with the expectation of receiving explanations will likely leave the theater frustrated, but hopes that those who are willing to embark on a journey of slow discovery—even if things are not readily comprehensible—will enjoy the film. Moestrup's response shows, however, that even viewers who are willing to go on that imaginary journey can get frustrated by the film's extreme slowness, and his complaints echo the results of a reception study that the media scholar Brigitte Hipfl and I conducted in Austria and Germany.⁴

As in Howell's study, our sample was not representative, and the results are thus not generalizable. It was nevertheless remarkable for us to see how difficult it was—especially for younger viewers—to cope with the pacing and style of the film. "Boredom" was a word that came up again and again in responses,

usually in the form of a complaint. Participants criticized that the film was “way too long” (w/23), that “everything [was] extremely dry” (m/22), that the “long shots without sound or movement were boring” (w/21), and that “nothing moves in that movie” (m/25). What nevertheless affected especially older participants (50+) were “the old people still working hard” (w/63), “the extreme intervention into nature” (m/52), and the “white slopes in the middle of a barren, un-wintery landscape” (w/60). Indeed, the hard labor of the old farmers and the massive interventions into the natural landscape of the Alps seem to have engaged these participants more than the thought that the observed changes might be due to climate change. Arguably, *Peak* does focus “on presenting positive stories of how ‘ordinary people’ (not ‘environmentalists’) have taken action” to address climate change (Howell 2011, 18), but since the depicted efforts are adaptation rather than prevention or mitigation, they may not have given viewers much incentive to consider changing their own actions. For most viewers, however, it was the pacing that stood in the way of any kind of engagement, and not a single one of our student participants said they would recommend the film to friends.

Given Lang’s statements, it would hardly make sense to blame his film for its failures in climate change communication when such communication presupposes the kind of explanations he deliberately eschews. While slow cinema has often been associated with non-Western responses to social and environmental issues (Hediger 2013), *Peak* demonstrates that this temporal strategy can also be found in European documentaries. Moreover, Lang has made clear that his main goal when making the film was to confront viewers with a landscape in which humans can only survive by actively shaping it (Mayr 2016). In that sense, the skiing industry is a continuation of the traditional work of mountain farmers rather than its opposite. But it is the scale of these operations that Lang wants to direct viewers’ attention to by forcing them to contemplate them in long, static shots. What they take away from this experience is up to them. With that in mind, I will now turn to the third and last film, Jeff Orlowski’s *Chasing Ice*, which moves at a very different pace and makes no secret of its intention to educate viewers.

SPEEDING UP ARCTIC TIME: *CHASING ICE* AS QUEST FOR EVIDENCE

Chasing Ice chronicles *National Geographic* photographer James Balog’s quest to speed up the gradual disappearance of the Arctic glaciers in such a way that the process becomes visible to the human eye and therefore more easily comprehensible to the human mind. His Extreme Ice Survey (EIS) drives sophisticated photographic technology to the limits of what it can do while at the same time depending on that technology for its success. Balog’s award-winning photography features prominently in the film, capturing the visual

beauty of the Polar region and thereby providing viewers with something to admire and, eventually, to mourn or feel solastalgic about. For Seymour, Orłowski's film is a classic example of "didactic environmental documentary" (2018, 47) because, like *An Inconvenient Truth*, it draws "heavily on expert knowledge" and aims to convince viewers with its authority and visual evidence. I have written in detail about the film's narrative strategies (Weik von Mossner 2017) but want to return to it here to contrast its depiction of glaciers with those of the two other films I have discussed.

Balog's plan is established at the beginning of the film: Rather than using isolated snapshots in time, or even the before-and-after pictures in earlier documentaries and other forms of climate change communication (Doyle 2009), he wants to provide the world with sophisticated time-lapse photography that will compress the gradual change occurring over a period of several years into just a few seconds. His stated belief is that such speeding up of glacial time will allow viewers to understand the magnitude of the anthropogenic impact on the Arctic region and motivate them to take action toward mitigating climate change. Ironically, what stands in the way of getting that evidence is the Arctic environment itself, which, as one of Balog's team members points out in the film, "is not the nicest environment" for the dozens of automatic time-lapse cameras they install all over the Arctic region.

The plotline of *Chasing Ice* is a familiar one, well anchored in the genre of melodrama. Balog emerges as a hero who risks both his financial security and his health to document a disappearing environment and perhaps save it from annihilation. This "obsession," as his wife calls it in the film, drives him to the limits of what he can do. He also suffers greatly when it turns out that the time-lapse cameras cannot function in these climatic conditions and that the work of many months has been in vain. Importantly, the film makes clear that Balog does not suffer for personal gain but for the greater good. This well-trying narrative strategy eventually culminates in several spectacular successes, as the Balog team is not only able to get the cameras to work, but also is serendipitously present when a chunk of ice the size of Manhattan breaks off the Jakobshavn Glacier in Greenland and the event is captured on film.

The resulting footage, just like the time-lapse photography of the retreating glaciers that Balog presents in the final minutes of the film, is nothing less than breathtaking as it shows the mighty glaciers changing shape, crumbling, and retreating within seconds. Whereas *Peak* invites viewers to take their time contemplating the absurdity and desperation involved in covering a glacier with white plastic foil to preserve it as long as possible for skiing, *Chasing Ice* wants them to watch in awe as they witness the expedited process of melting, thus turning climate change into a sublime spectacle. Where *The Age of Stupid* shows an assortment of ladders to give audiences a sense of just how much the glacier has melted over the past eighty years, *Chasing Ice* uses other visual

aids to provide scale. In the time-lapse episodes showing the melting glaciers, it inserts lines to mark earlier locations of the glacier's calving front (the area where ice chunks break off) and sometimes moves the camera when the calving front has retreated so dramatically that it is no longer in the frame. In the case of the Jakobshavn Glacier, it superimposes a three-dimensional map of Manhattan over the footage of the calving event to help viewers understand its enormous dimensions, which otherwise would not be visually comprehensible because of the lack of comparison. Several close-ups of audience members watching the footage during one of Balog's slide shows portrayed in the film reveal precisely those feelings of shock and awe, inviting viewers to feel alongside them. To emphasize the images, the film also provides a melancholic music score cueing feelings of loss and mourning. Balog thus achieves what he had set out to do, and, given the success of the film and the popularity of his related lecture show, one could speculate that his work has also helped raise awareness of the ice loss in the Arctic.

Speeding up glacial time seems to be a successful strategy in climate change communication if the goal is to capture attention and engage viewers emotionally. That is at least what our reception study showed, which included *Chasing Ice* as a second film. Our hypothesis was that people would mostly name the spectacular time-lapse footage of the retreating glaciers in response to our question of which moments in the film had touched them the most, and it was indeed a response we received frequently. Some people reported fascination and sadness, others a deep sense of shock, often in combination with an acknowledgment that they had previously not been aware of the urgency of the situation.

What the film's depiction of glaciers seems to have achieved, then, at least in the short run and with the groups we interviewed, is the raising of awareness and the evocation of emotions.⁵ In some cases, this also led to an expressed desire to help bring about social change through personal engagement. Others, on the contrary, expressed a sense of helplessness and the belief that there was nothing they could do to stop or change the ice loss in the Arctic or climate change more generally. Some even stated that they would probably forget the film before long because they were too busy getting on with their normal lives. It should also be noted here that our results were quite mixed regarding viewers' responses to Balog's role in the film. While some empathized with his struggle to get the visual evidence he felt he needed, others were annoyed by Orłowski's choice to dedicate so much time to Balog's knee surgery, which they felt had nothing to do with the topic of the film. But if we leave the melodramatic structure of the film aside, we can conclude that presenting glaciers as canaries in the coalmine is a helpful way of raising awareness of climate change, and that pace appears to matter in such presentations.

CONCLUSION

Given the commercial success of *Chasing Ice*, it is not surprising that there is by now a slew of films that have tried variations of its narrative strategies. Orłowski himself has made a second film, *Chasing Coral* (2017), that basically uses the same narrative structure but takes it underwater. Other filmmakers have continued the tradition on mountain peaks and in Arctic regions. Looking only at the past few years, Josh Murphy's *Purple Mountains* (2020), Craig Leeson's *The Last Glaciers* (2022), and Fredric Golding's *Meltdown* (2021) are all documentaries that rely on similar mixes of spectacular imagery, a quest narrative, and urgent calls for change. While the first two films feature white male protagonists who consider themselves mountain experts because of their professions, *Meltdown* centers on a female photographer, Lynn Davis, and a male scientist, Anthony Leiserowitz, but its central storyline is nevertheless a version of the one presented in *Chasing Ice*. Featuring professional snowboarder Jeremy Jones, *Purple Mountains* covers its hero's "physical and philosophical journey to find common ground with fellow outdoor people across diverse political backgrounds" as he takes them on mountain tours. *The Last Glaciers* was produced for distribution in IMAX theatres and places even more emphasis on its spectacular footage of mountain landscapes. However, as Carla Hay puts it pointedly in her review of the film in *Culture Mix*, the film "comes across as a ... vanity project for filmmaker Craig Leeson to have footage of him paragliding over famous glacial mountains instead of being an important call to action about climate change" (2022). Going on a quest for dazzling footage of dying glaciers has become popular in climate change film, but that alone is hardly enough to make an impact on society, not least because we must assume that a certain familiarization has set in by now.

There are also examples of recent films treading in the less spectacular footsteps of the other two films when it comes to representing glaciers as evidence of climate change. Rather than showing protagonists on a quest to secure breathtaking footage of ecological destruction, they portray local populations coping with environmental changes due to climate change. They include films such as Costa Boutsikaris and Anna Palmer's *Inhabitants* (2021), which depicts sustainable land management practices of Native American Tribes. They also include projects such as Caroline Hedin's *Rockies Repeat* (2022), which features a group of Indigenous and settler women artists hiking the Canadian Rocky Mountains and recreating artworks produced a century earlier to show how the landscapes have changed since then.

In the end, there is no best way to depict mountains to raise awareness of climate change. While mainstream productions such as *Chasing Ice* might reach more viewers, there is an audience for almost any kind of film, including

slow ones, and covering any country, region, or community. What they all share, regardless of their pacing, style, and budget, is a problem that is typical for documentary film. As the psychologist and film scholar Ed S. Tan has noted, “because of self-selection mechanisms, we would not expect major shifts of worldview in the natural audience as a result of watching a movie. Natural viewers tend to be attracted by the kind of film that fits their beliefs” (2011, 73). This is especially true for documentaries, which rarely reach audiences that were not already interested in the issues they present. We should not forget, however, that themes and genres overlap, and that we sometimes watch a film because we are interested in one issue only to learn about another. And given the vulnerability of mountain regions to shifts in temperature and precipitation, we could argue with Mark Bould (2022) that every mountain film is also a film about climate change, either because it documents past climatic conditions or because it features contemporary landscapes that are the result of shifting weather patterns. It is not least in this way, then, that global mountain cinema will continue to be an important genre for climate change communication.

NOTES

1. For a detailed analysis of the other strands of the film, see Weik von Mossner (2013).
2. In Albrecht’s definition, solastalgia is one of the *psychoterratic dis-eases*—an umbrella term that bundles ailments such as “ecoanxiety, nature deficit order, eco-paralysis, solastalgia, eco-nostalgia and global dread” (2010).
3. I’m quoting from the English subtitles here as the woman speaks in Italian.
4. The study was conducted in the winter of 2014–2015. Our subjects consisted of several groups of students at the University of Klagenfurt in Austria and the visitors of a public screening of the film as part of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society’s Green Visions film series in the Gasteig Cultural Center in Munich, Germany. Subjects received questionnaires directly after the viewing of the film, and the Klagenfurt students also talked about their viewing experience in moderated group discussions.
5. Some of what we heard from our participants is echoed in the testimonials the filmmakers themselves have collected (“Chasing Ice Testimonials”).

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II. FROM *LOCUS AMOENUS* TO *LOCUS ABSURDUM*: SKIING AT THE END OF NATURE IN RUBEN ÖSTLUND'S *FORCE MAJEURE* (2014)

Caroline Schaumann

In *The End of Ice* (2019), Dahr Jamail cautions: “A child born today will see an Everest largely free of glaciers within her lifetime” (6), urging us to come to terms with guilt and grief in order to acknowledge the loss of our planet as we know it. Melting mountain ice caps and retreating glaciers, as documented from *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) and *Chasing Ice* (Jeff Orlowski, 2012) to *Before the Flood* (Fisher Stevens, 2016) and *Ice on Fire* (Leila Connors, 2019), have become icons of global warming that highlight both the destructive power of humans and our vulnerability and incapacity to live with the damages we have produced. The fact that Al Gore’s 2006 claim “Within the decade, there will be no more snows of Kilimanjaro” (*An Inconvenient Truth*) has been—fortunately—proven wrong but more often ridiculed, illustrates the need for adequate and effective representation across genres:

It is now 15 years since Al Gore’s startling pronouncement, and, for now, Africa’s tallest mountain still has its iconic white icecap. In the intervening years, Mount Kilimanjaro has become a poster-child for the grim effects of climate change. Yet buried beneath the avalanche of panicked headlines and shock-inducing before-and-after pictures, the voices of scientists have largely been lost. Glaciologists who have studied the ancient volcano for decades argued that the link between climate change and Kilimanjaro’s disappearing glaciers is tenuous at best. Which, bizarrely,

has turned out to be a far less convenient (and less emotive) truth. (*Africa Geographic*, 2021)

While Kilimanjaro's glaciers continue to shrink rapidly (with over 90 per cent of the ice coverage lost over the last century, scientists now estimate most of the ice will disappear by 2040), the mountain media spectacle invited emotionally charged and cynical responses by scientists, laymen, and climate change deniers alike, but led to little action. In "The History of Ice: How Glaciers Became an Endangered Species," Mark Carey (2007) points out that glaciers have become a ready symbol of climate change precisely because of their affective charge, metaphorical malleability, and remove from ordinary life. In a more recent contribution, Zackary Provant and Carey describe glacier memorials in Iceland, Switzerland, and the United States, and provocatively conclude:

The news [of glacier funerals] romanticizes high-mountain elegies and paints funeral organizers as heroic saviors, making it too easy to consume and then forget the spectacles. This very process of consumption is often followed by amnesia amid the global climate crisis. What we ultimately need are stories that ignite change and force authorities to respond with justice-oriented policies. (Provant & Carey, 2022)

Photos of shrunken icebergs, Arctic environments flooded in water, and emaciated polar bears have indeed become all too common images shared in the news and on social media, while greenhouse gas emissions and global warming have accelerated at an unprecedented pace. As Provant and Carey allege, climate accountability as an acknowledgment of causation by the Carbon Majors, the top ten global emitters of carbon dioxide and methane from 1965 to 2017 (Saudi Aramco, Chevron, Gazprom, ExxonMobil, National Iranian Oil, BP, Shell, Coal India, PEMEX, and Petroleos de Venezuela), most often remains missing from these at once beautiful and terrifying visuals. And as Alexa Weik von Mossner's illuminating contribution in Chapter 10 of this volume details, it also remains to be seen whether climate films as a whole elicit engagement or action beyond a temporary sense of shock. The climate grief that Jamail references certainly carries great emotional force and becomes beautifully articulated in novels like Ilija Trojanow's *EisTau* (*The Lamentations of Zeno*, 2016) and films like *Chasing Ice*, but, with its erasure of causation, it can also serve to diffuse climate justice.

Rather than focusing on the emotional plea of mountain elegies, my contribution turns to comedy, an unlikely choice for instigating climate action. But by not rehearsing the emotionally-laden imagery of tragedy and documentary that has become both oversaturated and ridiculed, comedy is arguably freer to

concede to complexities, point to factors of causality and responsibility, and anticipate responses that engender denialism or inability to cope. As Nicole Seymour (2018) has suggested, irreverence, irony, and playfulness are not only able to run counter to a moralizing and self-righteous environmentalism, but also avoid its often undergirding racism and heteronormativity. With its critical and often ironic distance, comedy does not rely on a claim to truth or the providing of wide-ranging explanations, and it cannot be proven untrue—perhaps a more effective strategy to deliver climate change's unpredictability and vast impact reaching into all areas of life. In this vein, the sci-fi satire *Downsizing* (Alexander Payne, 2017) connected the threat of overpopulation and Arctic methane emissions leading to planetary disaster with a social critique of consumption and global inequality in a story about a middle-class white American male's midlife crisis and path toward political activism. The film flopped with the critics and public alike—though some suggest it was simply ahead of its time (See Kleinman, 2022). As a vehicle to communicate the climate crisis, comedy film received a big boost with Adam McKay's star-studded 2021 feature *Don't Look Up!*, which became the second most-watched film within a month of its release on Netflix. Rather than establishing the facts of climate change in grief-inducing imagery, the film pointed to the often comical and bizarre mechanisms of denial, deflection, and defensiveness of politicians, journalists, scientists, and the public. While the conservative media predictably trashed the film, finding its portrayal of climate deniers, Trumpism, and anti-vaxxers unfunny and derivative, others saw an astute and terrifyingly realistic depiction of not only the political status quo but also the media response. Slavoj Žižek (2023) commented:

[C]ritics were displeased by the light tone of *Don't Look Up!*, claiming it trivializes the ultimate apocalypse. What really bothered these critics is the exact opposite: The film highlights trivialization that permeates not only the establishment, but even the protesters.

Indeed the film inspired a broad debate on how to communicate the urgency of climate change most effectively (see Braun, 2022). In recent years, climate change humor has gained increasing attention, from online memes to stand-up comedy, to Rollie Williams's entertaining YouTube show *Climate Town*, to the Climate Comedy Cohort, a fellowship and contest supported by the nonprofit group Generation 180, which views comedy as "a vastly untapped resource."¹

While the classical *Bergfilm* drama has avoided comical interventions—as Christian Quendler (2022, 136) explicates, Siegfried Kracauer's film scenario *Tartarin sur les Alpes*, which was intended to subvert the pathos of the German mountain films, unfortunately remains unrealized—my chapter continues what

Eva-Maria Müller outlines in Chapter 2 of this volume as the destabilizing potential of the ski comedy. In particular, I investigate how Ruben Östlund's *Turist* (*Force Majeure*, 2014) models—by way of tracing a family's skiing vacation in the Alps with humorous absurdity—our disorientation and vulnerability in the Anthropocene. In both *Don't Look Up!* and *Force Majeure*, climate change is not mentioned at all, though both films—*Don't Look Up!* rather obviously and *Force Majeure* more broadly and in veiled form—confront both global warming and our simultaneous strategies of denial. While this denialism in *Don't Look Up!* leads to planetary destruction, in *Force Majeure* the catastrophic event ends up being physically harmless but carrying long-term mental repercussions, accentuating the absurd quality of the film. Both films thus engender a downward trajectory, visibly reinforced in *Force Majeure*'s iconic frames of expansive mountain vistas that pan down to cables lying in the snowy ground as if to symbolize the protagonists' dashed hopes for recreation in the mountains. Mountains in this way invite and fulfill but also resist and disappoint viewer expectations. If Tom Gunning in the Introduction to this volume claims that “mountains in cinema can provide not simply a backdrop or setting, nor an abstract symbol, but something that absorbs and exceeds all of these,” this holds true for *Force Majeure*, too, when the skiing protagonists, along with the narrative plot and the avalanche, speed down the mountain toward disintegration and destruction.

By now, it has been over two decades since Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2020, 18) put forth the term Anthropocene as a new geological epoch characterized by “the central role of mankind in geology and ecology.” If the term lends power to humankind, who in the “Age of Man” define an entire geological epoch, it also characterizes the destructive power that humans—and more precisely, distinctly historical-, racial-, religious-, gender-, and wealth-based humans—wield over the land, the oceans, and the atmosphere of the earth. At the same time, the Anthropocene highlights our vulnerabilities of living on a hothouse planet, with damage that hits disadvantaged populations first and hardest, though it becomes noticed and endured by all. These parameters offer urgent and rich lines of inquiry in the sciences and humanities alike, underscoring the need for new genres of delineating nature and our participation in it.

By his own admission, Ruben Östlund used “the absurdity of a ski resort” to show what happens when the lives of rich people seemingly in control “become messed up”—a theme of Anthropocene urgency when human dominance and helplessness go hand in hand. Indeed, climate change in and of itself carries a distinctly absurd quality—as with Albert Camus's laboring Sisyphus, the task of halting the looming disaster may well be unsurmountable. Since the effects of global warming are so far-reaching and long-term, they become difficult to pinpoint and easy to question with seemingly disparate singular weather events. The often-used analogy of comparing climate change to the social

strata on an ocean liner that is speeding toward an iceberg but unable to stop also pushes the absurd forward. On the 100-year anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, director James Cameron himself drew the connection between these two catastrophes:

You've got the starving millions who are going to be the ones most affected by the next iceberg that we hit, which is going to be climate change. We can see that iceberg ahead of us right now, but we can't turn. We can't turn because of the momentum of the system, the political momentum, the business momentum. There are too many people making money out of the system, the way the system works right now, and those people frankly have their hands on the levers of power and aren't ready to let 'em go. Until they do, we will not be able to turn to miss that iceberg, and we're going to hit it, and when we hit it, the rich are still going to be able to get their access to food, to arable land, to water, and so on. It's going to be the poor, it's going to be the steerage that are going to be impacted. It's the same with the Titanic. (Romm 2012)

If absurdism more generally can be understood as the disconnect between intention and outcome, then, in the collision between our awareness of global environmental damage and our simultaneous incapacity in finding a joint effective response, we have arrived at an utterly absurd moment. By depicting the protagonists' futile and flawed visions of grandiosity in the face of crisis, *Force Majeure* points to a similarly absurd moment. Rather than confronting us with the environmental damage we have caused, the film thus hits at the mechanisms of denial—from consumer capitalism to hypermasculinity to narcissism—that are continuing to enable the climate crisis. If in 1989 Bill McKibben famously declared the “End of Nature” and Dahr Jamail twenty years later lamented the “End of Ice,” Östlund presents us with the end of skiing, not only in environmental terms, but at its very moral, economic, and ethical foundation.

Östlund sarcastically admitted to three ambitions with *Force Majeure*: “To reduce alpine tourism, increase divorce rates, and make the most spectacular avalanche scene in history.”² The film's memorable first scenes explore these themes. As the initial credits begin to roll and the musical score swells, we first hear then see a persistent tourist photographer dragging a reluctant Swedish family into the frame and moving himself out of the frame. Assuming the perspective of the photographer behind the viewfinder, we become participants in the ensuing involuntary photography session (Figure 11.1), invited to stage, view, and analyze both the tired and grumpy family in the front and the gloomy mountainscape in the background. In this way, viewers are forced to partake in the awkward framing of the family, who—egged on by the relentless



Figure 11.1 Family photography session in *Force Majeure* (2014)



Figure 11.2 Family photographs in *Force Majeure* (2014)

photographer's commands, fake compliments, and the countdown of camera clicks—assume victorious postures, embrace, and smile affectionately. This double framing by the photo and the film camera creates an uneasy distance to the events unfolding on screen—Roger Edholm rightly termed it a Brechtian alienation effect, as we witness through supposedly two lenses an odd kind of double-acting in the creation of a nuclear happy family on vacation. At the same time, the scene adds to the absurdist character of the film, as it not only flaunts the constructedness of a supposedly loving family and a supposed

winter wonderland, but also makes us unwilling participants in the framing and staging of two equally unattainable environments. When later in the film, Ebba happily purchases the finished photographs as a keepsake, we have come full circle in the process of selective framing, staging, consumption, and denial.

Force Majeure takes place at an upper-class ski resort in the French Alps, an ostensibly perfected nature, created thanks to artificial snow, ski lifts, snowplows, transporter belts, restaurants, and posh lodging all integrated into nature recreation. Östlund's clever cinematography reveals that the picturesque mountainscape that tourists and viewers admire and consume during the day is the result of a violent warscape at night, when panzer-like snowplows roar to the cannon fire of controlled avalanche bombings. In the first few minutes of the film after the photography session, we are presented with a montage of shots: an illuminated ski resort amidst the mountains before dawn, medium shots and close-ups of snow cannons, bright avalanche barriers, and flashing welcome signs, all to a thundering condensed version of Antonio Vivaldi's violin passage from *The Four Seasons*. Though the easily-recognizable "L'estate" (Summer) Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 8, RV 315 may only ironically resonate with the subject matter of winter sports, the "Summer Storm" movement, along with the lyrical lines that Vivaldi (presumably) wrote and dedicated to this part, reference greater forces of nature quite fitting with the avalanche in the film: In the summer concerto, a "little shepherd sobs in fear of the violent storm [...] frightened by the lightning bolts and roaring thunder." The final *Presto* concludes with the storm's destructive impact: "Alas, his [the shepherd's] worst fears are realized, as huge hailstones fall from the roaring heaviness, cutting the heads from the proudly standing grain" (Vivaldi, 18th Century).³ The tension between technological control and natural forces is reinforced with a final slow camera pan from the sky, which looks over imposing mountains all the way to the cableways reaching down into the valley, and which, accompanied by the explosive sounds of the snow cannons, completes the film's opening. There are no humans visible, so the machines eerily assume a life of their own.

Though we are about to watch a ski film, this beginning unmistakably engages with Walter Ruttmann's Weimar city film *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927), when a quiet and peaceful Berlin opens to chaotic hustle and bustle in the early morning hours. By mapping the genre of the city symphony onto a mountain film, Östlund at once draws attention to the modern infrastructure networks of mountainscapes and creatively pushes the boundaries of mountain and city film altogether. *Force Majeure*'s contemporary viewers can hardly feel quite as celebratory about the coal-fueled, carbon-emitting (tourist) economy of production, transportation, and consumption, fully knowing its devastating environmental consequences. With his close-ups of machines and shots of the illuminated resort preparing for its

opening, Östlund, in another allusion to the absurd disconnect between intention and outcome, reminds us of the connection between fossil-fueled industrialization and outdoor recreation of a privileged leisure class. Conversely, the prominent mountain panorama in *Force Majeure*'s establishing shot recalls the classical German *Bergfilm* such as Arnold Fanck's *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, 1926), which also opens with a majestic panorama of snow-capped and lonesome mountains. Östlund grants us a similar panoramic view, but only in yet another absurdist and playful way; that is after a disorienting pan from a completely blue sky that viewers first take to be a background, and by concluding the pan with an image of cables amidst the snow, mapping the resort's infrastructure (Figure 11.3). Combining traditions of the Weimar city and mountain film genres with twenty-first-century technology not only underscores how nature (and in this case, the fragile and disappearing environment of snowy mountaintops) is molded and changed, but also points to the problematic legacy and unsustainable future of this form of outdoor recreation.

It is in this setting that marital tensions in *Force Majeure* come to the fore and eventually lead to an existential family crisis. What started out as a dream vacation takes on distinctly nightmarish dimensions when Thomas and Ebba, an attractive, young, and wealthy couple, and their two kids, Vera and Harry, watch an avalanche cut loose from the mountain's upper slope while enjoying an elaborate lunch on the deck of the resort's slopeside restaurant. Thomas first calmly reassures his family that the snow they see thundering down is a perfectly controlled slide, filming the incident on his phone. But when faced with the approaching flurry, he grabs his phone and gloves and flees the scene

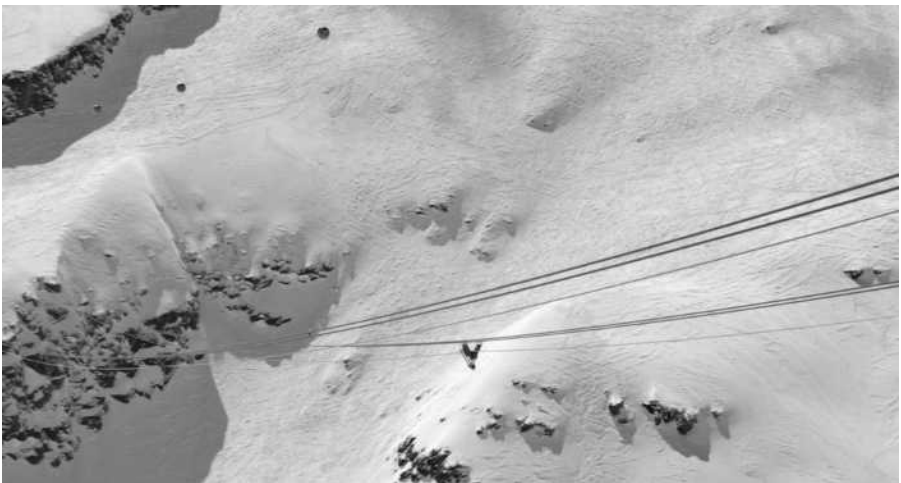


Figure 11.3 Cables in the snow in *Force Majeure* (2014)

in panic, pushing others aside and leaving his wife to fend for their two children as a billowing snow cloud roars into the dining area. This cowardly act of omission determines the entire course of the remaining vacation. Silenced at first, it leads to denial, shame, obsession, awkward social interactions, passive and open aggression, breakdowns, amends, and attempts at reconciliation.

While the actual cause of the (eventually harmless) avalanche is never revealed, this either intentional or unintentional force of nature sets into motion a crisis of masculinity and the nuclear family as a whole. As ambivalent as the avalanche itself—is it manmade or natural, does it qualify as a disaster or not?—are the responses to this event, inviting viewers to reflect on male heroism and failure while also questioning the validity of any one representation amidst a multitude of differing perspectives and framing devices. On the one hand, the film adopts a conventional dramatic plot, building up linearly and chronologically to a catastrophe that becomes the source of conflict and resolution. On the other hand, the film's parodic elements and ironic subtext continually undercut the melodramatic plot, and the intended disorientation questions not only the conflict and its resolution, but the reality of the film as a whole. As Thomas and Ebba desperately and futilely attempt several (ineffective) coping strategies, it is up to the viewer to recognize the incongruity of the situation, draw conclusions from the film's disasters big and small, and find meaning in an uncontrollably heating world.

Engaging traditions of the German mountain film and the disaster movie, Östlund exposes how violent disturbances disrupt a seemingly controlled and perfected environment. Like the geologist and avid skier Arnold Fanck almost a century before, Östlund also began his career with documentary ski films, and the setting of Fanck's *Der heilige Berg* and *Force Majeure* is similar—a secluded holiday resort in the Alps. But if the German mountain film pioneered on-location camerawork and men's daring climbing and skiing feats amidst an awe-inspiring but unforgiving nature, *Force Majeure* at first sight is a parody of a mountain film in that it does not display skilled skiing or mountaineering, but out-of-town tourists in convenient if clunky equipment who ski tentatively, awkwardly, and frightened on groomed and signed pistes, transported via gondolas, chair lifts, and conveyor belts. While Leni Riefenstahl in *Der heilige Berg* recalled being buried by several small avalanches during filming for dramatic effect (something still visible in the film), the protagonists in *Force Majeure* become paralyzed by an avalanche that does not touch anyone and was presumably safely controlled from the get-go. And while *Der heilige Berg* concluded with the tragic deaths of both male protagonists, leaving their love interest Diotima in despair and empty-handed, *Force Majeure* ends simply with the family travelling home, albeit in yet another absurdist sequence, as I will elaborate. Thus *Force Majeure* somewhat gleefully depicts the destruction of every single one of the values

that *Der heilige Berg* proclaimed in its dramatic conclusion, when a mountaineer simply called “the Friend” unswervingly holds onto to his fallen and long-dead climbing comrade dangling below on a rope, until he himself perishes. *Der heilige Berg*’s final intertitle pronounced the mountain as “a symbol of the greatest values that humanity can embrace—fidelity—truth—loyalty—faith”—contemporary as well as recent critics easily identified these values, in their celebration of sacrifice and masculine hegemony, as harboring proto-Nazi ideals. In *Force Majeure*, conversely, we are presented with Charlotte, a promiscuous wife in a seemingly happy open relationship, with Thomas’s outright lies when trying to hide his cell phone use, with Ebba’s passive-aggressive prodding to expose her husband’s failures, and with their children’s eroding trust in their parents’ marriage. Leading a formerly firm value system ad absurdum, the film does not proclaim anything in its stead but merely plays out attempted coping scenarios: Thomas experiences some male bonding with his friend Mats while off-piste skiing in the high mountains, but his efforts to scream away his pain atop the mountain on command by Mats seem clichéd and hollow. Later he enjoys a hypermasculine drinking ritual, but most likely this entire sequence is merely a dream and doesn’t lead to any solution. His eventual breakdown resulting in an excessive crying fit seems overdramatic even to Ebba, and a final scene of redemption when Thomas resumes his patriarchal role by heroically rescuing an injured Ebba from the ski slope becomes a performance staged for their kids when she proceeds to jump from his arms and easily walks away. It remains unclear if any of these tactics actually work, leaving viewers to reassess expectations, outcomes, and representational strategies.

If on-location shooting was a particular early trademark of Fanck’s films, Östlund also employs the by now customary on-location shooting (in the French resort Les Arcs and British Columbia), but his frequent use of film within the film critically reflects the function of recording and observing—from the professional photographer at the beginning to the pictures constantly being taken on phones, from the Go-Pro camera along the extreme ski descent to the recording that reveals Thomas’s escape on his phone. Corresponding to the protagonists’ different perceptions of what happened and how to interpret it, different versions of the unfolding events exist on different screens. When a drone interrupts the revelatory conversation between Thomas, Ebba, Mats, and Fanni, another device that has nowadays become prevalent in shooting mountain films is notably used for comic relief, with Östlund both anticipating and poking fun at the burgeoning drone fad. As a comedy, the film denies viewers emotional identification with a main character in the framework of a conventional story—Anders Johansson (2018, 149) sees it in the “avant-garde and modernist tradition.” In “Broken Contracts,” Michelle Orange elucidates on Östlund’s unique camerawork:

The *Guitar Mongoloid* and *Involuntary* established Östlund's distinctive style of long takes, stationary camera, and deceptively indifferent positioning of actors. [...] It's rare to get a good look into the eyes of any of his characters; their natures are revealed through their negotiation of other people along a modest spectrum of incident rather than through psychology or backstory. The picture-window quality of Östlund's direction reframes individuals as products of their surroundings, offering a study in both reaction and transience. The view is strictly limited and in constant flux. (2015, 34–37)

As we observe protagonists from a distance in mirrors, windows, and photographs, we come to wonder about hidden desires and conflicts. And as much time as the protagonists spend outdoors skiing, they spend as much and more time indoors, in restaurants, lobbies, and most of all in their hotel room. Here, the bathroom in particular occupies a prominent space and lengthy time for brushing teeth and peeing. Like the outdoor ski slopes, these indoor spaces are carefully attended and groomed by working-class personnel who are supposed to remain unseen but become visible in Östlund's film. Here, the encounter with a migrant worker adds another comical and absurdist perspective to the events unfolding on screen: Continually present in the hotel's hallways, the nameless janitor becomes an unwanted witness to the marital conflicts. In marked contrast to their reliance on camera and phone recordings, Ebba and Thomas become visibly uncomfortable with this human witnessing and confront the janitor, aggressively prodding "What do you want?" but in another scene inadvertently lock their kids into the hotel room with him. As with the nightly preparation of the ski slopes, the scenes with the janitor bring into focus the depth of the protagonists' oblivion, condescension, and prejudice. Annegret Heitmann has convincingly illustrated how *Force Majeure*'s visual language reinforces the emotional turmoil, gender imbalance, and social inequity in the pursuit of "happiness tourism":

The film's visuals, [...], deal heavily in impressions of the void—with long shots of the hotel's deserted and labyrinthine passages and the gloomy, empty pistes. [...] The cinematography thereby produces a feeling of unnatural unease that seems to haunt tourism and its promise of happiness in this anonymous, empty world propped up with metal struts and electric power. (2017, 513)

In its original version, the film was called *Turist*, but Östlund thought that *Force Majeure*, the title for the foreign language edition referring to a standard contract clause suspending obligations in case of natural or manmade disasters, was particularly fitting. Indeed it is fruitful here to turn to disaster

studies in order to illuminate the parallels between the triggering effects of the film's disasters and the even larger force majeure of climate change, which goes unmentioned in the film but remains the elephant in the room. Much like the avalanche in the film, climate change as a similar but much larger-scale combination of manmade and natural forces leads to helplessness, guilt, shame, and disillusion, a crisis deflected rather than confronted. The film's unexpected ending, concluding the five parts announced in intertitles proclaiming the first, second, third, fourth, and final day of skiing, substantiates the parallels to disasters and the disaster film. After their departure from what increasingly turned into a suffocating hell, the family endures yet another misadventure along the narrow switchbacks on the harrowing bus ride back to the train station. In scenes reportedly inspired by a YouTube video, Ebba begins to panic, then demands to leave the bus, with all other passengers except Charlotte following her lead. In reversal to the previous situation, Thomas does not abandon the family but on the contrary helps his children off the bus. The final scene shows the group marching down the lonely mountain road in growing darkness, becoming a united community that shares cigarettes, holds hands, and carries their children until the film fades out (Figure 11.4).

As critics have pointed out, the cinematography here recalls many disaster films, such as *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996), *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2010), and *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014), when a group of survivors becomes bonded in the wake of an extraordinary event pushing characters to extraordinary deeds. While the above-mentioned calamities on screen seem to fall into the category of natural disasters, Kate Rigby in *Dancing with Disaster* (2015)



Figure 11.4 Abandoning the bus in *Force Majeure* (2014)

points out: “there is a sense in which the term natural disaster has always been a misnomer.” Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, avalanches and floods, fires, and droughts have been a constant part of the planet’s geological history but are usually only declared a disaster once they affect the lives of peoples and communities. Rigby continues: “The entanglement of human and nonhuman actors and factors in the genesis, unfolding, and aftermath of a ‘natural disaster’ is now well recognized in the research field of disaster studies” (14). In the wake of manmade climate change, as we have exited the stable conditions of the Holocene and the “end of normal,” extreme weather events cannot be simply termed natural disasters anymore. In a disaster film, protagonists may learn that they are not always in control, and the catastrophe can free them from their predetermined roles, liberate gender expectations, and bond a community in the face of a threat. These developments arguably hold true for *Force Majeure*, when Thomas could learn from his previous acts of negligence, Ebba becomes the leader of the pack, and an unlikely group of tourists is bonded through decisive action and able to defeat danger.

In her examination of the disaster tradition, Kate Rigby traces the meaning of representations of catastrophes:

A true catastrophe, then, is not only a terminus but a turning point. In the *Poetics*, the catastrophe is intimately associated with anagnorisis: the moment of realization, when the tragic hero or heroine is faced with the collapse of their underlying assumptions about themselves and/or others and is brought, painfully and sometimes fatally, to the recognition of the damage that has been wrought by their ignorance. To the extent that it seeks to disclose the potentially catastrophic consequences of the track that society has taken, in the hope that a different path might yet be chosen and the worst averted. (2014, 18–19)

Such transformative potential corresponds to the unexpected turning points in *Force Majeure*, though Östlund characteristically imbues them with an ironic and absurd twist. In this way, the harrowing bus ride fails to relate to any of the previous themes in the film, and more importantly, the bus drive in and of itself cannot qualify as a disaster or catastrophe, making the film’s ending strange and unbecoming. At the conclusion of the film, therefore, all questions that have been posed remain unanswered: Will the group reach the train station unscathed? Was the bus ride, or, as a matter of fact, the avalanche, ever putting the family in danger or did they only reflect people’s fears? Have Thomas and Ebba overcome their marital troubles? Was their trip a turning point, or will they continue life as before? In interviews, Östlund revealed that only Charlotte, the philandering wife who in traditional cinema would be punished, remains on the bus and successfully makes her train back home. Hence the ending of the film questions

the value of community bonding in the wake of a disaster and, denying audience expectations once again, adds to the absurdist character of *Force Majeure*.

The American remake of *Force Majeure*, *Downhill* (Jim Rash & Nat Faxon, 2020) keeps the satirical portrayal of a wealthy married couple, thanks to brilliant performances by Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Will Ferrell. In the film, Billie and Pete Stanton hope to escape from their hectic work life to find rest and relaxation in the Austrian Ski resort of Ischgl, even though the “Ibiza of the Alps,” as the concierge terms it, is a little less family-friendly and suited for their two sons, Finn and Emerson, than they had hoped. Billie and Pete, too, meet a lustful Charlotte as the Austrian concierge (utterly overdrawn with a thick German accent and outlandish behavior), and one of the original actors of *Force Majeure*, Kristofer Hivju, even makes an appearance in *Downhill*. But by replacing the gloomy mountainscape, the impersonal hypermodern hotel, the high-tech lifts, cables, snow cannons, grooming tools, and thundering soundtrack with sunlit mountain slopes, cozy wooden inns, waitresses in dirndls, and yodeling, *Downhill* loses the environmental critique inherent in *Force Majeure*’s cynical depiction of outdoor recreation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Downhill* concludes on a happy note after Billie’s staged rescue by Pete, with no continually festering conflict. The entire bus ride of *Force Majeure*’s bizarre ending is omitted, as are any references to the larger framework of skiing during global warming. If *Downhill* acquires an absurdist dimension, it is entirely involuntarily, since the “Ibiza on Ice” ski resort of Ischgl made international headlines after more than 6,000 people from forty-five countries contracted COVID-19, leading to the resort’s closure in March 2020.⁴ As news of the Ischgl breeding ground of the virus circulated around the globe, it certainly did not help with *Downhill*’s release in February 2020, illuminating a different and more material type of transnationalism that shows that the Alps are—like metropolitan centers—global hubs.

In describing the human condition in the Anthropocene, the Australian chemist Will Steffen (2016) from the international Anthropocene Working Group muses: “I would use paradoxical. That’s the feeling I would have, this enormous paradox of this quite powerful, amazing creature but quite flawed creature at the same time.”⁵ Based on the assumption of predictability and human power that come with cheap energy resources and a remarkably stable climate, our cultural narratives have become insufficient to understand the human condition in a rapidly changing, volatile nature. While the Anthropocene has brought new genres, such as climate fiction, it has also led to the reassessment and reinvention of existing genres, as Stephanie LeMenager suggests:

The study of genres exposes how affective expectations are put together, in the process of foregrounding opportunities for innovation within

existing genres. Ideally, such innovation might shift the structures of feeling that undergird hegemonic understandings of nationhood and the good life. As we live into the everyday Anthropocene, literary scholars within the environmental humanities and a broader environmentalist public have seized upon genre as a means of innovating new socio-ecological relations. (2017, 476)

With its allusions to the absurd, *Force Majeure* works to unsettle understandings of “the good life” in the Anthropocene. As the film both exposes and disappoints clichéd and generic audience expectations, *Force Majeure* throws into question modern definitions of human control, exclusivity, masculine prowess, the meaning of family and friends, and the restorative power of nature. While climate change and other pressing ecological concerns go unmentioned, the film contributes to the environmental humanities by showing—with a lot of awkward moments—the thin veneer but destructive consequences of recreational ski tourism. In this way, *Force Majeure* invites us to reassess the very traditions and genres in which we narrate nature and creates space for new representational venues in the Anthropocene.

NOTES

1. For more information, see <https://generation180.org/climate-comedy-cohort/>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/26/force-majeure-johannes-bah-kukhne> (Accessed July 6, 2023).
3. In notable contrast, Thomas is not fearful of the approaching avalanche, remaining ignorant of the ubiquitous destruction it causes.
4. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/05/everyone-was-drenched-in-the-virus-was-this-austrian-ski-resort-a-covid-19-ground-zero> See also <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/24/europe/austria-ski-resort-ischgl-coronavirus-intl/index.html> (Accessed July 6, 2023).
5. Will Steffen interviewed in *Anthropocene*.

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12. FESTIVAL OBSCURA: GENDER IN FESTIVAL-DRIVEN MOUNTAINEERING DOCUMENTARIES

Julie Rak

Every year, mountain film festivals around the world show films that are difficult to see any other way, in formats that are very popular with audiences. These films, and mountain festivals in general, have not yet received much critical attention. In *False Summit*, I wonder why relatively narrow ideas about masculinity and heroism in climbing cultures persist (2021). This essay suggests that part of the reason lies with the influence of certain mountain film festivals, particularly large, influential festivals, on the content and reach of films featuring female climbers. Recent films featuring women can appear to make mountain film festivals more progressive than they were when Susan Frohlick lamented the hegemony of masculinity at mountain film festivals in the early 2000s, when women were rarely seen except as spectators (2005). Featuring a few more women in film and showing festival films by female directors appears to be a promising step. That step may not be as progressive as it may seem at first. Changes to the hegemony of heroic masculinity in mountaineering are tied to issues connected to the politics of representing minority climbers and climbing styles. These are linked to the popularity of mountain film festivals and the cultural norms that circulate there about mountains, mountaineering, and gender, because films represent the kinds of climbing that audiences want to see, and so representation sets standards for what climbing is supposed to be like.

Like other types of film festivals, mountain film festivals are central to maintaining and creating global audiences for their products, which means that they participate in making and representing mountain pursuits. Their influence

means that mountain film festivals sometimes contribute to considerable resistance to thinking about political issues in the representation of mountaineering and mountain life, particular with respect to gender politics. But at the same time, they do contain potential for representing gender differently to mountain cinema audiences. Film festivals are an important economic and social formation because they do not just show films: They help to create and distribute them too, making the general study of film festivals useful when considering mountain films and how the expectations of festivals result in relatively narrow ideas of diversity. Alongside the activities related to film production and distribution, mountain film festivals in particular have an appeal beyond film, and so they are also a marketplace for climbers and others who love the mountains and outdoor activities. And so, mountain film festivals are a place not just for film viewing, but for commerce: Outdoor products, such as gear or clothing, and other cultural products such as books or visual art, are commonly sold during festivals. In this way, mountain film festivals are occasions to celebrate mountains and mountaineering as a culture and an aesthetic, and they are an important way in which ideals about mountains and outdoor life circulate. Many of those ideals are connected to social norms in mountain climbing about who climbers should be, norms that include gender and racial norms, even when ideas about gender and race are not mentioned, or appear in relatively superficial ways. To show how gender issues are both highlighted and obscured in mountain film festival films as part of their participation in global film circulation, I will discuss *Pretty Strong* (Leslie Hittmeier, Colette McInerney, & Julie Ellison, 2020), a film by an all-female climbing and film collective, and *Cholitas* (Jaime Murciego & Pablo Iraburu, 2019), a film about the Aimara women of Bolivia who climbed Mount Aconcagua. Both films contain the promise of gender equity and the reality of gender politics as part of the conditions of their production and distribution.

OBSCURING GENDER IN PLAIN SIGHT: A PROMOTIONAL TRAILER

To show concisely how film festivals can highlight and obscure gender issues, I begin with a trailer for the 2021–2022 Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival World Tour, an event designed to encapsulate the aims and character of the festival and promote its latest curated collection of films (Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity 2021). The trailer is designed to delight and overwhelm audiences in equal measure with the wealth of material on offer. Soaring music plays as the video opens. A man in an orange nylon jacket reads his phone as urban scenes move in fast motion and social media emojis bubble around him. Suddenly the rapid images stop and we cut to the silhouette of a woman wearing a burka as she looks out at desert peaks. The alternation of fast and slow, active and passive, adventurous and contemplative continues

at a breakneck pace to the beat of furious drums and bells. Slackliners, BASE jumpers, skiers, kayakers, and paragliders perform breathtaking feats, a Tibetan woman uses a prayer wheel, and male and female bodies sweat during gym training, all timed to rhythms of the orchestral score. Briefly, there is a forest fire. Mountain bikers shred forest trails, a one-legged skier trudges up a snow slope, a man in traditional Arab dress filmed from above leaves a trail of footprints on a sand dune. A bearded white male climber grimaces as he climbs a difficult crack, and then a white male child delightedly climbs a tree as he is top-roped. A young white woman shot from below bridges a difficult chimney problem. Polynesian women in traditional skirts dance around a fire. One of them flaps her arms like a bird, and then we see a white eagle in a nest making the same movements. A deep, male voice with what could be an African or Caribbean accent tells us that “This is the Banff Mountain Festival World Tour” as a male mountain biker rides through a tight canyon, his progress dramatically lit by a red flare.

The trailer is a spectacle of equivalence in a global context, moving at a pace designed for maximum entertainment, because the montage unites Indigenous mountain people, white European athletes, adventurers, women and men, humans, a single ant, and even a couple of dogs all together in a celebration of mountain play on what looks like a spectacular, level playing field. Anyone can participate, and through film, anyone can be part of the celebration. The man in the orange jacket is supposed to be us, watching mountain films anywhere, on a phone, far from the mountains themselves. What he, and we, see is an immersive and seductive vision, meant to make us buy tickets and watch the films from which those clips came, either in a movie theater or online.

However, the trailer’s politics of gender and race in the mountains should trouble us, and we should ask why the thrilling content masks a forgetting of the inequities present in outdoor mountain pursuits. The changing pace of the images is connected to persistent ideas about gender identity and racial politics that are dependent on neo-colonial stereotypes of agency and passivity. There are approximately twenty identifiable women in the 2:57-minute trailer; I counted as many men in the first fifty seconds. Men are depicted as the masters of the environments in which they move. The ideal spectator at the beginning is male, and the voice-over is male and non-European, a way of signaling the global intent of the festival. Women do appear in the montage, but only white, fit, younger North American or European women are having adventures. Indigenous women mostly look contemplatively into the distance or participate in ceremonies involving dance or prayer, conflated with the natural world, not doing any outdoor activity that requires technical gear. Male children appear as symbols of a bright future and of innocence in the outdoors. Female children are all Indigenous and engaging in traditional activities such as dancing or drumming. There are two physically disabled people, both male.

The gender logic of the trailer, and I suggest of mountain film festivals more generally, is the logic of substitution. We are meant to identify with the man at the beginning, and we are meant to share his experiences and imagine ourselves in his place, whether we share his identity or not. The same is true for the people we see in the films doing adventurous things: It is not supposed to matter what gender they are. We can participate vicariously in what they are doing, easily, through the magic of film that takes us to scenes of difficult physical feats and exotic locations. Gender issues—and related issues to do with other types of identity and difference—are represented everywhere in the trailer. But their complex meanings are obscured too, in the name of globalism and enjoyment. Stereotypical ideas about Indigeneity, gender identity, and fit bodies are the norm, but we are not supposed to notice that. The trailer asks us only to look, enjoy, and marvel. We are not asked to question or think critically about what kinds of bodies are represented and why they appear the way they do.

MOUNTAIN FILM FESTIVALS

The trailer shows us that gender politics and accompanying ideas about neo-colonialism and the politics of race are still relatively conservative in mountain festival films shown at Banff. Banff is only one festival (although it is highly influential), but its example is instructive. The power and influence of festival culture within the economies and social worlds of mountaineering and other outdoor pursuits means that it is imperative to know the economic and political basis of such representation, and why festivals about mountains have the power to influence what audiences think about gender in the outdoors. Before looking at the work of gender in mountain festival films, it is important to understand how film festivals in general, and mountain film festivals in particular, reflect and create fan cultures, and contain within themselves sometimes complex meanings and values.

Mountain film festivals are connected in some ways to the history and development of film festivals in general. From their beginnings in the European 1920s context of film societies and clubs formed in opposition to mass-produced films like those made in Hollywood (“History of Film Festivals,” n.d.), film festivals generally have become an important aspect of global film industries, far beyond their original goal of showing films not available to mainstream audiences. Along the way, some film festivals have begun to produce films themselves. According to Dina Jordanova, “today, it has become the norm that film festivals not only show films but also engage with film production and distribution” (2015). Film festivals have therefore become part of the business of filmmaking, whether they are large industry-driven festivals such as Cannes or the Toronto International Film Festival, “identity-based festivals” created

to appeal to audiences within a specific community or nation (Valck 2016b, 3), or festivals dedicated to a certain genre, such as crime thrillers (Stringer 2008) or documentary (Vallejo & Winton 2020). Even festivals dedicated to activist causes have the potential to be places of commerce, where like-minded filmmakers meet each other, pitch ideas to producers, and learn to make films (Bowles Eagle 2021). Mountain film festivals reflect a desire to present a specific set of films to a fan base, much as identity-based festivals do. They also, like activist festivals, become occasions for people to meet who have a specific interest, and to participate in creating and nurturing a subculture. They are part of the business of providing opportunities for leisure.

Like activist film festivals, some mountain film festivals combine business aims with counter-cultural ideology. This is not as contradictory as it might seem. As the growing critical discourse on the business and culture of film festivals shows, festival cultures tend to be diverse and complex, with sometimes conflicting aims (Iordanova 2015). For instance, festivals can be business ventures made to benefit local communities and audiences as I just discussed, but these ventures have the potential to also be counter-publics for non-mainstream audiences beyond a local audience or community, professing values which may be at odds with the business of filmmaking, pitching, and distribution (Stringer 2008). Their potential for conflicting aims and their diversity leads Cynthia Hing-Yuk Wong to call festivals “loose structures with many components that allow a great deal of flexibility of production, text, and audience” (2016, 85). This is true of mountain film festivals too, as we shall see.

Regardless of their political aims or even their diversity in topics, size, and reach, film festivals tend to share two features. First, they are not merely neutral distribution systems for films, because “film festivals both *make* and *mediate* film history” (Vallejo 2020, 166). They do this because unlike commercial theaters, festival “films are not screened as part of a business undertaking, but because they are considered important or worthy to be shown ... festival screenings typically serve a cultural purpose, not an economic one” (Valck 2016a, 104). Films are curated, screened, and promoted by festivals as part of the specific culture that the festival addresses, and the festival itself helps to make that culture thrive. The aim of film festivals to *create* an audience culture is connected to their aim to *mediate* between film and audience, sometimes within a business model, and sometimes not. Second, as Iordanova points out, film festivals are “innately transnational” (2015) because of the centrality of curation and pedagogy of their structures and because many such festivals understand themselves to encourage and even create opportunities for the global art cinema market. Therefore, within the practices of global cinema, “festivals are transnational hubs, where filmmakers experience the globalization of the film industry in daily international social interactions and cultural negotiations” (Peirano 2020, 34). Many festivals have “international”

in their names to signal this kind of commitment to filmmakers, audiences, and vendors. Mountain film festivals participate in this kind of transnational community building.

However, like other kinds of documentary film festivals, mountain film festivals do a second thing, which is to convert transnationality into a very specifically curated aesthetic, designed to present films as windows into the world, and into a way of learning about different cultures. This is why it makes sense to think about mountain film festivals as part of documentary film festival systems. Documentary film festivals often understand themselves as promoters of the global in the name of what Michael Renov has called the “pleasurable learning” found in documentaries as a genre (2016, 755). Festivals devoted to documentary curate their offerings as examples of internationality or globalism, because “curating this type of cinema contributes to film festivals’ prestige as genuine international hubs that promote cultural diversity” (Peirano 2020, 35).

To encourage the kinds of films that they want to curate, documentary film festivals include significant pedagogical opportunities aimed at teaching audiences about global cinema connected to the festival’s theme, and teaching filmmakers to make the kinds of documentaries that global audiences want to see. It is unsurprising therefore that documentary film festivals feature learning opportunities for filmmakers in addition to other content. These types of events teach filmmakers from developing countries with small markets how to “be global,” that is, how to make films that film festivals want to screen, so that small market filmmakers can “learn the ways in which global cinema is produced and exchanged, and to train themselves to perform in the international market” (Peirano 2020, 36). The result of learning to be global means that filmmakers from small markets operate in a cosmopolitan filmmaking environment. The effect of this pedagogy is to make small market producers from non-Western locations fit into the expectations of Western documentary filmmaking. The pedagogy of filmmaking and curation also present in festivals have the effect of encouraging some difference, but not too much:

Despite these national and regional categories that serve to identify, promote, and lend some “exotic” flavor to these films (particularly the non-Western ones), the type of films selected by festivals is consistently a form of global art cinema, understood as a form of a somewhat delocalized, cosmopolitan “auteur cinema.” (Peirano 2020, 39)

In the case of mountaineering films, auteur cinema is not the point, but global cinema is. The need to curate “global” films encourages the screening of films that have a common look, accompanied by “exotic” features to take audiences to wild, even inaccessible locations in the name of adventure. The viewing

experience is meant to be immersive. In order to achieve this, mountain film festivals feature workshops that teach amateurs how to become filmmakers and how to be in the business of marketing films, too. The result is that films about climbing screened in festivals have many common elements, and, as we have seen in the 2020 Banff film trailer, the result can be a relatively rigid depiction of masculinity, gender issues, and Indigenous identity. It is likely that the workshops about filmmaking offered through film festivals create this common international look, and the politics which accompany it, just as they do in other kinds of documentary film festivals. As Aida Vallejo and Ezra Winton point out, documentary film festivals are organized around all aspects of making documentaries as well as watching them:

Documentary festivals play a crucial role in documentary production, curation, distribution, reception and scholarship, and therefore the study of their more recent challenges and developments is key to critically assessing contemporary documentary film. (2020, 3)

The same holds true for mountain films and their aesthetics. As a genre, documentary carries within it tension between its nonfictional intent and its aesthetics, Renov's pleasurable learning, which involves elements of recording, revealing, or preserving an aspect of reality, but also involves persuasion, analysis, and expression (2016, 744). Mountain film festivals, like other kinds of documentary film festivals, therefore have similar pedagogical and curatorial aspects to them, which have the effect of welcoming certain types of difference while encouraging the production of films that subscribe to similar aesthetics and themes—for instance, the frequent use of Kathmandu's temples in establishing shots about the Himalayas—which have the potential effect of domesticating some of that difference and relegating culture as an exotic background to nature, where the adventures are to take place. But the purpose of such domestication is different from the aims of many other documentary festivals. The intent of mountain film festivals, as we shall see, is pleasurable learning for a very specific purpose, and it is to this purpose we now turn.

PLEASURABLE LEARNING

As I said at the outset, mountain film festivals remain an important way to access films about the mountains, particularly films that are not shown in commercial theaters or on online platforms such as Netflix. Festivals are very popular with general and niche audiences worldwide, from the venerable Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival in Canada, to Telluride's MountainFilm in the United States, to festivals in the United Kingdom, Australia, Nepal, Columbia, Poland, and many other locations. In this, mountain film festivals

are both like and unlike other kinds of festivals: They share the commitment to commerce and industry, as large festivals such as TIFF and Cannes do, but most of them do not feature arthouse cinema or experimental filmmaking, and they do not tend to promote auteur cinema. How then to understand these festivals and their politics? Mountain film festivals share features with other kinds of cultural festivals, such as book festivals. Book festivals, in the words of Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, “have been analyzed as worlds, as games, as tournaments, as fields, as events, as microcosms, as situations, as institutions, as networks,” each within their commercial and cultural traditions. They are connected to what Driscoll and Squires call “serious fun,” which emphasizes the interconnectedness of leisure activities at book festivals such as listening to book talks, drinking wine and gossiping, and the business deals which take place in the same spaces (2018).

Mountain film festivals can be understood within the context of serious fun because some of them are combined with book festivals and so have much in common with them. The Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival is the best known of these, but is not the only example: The New Zealand Mountain Film and Book Festival, for instance, sees the media of film and print to have common content and runs a single event (NZ Mountain n.d.). Festivals like these are not meant to be elite, because the culture of outdoor pursuits is not allied with highbrow cultural activities such as attending art galleries, museums, theatrical performances, or poetry readings. Instead, they screen films, organize author readings and signings, and run workshops about filmmaking, writing, and photography, within what can broadly be termed a realist aesthetic emphasizing the production of nonfictional representation of mountains and outdoor pursuits.

Judging from the types of films they typically screen, mountain film festivals largely cater to an audience of people who enjoy the outdoors and want to see their lifestyle reflected or idealized in films and books, not film buffs who go to see arthouse cinema and want to see experimental films. The focus, for the most part, is on leisure, although there are environmental films too that call attention to environmental change and catastrophe. But the bulk of films screened at mainstream film festivals, as the 2020 Banff trailer shows, are meant to be fun, awe-inspiring, and uplifting. To this end, festivals have given rise to a cottage industry in creating documentary-style films about those places that can lead to the consumption of outdoor goods and mountain tourism, as well as a way to vicariously live through the activities shown on screen. They are the main arena for prizes and awards, which is another way that the culture celebrates its values and consolidates its norms. These festivals feature their own grammar of adventure, including the performance of heroism, breathtaking scenery (often, as the Banff World Tour trailer shows, with a frisson of Indigenous presence as the background to outdoor pursuits), and an allegiance

to showing action, with soundtracks to match. The commitment to leisure means that realism is paramount: Films themselves are rarely experimental and are meant to be immersive, so that audiences lose themselves in them.

For their part, the audiences of mountain film festivals constitute a subculture that identifies with what it sees on screen. Viewers turn up in mountain clothing and boots, which shows their commitment to outdoor culture. That level of commitment is the point: The films they come to see are meant to reflect and confirm the audience's lifestyle choices, sometimes expressed as values. As the quotation from David Charles Rodrigues on the welcome page for the 2022 Mountainfilm festival at Telluride states, "I love documentaries because they teach us critical thinking, but Mountainfilm takes that a step further and transforms the critical thinking into critical living" ("Festival Welcome Screen" 2014). That quotation connects mountain films to Renov's idea of documentaries as "pleasurable learning" that entertains as it teaches. Enjoyment and ethics can be imagined together in such an environment.

Mountain film festivals make a further connection to serious fun through an understanding of commerce as community responsibility. Major sponsors such as North Face or Black Diamond are central to mountain festival offerings, which, similar to other film festival events, are meant to highlight the presence of filmmakers and provide a learning and gathering space for them. These can include author presentations, and workshops that teach the basics of outdoor filmmaking, pitching, financing, project management, and distribution. In return, sponsors sell their wares at the festival in a marketplace environment, which constitutes another mix of commerce and audience enjoyment, because mountain festival attendees who are active participants in outdoor life can afford to buy expensive gear, and many celebrity outdoor athletes who appear in mountain films and books are also sponsored by these companies ("Festival Marketplace" n.d.).

In their own way, mountain film festivals provide an arena for commerce and community in a loose commitment to the idea of the public sphere, but they do so within a relatively narrowly defined distribution system regulated through the IAMF, the International Alliance for Mountain Film, which allows filmmakers to submit their films to many festivals at once. Filmmakers, the IAMF states, need to adhere to local rules, which generally govern exhibition during the festival, but not afterwards (IAMF n.d.). This is why so many films are hard to see outside of a festival. As Peirano points out, small film festivals embody the promise of a community coming together to watch films they would never normally see. Film festivals promise access and community cohesion as people sit in a darkened room to watch films connected to a common passion. But film festivals are also presentist, which means that each season brings new films, while it is difficult to see what was shown before, or to compare films to each other. There are no mountain film retrospectives,

for instance, and so the opportunity to evaluate and discuss how issues to do with inequality are represented over time is lost. It becomes difficult to assess whether the promise of community in small festivals is realized. Mountain film festivals, like other small festivals, have this problem.

Pierano calls this situation a memory loss, which means that festivals themselves “have complicated relationships with their own pasts” (2020, 171). Pierano refers here to the difficulty of conducting research on smaller film festivals, in part because films shown at the festival often cannot be seen anywhere else. This is the case with mountain film festivals too, because films screen in that eternal present, and it can lead to political problems. Festival films depend heavily on the festival circuit for distribution, a situation that the Banff World Tour program was designed to address. The World Tour allows a curated collection of films to be shown online or in other locations than Banff for a fee. *Cholitas*, for example, can be seen online as part of the “Coral Program,” which shows films from the 2020–2021 World Tour. Banff’s solution is an attempt to remedy the problem of access with a creative use of streaming technology, but problems with curation remain. The Coral Program is a list of only five films from the World Tour, and viewers do not get to choose what they see: The festival is still in control of curation and determines how the films will be related to one another. Online viewing requires a computer and internet connection capable of streaming films as well, which limits the kind of audience.

GENDER AT THE FILM FESTIVAL

What then is the role of gender in mountain film festivals and how do its films address gender? The pressures that Peirano says cause small-market filmmakers to become cosmopolitan “global” filmmakers in the industry operate here too. The insistence in mountain film festivals on a specific type of mountain globality means that hierarchies of race, class, and gender remain largely intact in the aesthetics of the films. Some films featuring women are shown, but not many. Masculinity in festival films goes unchallenged too. Mountain film festivals therefore contain normative ideas about gender that do not challenge the status quo. This situation is similar to the representation of mountaineering in many nonfictional accounts. As I have discussed elsewhere, the logic of gender politics in mountaineering nonfiction depends on Romantic ideas of corporeal sovereignty over oneself and one’s environment. These ideas privilege white male concepts of heroism and fitness in anachronistic ways, because they are claimed to be a way to connect more closely with the “natural” order of things and they ally with ideas of adventure and thrills in a way that masks their politics. A secondary logic of substitution found in representations of mountain climbers in film, painting, photography, and written accounts invites

the audience to imagine themselves as substitutes, who can take the place of the heroes we see in stories and on screen. This logic is the basis for claims that expectations for what a good or authentic climber is supposed to look like or act like do not need to change: One can simply substitute one body for another.¹ The same logic presumably structures most of the films shown at film festivals around the world, either through the International Alliance for Mount Film application process, or through the jury selection processes at individual festivals, given the relatively few films that take gender as their subject or seek to problematize the representation of gender in mountain festival films. I will turn now to two films that try to contest those rules of representation in different ways, to see how, in a festival context, films by and about women can and cannot work against the hegemony of gendered adventure.

PRETTY STRONG (2020)

Pretty Strong premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival online in 2020. It is an unusual climbing film in terms of its production and distribution, but as we shall see, its participation in the extreme sport discourse makes it relatively traditional, too. Produced by the Never Not Collective, an all-female climbing and film team, the intent of this film was to make a way for women to produce their own films in their own way. The reason is that “for decades, climbing media has fortified this scaffolding of male design. Of the 91 main segments in high-production climbing films produced before 2017, only 11 even showed a woman climbing” (Athena 2020). The male-dominated culture of climbing films motivated the collective to change that, with a “classic dosage-style film, packed with try-hard moments” in order to emphasize how capable female climbers and filmmakers are (Athena 2020). The collective therefore decided to make a film that operates on a substitutive logic, proving that women can climb as well and as hard as men can. *Boulder Weekly* calls this “an apolitical decision that’s resonated with some, and infuriated others.” Nina Williams, who is featured in the film and is part of the collective, responds that “we just needed more representation on the screen. We just needed more numbers,” adding that she considers the film to be a small first step for women in climbing that should be followed by more intersectional approaches (Athena 2020).

That production background and political orientation affect the content: The film’s opening features Collette McIrney, the lead filmmaker of the three-woman collective, who downplays her abilities and emphasizes her passion rather than her aptitude for filmmaking, claiming in the segment that she does what she loves because she is committed to climbing as a pursuit. This point is underscored during outtakes that show she is capable of making mistakes and laughing at herself (Never Not Collective 2020). The making of the film

immediately becomes part of the film's content, and women are presented as producers and not just the focus of production. The opening segment therefore establishes McIrney's humble origins as part of the climbing community to make her point: "we could use a few more climbing films about women." The seventy-four-minute film is a series of short segments about eight very strong female climbers, many of them internationally-known: Nina Williams, Katie Lambert, Daila Ojeda, Hazel Findlay, Isabelle Faus, Fernanda Rodriguez, Anna Liina Laitinen, Jessa Goebel, Alma Esteban, and Larissa Arce. *Pretty Strong* is therefore meant to be inspirational for filmmakers and climbers, to show its audience that women can do both roles as well as men can.

But the experimental nature of the film's production and distribution does not extend to its treatment of gender or other ideas about power. Most of the climbers are professional, from the United States, Spain, Mexico, Finland, and the United Kingdom—some, like Hazel Findlay or Katie Lambert, are famous. As its website description says,

Putting badass ladies front and center, this isn't a film about gender imbalance, or the sexualization of women, or what it's like to have your period at the crag ... *Pretty Strong* is a climbing film about women, by women, and for everyone. (Never Not Collective 2020)

Therefore, this is a climbing film about adventure, and not a documentary about gender. Its logic is that of substitution, where equivalence is shown as the resolution of the problem of marginalization and representation. Here the equivalence is imagined as sameness: The camera angles on the crag from above and below, shots of climbers gearing up, camping on a portaledge, or summiting are conventional—the only difference is that locations change. There are no shots, for example, of climbers at home. There is no mention of what things cost. Men appear in the film, but only in helping roles, because the film for the most part treats gender as a crux problem that has already been figured out. Everyone appears to be white. After the opening scenes, the filmmakers themselves are invisible, as they are traditionally in films of this type.

CHOLITAS (2019)

This 2019 documentary is about the "Cholita" climbers of Boliva, Aimara women who are Indigenous people in Bolivia and who do cooking and other support work for the climbing industry. The word Cholita is a derogatory term for them, and so they have, like the Cholita wrestlers and other Aimara women in non-traditional professions, reclaimed it for themselves, to prove in their own terms that they can do anything they want, including wearing their own Indigenous clothing as they pursue passions from which they were

once excluded (Leal 2018). In the film, this group of Cholita climbers (Dora Magueño, Lidia Huayllas, Cecilia Llusco, Elena Quispe, and Liita Gonzales) decides to climb Aconcagua, the highest peak on the South American continent, where they have often done support work on expeditions.

The film, which has won several mountain film festival prizes, including the Diable D'Or prize at the International Film Festival Alpin des Diablerets in Switzerland, Best Feature at the 2020 Banff Mountain Film Festival in Canada, and the 2019 Judge's Prize at the Bilbao Mendi festival in Spain, is made by Jaime Murciago and Pablo Iraburu. It has been praised for its sensitive editing, which seeks to foreground the women on and off the peak (Rivera 2020). Since the tradition of mountain films is to show women like them as exotic background, usually at the beginning of a sequence, it is a significant intervention to foreground who these women are, and to show them taking their values and their bodies into places where they are not expected to be. *Cholitas* makes extensive use of close-up shots to do this, showing the women's faces as they struggle, and celebrate at the summit (Murciago and Iraburu 2019). The filmmakers, as is common in cinema vérité, are off-camera, but this strategy is used to make the women themselves the center of the narrative as climbers, and not just as local color or a supporting cast for the "real" climbers. When one of them, Lidia, consults a fortune teller to see if the climb is going to go well, there is a close-up of her face as she reacts negatively to the fortune teller's dire prediction. We see close-ups of women crying as they say goodbye to their families, because what they are about to do is dangerous. The voices of the women are what we hear, including Dora's explanation for climbing, which includes the problems of labor and the need to provide a better life for her daughters: "I've always worked so my daughters don't suffer what I had to go through. That's the real challenge. In the mountains I forget everything. In the mountains I'm happy."

What must be said too, is that *Cholitas* participates in the circuits of globalized filmmaking, much as Peirano describes Chilean films that "go global" in an auteur-driven festival context (39). The financing of the film includes Oxfam, a world relief organization, the equipment maker La Sportiva and the Government of Navarra in Spain, a combination of corporate and non-corporate funding quite unlike the Kickstarter funding structure of *Pretty Strong* and reflective of the Indigenous and Bolivian content of the film, which a government and a major nonprofit wished to support. The filmmakers are not, however, Aymaran and are not even from Bolivia: The presskit describes Jaime Murciago as a freelance filmmaker from Spain who read about the Cholita climbers and traveled to Bolivia to film them. Pablo Iraburu is a Basque filmmaker and producer who has worked on international distribution for his films (Murciago and Iraburu 2019). *Cholitas* is about Aymaran women and it works hard to respect what is important to the climbers, but the film remains

within the aesthetics of European documentary. It uses establishing shots of the mountains, the filmmakers are invisible behind the camera, and there is heroic music. The women are shot in a heroic mode, and the film has a happy ending (they reach the summit) and a simple moral (they can do anything).

The discourse of adventure in mountain films exists in *Cholitas* in its soaring musical score and story of overcoming odds. But the film also contests the terms in which Indigenous women are usually seen in mountain films. Unlike the Banff trailer, in *Cholitas* we see the women talking on cell phones, using technical climbing equipment together, and enjoying an airplane flight. In other words, we see them being themselves in ways which do not make use of Indigenous stereotypes that assume Indigenous people only do traditional, non-technical things. We hear their voices rather than simply see them as the mute background for other adventurers. Therefore, *Cholitas* makes use of adventure discourse not as gender's substitutions, but as a way to put Aimara women in the frame as adventurers themselves, climbing Aconcagua in the style of their choosing. The formula of *Cholitas* has been successful: It won international film awards and, as mentioned previously, is part of the Banff World Tour Coral series, but part of the reason why the film circulates well is that it is a more traditionally "global" film about minority people by filmmakers who do not share a culture with their subjects. And so, like *Pretty Strong* but for different reasons, *Cholitas* is a small step for the representation of female climbers on the festival circuit, not a large one.

CONCLUSION

What then can be said about the state of festival-driven climbing films with women in them? Things are better than when Frohlick interviewed female festivalgoers, who lamented the lack of female representation. But the politics of the film festival circuit continue to contribute to the slow rate of change in mountaineering circles, where a very narrow idea of white masculine heroism persists and works to resist many kinds of difference, even as it slowly becomes more diverse. The festival distribution and audience systems mean that the discourse of adventure remains the primary way to tell stories, and that the logic of substitution, especially in films about traditional or big wall climbing, occurs at the level of style in filmmaking as well as climbing. The female bodies we see in *Pretty Strong* are strong, and so they conform to the stereotypical association of male climbing bodies with strength. Even in *Cholitas*, with its climbers occupying the center of the frame and not the exotic margins, the heroic mode is simply transferred onto the bodies of the Aimara climbers. Some climbing narratives are challenged in both films, but the discourse of adventure, performed for festival audiences, is still with us. Mountain film festivals therefore both invite and close down the possibility of difference, at

least, for now foregrounding enjoyment and adventure, while harder questions about the terms of gender representation and film production by and for women remain.

NOTE

1. For a more in-depth discussion of substitution and sovereignty, see *False Summit*, 34–40.

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PART IV

MEDIA

13. THE EVENING RAINS IN BASHAN: MOUNTAINS IN CHINESE CINEMA IN 1980

Mia Yinxing Liu

In the spring month of May in 1981, Chinese cinema announced its inaugural Golden Rooster Award (*Jinjijiang*). This brand-new triennial award, named after the zodiac animal of that year, was intended to be the authoritative voice for future Chinese cinema, judged by a jury consisting of professional filmmakers and critics. The name “golden rooster” was chosen also for its auspicious symbolism: a mascot ushering in the dawn of a new era and calling for much needed changes after the recent Cultural Revolution (officially 1966–1976) that left the nation in ruins. That year the first Golden Rooster award for the best feature film went to not one but two recipients, *Bashan yeyu* (*The Evening Rains in Bashan*, Wu Yonggang and Wu Yigong 1980) and *Tianyunshan chuanqi* (*Legends of Tianyun Mountains*, Xie Jin 1980). These two films also won in most of the other categories.¹ The award for best female actor in a leading role was given to Zhang Yu for her performance in two films: *Bashan yeyu* and *Lushan Lian* (*Romance in Lushan Mountains*, Huang Zumo 1980); the latter was undoubtedly a pop culture phenomenon and the most sensational box-office success of the era, though not a favorite of critics.² Therefore, in the first year of the new era, as the Golden Rooster crowed its premiere call, three magnificent filmic mountains loomed on the horizon of a twilight Chinese screen. They can be understood as historical heights, both offering a retrospective review of the past and proclaiming an aspirational, prospective, and new landscape for Chinese cinema. While each of the three mountains signals an exciting vision for its respective genre (melodrama, rom-com, et

cetera) and merits discussion on its own, this chapter focuses on *Bashan yeyu* as a close study of mountains in Chinese cinema. It is a film that has had little screening exposure outside of China and even less attention in English scholarship, despite the accolades from Chinese critics and audiences alike after its release. But besides the film being of undeserving obscurity, I chose *Bashan yeyu* because it is an important film in both Chinese film history and in global cinema for its original approach to cinematic landscape, especially its intermedial experiment with mountains.

The film depicts a group of passengers who become temporary roommates on a ship on its route between Chongqing in Sichuan and Yichang in Hubei, among the famous Three Gorges on the Yangtze River. Throughout the film, the mountains of Sichuan (Bashan) are persistently present on screen, either as landscape shots, or visible through the window in the interior scenes in the boat cabin, or in the background in scenes shot on the deck (Figure 13.1). The diegetic time is one day and one night amid the Cultural Revolution. A middle-aged political convict, a poet by the name of Qiushi, boards the ship accompanied by two plainclothes police officers: a shadowy old man named Li Yan, and a young woman called Liu Wenying (played by Zhang



Figure 13.1 Mountains of Sichuan in *Bashan yeyu* (1980)

Yu), barely out of her teens, in semi-military attire and zeal both typical of the Red Guards. The trio meet the rest of the passengers, an assembly of different professions and ages on their respective river voyages: Song, a sardonic young factory worker who used to be a Red Guard but has grown cynical and remorseful of his past participation in the violence; Lin, a school teacher who is frustrated because she can no longer teach literature since all classical writers have been branded as counterrevolutionary; and Guan, a Peking Opera actor who can no longer perform on stage because his old theater pieces have all been denounced as counterrevolutionary. While these professionals' talents and passions are uniformly denied by the political storms of the time, the two peasant representatives in the chamber, both female, are in utter distress and destitution: Apricot (Xinghua) is a young peasant girl on her way to fulfill a transactional marriage as she has been sold to pay off her father's debt; the old widow Granny is making this boat trip to visit the water grave of her only son, who died in the Yangtze River in the crossfire between Red Guard clans. Besides the eight passengers in the cabin, the film also includes a few of the ship's crew: the captain, the policeman, and the Party representative (who is given astonishingly little importance in this film) in the steering room, as well as the cook in the kitchen. There is also a street urchin, a mysterious orphan girl with piercingly suspicious eyes, scurrying all over the different decks on the ship in search of someone. She turns out to be the daughter of the poet. The film ends with the reunion between father and daughter, followed by their eventual liberation, sanctioned by the two convoys, aided by the crew, and blessed by all other passengers.

The capsuled time and space shared by a small set of typecast fellow travelers follows a well-tested narrative form in literature and cinema. From Guy de Maupassant's short story *Boule de Suif* (1880) to films such as *Frau im Mond* (*Woman in the Moon*, Fritz Lang, 1929), *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), and *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), this form, with great economy, provides a microcosmic view of both the societal structure and the psychological complexities of the time. The canned journey, whether it is a train on its tracks, a stagecoach between posts, or a ship from one dock to another, operates on a preset route, sliding back and forth regularly. It functions like an incision into the world, revealing its ails and problems. The small enclosed set of the film also reminds Chinese audiences of similar settings in modern stage plays such as *Chaguan* (Teahouse) by Lao She (1957) and *Leiyu* (Thunderstorm) by Cao Yu (1934), beloved masterpieces banished during the Cultural Revolution.³ Even though the film is solemn in subject matter and somber in tone, audiences were also tantalized by the familiar thrill in entertainment cinema, the suspension in a prison breakout, and the whodunit in an enclosed space. The little girl character keeps the audience in their seats: Who is she? Whom is she searching for? Will she find her father? Such an

emotional grip on the audience is a familiar trope in Chinese melodramatic cinema, reminiscent of a tried and true film narrative in 1930s Shanghai cinema, featuring an orphan searching for their family.⁴ *Bashan yeyu*'s emotional regime culminates in the last scene with a tearjerking music sequence: The little orphan sings a song, which is a secret code of her identity, known to the audience but hidden from her father. This music performance, shot with passionate zooms and cross editing, intensifies the emotional build-up for the final release in the moment of actual recognition. Therefore, the film serves as an emotional cue for two things: It activates the public memory of displacements and bereavements in the recent decade of Cultural Revolution, during which familial emotions were illegitimized and negated; it is also a cue for film memory. After decades of disruption in film productions and filmgoing experiences, it reminds Chinese audiences of popular cinematic conventions once popular but suspended in recent decades.

THE TRUE MOUNTAIN AND WATER: THE SEARCH OF LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS IN CINEMA

Since the 1920s, many Chinese filmmakers have looked to the tradition of Chinese visual arts, especially landscape paintings, for inspiration in their search for innovative modern cinematic forms. For centuries, Chinese painters regarded landscape as the most important subject. Their practice and theoretical treatises on landscape art had a profound impact on Chinese culture and society, not only as concepts in representational art but also as philosophical discourses on truth, reality, and the cosmic order to which all human activities shall be aligned. In the tradition of landscape painting, mountains are the main character, usually paired with water in the form of rivers, lakes, or ocean, and in Chinese this practice is simply called *shanshuihua* (painting of mountain and water). In his treatise on landscape art titled “Lofty Ambitions of Forests and Streams,” the master painter Guo Xi (ca. 1000–1090) wrote about the ideal of “true mountain and water” (*zhenshanshui*), or true landscape.⁵ To Guo, true landscape, with its effervescent clouds and mist varying in moments, seasons, and climates, cannot be achieved in painting by a simple definition of close observations, which are bound to be fragmentary and momentary in nature, but only by a painter who sees the whole view of the mountains from various distances, in movements, and through time. Since mountains appear differently to a beholder at each step, from each angle, and in each atmospheric instant, Guo asks, “How could a painter not familiarize himself with all of these views?” (Bush & Shih 2012). This ideal of “true landscape,” informed by a comprehensive understanding of reality, is therefore achieved by additive and composite observations. As art historian Wen Fong comments on the “additive” composition within Chinese landscape painting: “... [T]he picture unfolds

sequentially: individual elements, each a discrete image, are read on an additive basis, one by one” (Fong 1992, 73). In other words, the landscape painting ideal decries a view from a singular point with a singular vanishing point, or any singular instant of time. This mobile temporal spatiality in Chinese landscape painting, with its alluring affinity to the film medium, provides an inspirational threshold of intermedial experiments for Chinese filmmakers, including Wu Yonggang, who was trained as a painter in Shanghai before becoming a filmmaker. Wu often compared the film aesthetics in *Bashan yeyu* to those in Chinese painting (1986, 16). In a published directorial statement, Wu Yonggang states:

In *Bashan yeyu*, there is no sensational event or dramatic plot twist, nor are there a monumental hero or rousingly heroic deeds, but a group of ordinary people, good people with humanity and a sense of justice. There is no bad person. This group of people convene by serendipity on a boat. Everything that happens in one day and one night on that boat reveals their respective thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and feelings, the sum of which, evidently, shall be the subject of this film. (1986, 16)

This statement is remarkable in the explanation of intention and its proclamation against a monolithic monumentality often found in central male heroes in Chinese films. The focus on the variety of experiences and views is greatly reinforced by the film’s multilevel spatiality. Even though much of the film is set in a small cabin and the camera is rather static—rarely do we see a tracking shot—the film’s spatial design is an architecture of vision composed of ever-changing camera angles, over-the-shoulder and point-of-view shots from each character. The seemingly endless character combinations in the frame are achieved through minute changes of camera positions, which are distributed among the eight characters’ two-level bunk beds. With this perspectival complexity, the small space of one room is fully utilized. Therefore, the monolithic narrative and singular vision (based on the poet Qiushi) that is promised in the beginning of the film is dispersed and equal weight is given to the perspectives of different genders, ages, and walks of life. Unlike *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950), which negates the authority of a master narrative by pitching multiple conflicting narratives against one another, *Bashan yeyu*’s multi-point-of-view is not meant to deconstruct but to construct a history through composite experiences. Meanwhile, it also proposes a vision of a modern China where each citizen occupies their own valued position in a just society where the boundary of power is well defined and at the same time respected and executed socially and holistically.

At the beginning of the film, the poet Qiushi is the hero and the main subject for the audience. Qiushi is indeed an important figure throughout. He is the

savior, the only one who sees the attempted suicide of Apricot and jumps into the water to save her; he gives the young Red Guard the sight to see the truth that she is the real prisoner, though he is the one in handcuffs. With few exceptions, most subjective shots depict his point-of-view. The image of Qiushi in the film, down to the combed-back hairstyle and the cosmopolitan professorial attire characteristic of intellectuals in 1940s Shanghai, is modeled after that of Wen Yiduo (1899–1946), the martyred modern poet, as well as Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BCE), the ancient poet and politician. Both are from Hubei, the ancient Chu kingdom where the film takes place. Therefore, in *Qiushi* we see the official model of the ancient scholar and the modern humanist intellectual reunited and reinstated on the post-Mao screen. However, as the film progresses, the audience realizes that Qiushi does not satisfy the conventional expectations of a male lead. Some critics complained that he comes off as unconvincing and empty, as his pedantic speeches exhibit “righteous angst” not dissimilar to the heroes in the official “*yangbanxi*” (model opera) during the Cultural Revolution (Mei Dongwei 1981, 21). In contrast, the other characters, in supposedly supporting roles, have much more gravitas and texture. Each impresses the audience with their stories suggested by behavioral patterns carefully crafted and excellently acted out. (For example, the scaredy-cat Peking Opera actor ducks under his cover whenever there is a whiff in the air that any conflict might happen, suggesting a reflex developed after perennial persecution.) Indeed, the ensemble acting in supporting roles won many praises. The official note from the Golden Rooster committee sums up the jury’s opinion: “[T]his film, through its original concept and lyrical artistic style, constructs an ensemble of characters each with distinctive personalities and represents the beautiful heart of Chinese people during a given historical period.” The veteran film critic Xia Yan noted how the actors superbly used nonverbal bodily movements and facial expressions to sculpt the characters on screen (1981, 5). The actor Xu Huanshan followed suit and complimented that “their acting is cinematic, not theatrical” (Xu Huanshan 1982, 19). Perhaps we can say in painterly jargon that the supposedly main character, idealistic and mythic, is rendered void like a mountain of mist, while the ensemble of characters are portrayed with striking brushstrokes and substantial texture. It is quite symbolic that among the Golden Rooster awards that year, the best male leading role was left “vacant,” while the best actor in a supporting role was given to this ensemble of supporting actors.⁶

However, the film’s allegorical story, its reference to popular film genres, and its melodramatic emotive regime led to the criticism that it was not credible, and the story was not “real.” Critics had trouble with the uniform “goodness” of the characters: In this film, everyone is nice or eventually turns nice (Wu 1986, 20). They asked if it was an allegory of the nation, why was there not a single bad person on the boat? If there were no bad people in China, how come we suffered

through a blood-drenched ten years? These questions also stemmed from a generic confusion, as this film is difficult to place. It did not quite fit into the popular “retrospection film” or “scar film” of the time. Scar films tell the story of the recent past and aim to provide a national catharsis with a quick denunciation of the Cultural Revolution through restaging the history as Manichean battles on the silver screen. The good and evil roles are often unequivocally defined in the hope of a wholesale absolution of the nation/the audience, though at the expense of serious inquiries into the population’s massive complicities in this complex history.⁷ *Bashan yeyu* certainly does not ascribe to that Scar formula. Yet, the criticism about realism, or the lack thereof, was significant, as realism was an important movement for forward-thinking filmmakers at the time. The director Zhang Nuanxin and critic Li Tuo, in their groundbreaking article “Modernization of Chinese Film Language,” advocated “realism” in the name of Bazin as a fast track to bring Chinese cinema into the new era and abreast global cinema in the 1980s.⁸ Though their interpretation and reframing of Bazin’s long-take theory was mostly a Trojan horse to introduce a candid approach to the cinematic representation of social reality, realism, as it was defined at the time, was shorthand for an antidote to decades of deceitful practice that mandated film as a propaganda tool constructing screen realities *à la carte* to suit the Party’s political needs *du jour*. Understandably, *Bashan yeyu*’s idealized portrayal of the ship’s characters attracted suspicion from critics weary of the former manipulation of truth on screen.

To these criticisms director Wu Yonggang offered the following response, which again finds its source in Chinese landscape art theory. He wrote:

I am a humanist, I advocate writing about true humans, humans with humanity, and humanity that has been trampled during the past ten years. I believe that is realistic enough. Realism is to capture the core of life, the core of human thoughts and feelings. (1986, 86)

Here, Wu Yonggang aptly opened up the discussion of realism by questioning a documentary’s representation of reality, which to him is inevitably fragmented and not necessarily more faithful to the “core” and the truth than an allegorical fictionality based on the ideal of humanism; the true view of a mountain. His parsing in terms of documentary vs truth and fragments vs whole bears remarkable resemblance to the discussion of truth in landscape painting theory in traditional Chinese art.

MOUNTAINS ON THE YANGTZE RIVER, CINEMATIZED

While *Bashan yeyu* proposes an approach to truth and history approximating the composite view in traditional landscape art and the egalitarian



Figure 13.2 Mountains as markers of the journey along the river in *Bashan yeyu* (1980)

perspective of humanism, the film's treatment of the landscape on screen also engages traditional landscape art with a cinematic update. It begins with landscape scenes on the Yangtze River, followed by the boat sailing through the mountains of Sichuan (*bashan*) until the journey ends with the father and daughter fleeing the river into the mountains. They are all filmed from the moving ship—which constantly sails on the river, as if a tracking trolley is in perpetual motion (Figure 13.2). Therefore, even in the tense interior scenes, audiences can still see the window that the mountains outside are receding steadily, like the flow of time. In this sense, the mountains function as a watermark among all frames, an aide-memoire of the river journey's continuous progress, the progress of diegetic time and location (and of viewing time), and the momentous progress of the era.

It is easy to see the parallel between this continuous movement of landscape in the film and the traditional landscape handscroll format, as one critic astutely observed: "This film feels like a moving handscroll of ink painting, with its night rain, the fleeting cliffs outside of the heft, and the receding silhouette of the Goddess Peak" (Xie 1981, 23). In handscroll painting, a journey going up a river is an iconic subject, as seen in the famous twelfth-century painting *Up*

the River During Qingming and the numerous scrolls specifically depicting the journey on the Yangtze River. In fact, the title *Ten Thousand Miles on the Yangtze River* has been regarded as the ideal vehicle to showcase a painter's magnificent skills, like those of either the seventeenth-century painter Wang Hui or the twentieth-century painter Zhang Daqian. The handscrolls, viewed in smaller frames successively and continuously, are compositions that require continuity and mobility in views, a journey simply speaking, instead of a portrait of a single monumental mountain. "*Bashan*" in the title is indeed the plural form of the mountains of Sichuan, the anonymous mounts receding on the bank, not an arch mount like the Tai Mountain, which is often taken as the symbol of the nation.

For the shooting, the filmmakers obtained special permission from the Transportation Ministry to charter a passenger ship, *Dongfanghong* (The East is Red), and shot almost all scenes on this ship while it was in constant movement back and forth between Sichuan and Yichang on the Yangtze River.⁹ The shooting of landscapes from moving vehicles such as boats and trains was popular in early travel cinema; Jean Epstein famously called these forms of panning shot "landscape's dance," in that "through the window of a train or a ship's porthole, the world acquires a new, specifically cinematic vivacity" (1988, 237). These panning sequences animated the otherwise static mountains, provided kinetic energy to the screen even though the technology of tracking shots was yet to be available, and satiated the audience's desire for mobility and access to a virtual tour. But those looking for a cinematic landscape of attraction, to use Tom Gunning's famous phrase here, will be disappointed in watching *Bashan yeyu*. The mountains in *Bashan yeyu* display no excessive fetish in cinematic landscape; they are certainly not landscape porn. Nor are the mountains in the slightest sense seen through a tourist gaze, as the camera does not linger, and the ship keeps moving on. None of the famous scenic spots among the iconic Three Gorges, except for the Goddess Peak (which I will discuss later), are called out in the film. The cinematography adopts a rather "homely" approach, no National Geographic-style dramatic shots of wonder, even though the scenery itself still exudes marvel. Indeed, the mountains on the river are presented as rather familiar views, as if nature has become "second nature" seen from the standpoint of those who have taken so many trips on the same route that this river has become home. I would point out that it is precisely this "plain" approach to landscape where one can find the Bazinian realism that other modern filmmakers called for. While the human actors were all professionals and the narrative is allegorical, the filmmakers kept the landscape on screen extraordinarily "real." For a convict marching toward his possible death, for a mourning mother, and for all the passengers who are downtrodden in one way or another, the "plain" view of the landscape is appropriate. The Yangtze in its unbecoming brown hue therefore continues to flow, while the

mountains keep receding on the bank, unadulterated and unfiltered. There is trash in the water around the docks. In the landscape of *Bashan yeyu*, we see the faithful-to-life approach to and the respect for the natural flow that it was accused of missing.

The Yangtze water, changing and moving while Goddess Peak stands forever, is not only muddy but also treacherous. It kills. The water is the grave of the young (the young peasant son and Apricot, who attempts to kill herself), but the mountain is the haven of liberty and love, to which the poet and his daughter must flee. The film's ending is interesting in its symbolic designation of locations: The mountain is reserved for the intellectual Qiushi—only through him can the audience get off the boat and unlock an “inside” view of the mountain. The mountain is where the poet can obtain utmost freedom and humanity (as a father) while the remaining passengers, including the converted escorts and the kindhearted policeman, must remain on the ship on its predestined route going down the river. In other words, if this ship on the Yangtze River is a version of Noah's Ark, the first and perhaps only ones who found land (mountains) after the Great Deluge are the intellectuals, the victims during the past decade of the Cultural Revolution.

Bashan yeyu's treatment of mountains as a utopia for intellectuals is a cinematic update on the traditional iconography in literati art, which associates mountains with hermits of great virtue and talent. Consistent with the traditional iconography of utopia in Chinese literature and art, the route to a utopia, the haven in the mountains, begins by a river journey. The utopia in the film, the destination “mountain space of freedom,” is entered not through any generic stream but the great Yangtze River, the mother river of Chinese civilization. More importantly, in *Bashan yeyu* the utopia is far beyond the traditional literati space of personal spirituality. The film proposes that utopia can only be obtained through a new order of law, egalitarianism, and humanism, displayed on the ark on the river. Therefore, in *Bashan yeyu* it is not the intellectual as a monumental heroic figure who finds the mountains a utopia, but mountains that are identified as the intellectual space of utopia, given to the intellectual through the birthing canal of a collective benediction by other members of society, under the shared credo of humanism.¹⁰

THE GODDESS PEAK: THE PAST AND FUTURE OF CHINESE CINEMA

Though the mountains are passing by the boat as an unnamed landscape throughout the film, one particular mountain is specifically called out: the Goddess Peak (*Shennüfeng*), a famous scenic spot on the Yangtze. The Goddess Peak appears in the film at the fortieth minute, approximately at midpoint of the film, from the perspective of the brooding poet looking out on the deck in the moonlight while the boat is moving. The mountain's silhouette therefore

is a continuously changing shape against the night sky and intercut with close-ups of Qiushi's pensive gaze, accompanied by lyrical music. At the end of this sequence, the black silhouette of the Goddess Peak is replaced with a white silhouette of a human "goddess" draped in a white veil, Qiushi's deceased wife, followed by a sequence of her performance as an opera actress in Qiushi's memory. However, the first time the word *shennü* (Goddess) appears in the film is at the twenty-ninth minute, when the school teacher recites a verse supposedly written by our poet. "Every night the sleepless Goddess finds herself powerless, she can only try to part her veils." The teacher continues to ask the listening passengers in the cabin, "Isn't this beautiful? The Goddess is but a legend and a part of the culture, how come writing about her became a crime?" Therefore, we learn that the crime of Qiushi was that he wrote a poem about the Goddess, *shennü*.

To understand the significance of the Goddess Peak in this film, one must look at the filmography of the director Wu Yonggang, who was the author of the iconic Chinese film from the silent era, *The Goddess (Shennü)* (1934).

The young Wu Yonggang entered Shanghai's Tianyi Film studio and subsequently Lianhua Studio as an art director and set designer. In 1934, he was given the opportunity to direct the silent film *The Goddess*, and the film star Ruan Lingyu agreed to join as leading actress. *The Goddess*, Wu's debut directorial work, tells the story of a single mother who struggles to support her child's education through sex work. The film is now considered one of the world's masterpieces with Ruan's superb acting and Wu's deft composition, effective framing, and expressive use of light and darkness. After *The Goddess*, Wu Yonggang made the lesser-known but equally magnificent and decidedly modernist film, *Lang Tao Sha (Waves and Sands)*, (1936). In this black-and-white sound film, Wu delivered a philosophical treatise through an existentialist story of revenge, justice, greed, and survival with avant-garde techniques and minimal setting and cast: A sailor, Dragon (played by Jin Yan), kills the lover of his wife, runs away, and is hunted by a detective (played by Zhang Zhizhi, the villain pimp in the film *The Goddess*). The two, however, are accidentally stranded together on a deserted island and form a bond. One day, a ship comes into view on the horizon. The detective hits Dragon and handcuffs him to himself as he fantasizes about a great reward for this capture if rescued. However, the ship does not stop, and the film ends with the close-up of two skulls and a handcuff on the white sandy beach.

The connections between *Bashan yeyu*, *The Goddess*, and *Lang Tao Sha* are obvious. *Bashan yeyu* verbally and visually recalls *The Goddess*, the iconic work that made Wu's place in film history. In Qiushi's longing eyes *The Goddess* is remembered as a lost love. The first half of *Lang Tao Sha* is set on a ship, in which Wu Yonggang designed a multilevel perspectivism in a confined space through deft camera positioning. The second half of the film happens

on the beach, featuring the dynamic between a fugitive in cuffs and his captor. Traces of these films are displayed in *Bashan yeyu*. Made in 1980, *Bashan yeyu* therefore revisits Wu's own directorial career. However, this revisit is not a happy voyage down memory lane. Wu's career has been the tragic story of a humanist filmmaker who did not fit into existent political camps. In 1934, when *Goddess* was released, Wu was criticized for his humanism. The influential leftist critic Chenwu wrote, "The filmmaker's deep depiction ... of the human soul is by far incomparable with other shallow films in our theaters, but here is also precisely where the danger is. The director's emphasis on 'humanity' makes him prone to whitewashing or dissolving the film's social critical significance" (1993, 497). *Lang Tao Sha* attracted similar criticism and dealt a fatal blow to Wu's career. The humanist concern and the existentialist interrogation in this film were taken as an untimely and dangerous distraction, if not careless treason, during the war. Leftist critics were especially frustrated that Wu's humanist cinema would damage the momentum for societal changes that were urgently needed (Ni Lao 1936, 2). One critic worried that "after seeing the film, the audience takes home a sad sense of resignation, instead of a rage against this unjust society and a will to change" (Li Yi 1993, 497). Eventually, after the Communist takeover, *Lang Tao Sha* was singled out to be blamed for the "grave error" by the Shanghai film industry. The official Chinese film historian Cheng Jihua delivered the final say about this film: "[I]t advocates an absurd and counterrevolutionary thought, as it distorts the class struggles and national struggles and turns them into mutual vengeance based on a desire to 'survive'" (Cheng 1980, 459). This sealed *Lang Tao Sha's* fate as well as Wu Yonggang's in the subsequent decades. He was branded a rightist, deprived of the chance to work in film except a couple of opera films before he was named as "dark warrior of the 1930s" and sent to a labor camp at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. From the 1930s as a young and talented experimentalist who made *The Goddess* and *Lang Tao Sha*, the most brilliant twin peaks in Chinese film history, to 1980 as a sick old man of seventy-three when he finally had a chance to return to directing a major feature film, Wu took on *Bashan yeyu* with mixed feelings.

Bashan yeyu's river journey is therefore also Wu's own filmography. In this film, he used silent-film techniques for the acting and framing of the characters to intensify the psychological changes, techniques that won him great accolades in *The Goddess* (Lin Shan 1981, 5). Like *Lang Tao Sha*, *Bashan yeyu* is set on a ship and features the dynamic between a fugitive/prisoner and his custodian. The emblematic close-up of the handcuffs in *Bashan yeyu* is a powerful reference to the same close-up shots in *Lang Tao Sha*. Qiushi's wife, the goddess in white veil, is featured as an opera actress. Her image and her stage performance sequence are both quotations from Wu's opera films in the 1950s. In this context, the Goddess Peak on the river in *Bashan yeyu*, seen through the

point-of-view of a poet in handcuffs, is a tribute to the ambition and the quest for modernist Chinese cinema that has been rendered void by history. That quest, having started with his film *Goddess*, seems to have been a bygone illusion, as the Goddess Peak is superimposed onto the silhouette of a dead artist, a ghostly woman in white. This goddess also reminds Chinese audiences of the poetic tropes that made this stretch of mountains household imagery: In the poet Song Yu's (290–223 BCE) erotically-charged rhapsodies, *Rhapsody of Gaotang* and *Rhapsody of the Goddess*, the Goddess Peak on the Three Gorges is the site of dreams, fantasies, and sexual encounters. It is associated with a sorceress who visits men in their dreams, then leaves them forlorn when they wake up and find her gone (Song Yu 2000, 273; see also Schafer 1980, 43–48; Watson 1962, 259). In this sense, she is not unlike the alluring yet cruel life of an artist and the capricious history that Wu dealt with. On the other hand, the Goddess Peak derives her name from another myth of a goddess and her eleven sisters, who came to earth to help Great Yu the flood-tamer drain the Chinese earth after the Great Deluge and make it habitable for ordinary humans. She and her sisters became the twelve peaks on the Three Gorges and remain in petrified yet humanly form as a sentinel, helping rivermen safely through the treacherous river passage.

In 1980, two years before his death, Wu Yonggang's last film *Bashan yeyu* is truly a pinnacle of humanism, his perennial passion and simultaneous liability. While the elegiac adoration of the Goddess Peak in the middle of the film is certainly a haunting remembrance of the past, Wu also intended for the river journey to turn sharply under the benevolent Goddess Peak, to a more hopeful future. The Goddess Peak, presented through the longing look of Qiushi (and the audience), therefore, is at the same time a historiographic monument of not having been, a monument of love lost, a sentinel of humanism safeguarding the dramatic transition of history, and a prospectorial height for the future for both Chinese cinema and the Chinese nation.

CODA: MOUNTAINS ON YANGTZE RIVER

The Goddess Peak on the Yangtze River in real life survived the notorious Three Gorges Dam project and still stands today above the water, though her height has been shortened significantly by hundreds of meters. The Three Gorges Dam project, with a cost of over 20 billion USD, has been a highly controversial hydraulic construction that resulted in the forced relocation of over two million residents, not to mention the enormous impact on the ecosystem and the irrevocable loss of culture and heritage. The project found an enthusiastic supporter in Mao Zedong, who in 1956 wrote a poem about his vision: “[W]alls of stone will stand upstream to the west to hold back the clouds and rain in the Wushan Mountain, till a smooth and wide lake rises from these narrow gorges. The Goddess Peak, if the Goddess is still well there, will surely

marvel at a world so changed” (quoted in Sheldon Lu 2009, 46).¹¹ The belief that human beings can change and conquer nature is a main feature of Maoist ideology. Mao even thought of the Goddess, but he was sure that she would also agree with this grand scale alteration of nature.

Despite decades of debates and opposition, construction started in 1993 and was officially completed in 2020. During the process, the water level between Wuhan and Chongqing rose more than 500 feet, submerging 13 cities, 140 towns, 1352 villages, and 115,000 acres of prime agricultural land, as well as countless archeological sites, historical and artistic treasures. The Yangtze River today is no longer the one we see in *Bashan yeyu*.

Today’s audience will see the film differently than that of 1981. They may look for the “real” mountains and sites that once were seen from the ship in the celluloid strips taken in 1980, which are now submerged under water. And after the bloodshed in 1989 that ended the quest for democracy in Post-Mao China, Chinese intellectuals have undergone dramatic changes since its re-awakening in 1980. The humanist utopia that the father and daughter fled to, for a time seemingly accessible in real life in the 1980s, is now suspended as only a cinematic landscape from a bygone era. The audience today might be surprised by the liberty and courage the film took in its critical interrogations of history, which is rare in today’s Chinese mainstream cinema. They may ask, where have the mountains gone? The Goddess Peak, if she is still well, must indeed marvel at the world so changed, but will also wait to inspire and safeguard future passages.

NOTES

1. Among the other awards, the best playwright award was given to Ye Nan and the best music award to Gao Tian for their work on *Bashan yeyu*, the award for best cinematography was given to Xu Qi, and the award for best art director was given to Chen Shaomian and Ding Chen for their work on *Tianyunshan*. Xie Jin also won the best director award for *Tianyunshan*, a film that I have written about extensively in my book *Literati Lenses: Wenren Landscape in Chinese Cinema in the Mao Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019).
2. Since 1980, the film *Lushanlian* has continued to be routinely screened on the mountain of Lushan and is still showing there today, holding the Guinness Record for the longest first run of a film in one cinema.
3. *Teahouse* is set in a small teahouse in Beijing, while the drama of *Thunderstorm* happens in a chamber on the grand scale of a crumbling aristocratic family. Interestingly, both plays were adapted into great films in the ensuing years of the 1980s. For an account of the history of modern Chinese drama, see Chen Xiaomei, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002).
4. One of the earliest Chinese *yingxi* blockbusters, *Guer jiuzuji* (*An Orphan Rescues His Grandpa*, Zhang Shichuan, 1923), produced by Mingxing Studio in Shanghai, started this formula of an orphan reuniting with their family, followed by *Yulihun* (*The Death of Yuli*, Zhang Shichuan and Xu Hu), *Kuer ruonü* (*Miserable Son and*

Daughter, Zhang Shichuan, 1924), *Mang gu nü* (*The Blind Orphan Girl*, Zhang Shichuan, 1925), *Zimeihua* (*Twin Sisters*, Zheng Zhengqiu, 1934), *The Spring River Flows East* (Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli, 1947), and a later revival of the genre in the Taiwanese tearjerker *Mama zai ai wo yici* (*My Beloved*, Chu Huang Chen, 1988).

5. True and Real in Chinese language are interchangeable. See Guo Xi's treatise translated and collected in Susan Bush and Hsio-Yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012) and Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037–1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555–1636)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971).
6. It is also the only time in the history of Chinese cinema to date that this category has been awarded to an ensemble.
7. Scar film dominated the Chinese screen during these few years right after the Cultural Revolution. It shared the same name in literature, named after the popular novel *Scar*. While they provided a much-needed emotional release and anger-venting in public cultural space, the melodramatic Manichean structure of the narrative also provided a quick acquittal to the protean and flux agents that are accountable in the recent violence, which in turn blocked the more profound interrogation and reflection that the nation needed to engage in. See my own discussion in *Literati Lenses*.
8. Two articles that were published in 1979 in China were highly influential; one is Bai Jingsheng's "Throw Away the Crutches of Theater," calling for an independence of cinema from theater. The other was Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo's "On Modernization of Film Language," advocating for Chinese cinema to do away with theater in the perspective of world film history.
9. The film's cinematographer was Cao Weiye.
10. It is not the intention and is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a comparison between *Bashan yeyu* and the other two films. For the analysis of *Tianyunshan* in the same year, see my writing in *Literati Lenses*.
11. Mao, whose poem pictured the dam being built in the Three Gorges, was not the first to come up with the idea of a large dam on the Yangtze. Sun Yat-sen proposed a Yangtze dam project in 1912, and similar ideas were discussed from time to time during the 1920s and 1930s. But it was the CCP government that pushed through the project despite many objections. See Audrey Ronning Toppint, and Lyman P. Van Slyke (1988), *Yangtze: Nature, History, and the River*. Reading: Addison Wesley.

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14. FILM, MEMORY, AND INTERMEDIALITY: EXPLORING THE ANDES IN *LA CORDILLERA DE LOS SUEÑOS* (2019)

Michael Fuchs and Anna Marta Marini

Mountains and waterways have long been instrumental in defining international borders. Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz trace this practice to antiquity, when a variety of sources highlighted “the interest in adjusting political territories with the topography of their substratum” (2010, 51).¹ While Chile declared its independence in 1818, its constitution did not mention its territory until four years later when it was defined “by natural limits to the south, Cape Horn, to the north, the Atacama Desert, to the east, the Andes, [and] to the west, the Pacific Ocean” (Ch. 1, Art. 3). Consisting of *Nostalgia de la luz* (*Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010), *El botón de nácar* (*The Pearl Button*, 2015), and *La cordillera de los sueños* (*The Cordillera of Dreams*, 2019), Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán’s latest “trptych”—as he calls it (see, for example, Samoili 2016)—explores these geographical markers, with the exception of Cape Horn. The film series not only suggests that these geographical reference points are key to Chilean national identity, but it also reflects on cinema’s role in producing collective memory and connects human history to the Chilean landscape and geological timescales.

As its title suggests, *La cordillera de los sueños* focuses on the Andes. The film figures the mountains as unmoved and unmovable witnesses to the human drama unfolding at their feet. The mountains become vehicles that allow Guzmán to explore both his personal past and Chile’s history through interviews with painter Guillermo Muñoz, sculptors Francisco Gazitúa and Vicente Gajardo, volcanologist Alvaro Amigo, musician Javiera Parra, and

writer Jorge Baradit (in a rather exclusive line-up circumscribed to peers with whom Guzmán possibly identifies when imagining a non-exiled life). *La cordillera* practices what Isis Sadek has called “documentary archaeology” (2013, 31), a process of spatialization of collective memory through a focus on the survivors, witnesses, and documenters who experienced the unfolding of Augusto Pinochet’s repressive rule and the complex transition to a democracy that followed and was riddled with fallacies. By looking at the political history of Chile through the eyes of his interviewees and his own, Guzmán channels the reconstruction of historical memory and links it to cinema’s role in both archiving memories and producing mountains as symbolic vehicles, thereby interlacing memory, nation, and landscape.

Andrea Vidal has described Guzmán’s triptych as a “geo-trilogy of the memory,” in which historical layers are inscribed into Chilean geography and the landscape thus becomes a vast archive of memories (2020, 48). *Nostalgia de la luz* centers on the desert and integrates the collective pain produced by Pinochet’s regime into the desolation of the Atacama Desert, connecting the astronomic scale “to metaphorical images of the silenced memory” (Schürch 2013, 141) shared by the relatives of *desaparecidos*—that is, people who “disappeared” during Pinochet’s dictatorship. The unrecovered bodies of the regime’s victims—and the suspension in which their families have lived since—inhabit this vast timescale and are consigned “to nothing less than planetary memory” (Andermann 2018, loc. 4971). The film thus “contains a focus on individual testimony, the hunt for remains of the disappeared, and the need to consider how the past is archived,” while simultaneously acknowledging “the archival nature of landscape” (Martin-Jones 2013, 708). *El botón de nácar* turns to water; the Pacific Ocean in particular. Despite some 3000 miles of coastline, Chile, Guzmán muses, “denies its relationship with the ocean” (2015). This rejection of the watery world stands in stark contrast to the coastal Indigenous populations who “were one with the water” (Guzmán 2015). The film compares the genocide and forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century with how Pinochet’s regime killed between 30,000 and 40,000 people. This comparison oversimplifies historical conjunctures and carries problematic connotations by equating the experiences of Indigenous populations with the people oppressed and terminated by the regime, but the argument seems sufficiently clear: Chile’s history and Chilean identities have been shaped by mass violence and its concealment, even since before Pinochet seized power.

While the first two films of the triptych focus on the desert and the water, respectively, the Andes play a significant role in both *Nostalgia* and *El botón*. The mountains are always there—often, they occupy the background of the narrative and tower in the background of the image, a silent presence witnessing the unfolding of human and geological history. Sometimes, however,

they are foregrounded, such as when observatories, and the giant telescopes that they house, reign over their surroundings on mountaintops in *Nostalgia* (Figure 14.1) and when satellite images make visible the cordillera's north-south expanse in *El botón* (Figure 14.2).²

Although the Andes are a constant presence in *Nostalgia* and *El botón*, in *La cordillera*, they—somewhat paradoxically—simultaneously take center stage and are reduced to mere symbols, as their materiality is buried beneath various layers of semantic deposits. The film's title epitomizes this tension, as “la cordillera” might seem to highlight the Andes in their material dimensions, but “de los sueños” quickly transports the cordillera to the symbolic domain. The Andes epitomize how Guzmán “imagine[s] Chile from afar” (Guzmán 2019), demonstrating that the film is not primarily concerned with material mountains, but rather with “hallucinated material,” as sculptor Francisco Gazitúa puts it (Guzmán 2019); more than their physical presence, it is their cultural significance that matters, to paraphrase sculptor Vincent Gajardo (Guzmán 2019).

While the film projects a variety of possible meanings onto the Andes, layers of the Chilean past assume a particularly prominent role, continuing Guzmán's creative engagement with what Nelly Richard has called the “unresolved tension between recollection and forgetting” in Chilean culture (1994, 12). In *La cordillera*, the Andes embody unity and separation, repression and freedom, functioning as a geological fold that affords identity and fragments memory at the same time. Historical memory becomes inscribed into the landscape, layer



Figure 14.1 Astronomical observatories on mountaintops in *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010)



Figure 14.2 Composite illustration of the vertical pan that showcases the north-south expanse of the Andes in *El botón de nácar* (2015)

by layer, in palimpsestic fashion. As the Andes thus become semantically charged, *La cordillera* reflexively engages with how cinema produces mountains and deploys them as meaning-machines. This self-reflexive dimension, we will demonstrate, becomes particularly apparent in transitions in which Guzmán's film moves from representations of mountains in media other than film, such as paintings, to recorded motion pictures of mountains. Evoking Gilles Deleuze's notion that "every actuality surrounds itself with a fog of virtual images" (1996, 197), these intermedial circuits simultaneously render the mountains elusive, as they self-reflexively showcase that no representation can truly capture mountains, and point to their seemingly innumerable potentials of meaning, as different interpretations of the Andes are contrasted and various representations of the cordillera are visually superposed, stratifying the various possible meanings of the mountains.

GEOLOGICAL MEMORY AND HUMAN HISTORY

Patricio Guzmán is widely considered one of the key figures of New Latin American Cinema. His filmography arguably covers Chile's history of the past fifty years: His acclaimed trilogy *La batalla de Chile: La lucha de un pueblo sin armas* (*The Battle of Chile: The Struggle of an Unarmed People*, 1975–1979) documents the final days of the Allende presidency, while his more recent post-dictatorship films explore the legacies of exile and military violence as well as the systemic changes and continuations of exploitative practices brought about by neoliberalism. After being briefly detained in 1973 in the wake of Pinochet's coup, Guzmán left Chile and has since self-exiled in Europe, returning to his homeland almost exclusively to work on his films. Most of his work both explores and negotiates Chilean national identity and collective memory, echoing his personal struggles as a Chilean intellectual living abroad—and thus coping, to an extent, with the idea of having abandoned his peers.

By investigating Chile's past and present, Guzmán's films highlight the systematic processes of selective omission and their impact on collective memory that have characterized the Chilean experience of political repression. On September 11, 1973, Pinochet, then Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Army, led a group of military officers to overthrow the government and seize power. The military coup came after an extended period of social unrest and political tension, during which the majority of conflicts were addressed institutionally and within constitutional frameworks (Monsálvez Araneda 2012, 38). The dictatorial turn of Pinochet's government unfolded under the label of "republican presidency" from 1974 until 1988, when a referendum to decide on the transition to democracy led to Pinochet's eventual removal from office in 1990—he did, however, remain Commander-in-Chief of the Army until his indictment in 1998.

La cordillera attests to the difficulty that even talking about the onset of the regime implied. In the film, a volcanic eruption symbolizes the coup d'état that allowed the inception of a dictatorship.³ Guzmán's voice-over explains, "The coup was a massive earthquake that changed our lives forever. We were trapped in a giant explosion [. . .] We were millions of people who felt a type of profound fear that we had never experienced before. For years, we refused to explain to our children what had happened and what continued to happen" (Guzmán 2019). The symbolism employed in these moments combines different images: Whereas the voice-over describes the coup as an earthquake that causes an explosion (and shakes the foundations of Chilean society in the process), the images (and sounds accompanying it) liken the coup to a volcanic eruption (Figure 14.3). The seemingly contradictory verbal and visual images share the idea that a massive natural force was unleashed, suggesting the social tension that was brewing in Chile in the 1960s and early 1970s resulted in the unexpected coup. At the same time, the dust clouds emerging from the volcano endow the verbal description with a distinctly dystopian touch evocative of the realities of life during Pinochet's dictatorship.

The volcanic eruption represents the caesura in the lives of many Chileans brought by the political repression institutionalized under Pinochet's regime. State terrorism and political violence were legitimized through a complex configuration of repressive mechanisms, which resulted in the torture, abduction, tracking, threat, detention, and murder of civilians that would have been otherwise extrajudicial. In addition, the regime internalized the acceptance of systematic processes of memory erasure, suppressing historical consciousness.



Figure 14.3 A highly symbolic volcanic eruption in *La cordillera de los sueños* (2019)

The process of transitioning back to a democracy in the 1990s was then accompanied by narratives of reconciliation, which facilitated a seeming collective unwillingness to critically confront the recent past. These two dimensions coalesce in a third, which Nelly Richard has identified as “the challenge of [memory’s] pacification when today, a community divided by the trauma of homicidal violence seeks to reunite in the post-dictatorial era” (1994, 13).

In *La cordillera*, Guzmán digs into his interviewees’ personal accounts of the experience, as well as into filmmaker Pablo Salas’s film archive, to unearth the cracks through which alternatives to the official historical record surface. Guzmán follows Salas through the streets of Santiago, filming protestors engaging with questions of collective memory (such as a *desaparecidos* protest and a *Día nacional del ejecutado político* march remembering people executed during the regime) and visits him at his office, concluding, “With his recordings, today we could reconstruct the lost years of Chile’s history” (Guzmán 2019). As Salas reconstructs his personal memories and *La cordillera* incorporates historical footage of policemen attacking peaceful protestors, military invading homes, and dozens of men being held captive in the Estadio Nacional, the film hints at an interstitial history connected to “the nevertheless clandestine threads of many other artistic and cultural memories that rebelled against the ideological determinism of rationalities unified by final and totalizing truths” (Richard 1994, 14). Whereas Salas and Guzmán acknowledge that the state controlled the messages circulating in Chile, they are nevertheless committed to the idealist belief that filmic storytelling allows for the rediscovery of neglected aspects and voices as well as the reinvention of a collective memory that has been flattened by dominant narratives revolving around notions of “reconciliation.” Notably, Salas stresses that only a small fraction of what the Pinochet regime did is truly known to the public: “What others and I were able to film during the dictatorship accounts for, maybe, five percent of what the repression by the regime implied.” However, he continues, the film recordings “prove how dreadful the dictatorship was. You can imagine the rest [. . .] These video documents were produced during the dictatorship. There is no way to claim that people didn’t know” (Guzmán 2019).

Yet Guzmán also engages with his own memories and his own past in *La cordillera*. The film’s opening introduces the problem of trying to access a space of nostalgia. This process is inseparable from trying to transport the past into the present: “[N]ostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood,” Svetlana Boym has explained (2001, xv). In *La cordillera*, the Andes function as the geological projection screen for this journey into the past. In the film’s opening moments, an aerial perspective provides the audience with a view of Santiago de Chile in the foreground and the snow-covered mountains towering in the background (Figure 14.4). These images are accompanied by music that creates a



Figure 14.4 The Andes and Santiago at their feet in *La cordillera de los sueños* (2019)

pensive mood. After a smooth cut, the camera passes over the mountains, a type of imagery that is continued after the brief opening credits. As the camera hovers above the Andes, Guzmán's voice-over narration starts: "Whenever I cross the Andes, I feel like I'm reaching the land of my childhood, my land of origin. Crossing the mountains means coming to a place that's past" (Guzmán 2019). Due to his prolonged exile, the homeland he returns to is inevitably situated in the past and, thus, no longer there. Indeed, the filmmaker puts into words his struggle to cope with the fact that the Santiago he hailed from and then left, the city he remembers, can no longer be reached because it exists only in his own memory. Santiago has been transforming and, for Guzmán, the city is increasingly unlike the Santiago he used to be familiar with. His perception of his homeland is frozen in a specific moment in time, and thus Guzmán's Santiago—the locus of his childhood and youth, strictly connected to his political and intellectual experience before the coup—moves farther and farther into a distant past that can only be recreated through his narration. However, as his memorialized past-Santiago becomes distant and inadequate to keep up with the unfolding of time, Guzmán feels that he also becomes increasingly alienated from present-day Santiago: "I remember a place where I felt more at home," he laments (Guzmán 2019).

These opening moments demonstrate that Guzmán struggles with his alienation from his childhood home, on the one hand, and the process of individual and national memory-making, on the other. Guzmán is caught in the nostalgic idealization of "a youth of political and cinematographic militancy and its tragic and abrupt end with the 1973 coup," to draw on Jens Andermann's

analysis of *Nostalgia de la luz* (2018, loc. 5022). In Johannes Hofer's original coinage, "nostalgia" meant "a sad feeling arising from the burning desire to return to one's country" (1688, A3). However, as much as Guzmán may long to return to Chile—or the homeland he remembers and cherishes—when being exiled, his temporary visits to Chile reopen a wound that paradoxically further alienates him: The trauma resulting from the coup and the self-imposed exile aggravate the pain to return to a home that no longer exists, rendering his yearning unresolvable.

Discussing the larger national contexts within which Guzmán's work is embedded, Nelly Richard has explained that despite the myriad discontinuities characterizing Chile's past, the national discourse tries to "maintain the illusion that history and tradition are reconstructable continuities, despite the suddenness of their interruption" (1994, 23–24). However, she has also highlighted diverse strategies to produce (counter-)memory by embracing the ruptures and discontinuities of the Chilean past. *La cordillera* suggests that the Andes do not simply provide a gateway to the past but have rather monolithically borne witness to all the sudden political disruptions that define Chile. Guzmán hopes that the glimpses of the past, to which the cordillera provides access, will allow him to understand the present. Exploring the conflation of personal recounts, unofficial records of the dictatorship, and indescribable perceptions, Guzmán constructs the mountains as immanent witnesses to the stratification of historical violence and political repression, and the consequent erasure of related memories. As Guzmán struggles with the difference between his self-exile and Salas's decision to stay in Chile and document the widespread opposition to the regime on film, the cordillera assumes a role similar to Salas's recordings: The Andes "saw things that [the authorities] wanted to conceal from us," Guzmán (2019) muses, as the camera slowly proceeds through the clouds to approach the snow-covered mountain peaks. But whereas Salas's analog tapes will become forgotten due to technological progress and the attendant incompatibilities (lest someone digitizes the video cassettes), the Andes are here to stay, continuing to witness history unfold. The Andes, Guzmán explains earlier in the film, have nothing "revolutionary" about them. While this characteristic feature made the cordillera representative of what his generation sought to leave in the rear-view mirror when they tried to "create a new society" in the turbulent years preceding the coup (Guzmán 2019), that very same trait evokes stability and continuation in view of the revolution that actually took place in the early 1970s.

Beyond emphasizing cinema's production of history and reproduction of memories, *La cordillera* leverages the incomprehensibility of mountains to produce a counter-discourse that explores the legacy of the dictatorship whose repressive workings were based on systematic enforced disappearances and cover-ups of evidence. The silence of the mountains comes to embody the

enduring silencing of political voices, or what Macarena Gómez-Barris defines as “a particular kind of historical memory of torture and disappearance as absent in the nation, despite ample evidence to the contrary” (2012, 3). With its overwhelming and at the same time detached presence in the background of Chileans’ daily lives, the Andes embody the ineffable and seemingly static—because muddled and purposely concealed—“peeling” of the historical layers laid by the dictatorship. Tellingly, one of Guzmán’s interview partners, sculptor Vicente Gajardo, notes at one point that when you conquer a mountain in the Andes, the next one is waiting right behind it. In other words, ascending to a single mountaintop is not the end, but rather the beginning of a much longer journey, a journey that—in the context of memory—inevitably leads into the past and reveals additional layers of meaning. The frustrating impossibility to uncover the “truth”—or at least the actual workings of state terrorism—marks the Chilean quest to reconnect with one’s own memories and past.

In his discussion of the intersections between memory and truth in *La fable cinématographique (Film Fables)*, Jacques Rancière notes that “as the abundance of facts grows, so grows the sense [. . .] of ever being able to read, in the facts and their juxtaposition, the meaning of one story” (2001, 202). Grasping the meaning of the Andes is a process as complex, meandering, and riddled with obfuscated narratives as is unearthing memories of a dictatorial regime such as Pinochet’s. Guzmán collects and overlaps personal memories as a way to reconstruct the history of the coup beyond mere facts and official statistics. The interrogation of the meaning of the mountains seems inextricable from the conception of history as a perceptual horizon in which the sensory field interplays with “ideological, imaginary, mythical, practical, and symbolic fields—historical contexts and perception as reading of these contexts” (Merleau-Ponty 2015, 143). Exploring the mountains thus becomes interwoven with studying the past, which Guzmán ties to the re/construction of history through film: The director continuously juxtaposes and interlaces the production of filmed records of the dictatorship with his own medium of choice for investigating (the meaning of) mountains, rendering the correlation inextricable.

MOUNTAIN MEDIA

In his quest to understand the persistence of the mountains—always present yet nearly invisible and taken for granted—Guzmán asks his interviewees to share their insights about the cordillera. They all provide their interpretations and understandings of the mountains: The Andes are a material presence, constant and almost motherly; they provide an almost impenetrable barrier against external attacks, but at the same time, they separate Chile from the rest of the world, and they represent millions of years that passed without human presence. Nonetheless, they all conclude that, in the end, the Andes remain a

mystery, as mountains cannot really be explained. Through these complementary takes, Guzmán begins to understand that by digging into the mountains layer by layer, he may approach the past, echoing Robert Macfarlane's conclusion that spaces such as the insides of mountains hold what we bury and "wish to lose" just as much as "what we love and wish to save" (2019, 8). As the volcanologist puts it in the film: "The deeper you advance into the mountains, [. . .] the farther you go into the past" (Guzmán 2019).

As Guzmán explores the meanings of mountains, the camera repeatedly focuses on representations of mountains (that are, of course, framed by film). However, just when these images are about to convey a particular idea of what the cordillera is, the film overlays—or even returns to—cinematic renderings of mountains (see Figure 14.5 and Figure 14.6 below). These intermedial circuits, framed by film, suggest that film has more impact on shaping the public understanding of mountains than the various representations incorporated into *La cordillera*, while acknowledging that the meaning of mountains remains elusive.

Gilles Deleuze's conception of crystal images may help explain how these intermedial strategies address questions of temporality. Deleuze draws on Henri Bergson's understanding of time, of a virtual past and an actual present. Time always consists of two interrelated layers: a present that passes and a past that is preserved. Crystal images capture the particular moment when the present does not simply turn into the past, but rather when the two are momentarily indiscernible. Notably, Deleuze suggests that these crystal images are "circuits" of exchange. Discussing mirror images as "the smallest internal circuit," Deleuze explains that

the mirror image is virtual in relation to an actual character that the mirror catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a simple virtuality and pushes him out of the frame [. . .]. Distinct, but indiscernible, such are the actual and the virtual, which are ceaselessly in exchange. When the virtual image becomes actual, it is then visible and limpid, as in the mirror or the solidity of a completed crystal. But the actual image becomes virtual in its turn, referred elsewhere, invisible, opaque and dark, like a crystal just dislodged from the earth. (1985, 94–95)

Whereas Deleuze focuses on temporal implications, the intermedial overlays in *La cordillera* just as much meta-cinematically address their mediated nature—as filmic representations of mountains and other-than-filmic representations of mountains framed by film.

The first of these intermedial reflections seeks to advance Guzmán's argument that rather than ever truly seeing the Andes, the inhabitants of Santiago

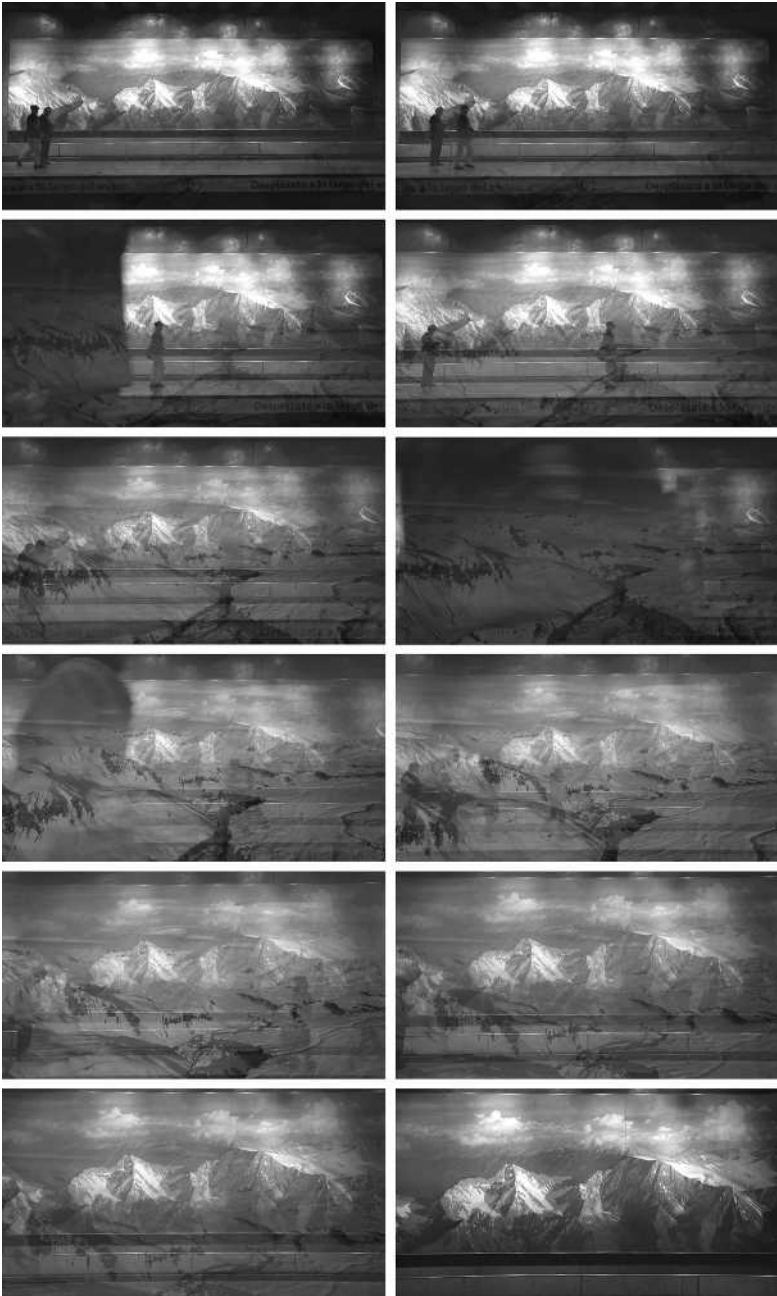


Figure 14.5 A selection of individual frames illustrating the transition from a painting of the Andes in the subway station (captured on film) to motion pictures of the Andes in *La cordillera de los sueños* (2019)

experience the cordillera through representations, notably paintings in subway stations. Accordingly, *La cordillera* introduces the setting: a crowded, bustling subway station defined by quick movement, as countless people pass by and trains constantly arrive and depart. A painting of the Andes, which is slowly revealed, contrasts with the ceaseless motion in the foreground: Seemingly immovable and frozen in time, the visual symbol evokes notions of stability in the face of perennial change. As the camera slowly zooms in on the paintings, the filmic overlay of the Andes, which slowly moves, begins to disrupt the stability of the painting (Figure 14.5), highlighting that the mountains are subject to change, not only because of geological processes but also—and primarily, the film seems to suggest—because although mountains simply are, our perceptions of them evolve.

The overlay sequence stretches over some fifteen seconds, providing a rather extended example of the crystal image. Nevertheless, these fifteen seconds render visible not simply the exchange between the two spatio-temporal and medial layers, but also that their combination produces additional dimensions of signification. As the cinematic renderings of the Andes intrude into (the filmic depiction of) the painting, a hazy quality is created, for neither layer is perfectly visible. The two layers begin to visibly influence each other, as the outlines of the painting gradually blur, while the slow fade-in of the filmic representation renders the second layer increasingly dominant: Symbolically, the past becomes overwritten by the present. Crucially, however, this sequence does not conclude with the filmic representation of the mountains, but instead returns to the painting. The resultant emphasis on painting the cordillera acknowledges the consolidated Chilean production of landscape paintings focused on the Andes, which has represented a “modern platform through which both art and the nation can be talked about” (Valdés Echeñique 2014, 117). The immensity and incomprehensibility of mountain landscapes serve as a symbolic canvas to configure the geopolitical conception of the nation, define the nation’s limits—both geographical and metaphorical—and consciously locate one’s own origin, turning the mountains into “the vessel for a Latin American expression” (Valdés Echeñique 2014, 121). As Andrés Núñez has evidenced, the cordillera has been an integral part of the hermeneutic spatial construction of the Chilean nation since its independence, helping shape a consolidated nationalist iconography supported by the fabrication of a “geographic imaginary that ‘normalized’ the meaning” of the mountain’s static presence (2014, 135). Guzmán’s work leverages the mountain space as a container of historical memory, as the Andes “cannot be alienated from a materialization of collective memory” that projects onto the cordillera its social imaginary, preoccupations, and identity (Núñez 2014, 127).

MOUNTAIN MEMORY

Guzmán's recent work has been characterized by the connection between the idea of nation and the focus on what Natalia D'Alessandro has called "macro-landscapes": The Chilean experience is shaped by geological and geographical aspects, epitomized by Guzmán's focus on monumental landscapes. The resultant "cartography of giganticness" (D'Alessandro 2022, 746) inscribes Chilean history—undergirded by the disappearance and silencing of the Chilean people—into the landscape. However, the materiality of mountains "comes to matter," too, to draw on the subtitle of an essay by Karen Barad (2003). After all, landscapes, Donald Mitchell has explained, "work" in the construction, articulation, and maintenance of identity; landscapes are not passive objects, but rather participate—symbolically and materially—in various types of social relations (2000, 91–119), as human beings are entangled with nonhuman bodies and nonhuman matter. In other words, the process of inscribing Chile's history and the Chilean national identity into the Andes is not a one-way street, for the mountains influence the country's people, too: Whether as a wall protecting Chile from outside enemies, as a natural national boundary, or as a source of valuable minerals, the Andes have shaped the Chilean people and their ways of living.

This intra-action (Barad 2007) adds to the complexity of mountains. And, indeed, in *La cordillera*, Guzmán avers that mountains elude human comprehension. One example of what we have called "intermedial circuits" above illustrates this point. When Francisco Gazitúa likens the Andes to a labyrinth that contains "traces of our ancestors" that date back 20,000 years (Guzmán 2019), the artist evokes values connected to ancestral cultures and thus spotlights human life that preceded European settler-colonialists. The visuals respond to this idea, as a map of the Andes fades into a bird's eye view of a river running through a canyon that becomes a waterfall before the images cut to a wide-open hilly landscape with the imposing mountaintops of the Andes in the background (Figure 14.6). By rejecting the containment of the landscape in the cartographic system, the film symbolically rejects the imposition of Western knowledge systems onto the Andes and, quite literally, opens up the meaning of mountains. The music evokes stately and majestic grandeur at first, but quickly becomes more reflective as the camera lingers on the mountains, inviting viewers to think about them. "Mountains [. . .] are simply there, and there they remain, their physical structures rearranged gradually over time by the forces of geology and weather, but continuing to exist over and beyond human perceptions of them," Robert Macfarlane has explained (2003, 19). At the same time, however, mountains are "products of human perception; they have been *imagined* into existence" (Macfarlane 2003, 19). The mountains thus embody notions of geoheritage and become a bio-cultural landscape,

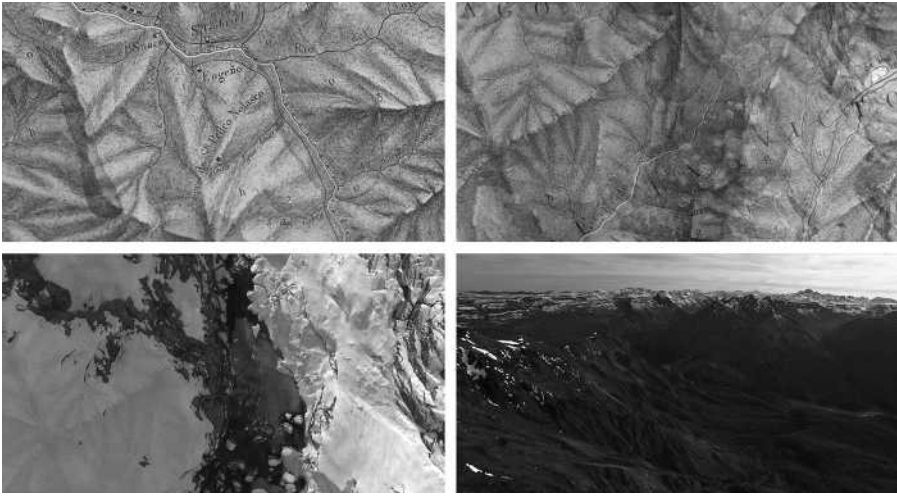


Figure 14.6 The transition from a map of the region to the Andes evokes the cartographic function of cinema in *La cordillera de los sueños* (2019)

in which “multiple forms of social appropriation of nature that establish relations of cohabitation or conflict” converge (Manríquez Tirado, Mansilla Quiñones, & Moreira Muñoz 2019, 146). Such relations are necessarily connected to the production of historical memory and a historical imaginary that can help heal (or at least confront) the wounds indicated in Guzmán’s cinematic reflections.

Cinema, as *La cordillera* stresses, plays a crucial role in shaping the public imagination. We conclude with the image of a map transforming into wide-open spaces dominated by mountains for a reason. In his book *Cartographic Cinema*, Tom Conley explains that “a film can be understood in a broad sense to be a ‘map’ that plots and colonizes the imagination of the public [. . .]. When it takes hold, a film encourages its public to think of the world in concert with its own articulation of space” (2007, loc. 50–53). Although *La cordillera* might gesture at opening up the imagination and our thinking about mountains, its depiction of the Andes often focuses on spectacular images of mountains made possible by human technologies, while the mountains’ discursive function is first and foremost reduced to that of a symbol. Indeed, although *La cordillera* critiques how metropolitans, in particular, ignore the ever-present mountains (“[I]n Santiago, many people only see the cordillera when taking the subway,” Guzmán laments at one point [2019]), the film does, likewise, not really see the Andes, reducing them to gateways and symbols in Guzmán’s exploration of Chile’s past and present.

NOTES

1. All translations of sources in languages other than English are by the authors of this chapter.
2. Four of the five highest permanent astronomical observatories on the planet are located in the Andes, three of them in Chile.
3. A major volcanic belt accompanies the Andes from north to south. The vast majority of Chile's 6000m peaks are either of volcanic origin or volcanoes, including Ojos del Salado, the highest volcano on the planet.

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15. LIBERATING THE CAPTURED IMAGE: BERGFILM LEGACIES AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN *FREE SOLO* (2018) AND *THE ALPINIST* (2021)

Seth Peabody

Discussions of mountain films have long talked about “capturing” or “chasing” elusive images; as discussed below, this discourse surrounds the alpine films of the 1920s no less than the nature films and adventure documentaries of today. The present chapter explores implications of the language of the “chase” that lead to intriguing tensions with regards to mountain films. It begins by reviewing discussions of tensions between reality and representation, and between authenticity and technology, with regards to both the broader category of documentary film and the specific genre of mountain film. Exploring these complexities through readings of *Free Solo* (Jimmy Chin & Elizabeth Vasarhelyi, 2018) and *The Alpinist* (Peter Mortimer & Nick Rosen, 2021), the chapter argues that entanglements of physical landscapes, athletic challenges, and technological mediation have been central to claims of authenticity within mountain films since the advent of the genre, but digital technologies have intensified these entanglements and rendered them newly visible.

Chasing weather windows, chasing light, chasing the perfect alpine image: These tropes recur throughout statements around classic mountain films of the 1920s and 1930s. Sepp Allgeier, a prominent cameraman for these films, titled his 1931 autobiography *Die Jagd nach dem Bild* (The Hunt for the Image). Similarly, in Leni Riefenstahl’s 1933 memoir about her work as an actress in Arnold Fanck’s mountain films (before she gained notoriety as a director of propaganda features for the Nazi regime), she describes the process of “chasing down images like hunters” (Peabody 2020, 225). These examples

from nearly a century ago illustrate that, from the beginning of the genre, mountain filmmakers have portrayed themselves as pursuers of elusive subjects. An important foundation to the notion of chasing an image or event is that the event is real and intact. It is not faked and has been captured after a fair hunt. For documentary film, and for the specific case of mountain film, this implication has always been fraught. As Patricia Aufderheide notes, “the genre of documentary always has two crucial elements that are in tension: representation, and reality. Their makers manipulate and distort reality like all filmmakers, but they still make a claim for making a truthful representation of reality” (Aufderheide 2007, 9–10). Aufderheide does not explicitly discuss mountain films, but they might be seen as a particularly apt case for her point. In another, similarly framed introduction to documentary film, Paul Ward discusses the reenactments in the mountaineering documentary *Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, 2003) as a case study for the interplay between seemingly authentic historical material, in the form of interviews, and reconstructed video content: “[T]he evidentiary status of the testimony ‘anchors’ the re-enacted scenes” (Ward 2005, 53). This relatively recent alpine film exemplifies the blend of creativity and documentation that marks the documentary genre.

In fact, long before *Touching the Void*, mountain films served as prime examples of this fundamental tension within documentary and semi-documentary films. The opening intertitles in *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, Arnold Fanck, 1926) state,

The well-known sportsmen who participated in the making of *The Holy Mountain* ask the audience not to mistake their performances for trick photography. All shots taken outdoors were actually made in the mountains, in the most beautiful parts of the Alps . . . The big ski race is performed by German, Norwegian and Austrian master skiers . . . The screenplay to this motion picture was inspired by actual events.

Beyond the emphasis on the authentic landscapes and expert athletes, the linguistic repetition of “actually” or “actual” makes clear that the idea of authenticity is an overdetermined signifier within the film. Director Arnold Fanck reiterated this defense of the reality content of his films with regards to later productions as well, for example in his letter responding to a review that had questioned the mountaineering scenes in his 1929 film *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Pitz Palu*) (Fanck 1997, 146–49). At the same time, Fanck responded to critical commentary regarding a film’s supposed deviations from reality by asserting that “a film is not there to render reality, but rather to yield art, which is to say the diametric opposite of reality” (Fanck 1997, 154). Fanck, the pioneering director of the mountain film genre, simultaneously emphasized the authenticity of his landscapes and insisted on the status of his

films as art rather than reality. While most of Fanck's films comprised major productions that featured melodramatic plots as well as expert mountaineering sequences, similar tensions arise in recent mountaineering documentaries. As seen in *Touching the Void*—and again in the recent films discussed below—the technical challenges and remote locations involved in mountaineering documentaries often make it impossible to film the initial event, so that reenactments, repeated ascents, or computer-generated graphic animations are used.

In their discourse of authenticity, mountain films portray their use of film-making technology as a process that yields a closer view of reality. Martin Heidegger offers a pertinent discussion of reality, observation, and science being intertwined: Reality (*Wirklichkeit*) is a process of perception or observation (*Betrachten*), in that both are formed through active processes within the perceiving subject. In other words, the scientist engages in “an entrapping and securing refining of the real,” leading to a representation of nature that can be experimented upon—or used for a desired effect within the editing and montage practices of creating a film (Heidegger 1977, 167; cf. Lovitt 1977, xxvii). Seen in this way, reality is a construct that arises through deliberate work using material made available through tools of observation. These issues have been complicated further with the advent of digital film and ensuing debates regarding the status of the digital image. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, theorists of new media argued that digital images based on numerical data comprised a fundamental change in the art of film, since its former indexical connection to the filmed object was replaced by infinitely manipulable data. Formerly “the art of the index” (Manovich 1999, 174), cinema seemed to have become “the art of synthesizing imaginary worlds” (Rodowick 2007, 86–87). However, subsequent assessments questioned these assertions, pointing out that photographs were manipulated long before they were digital and that indexicality need not be at odds with numerical storage of data (Gunning 2008, 24–27). Tom Gunning elaborates that the “playfulness celebrated in the digital revolution remains parasitic on the initial claim of accuracy contained in some uses of photography” (27). In recent climbing documentaries, this process pushes in multiple directions: Of course, viewers might wonder to what extent the filmmakers enabled or altered the events they depict. At the same time, viewers are part of a media ecology that provides visibility, marketability, and therefore, funding that makes the climbs possible (See, for example, the culture of mountain film festivals, discussed by Julie Rak in Chapter 12 of this volume). Meanwhile, small digital cameras that are mounted on helmets, or integrated into smartphones, seem to offer an escape from the trappings of traditional technology, allowing a climb to be recorded without offending the climber's minimalist or romantic sensibilities that would take issue with a more visible array of filmmaking equipment. Digital film allows both the viewer and the subject of the film to subscribe to a “truth claim” (Gunning

2008, 24)—harkening back to Fanck’s assertions of authenticity in his 1920s mountain films—that asserts they are engaging with an event that has been captured in the wild, minimally mediated, neither faked nor manipulated.

Recent mountain films inherit the legacy of the *Bergfilm* with regards to its landscapes and its discourse of capturing them authentically, while raising new questions that test or extend the genre’s limits with regards to both impact and authenticity. In *Free Solo*, a 2018 film about an attempt by professional climber Alex Honnold to scale a 3000-foot vertical cliff without the protection of ropes, the filmmakers reflect at length on the impacts they might have on Honnold’s climb and are aware of the high stakes with regards to his safety. But at crucial moments, precisely when the filmmakers seem to disappear from view, new kinds of impact and mediation emerge that warrant closer attention. In *The Alpinist*, a film shot before *Free Solo* but not released until 2021, a different problem emerges, in that the filmmakers find themselves trying to chase down a subject, the Canadian alpinist Marc-André Leclerc, who often eludes their attempts at direct visual documentation. As a result, other media must stand in for footage of Leclerc’s climbs. In both films, digital technology yields important aesthetic effects. Sean Cubitt (2013) has argued that in environmental films, data visualization, as in *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) stands in opposition to environmental imagery, exemplified by *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004). At crucial moments in *Free Solo* and *The Alpinist*, however, this opposition dissolves: Visual representations of the physical world merge with data visualizations and digital graphic design in a configuration that I describe as the data-image. In these moments, the films do not chase natural subjects, but rather synthesize imaginary worlds, and thus render visible complex environmental, social, and infrastructural systems that stand behind seemingly unmediated experiences. While a nostalgic view of cinema as a formerly indexical medium might reinforce the romantic self-image of climbing culture, the overt technological mediation of these films metonymically emphasizes the economic and technological systems upon which contemporary climbing relies.

The 2018 documentary *Free Solo* centers around a single event about which the filmmakers express significant misgivings: Alex Honnold’s free solo climb of the 3000-foot granite cliff El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. The filmmakers reflect on the inevitability that the filmmaking process somehow impacts the course of events captured on screen. However, their reflections rarely extend to the status of the (digital) filmic medium, or to visibility as such. I propose that technologically mediated visibility is central to the film’s impact. *Free Solo* opens with a series of shots showing Honnold climbing without ropes, juxtaposed with clips from interviews about the inherent risk

of death involved in free solo climbing. The primary elements introduced in this opening sequence—spectacular climbing and extreme risk—have been discussed in many reviews and critiques of the film, but one interview raises an intriguing issue that has received much less attention. Honnold responds to a question regarding risk by stating that he does not take risks recklessly. He prepares obsessively and methodically; indeed, this process of meticulous preparation is the focus of the vast majority of *Free Solo*. But he then acknowledges a potential problem: “Maybe I’m too close to it and I can’t tell that I’m speeding towards a cliff.” Maybe, he suggests, he is unable to see the risk clearly because of his limited perspective. The pronoun “it” is suggestively unclear in Honnold’s statement, calling to mind his physical proximity to the specific section of rock he is climbing at a given moment, but also implying the much larger physical referent of an entire wall thousands of feet tall, as well as the psychological context of being continually immersed in the high-risk environment of a career built around free solo climbing.

Soon after, the film’s title sequence sheds light on how the documentary might respond to Honnold’s stated problem of being “too close.” Just before the title screen, the main setting for the film is established through an aerial shot looking down at Honnold’s van on the road to Yosemite, and then the image cuts to a series of shots showing Honnold driving and the landscape seen from his van. He declares, “I’m aiming towards the most beautiful valley on earth.” With the celebratory but generic adjective “beautiful,” the film introduces Yosemite as a visual spectacle. Honnold then describes his childhood memories of the park: “[W]e’d sit on these slabs above Tunnel View, which is, like, the most epic view of Yosemite.” He continues: “As soon as you see El Cap it’s like, ‘Oh, there it is, pretty exciting!’” The word “view” is repeated and the act of *seeing* the mountain is emphasized, but the viewer has still not seen the granite face of El Capitan, and at the moment when Honnold says “as soon as you see El Cap,” the opposite occurs: The screen goes dark as the van enters a tunnel; only a faint point of light can be seen just below the center of the screen, promising the view that Honnold has just described. But this promise is never fulfilled. Instead, a quick dissolve shifts from the darkness of the tunnel to an aerial view of the cliff face. The light at the end of the tunnel is aligned with a lighter-toned vertical stripe on the granite face, so that it might be described as a match dissolve between the almost-uniform darkness of the tunnel and the slightly varied rock surface of the cliff. The visual match draws attention to the fact that the darkness is answered not by the light of day, but by a technologically mediated perspective, a view from the sky, thousands of feet above the valley floor. As the aerial shot of the cliff face continues for several seconds, the camera seems to move downward and away from the rock face, so that it transitions from a high-angle shot looking down on the cliff to a horizontal shot looking at the mountain head-on. Honnold’s problem of being

“too close” seems to be solved through the support of massive travel and data infrastructure provided to film his climb: The image from a helicopter, plus 3D imaging using data from Google Earth, provide the needed perspective.

The transformation of the image continues once the whole cliff is in view. A hand-drawn line showing Honnold’s climbing route is superimposed over the cliff face. Then, as the camera seems to continue tracking away, the bold letters of the movie title come into view in front of the cliff: Digitized special effects transform the mountain into a cinematic spectacle. Finally, in the two seconds before the title screen fades to black, a last element of multimedia image manipulation appears. On the edges of the screen, in the dark spaces outside the lighter form of the granite wall, we see notes about the climb from Honnold’s handwritten journals (Figure 15.1).

The motif of the journal becomes increasingly prominent throughout the film. During a training trip to Morocco, Honnold and his training partner Tommy Caldwell are shown in their hotel room after a day of climbing, Honnold writing in his journal, while Caldwell has a laptop open in front of him. Caldwell asks Honnold to read his journal entry for the day, and Honnold responds by reading a few fragmentary comments about climbing and the actions he needs to take to improve his training. As Caldwell bemusedly points out, there is nothing personal or emotional, only technical notes about how to scale a wall. The journal excerpt defies Caldwell’s genre expectations, since the entries have the objective and pragmatic tone of an instruction manual rather than the more personal tone he expects from a diary. Recent scholarly discussions regarding diaries are informative here: Philippe Lejeune writes that journals can take various forms; the date and series of entries are the defining elements. He defines a diary simply



Figure 15.1 Opening title of *Free Solo* (2018)

as “a series of dated traces,” and with this definition in mind, Honnold’s notes certainly fit the genre (Lejeune 2009, 176). Building on Lejeune, other scholars have noted that diaries “are repetitive, rough, elliptical—in short, they are not for us” (Rak 2009, 20). Memoirs and autobiographies constitute “forms of social communication”; in contrast, “diaries are better described as forms of personal reflections that do not include a pact with a reader” (Quendler 2013, 341). Rather than provide a compelling emotional narrative for an outsider, Honnold’s journals serve the intent of their own author, frustrating though it may be for Caldwell and the film viewer.

Later, when still images are shown of family photos or magazine covers featuring headlines about Honnold’s climbing feats, pages from his journal are seen in the background as digital wallpaper. When the film shows Honnold’s training nearing its peak, the visuals present a montage of short clips from his training routine while the soundtrack is an extended voice-over of Honnold reading from his journals, likely the longest sample of continuous speech from Honnold during the entire film. At first glance, the repeated emphasis on the journal seems to highlight his low-tech approach (an aspect seen most starkly in the contrast to Caldwell’s laptop), but by repeatedly introducing it as the background to so many different parts of the film, a new emphasis emerges: The journal is one piece of technology among many; the simplicity or purity of Honnold’s climbing is tethered to the complexity that surrounds him. The journal becomes the “unremarkable” and “naturalized background” that provides “connective tissue” for the various aspects of Honnold’s life as a climber, aligning with the way infrastructure studies scholar Paul Edwards describes the functions of infrastructures in modern societies (Edwards 2003, 185). The journal is a crucial part of the information infrastructure of Honnold’s climbing. It is the place where all of the technical information about the climb comes together, just as the filmic medium is where the broader set of technologies and support personnel (ranging from the park roads, retrofitted vans, supportive family members, and international hotels that enable Honnold’s lifestyle, to the ropes, carabiners, cameras, and training partners that support his climbing) become visible. Following the notion of “media materiality” promoted by Jussi Parikka (2015, 139), all of this belongs to the materiality of *Free Solo*.

BigStar, the graphics company responsible for the visual design of *Free Solo*, states on its website blurb about the film that it “worked with Google Imagery to create a pixel-by-pixel rendering of the exact image of El Cap’s structure. Through this partnership, we were able to zoom in extremely close to our model of the mountain and maintain the most finite details—as well as scale back wide enough to show the enormity of El Cap in relation to Alex’s location” (“Ascent: Free Solo”). In addition to the digitized landscape data from Google Earth, BigStar highlights its use of Honnold’s journals as a visual leitmotif, underscoring the importance of basic information infrastructures

and technologies alongside digital graphics. The importance of this digital design work is emphasized in the fact that Google Earth and BigStar are the final two names shown in the production credits at the end of the film, superimposed over an image of El Capitan, just before the image disappears and the remaining credits roll over a blank screen. While Rodowick asserts that an electronic image “never displays a spatial or a temporal whole” due to the abstract mathematical rendering of the image as data (Rodowick 2007, 138), the hybrid data-image finds new, and in fact more complete, ways to make the whole visible. Or, speaking with Friedrich Kittler, using digitized data, “any medium can be translated into any other. With numbers, everything goes,”—and yet, “there are still media; there is still entertainment” (Kittler 1999, 2). In contrast to Lev Manovich’s claim that digital cinema “is no longer an indexical media technology” but an infinitely manipulable form of animation, thus emphasizing the “anything goes” side of Kittler’s dichotomy (Manovich 1999, 175), Gunning insists not only that “there are still media,” but that in fact not much is new about them: Photographic media have always been manipulated, and many important indexical media have always been numerical (Gunning 2008). These perspectives on digital media help contextualize the observation regarding *Free Solo* that, despite the hyper-mediation of the digital image, the product is still, more than ever, recognizable as a representation of the real.

The final credits, similar to the opening shots of Yosemite, emphasize that the film is not only a celebration of a single daring climber, but also a cinematic exploration of a dense set of infrastructures that underlie the climb. In numerous interviews, Chin and Vasarhelyi describe the immense labor and expertise required to prepare for the event, on the part of the camera team as well as Honnold. The result is what Joseph Taylor describes as “calculated spectacle” (Taylor 2020, 373). Moreover, as James Lucas points out, “Honnold has used the film crews not only to advance his career but also to help with logistics—and they’ve been there to bail him out in a pinch”—including the descent from his aborted first attempt to free solo El Capitan in November 2016 (Lucas 2022). The filmmakers do not merely capture an independent event, they provide the financial and logistical infrastructure to make the event possible. Despite the film’s title, and although the film has been accused of rehearsing familiar and anachronistic tropes of “man against nature” (e.g. Graves 2019), *Free Solo* is never a vision of an individual struggling against pristine nature. From the extreme close-ups of handholds smoothed over and marked by the chalk of prior climbers; to the dozen cameras around, above, and below the wall and the expert operators and climbers working with them; to the repeated glimpses into Honnold’s obsessive notes; to the digital graphics that bring it all together: The film is precisely about the infrastructures of mobility and visibility that undergird both the climb and the film itself. It presents a reverse of the “digital multitude” that Kristen Whissel has described as an effect that

provides thrill and triggers astonishment while serving as a visual tool “to interrogate the relationship of the individual to the collective and to dramatize the perils of fragmentation and isolation” (Whissel 2010, 109). Here, Honnold is alone on the wall, seemingly in the flesh, but surrounded by a digitized 3D image of the landscape. It is a vision of digital solitude. The solo climber, supported by the work of the multitude, plods upward as the entire world around him is digitized.

The Alpinist was filmed largely before *Free Solo* but released after; in fact, the act of waiting is key for the film. Whereas the digital image in *Free Solo* navigates tensions of scale, mediating between the immensity of an object and the desire to view an event involving that object in minute detail, *The Alpinist* uses visual technology to navigate tensions of time and access. The film subjects its viewers to a struggle between what should (according to the rules that govern climbing documentaries) be seen and the footage that the filmmakers are able to capture. Moreover, in *The Alpinist*, the relation between film technology and the event it seeks to capture pushes in a different direction than in *Free Solo*: While the latter focuses on climbing without a rope yet makes no secret about the infrastructure of experts and sponsors that support Honnold’s climbs (even if it leaves out the explicit moment when the film team aided his descent), the former presents its subject as “a man out of his own time,” a climber supposedly adhering to romantic notions of adventure who is out of place in the technology-driven modern world. Through this discourse of romantic rejection of modernity and technology, *The Alpinist* offers a new take on the “dialectic of romanticism” (Coeckelbergh 2017, 3) that has marked the *Bergfilm* since the genre’s inception a century ago. And yet, from the outset, the film foregrounds its reliance on digital technology to fill the gaps between what exists and what can be seen. The filmmakers make no secret of the fact that they are chasing Leclerc through a digital world.

The Alpinist begins with a voice-over while the opening credits are still showing on a black screen. The voice of Tim Ferriss is heard at the beginning of an episode from his hit podcast, “The Tim Ferriss Show,” introducing “one of the most recognized climbers in the world, Alex Honnold.” Ferriss asks Honnold who impresses him, and Honnold replies: “This kid Marc-André Leclerc.” Honnold describes him as being “so under the radar” that very few people know about him. When Ferriss promises to add video links to his podcast website, Honnold interjects: “[T]hrough one of the interesting things with Marc-André is that I don’t know if there, like, is video of most of the stuff he’s doing . . . yeah, I mean, he’s just going out and climbing for himself in such a pure style . . . it’s, um, it’s pretty full-on.”

This opening interview, in multiple ways, highlights the film's structuring tensions between immediacy and mediation, visibility and disappearance. Honnold serves as the totemic voice of authority on high-risk climbing; he is not seen, but is introduced by name, and his voice is readily identifiable to the audience, since both the steady, low, slightly monotone sound and the prosody marked by frequent informal pauses are familiar to viewers of *Free Solo*, which likewise features an interviewer's brief description of Honnold as its first moment of dialogue. Since *Free Solo* was released three years before *The Alpinist*, Honnold's voice carries authority regarding the "pure" and "full-on" qualities that he diagnoses in Leclerc's climbing. At the same time, the opening foregrounds multiple problems that will plague this film. Honnold's voice holds authority for the viewers that it would not have carried when the interview was recorded. His interview on "The Tim Ferriss Show" was released in May of 2016, more than a year before his successful climb of El Capitan and almost two and a half years before *Free Solo* was released. Among those familiar with high-profile climbers, he was very well known, but he had nowhere near the profile that he had attained through the Oscar-winning film by the time *The Alpinist* was released. In a review of *The Alpinist* for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Daniel Fienberg complains of moments in which "the filmmakers are being cagey, leaving out dates and chronology, preventing us from knowing when various talking heads were being filmed," resulting in an "amorphous mythologizing" (Fienberg 2021). This is certainly true of the opening interview, in which the myth of Marc-André Leclerc is founded on a statement from the climbing (and film) star Alex Honnold, yet one made before Honnold had achieved true stardom. But the film does not hide this fact; instead, I argue that the Honnold interview emphasizes precisely the necessity to use the visual, aural, and chronological manipulation offered by cinematic technology to render visible a story that does not want to be seen.

The opening visuals likewise simultaneously celebrate the film's protagonist and raise doubts regarding his status as a filmed subject. Honnold's voice is first heard over the black screen of the opening credits: The film begins by withholding views of its eponymous hero. After the question, "Who impresses you right now?," the dark screen cuts to an extreme long shot of a jagged mountain peak in winter, seen in an aerial view that gradually approaches the mountain. The visuals seem to appear in response to the expectation raised by Ferriss's question. Still, the impressive aerial shots continue to be juxtaposed with the theme of not-seeing. While Honnold is voicing doubts regarding the availability of videos in response to Ferriss's promise to post video clips of Leclerc on his website, the film's visuals show footage from a helicopter that has now closed in on the mountain and is circling around the peak. During the exact sentence when Honnold declares that video may not be available, Leclerc is first seen clinging to a vertical spire. In other words, the first video

of Leclerc climbing is seen precisely as the availability of visual evidence is called into question. The beginning of the film is a deliberate montage and juxtaposition of sounds and images: The audio was recorded five years before the film's release; the video was shot later, but still multiple years before the film was shown to audiences. This contradictory mixture can be read as a deliberate foregrounding of a problem that is central to the film. In a review for *Climbing* magazine, Francis Sanzaro asserts that the opening climb (on Mt. Slesse in British Columbia) "sets a high bar cinematographically, but it's also the meta commentary on what, and who, you are about to learn about" (Sanzaro 2021). The overt "meta commentary" Sanzaro refers to involves the risk and reclusiveness of Leclerc's climbing, but the opening sequence also gestures toward the fraught process of weaving the available materials together into a coherent film.

The choice to use Honnold's interview in the opening sequence suggests to the viewer that the high bar set by these opening shots might not be sustained as the film goes on. Instead, as the next sequence makes clear, data and image will be cobbled together. The very next scene after the shots of Leclerc climbing shows director Peter Mortimer and his collaborators looking at their footage on computer screens. Later, in a sequence midway through the film that is mentioned in nearly all of the film's reviews, Leclerc disappears from view. While he is away climbing in remote locations, the filmmakers frantically try to make contact with him and piece together a sense of his activities from fragmentary posts and images on social media. Once again, rather than showing Leclerc climbing, the film shows the filmmakers engaging with digital media technologies. While Leclerc's absence in this sequence might seem like the opposite of the "full-on" presence that Honnold initially describes, both the opening sequence and Leclerc's disappearance from view in the middle of the film emphasize the filmmakers' balancing act as they navigate various image sources and options for stitching together a visual story.

The climbing episode that functions as the film's climax, in which Leclerc completes a solo winter ascent of Torre Egger in Patagonia, follows this same pattern of visually representing a climb despite lack of access to Leclerc's climbing. In Leclerc's first attempt of the ascent, cameraman and climbing partner Austin Siadak climbs with him on the first half of the mountain, and a number of shots display Leclerc traversing rock faces thousands of feet above the valley. But from the outset, the plan is for Leclerc to complete the climb by himself, without Siadak, and as a result, during the final phases of the climb (and during the dangerous descent after he abandons the climb due to the onset of a blizzard), the film offers only a few selfie videos or shots from a helmet camera. In his second, successful summit attempt, Leclerc climbs by himself with minimal gear in order to maximize his efficiency and speed. This time he does reach the summit, but the viewer sees almost nothing of the



Figure 15.2 Torre Egger in *The Alpinist* (2021)

climb. Leclerc begins in the dark; the viewer sees only his silhouette against the pool of light from his headlamp. As Siadak leaves him at the base of the mountain with a shout of “Good luck, Marc!,” he is in essence bidding farewell not only to Leclerc but also to the visual traces of his ascent. Thereafter, Leclerc’s progress up the mountain is depicted by a computer-generated animation showing his location as a dot of light rising up a three-dimensional graphic rendering of the mountain (Figure 15.2), somewhat similar to the graphic effects depicting Honnold’s climb in *Free Solo*, interjected with two brief selfie videos that Leclerc takes at breaks during his climb and a final short video on the summit. Very little is seen of Leclerc, and nothing is seen of him climbing.

Throughout *The Alpinist*, the filmmakers’ challenge is to gather whatever video they are able to capture, audio clips that provide narrative and explanatory content, and computer-generated images that augment the captured footage with digital data, and then curate, stitch together, and synthesize the disconnected and sometimes meager elements into a seemingly complete and coherent whole. The fact that this process can succeed reveals a core contradiction in Leclerc’s image as a “romantic” (Wollaston 2021, Sanzaro 2021), described in the film as “a man out of his time,” who frustrates camera teams’ attempts to film him and who refuses to carry a cell phone. Despite his seeming refusal of the technologies and infrastructures of visibility, his position is remarkable in large part because he is so fully surrounded by these technologies. Like Honnold, he relies on sponsorships and functions, his reluctance notwithstanding, within systems of technological visibility that make them

possible. The Arc'teryx and Black Diamond logos of his equipment are visible even in the scant footage of his Torre Egger ascent. In the final episode of the film, the film's viewers—and Leclerc's loved ones—are granted one final video thanks to his cell phone reception on a mountaintop in Alaska.

In *Free Solo*, the hybrid data-image renders something visible that is too massive to be visually digested without technological mediation, while also providing the details and emotional impacts that result from getting in close. In *The Alpinist*, the hybrid data-image has a more modest goal: It is only thanks to digital visuality that anything resembling a film about Leclerc is possible. The final sequence of the film presents two images of Leclerc that the filmmakers seem to have been seeking throughout: The first shows Leclerc submitting a snowcapped mountain, with helicopter shots circling away to show the entire peak within the panorama of the surrounding mountains, as the individual figure of Leclerc appears ever smaller amidst the grandiose landscape. The triumphant visuals and rising music feel like a conclusion, but it is actually a return to the beginning: It is the continuation of the Mt. Slesse climb shown in the opening sequence. In a match dissolve, the mountain is replaced by the oval form of Leclerc's face, seen in close-up, gazing upward in a still photo. The film's directors describe close-ups as being crucial for their films' success, since these shots make climbing feats emotionally gripping for audiences (Bean 2021). In *The Alpinist*, the shots stitched together at the conclusion seem to offer this element of intimacy that Leclerc resists through so much of the film—yet, of course, the close-up is a still photo, taken years before the film was released, when Leclerc was still alive and full of youthful energy. It exemplifies photography's long-discussed affinity with death, capturing an image visually while its subject is doomed to fade.

With their depictions of cases at the limit of high-risk climbing and alpinism, *Free Solo* and *The Alpinist* also display different poles within the spectrum of what digital mountain cinema can do. Honnold's climbing is fascinatingly visible because he is surrounded by a multitude of supporting teammates even as he ascends alone. Meanwhile, Leclerc traverses the periphery, barely seen but still in contact. He marks the edges of what is visible, shedding his blue light on the land of technology of which he is no less a part than those at the center, and which is illuminated anew when viewers see the digital landscape from Leclerc's tragic position at its margins.

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16. GEOGRAPHICAL PLATFORMS, EMBODIED INFRASTRUCTURES: ON THE MOUNTAINS IN *DEATH STRANDING* (2019)¹

Daniel Reynolds

A vast mountain range bisects the map of the videogame *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019). Corresponding to the American Rockies, the range cuts from north to south across the post-apocalyptic “United Cities of America,” dividing the nation-state’s expansive Central Region from its narrower West. To advance through the game, players cross the former continental United States from the East, moving from around Washington, DC, to the Pacific Coast, before returning eastward for the game’s denouement. As is common in open-world video games, a map of the diegesis is also a spatial representation of its narrative possibilities (Jenkins 2004). In *Death Stranding*, the map further functions as a raised-relief representation of the game’s narration, which is closely tied to variations in the diegetic landscape. As players move toward the climactic events in the West, the game’s interactive challenges and its narrative and thematic development are modulated by, heightened by, and reflected in changes in the setting’s elevation, topography, and climate.

Moving through the narrative and across the continent, players retrace the trajectory of America’s colonial expansion, in the process exploring a landscape in which nationhood, the body of the citizen, and physical geography are conceptually mapped onto one another. The mountains *embody* their status as a high point in the game; themes of embodiment, extending from the environment to the characters to the game’s player, are crucial to *Death Stranding*. Protagonist Sam Porter Bridges traverses great distances on foot,

and the relationship between Sam's body and the terrain forms a thematic and interactive crux of the gameplay. As the landscape presents new challenges, the game gradually provides new equipment that permits Sam to navigate it more easily. During his travels, Sam establishes transportation infrastructure like roads, bridges, and ziplines that facilitate smooth movement across this previously difficult terrain. These interventions alter both Sam's relationship to the game world and the player's relationship to the game, highlighting how videogames function at the intersection of interactive embodiment and diegetic geography, where the technological and physiological specifics of hardware, software, player, and play meet and co-constitute one another. A videogame diegesis is a geographical platform, an embodiment of the software and hardware with which a player engages. A player's path-making in a game establishes embodied infrastructure that modulates relationships among bodies—those of players and those of in-game characters—and the geographical platforms they negotiate.

Death Stranding foregrounds these typically implicit properties of videogame play, nowhere more so than in its mountain region. In their resonances with videogame form and with practices of videogame play, the game's mountains provide insight into ways that mountains feature in broader sociocultural rhetorics of what already is (naturally) and what ought to be (culturally), culminating in the idea that a place, whether in expansionist rhetoric or in videogame design, is manifestly *for* a particular purpose. Throughout its forty or so hours of gameplay, *Death Stranding* progressively normativizes the relationships it establishes among embodiment, technology, geography, and nationhood. In the process, it exhibits a range of metaphoric and literal roles that mountains can play within interactive narratives and in virtual space, from emergent, novel gameplay challenges to rhetorical manifestations of that which is ostensibly established, prior, and immovable.

LANDSCAPES AND BODIES, PLATFORMS AND PLAYERS

When the landscape swells up in a game like *Death Stranding*, a platform (a flat form) becomes an obstacle. What would otherwise be the horizontal surfaces on which a character could stand become navigational challenges and vertical barriers, and they thus come into increased visibility while maintaining topographic continuity with the flatter landscape that surrounds them.

Though we may be inclined to regard them as colossal objects in their own right, mountains are really articulations of the ground, neither separate from it nor embellishments to it. They thus belie the conventional contrast of figure (in this case, mountain) vs. ground (in this case, well, ground). John Dewey employs this continuity as a metaphor for encounters with artworks, urging the restoration of

continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience. Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish. (Dewey [1934] 2005, 2)

While Dewey's topic is the theorization of aesthetic experience, his metaphor requires a particular characterization of mountains and their study. A mountain is a "manifest" operation of the earth, an aspect of what the earth is and what it does. Art and artistic experience, likewise, are not separate from other phenomena and forms of experience but are instead continuous with the rest of the world and with the broader range of human activities.

Videogame mountains are grounded not only in the diegetic earth, but in the software and hardware underpinnings that make videogame diegeses possible. Videogame mountains, in other words, are videogame platforms in one of their manifest operations. The mountains of *Death Stranding* in particular make evident the continuity among overlapping diegetic, technological, and cultural platforms at play in videogames. "Platform" is a multivalent term, and it would be a mistake to treat its various senses as discrete from one another (Reynolds 2019, 97–121). "In common parlance," write Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal, "a platform is something you build on. Rather than a completed structure in its own right, it provides a base or foundation upon which people can build. But the openness of platforms to being built on varies widely" (2012, 126). This is a versatile framework for understanding platforms as simultaneously physical, conceptual, procedural, and socio-cultural formations. When Sam builds structures on the mountains, he uses the mountains as physical platforms; his building is constrained by their topography even as it expands their affordances. A high peak may be difficult to climb but might provide a direct line of sight and thus be an ideal site for a zipline which, once installed, makes the peak's daunting elevation an asset rather than a hindrance. The resulting opportunity for faster travel is made possible by the platform of the zipline *and* the mountain in combination with one another. These forms of infrastructure transform the diegesis as a narrative space, altering both a player's embodied relationship to the game and Sam's bodily presence in his environment.

Death Stranding foregrounds Sam's body within a largely depopulated landscape. The game is played in third-person perspective, and Sam is on-screen most of the time. As he travels, players are given the option to sit and rest, to

have Sam massage his aching shoulders, and occasionally to visit a restorative hot spring. Sam's actions, movements, and perceptions are enactively foregrounded by a complex and sometimes confounding control scheme, and his physical vulnerability is made visual and haptic through dramatic and dangerous, though often visually slapstick, falls that he experiences while attempting to negotiate the world. Sam's archetypal masculinity is complicated by a female fetus that he carries in a life-support system on his chest. The game's partial deviation from tropes of videogame masculinity connects Sam to what Soraya Murray has called "an image of masculinity that mobilises a moral high ground of victimisation and alienation within the nation," as exemplified by the character Joel in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), another game in which a middle-aged male protagonist travels westward across a devastated United States while escorting a younger female character in service of a supposedly socially restorative mission (Murray 2019, 107). As Melissa Kagen has shown, the characters of Sam and Joel both function as "postapocalyptic cowboy" figures whose "stories obfuscate the actual historical apocalypses that occurred for native peoples around the globe after the invasion of White Europeans" (Kagen 2022, 128).

In a corresponding geographic obfuscation, the in-game map of *Death Stranding* matches the boundaries of the present-day continental United States. It is as if, even after an apocalypse, cultural understanding of the proper extension of the nation is a given. However, the playable gamespace diverges from the country that serves as its model. It is smaller and distorted, with some regions inaccessible and others compressed to a more navigable scale. As Dia Lacina notes, its ecological and topographic details are profoundly unlike those of the real United States, with ambiguous implications and destabilizing effects for players that open a range of possible allegorical interpretations (Lacina 2020). The game functions as an imaginary United States, a setting for a thematic exploration of technology, embodiment, and an historical ethos of expansion undertaken with the goal of establishing a nation stretching across the land "from sea to shining sea."

The song "America the Beautiful," source of this turn of phrase, maps ordained nationhood and God's grace onto the natural features of the country—mountains and plains, grain and fruit—naturalizing the conquest and violence that established "alabaster cities" ostensibly "undimmed by human tears." Significantly, "America the Beautiful" had its origins as a mountain poem. It was composed by Professor Katherine Lee Bates of Wellesley College, Massachusetts, who traveled west to Colorado, where the ground swells upward and the Great Plains transition into the Rocky Mountains, and it was inspired by the view of the plains from Pikes Peak, the highest summit of the region. "No one can have had a more directly continental American inspiration," writes Sylvester Baxter, citing "the panorama of American landscape

unrolled in the long journey from the sea, and across the prairies and plains, to its culmination on the mountain heights” (Baxter 1918, 428).

In and out of videogames, mountains function as platforms for sociocultural meaning. The Rocky Mountains, in particular, played a symbolic role in the nineteenth-century ethos of Manifest Destiny, which held that white colonial settlers were fated to spread across the breadth of the North American continent. The real-world Rockies were cited as the last major geographical obstacle to Manifest Destiny, as when expansionist politician Thomas H. Benton wrote in 1818 that “[I]n a few years the Rocky Mountains will be passed, and the ‘children of Adam’ will have completed the circumambulation of the globe, by marching to the West until they arrive at the Pacific Ocean” (quoted in Smith 1947, 378–79). This ambulation of the mountains, and the transportation and communications infrastructure that attended it, were instrumental in the genocide and displacement of the continent’s Indigenous inhabitants and to the appropriation of land and resources that characterized the westward expansion. A rhetorical link between conquest, colonization, and mountaineering, as Caroline Schaumann writes, “helped develop a sense of place and pride in North American identity predicated on driving indigenous populations from their homes and erasing their histories” (Schaumann 2020, 234). Open-world videogames, as Ashlee Bird writes, “take on the narrative of Manifest Destiny” when they depict land as something “to be moved through, erased, and reshaped for the purposes of the ‘progression’ of civilisation and its people” (Bird 2021, 249). In its narrative, *Death Stranding* interrogates the myth of a rugged individualist—prototypically white, cismale, and able-bodied—whose acts of bravery and kindness, as he traverses the wilderness and scales the mountains, serve to extend and unify the nation under a common, and ostensibly higher, cause. The connection between Sam’s mission and America’s historical expansion has prompted commentary on its implications for interrelated topics including Indigenousness, colonialism, ecology, gender, and contemporary politics (Lacina 2020; Kagen 2022; Jayemanne et al. 2022; Green 2022).

Landscape may find “culmination on the mountain heights,” as Baxter puts it, but what lies beyond the land? In *Death Stranding*’s supernatural lore, a shoreline can represent both the limits of a landmass and the limits of life. “The Beach” is the name of a transitional space one enters upon dying; beyond this strand is the world of the dead. Oceanic death suffuses the game. Wraithlike creatures stranded in the world of the living are called “Beached Things” (BTs). As Amy Green writes, a motif of dead whales “elicits ... a sense of biological ruin” throughout the game (Green 2022, 48). Precipitation has become dangerous; now called “timefall,” rain accelerates the aging and deterioration of anything it touches. Dying is figured as leaving a body, leaving dry land, and leaving a nation. If Sam dies, his soul is transported to an aquatic

version of his current location, called “The Seam,” in which it can swim back into his body and re-emerge, on land, into his life. Unlike the rest of the game, these sequences are played in a disembodied first-person perspective, so that players must locate and re-enter Sam’s physical body from without. This process is known as “repatriation.” Via his revival, Sam is restored to citizenship within his body, within the nation, and within life itself. Nationhood is existential in *Death Stranding*; the shoreline is the limit of existence, and the mountains are its highest point. Manifest Destiny, *Death Stranding* reminds us, is not merely a horizontal proposition.

GEO-GRAPHS AND GEO-LOGICS

If mountains have loomed over the western American landscape in physical fact and in national mythmaking, they have likewise been a persistent environmental presence in videogames throughout the medium’s history. Many early videogames played out in abstract space, as in the tic-tac-toe simulator *OXO* (Alexander Douglas, 1952), or in the abstraction of outer space, as in *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, 1962). When games became terrestrial, gameplay became geographical and geological and thus geo-graphical and geo-logical, grounded in representations of earthly structures, limits, and affordances. The text-based *Colossal Cave Adventure* (designed by Will Crowther and further developed by Don Woods, 1976) helped to establish an intertwining of spatial logic, interactive possibility, and narrative progression that characterizes many videogames of the decades since. The game’s descriptions of its settings exemplify how spatial representation in videogames—often defined pragmatically by a delineation of what is navigable and what is not—intertwines the graphic (or, in this case, the textual) and the geographic.

As Nick Montfort notes, the world of *Adventure* “is described much as one would expect a caver to describe it ... the emphasis is on where there is access for further travel” (Montfort 2003, 88). Space, including geological formations, defines the potential for motion, and motion is progress: to the next challenge, through the narrative, or toward a goal. Laine Nooney proposes “speleology” as a metaphor for videogame historiography, a “phenomenologically imprecise” feeling-through of history that acknowledges the “inability to apprehend the spatial field in its wholeness” in pursuit of a methodology that acknowledges that “gender is an *infrastructure* that profoundly affects who has access to what kinds of historical possibilities at a specific moment in time and space” (Nooney 2013). Following Nooney, Aubrey Anable writes that “in a cave, our access is limited by the contours and qualities of the space, the contours and qualities of our bodies, and the affordances of the technologies at hand” (Anable 2018, 3). In videogame studies, Anable argues, “we must hold on to the body, its corporeal and

discursive properties, and its affordances and limitations” (2018, 36). Caves are, of course, an ancient metaphor for partial knowledge. In their pragmatic and embodied use of the figure of the cave in videogame studies, the accounts of Montfort, Nooney, and Anable diverge from Plato’s model of the cave as a space of illusion and show how an embodied understanding of spelunking is instructive for characterizing experience and perception in the wider world. These accounts are more concerned with the embodied enactive experience of *a* cave than the implications of *the* cave. Like Dewey’s mountains, caves are neither discrete entities nor abstract essences; they are part and participant in the landscapes with which they are continuous and the experiences to which they contribute.

Mountains themselves appear on the early horizons of videogame history. *Battlezone* (Atari, 1980), among the first games played in a first-person perspective, uses distant mountains to convey scale and proportion. In the two-dimensional gamespace of *Moon Patrol* (Irem 1982), inaccessible background mountains create parallax effects and lend a sense of diegetic depth. Impassable mountains can establish the boundaries of a gamespace, as in *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1987) and many other games. A distant peak might serve as a destination or a point of navigational reference; in *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), players spend the game moving toward, and then ascending, a mysterious mountain. Climbable mountains often present interactive challenges, as in *Journey*, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017), *Celeste* (Extremely OK Games, 2018), and *Death Stranding*. In their immense complexity, mountains can serve as a showcase for what games and consoles can do; the second-generation PlayStation virtual-reality headset was released alongside the prestige mountain-climbing title *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2023).

Sascha Pöhlmann characterizes videogame mountains as simultaneously provocative and elusive presences that share with mountains outside of games a quality of “thereness.” This is a quality “that both challenges and rejects human interaction,” highlighted by games that “draw on the cultural imagination of the thereness of mountains to take their players to the limits of interactivity within a medium that is fundamentally defined by it” (Pöhlmann 2021, 217). Pöhlmann’s emphasis on the *limits* of interactivity is fitting not only for consideration of mountains in videogames but for consideration of videogame play itself. While videogames are often equated with interactivity, videogame play is also characterized by the modulation of what is interactive and what is not—what the player can or cannot manipulate, access, and employ at a given time. As Ian Bogost writes, this is fundamental to what play and games are: “an invitation to do *only* what the system allows . . . Games are built out of constraints, and play arises from limitations” (Bogost 2016, 138). Bogost’s characterization of the constraint systems of games resonates with the quality

of being “there” in Pöhlmann’s terms—like mountains, games simultaneously invite and constrain presence, comprehension, and interaction.

The massive scale of *Death Stranding*’s landscape, and that of the mountains as elements of it, underscores the resonant therenesses of both games and mountains. Alva Nöe classes *experiential* forms of artwork that engage with perceptual experience as “a temporally extended process of exploration of the environment on the part of an embodied animal” (Nöe 2000, 128). Nöe focuses on artworks like large-scale sculptures that can be explored by moving through and around them, but these core qualities would seem to apply also to experiences of videogames, and to experiences of mountains. These may be exceptional as experiences, but they are not exceptions to experience; being “refined” or “intensified,” in Dewey’s terms, does not make them discontinuous with experience more broadly.

An environmental understanding of perception, and a sense of how thereness participates in experience, points to a blurring of distinctions between what is regarded as external and what is internal either to experience (perceptual, conceptual, subjective) or to media (textual, virtual, diegetic). In videogames and across media, distinctions between what is “inside” and “outside” of a media text erect divisions between the diegetic and the extradiegetic, narrative and “real” experience, media use, and everyday life. However, the relational dynamics of engagement with videogames invite us to treat this nominal inside and outside as constituent parts, components of a larger dynamic characterized by continuity rather than division (Reynolds 2019). A player’s exploration of a game world becomes a simultaneous inquiry into a diegesis and into the hardware and software platforms that structure it, carried out through embodied, physical tasks of gameplay. This exploration is never unidirectional but mutual and reflexive. Nor is it ever neutral; we change the world, and in the process we change. This change is constant, even as we, and as the features of the world, maintain a certain stasis for the duration of our existence. Real mountains come and go—in fact, they never stop doing so as they “continually form and deform all over the globe” (Ireton & Schaumann 2012, 1). A mountain is emblematic of the simultaneity of stasis and change, at once monumental and immovable *and* a signifier of the dynamism of the ground itself—not unlike a videogame, which only exists because of an ongoing process among a player and a program, but which also relies on a previous stable substrate, a platform that allows it to take form.

DEATH STRANDING: EXPLORATION AS GAMEPLAY

The story of *Death Stranding* is so complex and convoluted that I find it nearly impossible to summarize, an insurmountable edifice of speculative science fiction, supernatural allegory, and wordplay (for instance, the term “strand”

permeates the game as a verb, a proper name, several homonymic nouns, and an organizing metaphor). In very broad strokes, the game is about Sam Porter Bridges, a porter who delivers goods and information to the isolated inhabitants of the United Cities of America. He is the adopted child of Bridget Strand, who was President of the United States at the time of a catastrophe called “Death Stranding,” which established a connection between the worlds of the living and the dead, caused a series of devastating explosions, and disrupted communications networks. As Bridget dies near the beginning of the game, she pleads with Sam to travel west, reconnect the nation, and locate his sister, Amelie. In one of the game’s many narrative convolutions, it is eventually revealed that Amelie and Bridget are two aspects of the same entity, respectively representing a soul and a body.

Technology, the supernatural, and the body are intertwined throughout *Death Stranding*. On his chest, Sam carries a “Bridge Baby” (or BB), a fetus who connects Sam to the world of the dead. Sam names her Lou. Other than Lou, Sam spends most of the game alone. When he encounters others, he usually only meets holographic projections of survivalists who prefer to stay hidden in underground bunkers. The non-player characters’ alienation from Sam, and from one another, is incrementally bridged as Sam ports cargo, delivers information, and establishes infrastructure. This is sometimes represented as an interpersonal endeavor, as when he helps to reunite an estranged couple, but it is more often in service of reestablishing industrial and governmental presence by bringing locations online to the “Chiral Network,” a kind of supernatural internet. As he makes deliveries to the scattered doomsday preppers, he connects their bunkers to the growing network.

The game is structured around a long series of deliveries. Some are required to advance the storyline, introducing Sam to new areas and prompting new narrative developments, while optional deliveries flesh out the game’s world and extend the gameplay. At the outset of a delivery, Sam collects cargo and straps it to his body, loads it into his oversized backpack, carries it by hand, or loads it onto a vehicle. The cargo presents a challenge even before Sam sets out on a delivery. It is beneficial to be careful about the alignment, positioning, and accessibility of each object that Sam carries. The game tracks weight and balance precisely, and a heavy or unbalanced load might slow Sam down or upset his equilibrium. A player is responsible not only for Sam’s intentional motion but also for his sense of balance. *Death Stranding* has an unusual play mechanic in which the trigger buttons at the top corners of the controller are used to adjust Sam’s balance and to grip the straps of his backpack and steady the shifting load.² Balancing a large delivery is challenging even on level terrain. In hills and snowy mountains, where surfaces are uneven and traction can be bad, a misplaced step can send Sam tumbling, injuring or killing him and scattering his possessions and cargo. New equipment and infrastructure

alter Sam's relationship to the inhospitable environment and can make it safer, more navigable, and even restorative. This is sometimes achieved through gear that adorns and extends Sam's body, whether futuristic enhancements like robotic exoskeletons or more pedestrian equipment like hiking boots. Other technologies to navigate the terrain include ropes, ladders, roads, bridges, and ziplines that allow Sam to traverse distances with newfound disregard for elevation and topography, as well as shelters where he can rest and restock his supplies.

While *Death Stranding* can be played as a single-player adventure game, it is at its most fully realized in its online mode. Unlike online multiplayer games in which players collaborate or compete synchronously, *Death Stranding* allows tools, vehicles, and infrastructure that players create to be shared asynchronously with others playing the game. Structures that other players have left in the landscape will sometimes appear in your game, and yours in theirs, so that Sam might be in a remote region and come across a ladder that helps him to climb out of a ravine, or he might climb a rise to discover a shelter built by another player. In addition to its practical utility in the moment, this feature creates a sense of interpersonal, asynchronous collaboration and connection—and often of gratitude—even as the gameplay is still largely taken up in solitary single-player exploration.

The asynchronous multiplayer aspect of *Death Stranding* introduces new diegetic technologies for a particular player's version of Sam to employ in their game; it is also itself an articulation of technology, of networking among players' consoles, that is felt out by players as a particular variety of platform for videogame play. The game's diegetic technologies—ziplines, exoskeletons, vehicles, ladders—straighten paths of motion and smooth bumpy trajectories without flattening the landscape itself. They modulate Sam's relationship to the in-world geographical platform, altering its possibilities, and they mirror the entangled and mutually constitutive relationships among players, game, and platform. In the game's online mode, write Jayemanne et al., "traversal is not treated as a sovereign right of neocolonial conquest wielded by 'the player' ... but instead facilitated by the connection to an ad hoc community and the infrastructure it maintains" (Jayemanne, Keogh, & Abraham 2022, 223). Seen as collective action, *Death Stranding's* gameplay comes further into focus as a reminder that exploration and path-making are never neutral acts. Sam's infrastructural interventions in the environment come to look more like repurposing the enactive landscape in his own image.

As the game proceeds, the immediate enactive challenges of its gameplay recede. Ambulation becomes simpler, paths through the world more linear, and the topography's inherent difficulties more manageable on a moment-to-moment basis. Simultaneously, variations in landscape, as exemplified by the mountains, emerge as sites of ongoing challenges to players. As Sam

scales up the mountains, the game scales up its challenges, moving from local enactive contingencies to engagement with varieties of vast spatio-temporal thereness like those identified by Pöhlmann. Players, and Sam, become attuned to the immediate enactive challenges of the game's world, and this process gradually forecloses thematic ambiguities and possibilities for more radical or experimental gameplay forms. Interactively, thematically, and narratively, progress through *Death Stranding* entails the reestablishment of prior norms of gameplay, identity, and conceptions of nationhood. This normative process pertains to Sam's bodily relationship with the game world, and to that of the player as well.

Writing about videogames in the early 1980s, David Sudnow conceives of games as worlds and gameplay as a pilgrimage of sorts, as an act of presence, of inhabitation, and of negotiation. The development of the player's skilled relationship with the game transforms the gamespace in scale and density: "Of course size is relative, the more competent you become, the more these lights take on a sort of environmental density and you're pulled by the fingertips onto a full-scale playing field whose dimensions aren't found on rulers" (Sudnow 1983, 33). Sudnow captures the unavoidable centrality of the physical control interface to videogame play, but also the ambition that the game controller will become a conduit of sorts through which a player can access and navigate a game's "microworld." The bodily demands placed on videogame users are also shaped by the structures of the games themselves. Games encourage us to try to play them well, but to do so on *their* terms. As Sudnow puts it, "Sequences of events can be scheduled into readily mastered routines of progressive difficulty, and a program of timed transitions can be organised, *programming you*, in turn, at an economically desirable rate" (63). Programmers program the game to program you. This is a useful framework through which to consider *Death Stranding*, precisely because of how the game is often careful to construct a control interface that is *not* suited for the tempos and terrains of its world and is thus pointedly not readily mastered.

More recent videogame scholarship has examined how bodily relations to gameplay and affective relations to gamespaces are foundational to the experience of videogame play (Jayemanne 2017; Anable 2018; Keogh 2018; Reynolds 2019; Ruberg 2019). Emphasizing affective relations among bodies and gameplay, game worlds, and game technologies, Anable writes, helps to refocus videogame studies on "the complex interplay of bodies, hardware, code, aesthetics, affect, and cognition" (Anable 2018, 52). *Death Stranding's* unforgiving simulation of balance and proprioception means players must learn how to keep their avatar upright and able to walk before they are able to run, climb, and negotiate the environment. The game's enactive exploration is always at once bodily and environmental, but its focus shifts toward the latter as players gain facility with the former. Especially in its earlier stages,

Death Stranding draws on a trend in smaller-scale games that center and complicate players' relationships to the bodily motion of characters. *QWOP* (Bennet Foddy, 2008), *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Studios, 2013), and others undermine the unity of bodily motion felt in many games (Reynolds 2019, 60–62). Bo Ruberg outlines a genre of “body physics games,” including *QWOP*, that “[transform] the human into an uncooperative collection of moving parts” (Ruberg 2019, 105). In *QWOP*, players must individually articulate the character's calf and thigh muscles to make a racer run; most game sessions end with the character falling down. The game, as Darshana Jayemanne puts it, “denatures the vehicular relation between player and avatar” (Jayemanne 2017, 161). If *Death Stranding* feels like a body physics game at its outset, the attenuation of its immediate challenges can be seen as an incremental renaturing of the relationship among player, avatar, and environment.

As these relationships become more conventionally direct, so too do the larger-scale trajectories that Sam takes through the game's environment. Ruberg identifies “meandering” as an oppositional form of navigation in videogames, one suffused with “potential for queer movement” resistant to the normative, linear paths often encouraged by mainstream games (Ruberg 2020, 633–34). If the geographical platform of *Death Stranding* encourages nonlinear navigation at the game's beginning, by the game's end the accumulated built infrastructure primes the space for more linear, rapid, goal-driven motion. In a world nearly devoid of forests and trees, Sam increasingly misses the inclines for the ziplines. This normativization extends to Sam's presentation as a character. He is coded largely in keeping with what Murray calls a “traditional highly militarized masculine ideal of strength, resourcefulness, combat readiness, a competitive spirit, a penchant for violence, and dominance in the theatre of war” (Murray 2019, 103). However, from the Bridge Baby that he carries to his depiction as existentially vulnerable, noncombative, and at a disadvantage in navigating the game's topography, Sam initially diverges from historical hyper-masculine videogame archetypes. By the game's conclusion, though, Sam has vanquished threats, crossed mountains, traversed the continent, returned to the East, and established a new degree of independence from the United Cities government; ambiguities about his origin and identity have been resolved; the Bridge Baby is out of life support and cooing in Sam's arms, with Sam seemingly poised to assume a more conventional form of paternal guardianship; and once-treacherous paths through the game have been simplified and straightened by the infrastructure that he has established. Bumpy challenges to player control are smoothed, but at the expense of foregoing more radical thematic and interactive possibilities. The embodied infrastructure with which Sam alters the geographical platforms of the game world ultimately straightens not only Sam's paths through the mountains but *Death Stranding* itself. Sam's mission

is, at once, imperial and self-regulatory; it enacts the mountainous normative thereness of nationhood, masculinity, and gameplay. Especially in the game's online mode, the interactive straightening of the landscape becomes a form of highly structured consensus-building. In the process, the game becomes an effective, if ambiguous, meditation on how platforms, both technological and ideological, come into being and reinforce themselves.

CONCLUSION: MANIFEST OPERATIONS

As the most extreme examples of topographic variation in a game in which the very contour of the ground presents a challenge, the mountains in *Death Stranding* epitomize the intrinsic relationship between videogame landscapes and videogame technology. While this relationship remains implicit in many videogames, *Death Stranding* centers and foregrounds it, both interactively and narratively. As the game progresses and players modify and simplify their character's enactive relationship to the landscape, they make easier what was once difficult and linear what was once meandering. They do not flatten the landscape itself; they flatten their ways of relating to it. This process renders frictionless and predictable what was once tactile, intimate, and contingent. Through their explorations and interventions in the world of *Death Stranding*, players industrialize the landscape, transforming its natural spaces into conduits of goods and information, extending the governmental reach of the United Cities of America.

That government's conception of the extent of the nation is presented as predetermined, as preestablished, as a platform, and its borders on the game map never change. As with the historical ideology of Manifest Destiny, a belief in what must be, coupled with the resources and might to force change upon a landscape and the people who occupy it, fuses exploration to exploitation. The desired nation-to-be is imbued with the givenness of a mountain, a game, or a platform. *Death Stranding* prompts us to consider what it means to think of a nation as the earth in one of its manifest operations. In the game's post-apocalyptic landscape, America's plains may no longer bear fruit, and the amber grain may no longer wave, but the mountains remain as geographical platforms for narrative, for exploration, and for a conception of nationhood that precedes *Death Stranding* by centuries, even as it is rebooted each time a player starts a new game and Sam steps, unsteadily, west.

NOTES

1. This essay was supported by a University Research Committee grant from Emory University.
2. The descriptions of controls correspond to the Sony PlayStation 5 release of the game.

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INDEX

Note: Index is ordered word-by-word. n after page entry indicates a note.

- 1930s Shanghai cinema, 230
3D image, 266, 269
- Abram, Enrico, 124
absurdism, 197
Aconcagua, Mount, 210, 221–2
acrobatics
 aerial, 57
 ski, 41
affect, 36, 78–9, 183, 287
Age of Stupid, The (2009), 13, 179–83,
 185, 187; *see also* Armstrong,
 Franny
Aimara/Aimaran, 210, 220–2
Albrecht, Glenn, 182, 190n
alienation effect, 198
Allgeier, Sepp, 261
 Hunt for the Image, The (*Die Jagd*
 nach dem Bild, 1931), 261
Alpenkrimi, 154–5, 161
Alpine, 5–6, 8, 10, 35, 37–8, 43–4, 46,
 52, 68, 134, 150–3, 155–6, 180,
 182–3, 261–2
 episode, 150, 155, 158–61
 hero, 40
 landscape, 36, 151, 153, 155, 161,
 181, 184
 model 5–6, 8–9, 15
 pictures, 88, 106
 region, 2, 183
 tourism, 7–8, 176, 197
alpinist, 38, 48, 264
 hero, 36
Alpinist, The (2021), 14–15, 261, 264,
 269–70, 272–3; *see also* Mortimer,
 Peter
Alps, 2, 4–6, 13, 35, 45, 150, 152,
 154–8, 171, 176, 180, 183–4, 186,
 196, 201, 206, 262
 Austrian, 12, 149–53, 158
 French, 180, 183, 199
 European, 122
 Japanese, 93, 95, 107
America, 5, 12, 74, 159, 277, 281
 North, 6–7, 22
 South, 11, 13
-

- America (*cont.*)
 the Beautiful, 280
 United Cities of, 15, 277, 285, 289
 Western, 29
see also American
- American, 22, 26, 44, 70, 74, 111, 119,
 138, 150, 159, 195, 206, 277, 280,
 282
 Latin, 247, 255
 Native, 137, 189
 North, 6, 22, 211, 281
 South, 221
 West, 132, 173
 Western, 7, 29, 134
see also America
- anagnorisis, 205
- Anamgal, 120
- Ander* (2009), 138, 141–3n
- Andes, 4–5, 11, 14–15, 243–7, 249–57,
 258n
- Ang Nema, 119
- Angst, Richard, 88, 91–3, 99, 107n
- Annapurna, 111–15
- Anthropocene, 12–13, 62, 68, 196,
 206–7
- apocalypse/apocalyptic, 78, 179–80, 182,
 195
 post, 277, 280, 289
- Arctic, 12, 186, 188, 195
 environment, 187, 194
 glaciers, 180, 186
 region, 187, 189
- Arlberg technique, 38
- Armstrong, Franny, 13, 179–81, 184; *see also* *Age of Stupid, The* (2009)
- Asama, Mount, 87–9, 91, 93–6, 99,
 100–1, 105–7n
- ascent, 7–8, 21, 24–6, 29, 33, 52, 57,
 59–63n, 67, 94–5, 112–13, 116,
 120–1, 167, 263, 271–3
- “Ascent, The” (“La salita”), 10, 51, 59,
 61
- Aso, Mount, 87–9, 91–6, 101, 104, 106,
 107n
- asynchronous, 286
- Atacama Desert, 243–4
- Austria/Austrian, 134, 150–2, 155–8,
 161, 162n, 172, 183, 185, 190n,
 206, 262
- avalanche, 99, 113, 193, 196–7,
 199–201, 204–5, 207n
- avant-garde, 9, 22, 70, 202, 237
- Balázs, Béla, 171
- Baldi, Marcello, 11, 111, 121–3, 125; *see also* *Italia K2* (1955)
- Balog, James, 180, 186–8
- Baltoro glacier, 125
- Banff, 210–12, 215–16, 218, 221–2
- Baraka* (1992), 76
- base camp, 113, 123, 125
- Bashan yeyu* (1980), 14, 227–8, 230–1,
 233–41n
- Bassolino, Antonio, 59, 61
- Battlezone* (1980), 283
- Beattie, James, 42
- Before the Flood* (2016), 193
- Behemoth* (2015), 10, 67, 69–73, 76–81
- Benjamin, Walter, 10, 52–4, 56, 62–3n
- Bergkristall*, 171
- Bergfilm*, 7–9, 11, 14–15, 35–8, 40,
 43–4, 87–8, 133, 151–3, 167, 169,
 171, 174, 195, 200, 261, 264, 269
- Bergson, Henri, 37, 253
- Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*
 (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*,
 1927), 199
- Bezucha, Thomas, 137; *see also* *Big Eden*
 (2000)
- biculturalism/bicultural, 142–3, 150, 158
- Big Eden* (2000), 131, 137–8; *see also*
 Bezucha, Thomas
- BigStar graphics company, 267–8
- biker, 59
 gang, 57
 mountain, 211
- bisexuality/bisexual, 135, 142–3n
- bisociation, 37
- Black Diamond, 217, 273
- Blue Light, The* (*Das blaue Licht*, 1932),
 13, 167–72, 174, 176–7; *see also*
 Riefenstahl, Leni
- body physics games, 288
- Bolivia, 210, 220, 221

- Bollywood, 151, 156–62n
 action thriller, 12, 149
 aesthetics, 150, 152
 cinema, 149, 151, 159
 film, 10, 12, 157
 production, 12, 151
 strategies, 153
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 40
- Bridge Baby, 285, 288
- British Columbia, 202, 271
- Brokeback Mountain* (2005), 11–12,
 129, 131–3, 135–41, 143n
- Buddhist, 11, 94, 100–2, 104, 107
- Caldwell, Tommy, 266–7
- camera, 15, 26, 28, 30–3, 38, 69, 76,
 89, 91–2, 96–8, 112, 122–3, 151–2,
 155, 158, 174, 181, 183–5, 187–8,
 198–9, 202–3, 220–2, 231, 235,
 237, 250–1, 253, 255–6, 265–6,
 268, 271–2
 movement, 31–2, 88, 92
- Cameron, James, 197
- campanilismo*, 123
- Cannes, 212, 216
- capitalism, 61, 68, 70, 76, 197
- Capitan, El, 264–5, 268, 270
- Capuano, Antonio, 10, 52, 56, 58
- Carey, Mark, 194
- cartography, 77–80, 81n, 256
- Castón, Roberto, 138, 141
- catastrophe, 197, 201, 205, 216, 285
- chase, 95, 152, 169, 264
 language of, 261
 sequence, 87, 95
- Chasing Coral* (2017), 189
- Chasing Ice* (2012), 13, 179–80, 184,
 186–9, 190n, 193–4
- Chile/Chilean, 15, 221, 243–5, 247–9,
 251–2, 255–7, 258n
- Chin, Jimmy, 14, 261, 268
- China, 6, 14, 69, 72, 76–7, 81n, 90, 228,
 231–2, 241n
 Post-Mao, 240
- Chiral Network, 285
- Cholitas* (2019), 14, 210, 218, 220–2
- Chongqing, 228, 240; *see also* Sichuan
- ciceroni, 52
- cinema
 Bollywood, 149, 151, 159
 New Latin American, 247
 New Neapolitan, 10, 52, 54–5, 57
New Queer, 136–7, 141
 porous, 55–6, 63n
 slow, 183–6
 verité, 221
- cinematography, 7, 9, 29, 167, 174, 199,
 203–4, 235, 240n
- civilization, 113, 155–6, 181, 236
- Classical Hollywood, 21–2
- climate change, 1–2, 12–13, 179–83,
 186–90, 193–7, 204–5, 207
- climber/climb, 6, 7, 25–6, 117–19,
 122–3, 125, 210–11, 219–22,
 263–4, 266–73
- Aimara, 222
- American, 111
- British, 6
- female, 13, 209–10, 219–20, 222
- free solo, 264–6, 268–9
- Indigenous Andean, 14
- Italian, 123–5
- minority, 13, 209, 222
- mountain, 59, 218
- closet, 130–3, 135–9, 141
- coffee-table globalism, 76
- collaboration, 70, 119–20, 123, 286
- Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), 282
- comedy, 9–10, 35–40, 43–5, 47–8, 55,
 138, 194–5, 202
 mountain, 10
 physical, 39, 41
 ski, 10, 35–41, 43–6, 48, 196
 slapstick, 10, 38–9, 41, 44–5, 48
- comic assemblage, 42
- communism, 61
- Compagnoni, Achille, 124
- Conquest of Everest, The* (1953), 11,
 111, 116, 118–20, 125–6
- Cordillera of Dreams, The (La cordillera
 de los sueños, 2019)*, 15, 243, 248,
 250, 254, 257
- Corsicato, Papi, 10, 52, 56–7, 59
- Costa, Joaquín, 173

- coup, 247–8, 250–2
 d'état, 248
 military, 15, 247
- Crutzen, Paul, 196; *see also*
 Anthropocene; Stoermer, Eugene
- crystals, 168–71, 176
- Cubitt, Sean, 264
 on distinction between data
 visualization and environmental
 imagery, 264
- Cultural Revolution, 11, 227–30, 232–3,
 236, 238, 241n
- Dante, 57, 60, 71–2, 78, 80–2n; *see also*
Divine Comedy
- Daršana*, 151–2
- Day After Tomorrow, The* (2004), 264
- Day of the Outlaw, The* (1959), 29; *see*
also outlaw
- de Gaulle, Charles, 112, 114–16
- De Lillo, Antonietta, 52, 56, 58
- Death Stranding*, 15, 277–89
- defeat, 114, 116
- descent, 25, 28, 33, 42, 59, 61–2, 113,
 174, 268–9, 271
 political and moral, 61
 ski, 202
- desert, 29, 132, 210, 244
 Atacama, 243–4
 Iraqi, 155
- Desio, Ardito, 123
- deus-ex-machina, 13, 168, 176
- “Devil in the Bottle, The” (“Il diavolo
 nella bottiglia”), 58; *see also* Incerti,
 Stefano
- dialectic of romanticism (concept from
 Mark Coeckelbergh), 269
- diegesis, 278–9, 284
 map of, 277
- digital multitude, 268; *see also* Whissel,
 Kristen
- disaster, 196, 201, 203–6
 film, 13, 201, 204–5
 natural, 204–5
 planetary, 195
- disruption, 42, 230
 political, 251
- Divine Comedy*, 71–2, 80; *see also* Dante
- documentary, 7, 9, 11, 13, 33n, 67–71,
 77, 80, 95, 111–12, 120, 126n, 142,
 177n, 179–81, 184, 186–7, 189,
 194, 201, 209, 213–17, 220, 222,
 233, 262–5, 269
 archaeology, 244
 climate change, 180, 183
 film, 14, 77, 120, 190, 201, 214–16,
 261–2
 strand, 179, 182–3
- Dolomites, 40
- Don't Look Up!* (2021), 195–6
- Dongfanghong*, 235
- Downhill* (2020), 48, 206; *see also* *Force*
Majeure (2014)
- Downsizing* (2017), 195
- drylands, 174, 176
- Duke of Spoleto, 122
- Duke of the Abruzzi, 122
- Duomo di Milano, 124
- ecosystem, 6, 46, 179, 182, 239
- Ek Tha Tiger* (2012), 149–50
- Elizabethan age, 116–20
- embodiment, 15, 25, 53, 67, 76, 113,
 277–8, 280
- emotion/emotional, 12, 31, 36, 45, 75,
 89, 139, 142, 160, 180–1, 188, 194,
 202–3, 230, 241n, 266–7, 273
 engagement, 180
- empire, 115–17, 119
 British, 6, 116, 118–20
 French, 112
- empowerment
 tourist, 39–40, 44
 women's, 159–61
- End of Nature, 13, 193, 197
- equipment, 40, 118–19, 122–3, 152,
 201, 221–2, 263, 272, 278, 285–6
- Ertl, Hans, 11, 111, 120–1, 126n
- eruption, 52, 62, 88–9, 93–4, 99–100,
 104–6, 138, 205, 248
- ethics/ethical, 1, 5, 9, 69–70, 72, 75, 77,
 183, 197, 217
 post-humanist, 10, 67
- Evening Rains in Bashan Mountains*

- (1980), 14, 227; *see also* *Bashan yeyu*
- Everest Unmasked* (1978), 68
- Everest, Mount, 111, 116–20, 126n, 193
- exile, 114, 143n, 150, 154, 247, 250–1
- expedition, 7–8, 11, 78, 111–13, 115–20, 122–6, 221
- film, 11, 67, 111, 121, 126
- leader, 112, 116, 123–4
- see also* Duke of Spoleto; Duke of the Abruzzi
- exploration/explorer, 4, 6, 9, 27, 47, 67–9, 80, 117, 141, 257, 280, 284, 286–7, 289
- British, 117
- cinematic, 68
- films, 10, 67–9
- narrative, 69, 78
- faith, 26, 115, 121, 123, 153, 202
- Catholic, 124–5
- family, 13, 27–8, 30, 91, 99, 116, 120–1, 123–4, 141–2, 150–2, 154, 157–8, 160–1, 168, 174, 182, 196–8, 200–1, 204–6, 221, 230, 240n, 244, 267
- and friends, 13, 124, 207
- council, 93–4
- farm, 139–40
- life, 72, 131, 149–50, 154–5, 157, 161
- Fanck, Arnold, 7–8, 10–12, 35, 40–6, 68, 87–100, 102–7, 108n, 167, 200–2, 261–4
- Farnborough, 118
- fascism/fascist, 88–9, 107, 121, 125; *see also* ideology: fascist
- ideology, 88
- Ferriss, Tim, 269–70
- fictional/fictionality, 15, 22, 72, 80, 106, 150, 169, 179–80, 233
- Fifth Republic, 115; *see also* de Gaulle, Charles
- film festival, 8, 55, 209–10, 212–19, 221–2
- mountain, 13, 209–10, 212–18, 221–2, 263
- Force Majeure* (2014), 13, 48, 196–207; *see also* Ruben, Östlund; *Downhill* (2020)
- Fourth Republic, 112
- frame narrative, 112, 114, 171, 179–80
- France/French, 8, 11, 45, 47, 111–16, 125, 181, 183, 202
- Battle of, 114
- Free French, 114; *see also* Vichy regime
- Free Solo* (2018), 14, 261, 264–70, 272–3
- Freud, Sigmund 36, 45
- Fuji, Mount, 87–91, 93, 107
- gag machine, 36, 39
- gender/gendered, 5–6, 13, 159, 161, 169, 196, 203, 205, 209–10, 212, 218–20, 222–3, 231, 281–2
- behaviour, 134
- identity, 211–12
- issues, 210, 212, 215
- equality, 36, 210
- politics, 141, 210–12, 218
- relations, 12, 158, 171
- roles, 12, 36, 141, 159–61
- geography, 15, 21, 69, 78–81n, 91, 106, 151, 244, 277–8
- Chilean, 244
- creative, 11–12, 80, 87–8, 106
- geosophy, 78; *see also* Wright, John K.
- Germany, 11, 120–1, 134, 172, 179, 185, 190n
- ghost cities, 72, 80
- glacial time, 187–8
- glacier, 13, 27–8, 43, 125, 179–82, 184, 186–9, 193–4
- God's Own Country* (2017), 12, 131, 138–42, 143n
- Goddess, The (Shennü)*, 237–9
- Golden Rooster Award (*Jinji Jiang*), 227, 232
- Google Earth, 266–8
- Gore, Al, 179, 193
- Grand Tour, 51–3, 55, 60
- grandeur, 89, 112, 115–16, 135, 256
- Great Leap, The (Der große Sprung)*, 1927); 10, 35, 40–5; *see also* Fanck, Arnold

- Griffith, David Wark, 21, 33
guide, 29, 52, 60, 80, 100, 102, 115,
180–4
- Gunning, Tom, 9–10, 36, 39, 41–2, 196,
235, 263, 268; *see also* media
- Guo Xi, 230, 241n
- Guzmán, Patricio, 15, 243–5, 247–53,
255–7
- habitus, 40–1, 48n
- hagiography, 112, 116, 128
- handscroll, 234–5
- Hauser, Arnold, 74, 80–1
- Hawks and the Sparrows, The*
(Uccellacci e uccellini, 1966), 61–2
- Heidegger, Martin, 263
Wirklichkeit (reality) and *Betrachten*
(perception or observation) in,
263
- Heimat*, 10, 12, 129, 138, 142, 154; *see*
also *Heimatfilm*
- Heimatfilm*, 12, 133–4, 138, 140–1, 143,
153–4, 156, 160–1
- hero, 40, 43–4, 46, 58, 112, 114, 116,
143, 149, 155, 157, 159, 187, 189,
205, 219, 231–2, 270
alpinist, 36, 40
Western, 132–3
white, 138
- heroism, 13–14, 43–4, 97, 201, 209,
216, 218, 222
- Herzog, Maurice, 112–16
- High Sierra* (1941), 30–1; *see also* Walsh,
Raoul
- Hillary, Edmund, 116–17, 119
- hillbilly, 133
- Himalaya, 5, 8, 10–11, 68, 111, 122,
125–6, 215
- Hindi, 151–2, 156, 158–60, 162n
- Hinton, David, 174–6
- Hitler, Adolf, 172–3
- Holy Mountain, The* (*Der heilige Berg*,
1926), 8, 40, 43, 91, 200–2, 262; *see*
also Fanck, Arnold
- homesteading, 130–4, 138, 140, 143n
- homophobia, 132–3, 136, 138, 140–2;
see also violence: homophobic
- homosexuality, 135, 137, 139
post-gay, 139, 143n
- Honnold, Alex, 264–73
journals in *Free Solo*, 266–7
- horizontal solidarity, 123
- Houston, Charles, 111, 125
- Howell, Rachel, 182–3, 185–6
- Hubei, 228, 232
- humanism, 10, 69–70, 75–6, 78, 81n,
233–4, 236, 238–9
cinematic, 69, 72, 76, 81
Renaissance, 72
- humor, 35–7, 39–40, 44, 46, 185, 195
- Hunt, John, 116, 120
- hydro-dependency, 174
- IAMF (International Alliance for
Mountain Film), 217, 219
- ice, 106, 125, 182, 186–8, 193–4, 197,
206
loss, 182–4, 188
berg, 194, 197
- Ice on Fire* (2019), 193
- Ichac, Marcel, 11, 111–13
- ideology, 6, 76, 138, 213, 289
fascist, 88
Maoist, 240
Nazi, 11, 106
Orientalist, 88
- idyll, 12, 72–3, 149, 153, 156, 160
- Ikrit, 150, 154, 159–61
- Incerti, Stefano, 52, 56, 58
- incongruity theory, 37, 42
- Inconvenient Truth, An* (2006), 179,
182, 187, 193, 264
- India/Indian, 29, 47, 113, 116, 119, 138,
149–51, 153, 155–61, 162n, 181,
194
- Indigenous, 6–7, 9, 14, 138, 189, 211,
215–6, 220–2, 244, 281
- indoor ski resorts, 45, 47
- inequality, 45, 174, 181, 195, 218
- infrastructure, 4, 184, 199–200, 266–9,
272, 277–9, 281–2, 285–6, 288
information, 267
- Inhabitants* (2021), 189
- injuries, 41, 113–14

- injustice, 134, 172
 Inner Mongolia, 69, 81
 innovation, 3, 9, 117–19, 177, 206–7
 Innsbruck, 151, 153, 157
 interaction, 3, 15, 63, 123, 201, 213, 283–4
Intolerance (1916), 21; *see also* Griffith, David Wark
 Iraburu, Pablo, 14, 210, 221
 Iraq/Iraqi, 150, 155, 159
 Ischgl, 206
 Isserman, Maurice, 1, 111, 126
Italia K2 (1955), 11, 111, 121–2, 124–6; *see also* Baldi, Marcello
 Italy/Italian, 3, 11, 22, 51, 53, 56–60, 62, 74, 111–12, 121–5, 183, 190n; *see also* climber/climb: Italian
- Jamail, Dahr, 193–4, 197
 Japan, 6, 10–11, 60, 87–95, 97–101, 104–8; *see also* Alps: Japanese
 Jones, Jeremy, 189
Journey (2012), 283
 justice, 12, 29, 46, 194, 231, 237
- K2, 111, 122–5; *see also* *Italia K2*
 Kant, Immanuel, 2, 36–7
 Kilimanjaro, Mount 193–4, 208
 Koestler, Arthur, 36–7
 Kracauer, Siegfried, 22, 24, 35, 74–5, 78, 170, 172, 195
 Kyushu, 92
- laboratory, 6, 9, 118
 Lacedelli, Lino, 124
 Lachenal, Louis, 112–14
 Lang, Hannes, 13, 179–80, 183–6
Last Glaciers, The (2022), 189
Last of Us, The (2013), 280
 laughter, 36–9, 42, 45, 47
 leader/leadership, 61, 112, 114–16, 123–4, 126, 159, 162n, 205
 Leclerc, Marc-André, 264, 269–73
 Lee, Ang, 12, 129, 135–6
 Leeson, Craig, 189
Legend of Zelda, The (1987), 283
 legend, 80, 81n, 168, 170, 237
- Lejeune, Philippe, 266
 LGBTQIA+, 130–1, 131, 133, 139, 141–2
 Liang, Zhao, 10, 69
 Linder, Max, 39–40
 “Lineage of Diana, The” (“La Stirpe di Iana”), 57; *see also* Corsicato, Papi
 “Lofty Ambitions of Forests and Streams,” 230
 Lowe, George, 11, 111, 116–20; *see also* *Conquest of Everest, The* (1953)
 lowland/s, 27–8, 174–6
Lowlands (*Tiefland*, 1954); 13, 167–8, 172–7; *see also* Riefenstahl, Leni; lowland
 Lumière, 22, 40, 52
- Madonnina, La, 125
 magic object, 38
 Manifest Destiny, 281–2, 289
 Manovich, Lev, 81, 263, 268; *see also* media
 Mantovani, Roberto, 35, 112
 Mao Zedong, 232, 239–40, 241n; *see also* ideology
 mapping, 15, 72, 79–80, 83n
 Martone, Mario, 10, 51–2, 56, 59–62, 63n; *see also* *Ascent, The*
 martyr, 22, 115, 140, 232
Maruzzella, 57–9; *see also* De Lillo, Antonietta
 Marxism/Marxist, 60–2, 69, 171
 masculinity, 132–3, 135, 139, 159, 201, 209, 215, 218, 280, 289
 hegemonic, 133, 142
 hyper, 197
 white, 135
Max Goes Ski-ing (*Max fait du Ski*, 1910), 39–41
 McInerney, Collette, 219–20
 media, 3, 14, 38, 59, 70, 111, 185, 194–5, 216, 219, 247, 252, 263–4, 268, 284
 digital, 268, 271
 indexical, 264, 268
 mass, 149, 158
 social, 131, 210, 271

- melodrama, 22, 132, 137–8, 187, 227
 mountain melodrama, 7, 9, 35, 132–3
 Western, 132–3, 137
- Melody of the World (Melodie der Welt, 1929)*, 70, 72; *see also* Ruttman, Walter
- Meltdown* (2022), 189
- Melville, Hermann, 21, 33
- Messner, Reinhold, 9, 68
- metronormativity, 134
- McKibben, Bill, 197; *see also* End of Nature
- migrant, 131, 134, 138–42, 203
- mineral, 13, 168–9, 171, 256
- mining/mines, 10, 13, 68–73, 78, 81, 168–9, 171, 176
 copper, 71
 gold, 47
 coal, 69, 71–2, 80, 179, 182, 188
- Miracle, The (Il Miracolo, 1948)*, 25–6, 33
- Miracle of Bern, 125
- mobility, 14, 36–40, 48, 138, 235, 268
- modernity, 37–8, 40, 51–3, 150, 156, 171–2, 177n, 269
- Mont Blanc, 4–5, 112, 182–3
- Montana, 135, 137
- Monte Cristallo, 168–71, 176
- Moon Patrol* (1982), 283
- Mortimer, Peter, 15, 261, 271; *see also* *Alpinist, The* (2021)
- Moulet, Luc, 8–9, 68
- mountaineering, 1, 69, 97, 106, 112, 122, 126, 167, 171, 201, 209, 210, 212, 218, 262–3, 281
 British, 121
 circles, 222
 culture, 7
 documentary, 209, 262–3
 expedition, 11, 111–12, 116
 film, 37, 214
 narrative, 14
 news, 116
- mountainscape, 12, 22, 27, 129, 136–7, 142, 197, 199, 206
- Mountain of Destiny (Der Berg des Schicksals, 1924)*, 40, 43; *see also* Fanck, Arnold
- Müller, Eva Maria, 9–11, 179, 196
- Murciego, Jaime, 14, 210, 221
- mystification, 121
- myth, 3, 15, 57–8, 77, 81n, 115–16, 170, 239, 270, 281
 making, 52, 282
- mythology, 3, 11, 24, 57–9, 77
 mountain, 24
- Nanga Parbat* (1953), 11, 111, 120–1, 125–6
- Naples, 10, 51–62, 63n
 Gulf of, 52–3, 56–7
- narrative film/narrative cinema, 22–3
- nationhood, 207, 277–8, 280, 282, 287, 289
- national
 Geographic, 76, 180, 186, 235
 identity, 11, 15, 122, 243, 247, 256
 socialism/socialist, 8, 106, 120, 171
- neocolonial, 46–7, 122, 286
- Never Not Collective, 219–20
- New Gay Sincerity, 141
- North Face (Nordwand, 2008)*, 59; *see also* Stölzl, Philipp
- Nosferatu* (1922), 171
- Nostalgia for the Light (Nostalgia de la luz, 2010)*, 243–5, 251
- oil, 180–2, 194
- online multiplayer games, 286
- Orange, Michelle, 202–3
- Orlowski, Jeff, 13, 179–80, 186–9, 193
- Östlund, Ruben, 13, 48, 196–7, 199–203, 205; *see also* *Force Majeure* (2014)
- Othering, 43
- Outlaw and his Wife, The*, 27, 29; *see also* Sjöström, Victor
- outlaw, 10, 27–30
- pacing, 13, 179–81, 184–6, 190
- Pakistan/Pakistani, 12, 125, 149–51, 157–61
- Parikka, Jussi, 267

- Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 57, 61–2; *see also* *Hawks and the Sparrows, The* (*Uccellacci e uccellini*, 1966)
- Peabody, Seth, 14–15, 35, 37, 168, 184, 261
- Peak* (2011), 13, 179–80, 183–7
- Pearl Button, The* (*El botón de nácar*, 2015), 243–4, 246
- Peretjatko, Antonin, 10, 46–7
- photography, 3, 186, 197–9, 216, 218, 262–3, 273
and death, 273
time-lapse, 180, 187
- Pinochet, Augusto, 15, 244, 247–9, 252
- platform, 162n, 215, 255, 278–9, 281, 284, 286, 288–9
- Pompeii, 52, 62
- pornography, 75
- porous/porosity, 10, 52–9, 62–3
- postcolonial, 47, 159
- postwar, 55–6, 74, 106, 112, 171
- Powaqqatsi* (1988), 69, 76
- Pretty Strong* (2020), 14, 210, 219–22
- propaganda, 77, 89, 120, 168, 233, 261
- Puchoz, Mario, 124
- purgatory, 71–3; *see also* *Divine Comedy*
- Purple Mountains* (2020), 189
- Pyrenees/Pyrenean, 5, 141, 174
- Qu Yuan, 232
- Queen Elizabeth II of England, 116, 120
- queer/queerness, 12, 57–8, 129–42, 143n, 288
- Quendler, Christian, 7–8, 9–11, 35, 42, 48n, 179, 195, 267
- race, 120, 210–12, 218
- Rak, Julie, 1, 11–14, 263
- Rapp, Christian, 8, 37–8, 152, 167
- Rassemblement, 114–15
- realism, 55, 70, 72, 75–6, 217, 233, 235
grotesque, 52, 57, 60
neo, 22, 24–5, 52, 55, 74
- reality, 29, 37, 68, 70–2, 74–6, 78–80, 129, 153, 201, 210, 215, 230, 233, 248, 261–3
concrete, 3
diegetic, 157, 161
intradiegetic, 12, 149, 151
Neapolitan, 55
- Rebell, Der* (1932), 167; *see also* Tyrol rebirth, 117, 122
- reception, 9–11, 72, 158, 173, 180, 182, 185, 188, 215, 272
- reconstruction, 111, 244
- regeneracionismo*, 173
- Reggio, Godfrey, 69–70, 76–8, 81n
- Région Centrale, La* (1973), 31–2
- Reinl, Harald, 172–3
- relaxation, 37, 206
- renegotiation, 112, 150
- Rentschler, Eric, 37, 170–2
- resistance, 79–80, 115–16, 173, 184
- Riefenstahl, Leni, 7, 13, 40, 91, 99, 167–8, 171–4, 176–7n, 201, 261
- Rigby, Kate, 204–5
- Rockies Repeat* (2022), 189
- Rocky Mountains, 129, 135, 189, 280–1
- Rodowick, David Norman, 263, 268
- Roma and Sinti, 172–3; *see also* Riefenstahl, Leni
- romance, 134, 137, 140, 153, 157, 160
- Rossellini, Roberto, 3, 24–6
- Ruan, Lingyu, 237
- “Runenberg, Der” (1804), 169
- ruralism/rurality, 12, 130, 140–2
- Ruttmann, Walter, 70, 72, 199
- sacred mountain, 100
- sacrifice, 62, 112–15, 150, 171, 202
- Salas, Pablo, 249, 251
- Samurai's Daughter, The* (*Die Tochter des Samurai*, 1937), 11–12, 87–8, 90–2, 94–8, 96, 101, 103–7; *see also* Fanck, Arnold
- San Yuan Li* (2003), 70
- Sanders-Brahms, Helma, 173
- Santa Maria, 168–70, 176
- Sanzaro, Francis, 271–2
- scar film, 233, 241n
- Schaumann, Caroline, 1, 6, 12–13, 37, 63, 281, 284
- Schneeberger, Hans, 40–1
- Schuster, Alfredo Ildefonso, 125

- Schwarzer, Alice, 171–2, 176
science, 3, 53, 118, 121–3, 196, 263, 284
Scott, Andrew, 39
Sella, Vittorio, 122
Servillo, Toni, 55, 59
Setsuko, Hara, 98–9
Seymour, Nicole, 183–4, 187, 195
shame, 13, 130, 132–3, 135–6, 141, 201, 204
shanshuihua, 230
shennü, 237; *see also* goddess; *Goddess, The (Shennü, 1934)*
Sherpa, 119–20
Shipton, Eric, 117
Siadak, Austin, 271–2
Sichuan, 228, 234–5
Sjöström, Victor, 27–8
ski
 film, 35, 38, 44, 48, 68, 199, 201
 industry, 45, 47, 180, 183–4, 186
Slesse, Mount, 271, 273
Smugglers, The (Les contrebandières, 1967), 68
“Sofialorèn,” 58; *see also* Capuano, Antonio
solastalgia, 182, 190n
South Col, 117, 120
South Tyrol, 172
space pan, 31
Spain/Spanish, 138, 141, 168, 172–4, 176, 220–1
speleology, 282
steam age, 118
Steffen, Will, 206
stereotype, 42–3, 133, 160–1, 211, 222
Stoermer, Eugene, 196; *see also* Anthropocene; Crutzen, Paul
Stromboli (1950), 25
Struggle for Life (La Loi de la Jungle, 2016), 10, 45–7
suffering, 71, 75, 78, 112–15, 279
suicide, 60, 94, 99–100, 170, 232
summit, 61, 63, 100, 113, 123, 126n, 155, 220–2, 271–2, 280
 false, 209, 223n
 mountain, 26
 of Everest, 119
 South, 117, 120
Tartarin sur les Alpes, 195
technology, 3, 8, 15, 32, 37–8, 121, 123, 186, 218, 235, 261, 263, 267–9, 273, 278, 280, 285–6
 British, 119
 camera, 31–2
 cinematic, 31, 270
 digital, 14–15, 264
 twenty-first-century, 200
 videogame, 289
Tenzing Norgay, 116, 119
terrorism/terrorist, 149–51, 159–60, 162n
 state, 248, 252
Third Pole, 117
Three Gorges, 14, 228, 235, 239, 241n
Tiger Zinda Hai (2019), 12, 149–57, 159
Togliatti, Palmiro, 61
Tokyo, 94, 99
topography, 52, 55, 139, 243, 277, 279, 286, 288
Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), 212
Torre Egger, 271–3
Totò, 61
Touching the Void (2003), 262–3
tourism/tourist/touristic, 6–8, 22, 36, 38, 42–3, 45, 52, 60–1, 68, 81, 102, 170–1, 176, 179, 184, 197, 199, 201, 203, 205, 235
 Alpine, 7–8, 176, 197
 attraction, 100
 empowerment, 40
 fantasies, 77
 happiness, 203
 industry, 170, 183
 mass, 62
 mountain, 44, 46, 216
 ski, 35, 44–8, 207
tragedy, 37, 44, 176, 194
transcultural, 10, 45, 72, 150, 155, 158, 161
transformation, 9, 25, 29, 36–7, 54, 58, 61–2, 78, 150, 161, 266

- transgression, 161
 traveler, 5–6, 43, 45, 48n, 51, 130, 229
 Trenker, Luis, 7, 40, 167
 triumph, 2, 53, 114, 125, 176
 tuff, 10, 52–5, 57–8, 60–3
 Tyrol/Tyrolean, 43–4, 172
 Rebellion, 167
- Ufa, 44
 urban, 12, 37, 46, 52–3, 59–60, 62,
 130–4, 136, 139, 142–3n, 169,
 210
 gangster film, 30
 residents, 15, 169
 urbanite, 40, 43, 46
- Vasarhelyi, Elisabeth Chai, 14, 261, 268
 vaudeville, 22, 38
Vesuvians, The (I vesuviani), 1997), 10,
 52–3, 55–7, 59, 62–3
 Vesuvius, 10, 51–3, 55–63
 ascent of, 52, 57, 60
 eruption of, 52
 Vichy regime, 114; *see also* Free French
Victoire sur l'Annapurna (Victory over
Annapurna, 1953), 11, 111–12,
 114–16, 125–26; *see also* Ichac,
 Marcel
- Victorian (Age), 117, 119
 videogame, 14–15, 277–84, 286–9
 diegesis, 278–9
 mountains, 279, 283
 play, 278, 282–4, 286–7
 studies, 282–3
 violence, 75, 132–3, 142, 151, 155, 229,
 241n, 244, 247–9, 251, 280, 288
 homophobic, 132
 male-on-male, 132–3
 visibility, 130–1, 133, 263–4, 268, 272,
 278
 hyper, 131
 Vivaldi, Antonio, 199
 voice-over, 77, 113, 126n, 211, 248, 250,
 267, 269
- volcano, 51–7, 60–3, 87–9, 91–6,
 99–100, 104–7, 193, 248, 258
 active, 88–9, 95, 99
 film, 56, 91
 fumes, 26
- Walsh, Raoul, 30–1; *see also* High Sierra
 Ward, Paul, 262
 water cycle, 176
Waves and Sands (Lang Tao Sha), 1936),
 237–8
 Weaver, Stewart, 111, 126
 Weik von Mossner, Alexa, 12–13, 187,
 190n, 194
 Weimar, 36–7, 46, 199–200
 Weinstein, Valerie, 88, 107n
 Wen, Yiduo, 232
 Western, 7–8, 10–11, 29, 57, 59, 132–4,
 136–7, 143n, 173, 175
 genre, 7, 30, 133
 melodrama, 132–3, 138
 Western Cwm, 117
 Whissel, Kristen, 268–9; *see also* digital
 multitude
White Ecstasy, The (Der weiße Rausch),
 1931), 10, 35; *see also* Fanck,
 Arnold
- Wilke, Sabine, 171–2
 Williams, Nina, 219–20
 winter sports, 152, 199
Wirtschaftswunder, 120–1
 World War II, 11, 26, 29, 111–12, 115,
 120, 122
 Wright, John K., 78–9
 Wu, Yonggang, 14, 227, 231–3, 237–9
- Yake, Mount, 87–9, 92–3, 95–7, 105–6,
 108n
 Yangtze, 14, 228–9, 233–6, 239–41n
 Yichang, 228, 235; *see also* Hubei
 Yorkshire, 129, 139–41
 Yosemite, 264–5, 268
- Zhang, Nuanxin, 233, 241n

