Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the Bergfilm

Eric Rentschler

Fanck films for our weary and distraught contemporaries. For the veterans of war, for warriors who need a rest. Fanck films for everyone.

—Hans Feld, “Der Fanck-Film der Aafa,” Film-Kurier
3 February 1931

Ach, Lenichen — that’s exactly what’s so nice about you, what I like so much, that people don’t need to take you the least bit seriously.

—Arnold Fanck speaking to Leni Riefenstahl at the reception following the premiere of Olympia

(Although I don’t want to equate ‘special effects’ with ‘woman,’ it is interesting to note the many instances in which ‘woman’ is a man-made concoction in the classical cinema.)

—Patricia Mellencamp, “Oedipus and the Robot in Metropolis”

I Discursive Spaces

A Topography of the Mountain Film

A combination of auratic landscapes, breathtaking atmospherics, and high-pitched emotions, the mountain film (Bergfilm) is a prominent Weimar genre often spoken of as a precursor of National Socialism. These narratives, claim commentators, glorify submission to inexorable destiny and elemental might, anticipating fascist surrender to irrationalism and brute force. Regressive parables, they play a central role in Siegfried Kracauer’s From Caligari to Hitler: in his teleology, the stunning cloud displays of Avalanche (Stürme über dem Montblanc, 1930)
segue into the celestial prologue of *Triumph of the Will* (Triumph des Willens, 1935). Even if Kracauer’s “psychological history” of Weimar cinema has its many detractors, his criteria still govern how we approach much of classical German film — and this is particularly the case with the *Bergfilm*.

As a genre, the mountain film receives mention as a preview of coming attractions, an “anthology of proto-Nazi sentiments,” reactionary fantasies which fed on and fueled anti-modern persuasions, stirring documentaries whose allure above all was one of images rather than characters and stories. Kracauer and others in his wake thereby overemphasize how the mountain film points ahead to the Third Reich and underestimate how it functions within the Weimar Republic. The status of the mountain film seems all but cast in stone. Kracauer's harsh verdict has had the effect of stifling further discussion; respondents either accept or reject his conclusions, but have little else to say. In the midst of much reevaluation of Weimar cinema, we take pause here to reexamine this genre and to question its critics, to comb the archives and to take a fresh look at rarely screened films. We want to know more about the reception accorded these films upon their initial release and to reconsider, with care and all due skepticism, eyewitness accounts and memoirs of their creators. Wider perspectives will, let us hope, enhance our focus, allowing us to discern with more precision the place of the *Bergfilm* within Weimar culture and classical German cinema.


2. See, for instance, David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 2nd ed. (New York/London: Norton, 1990) 129-30n. The author describes the genre as “an exclusively national phenomenon . . . which exploited the Germanic predilection for heroic scenery and winter sports. . . . These were all fiction films, stunningly photographed on location . . . which relied heavily upon spurious sentiment and inflated plots for their dramatic effect. Nevertheless, they enjoyed quite a cult among the German audience, and according to Kracauer, their popularity was a harbinger of the heroic and irrational appeal of Nazism.” For similar accounts that rely on Kracauer, see Eric Rhode, *A History of the Cinema: From Its Origins to 1970* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976) 197-8; and Ulrich Gregor and Enno Patalas, *Geschichte des Films 1895-1939* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1976) 61-2. For comparative perspectives regarding the genre and its presence in other national cinemas, see Pierre Leprohon, *Le Cinéma et la Montagne* (Paris: Susse, 1948). It must not be forgotten that numerous mountain films also came out of Austria and Switzerland during the 1920s.

Rescanning the treatment of the genre in *From Caligari to Hitler*, we encounter several peculiar lapses, a sudden change of tone and a glaring blind spot, both of which urge us to reopen a seemingly closed case. In his overarching tale of a German collective soul oscillating between images of tyranny and chaos after World War I, Kracauer analyzes various endeavors by the cinema to offer a way out of impasse, to provide sanctuary for homeless spirits. Read symptomatically, the mountain film manifests a desire to take flight from the troubled streets of modernity, from anomie and inflation, to escape into a pristine world of snow-covered peaks and overpowering elements. With much enthusiasm, Kracauer lauds the genre for its eschewal of studio settings and its explorations of "the silent world of high altitudes." Recollections of mountain films give rise to an uncharacteristic moment of lyrical effusion, an indication just how profoundly these images resonated in the mind of the German exile many years later:

Whoever saw them will remember the glittering white of glaciers against a sky dark in contrast, the magnificent play of clouds forming mountains above the mountains, the ice stalactites hanging down from roofs and windowsills of some small chalet, and, inside crevasses, weird ice structures awakened to iridescent life by the torchlights of a nocturnal rescue party (111).

Nonetheless, Kracauer immediately ceases his flight of exuberance, insisting that these rousing documentary images do not offer firm spiritual footing in uncertain times; rather, they reflect the rarefied sensibilities of students and academics who would venture into the Alps of Southern Germany on weekend pilgrimages.

The cultish credo of these mountain climbers — popularized in the films' overwrought scenarios — was one of anti-rationalism, a belief in the laws of a mighty and inscrutable nature, a disdain for the statutes of civilization and the denizens of the city. Indeed, one such student, the

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4. Kracauer described the genre's intended audience more harshly in his notice, "Der Heilige Berg," Frankfurter Zeitung 4 March 1927, reprinted in *Von Caligari zu Hitler*, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979) 400: "There may be here and there in Germany small youth groups which attempt to counter everything that they call mechanization by means of an overrun nature worship, i.e. by means of a panic-stricken flight into the foggy brew of vague sentimentality. As an expression of their particular manner of not existing, the film is a masterpiece" (Trans. by Thomas Y. Levin). The mountain films reviewed by Kracauer in the Frankfurter Zeitung include Arnold Fanck's *Das Wunder des Schneeschuhls (The Miracle of the Snow Shoe)*, 16 June 1921;
young Joseph Goebbels, rejoiced during a winter outing, finding spiritual renewal in a communion with the elements:

That was my yearning: for all the divine solitude and calm of the mountains, for white, virginal snow.
I was weary of the big city.
I am at home again in the mountains. I spend many hours in their white unspoiledness and find myself again.5

The narratives of the mountain films, claims Kracauer, culminate in acts of heroism which involve abandon and self-sacrifice, rehearsing “a mentality kindred to Nazi spirit. Immaturity and mountain enthusiasm were one” (112). At center stage in these Alpine dramas stands “the perpetual adolescent” (258), the confused male subject under scrutiny in the author’s psycho-historical treatment of Weimar Germany.6 Curiously, throughout his entire exegesis, the analyst has precious little to say about matters of sexual difference. He reduces women to secondary factors in his terse and frequently ironic plot descriptions and desists from any sustained comment about their constant and conspicuous appearance in these films.7

William Karfiol’s Finnernrausch (Glacier Fever), 30 March 1924; Max Frankl’s Die Gefahren der Berge (The Dangers of the Mountains), 15 November 1924; Fanck’s Der Berg des Schicksals (The Mountain of Destiny), 9 April 1925; Johannes Meyer’s Der Wilderer (The Poacher), 20 March 1926; and Mario Bonnard’s Die heiligen drei Brunnen/Symphonie der Berge (The Holy Three Fountains/Symphony of the Mountains), 20 April 1930.


7. Kracauer’s discussion of The Blue Light would seem to pose an exception; its protagonist, after all, is a woman. Still, he overlooks Junta’s erotic attraction and the sexual
These two instances of disturbance provide a challenge and a point of departure. Why does Kracauer so vehemently disavow his initial fascination for the mountain film? At what cost does his ideological analysis repress female presence in the Bergfilm?

Renegotiating a Popular Space

Almost universally, commentators praise the mountain film’s images and scoff at its scenarios. Assailants of the genre’s histrionics and plot contrivances still acknowledge its sterling photography and picturesque vistas, recalling enemies of early narrative production in Germany who nonetheless support films displaying “the landscapes of the German fatherland, the characteristic beauty of the homeland.” 8 The Bergfilm’s celebrations of Alpine scenery echo the enthusiasms of 18th-century nature aesthetics and share the emphases of German romantic landscape painting. The genre would become a major force in German film history: continuities of casts, crews, sources, and titles link the Bergfilm with the blood-and-soil productions of the Third Reich as well as the homeland films of the Adenauer era. Arnold Fanck stands out as the great pioneer of the mountain film, a figure who influenced virtually all subsequent efforts in this vein. He trained both Luis Trenker and Leni Riefenstahl, initiating a host of important cameramen whose craft would make indelible marks on German cinematography through the 1950s, including Sepp Allgeier, Hans Schneeberger, Albert Benitz, and Richard Angst. With a relish for authentic locations, athletic daring, and technical resourcefulness, Fanck gained renown as a director of film crews, snowscapes, and seas of clouds.

Career descriptions suggestively proclaim a heroic impetus shaped Fanck’s self-understanding, thereby linking his wartime experience, scientific research, and textbook writing with his activities as a mountain climber, explorer, still photographer, and filmmaker. 9 He prided

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himself as an artist whose popular productions brought modern times renewed reverence for nature’s incomprehensible majesty. An adversary of Hollywood’s linearity and “tempo,” a filmmaker whose aesthetics accorded preeminence to “contemplation and meditation,” Fanck recognized the inevitability of narrative concessions were his films to reach larger audiences and thus ensure him a steady and continuing basis of production beyond the confined format and limited impact of travelogues and Kulturfilme. After initial efforts of a purely documentary cast, his mountain epics assumed narrative contours and a fixed ensemble: high altitude locations, a collective of male comrades, climbers, and guides—plus an obligatory female presence.

The mountain film evolved into a precarious balance between the expressive shapes of nature and the romantic triangles of melodrama. For Kracauer this amounted to an ill-begotten pastiche, something “half-monumental, half-sentimental” (257), an infelicitous mix of “precipices and passions, inaccessible steeps and insoluble human conflicts” (110). For all their masterful imagistic immediacy, these films are seriously inept — and misguided — in their negotiation of narrative terrain. Kracauer’s topography, however, is not the most reliable guide either. It affords only a partial and somewhat cloudy view, leaving crucial points half-sighted or uncharted, obscuring how the Bergfilm inhabits dialectical fields of force and a much wider discursive territory in the Weimar Republic.

First, reviewing the effective history of the mountain film, we cannot help being struck by the wide acclaim the genre received, from one

heroic conception of the world and in this respect I share the good company of almost every great German mind from centuries before Hitler.” Among Fanck’s many film books, see his autobiography (whose title derives from a formulation by Béla Balázs), Er führte Regie mit Gletschern, Stürmen und Lawinen. Ein Filmponier erzählt (Munich: Nympheburger, 1973). See as well the Fanck career interview and homage in Filmhefte 2 (Summer 1976). A recent West German television film provided a sympathetic biographical account in conjunction with a Fanck retrospective: Hans-Jürgen Panitz, Wer war Arnold Fanck? (NDR/BR/Omega Film, 1989).

10. Fanck employs an insistent rhetoric of quantification to elucidate his popular appeal in the letter to Kreimer quoted above, stressing the “millions” of enthusiastic viewers who have applauded his films, the “many thousands” of otherwise hardened critics who have praised his work.

11. Arnold Fanck, “Der Kultur-Spielfilm,” Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte 147 (June 1942) 36ff. See also the unsigned Fanck portrait, “Der Mensch in der Natur. Die Filmarbeit Arnold Fancks,” Der Deutsche Film 3.1 (July 1938): 3-5. Even the most beautiful images of nature, he would lament in his autobiography, do not seem capable of entertaining and captivating a popular audience for longer than twenty minutes (Er führte Regie mit Gletschern 131).
end of the political spectrum to the other. Not only venerated by reactionary and nationalistic sectors, the *Bergfilm* engaged a host of supporters on the Left, indeed finding some of its most ardent partisans there. The reviewer for the Social Democratic *Vorwärts* lauded *The Holy Mountain* (*Der heilige Berg*) and recommended Fanck: “He imparts to millions, both in Germany and throughout the entire world, visual delight (*Freude am Schauen*) and a heightened feeling for nature’s vast and demonic powers.” The Communist Party organ *Die Rote Fahne* celebrated *The White Hell of Piz Palü* (*Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü*) as “undoubtedly one of the best German films ever,” praising the film’s visual effects (“outstanding achievements of inordinate beauty and gripping suspense”) and its realistic physicality. The same newspaper also spoke highly of *Avalanche*: “The director was able to visualize the power of nature (without any idyllic razzle-dazzle in its treatment of nature) in constantly changing, stirring images.” These accolades echo the jubilation we encounter across the board, be it in trade journals like *Der Film-Kurier, Lichtbild-Bühne, Kinematograph* or in dailies like the *Berlin Börsen-Courier, Berliner Tageblatt*, and the Nazi *Völkischer Beobachter*.16

The most eloquent and ardent advocate of the *Bergfilm* was the leftist Béla Baláz, who also wrote the script for Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Blue Light* (*Das blaue Licht*). In his article, “Der Fall Dr. Fanck,” Baláz extols Fanck

12. This is not to say, however, that it met with universal accolades; on the contrary, it had quite a few detractors. Béla Baláz’s apologia, “Der Fall Dr. Fanck,” systematically addresses elements of the *Bergfilm* ridiculed by critics, making it clear that there were numerous deriders of the genre. The essay originally appeared as the foreword to Fanck’s film book, *Stürme über dem Montblanc* (Basel: Concordia, 1931) V-X. It is reprinted in the second volume of Baláz’s *Schriften zum Film*, ed. Wolfgang Gersch (Munich: Hanser, 1984) 287-291. All citations are taken from this latter source.


16. See Fanck’s own documentations of the press response to *Der heilige Berg* (quoted above in note 13), *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (Berlin, 1929), and *Die Tochter des Samurai* (Berlin, 1938) as well as the materials assembled in Fanck — Riefenstahl — Trenker. The director’s obsessive collecting of approving words as well as his hypersensitivity towards detractors remind one of Hans Jürgen Syberberg.

for his redemption of nature’s countenance in an age of instrumentality. Fanck sensitizes mass audiences to the physiognomy of the organic world, granting mountains a subjective vibrancy, making them players in his dramas: “Natural elements become dramatic elements, living companions.” Balázs goes on to attack those souls who would impugn Fanck’s sentimental narratives, characterizing these responses as a function of an effete and complacent Sachlichkeit. Balázs’s apologia expresses a desire to commune with a less functionalized reality, a non-synchronous sentiment on which the Right surely had no monopoly. It bears much in common with Ernst Bloch’s 1930 essay, “Alps without Photography” (“Alpen ohne Photographie”), a recollection of a monumental world both tangible and inspiring, an epiphany that grants towering peaks mystery and majesty, an uncanny, unsettling, and therefore all the more invigorating effect. Bloch challenges the reader to imagine an unmediated access to the sublime, to contemplate Alpine spaces untamed and uncontaminated by modern perspectives. Imagine today how might we stand before the Matterhorn, never having seen a tourist bureau poster of it — or never having been to Disneyland.) Bloch’s ‘ultimely observations’ eschew sterile genre paintings and picture postcards which reduce nature to a miniature form and kitsch object, diminishing and thereby domesticating its demonic and transcendent aspect.

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18. See note 12. After World War II, Fanck would repeatedly call on Balázs as a character witness, using the leftist and Jew to debunk ideological critics and their attacks on his films. Consider Fanck’s vehement comments about Siegfried Kracauer in his letter to Klaus Kreimeier of 24 April 1972, cited in Fanck — Trenker — Riefenstahl: “Because ‘Kracauer’ is a pure Jewish name [ein rein jüdischer Name], I would like to let him in on something which he surely does not yet know: that the vast majority of my films were in fact financed by Jews and produced by Jewish companies; that all of those involved did not even have the foggiest notion that they were helping to lead the masses into the arms of Hitlerism.”

19. “Der Fall Dr. Fanck” 288. For a similar formulation, see the unsigned review, “The White Hell of Piz Palû,” Close Up 5.6 (December 1929): “Other mountain films we have had, but we have never had mountains — almost personifiable, things of wild and free moods, forever changing.”

20. “Der Fall Dr. Fanck” 290.

In sum, the mountain films enthralled both Right and Left; they engaged and even involved progressive spirits, indicating common needs and shared desires that crossed party lines. No matter how radically Kracauer and Balázs differed in their assessment of the mountain film, both believed that cinema’s calling lay in fostering a more direct experience of reality and a revitalized interaction with the physical world. “What we want,” Kracauer would later say, “is to touch reality not only with our fingertips but to seize it and shake hands with it.” This fiercely held conviction may well explain why Kracauer — for all his ideological misgivings — could not fully deny the haptic frisson of the mountain film. These dynamics, at any rate, suggest that Kracauer’s one-way street from the cult of the mountains to the cult of the Führer leaves out some crucial attractions.

Second, the genre does not simply emanate a virulent anti-modernity nor does it only retreat to a sublime sphere beyond time. Initial reviewers registered keen awareness of the numerous temporal markers in the Bergfilm. Besides snowy scapes, billowing clouds, and unpeopled expanses, the films show us tourists, resort hotels, automobiles, airplanes, observatories, and weather stations. Weimar contemporaries frequently hail the ability of Fanck’s camera at once to hallow and to penetrate nature, to sanctify its secrets and still disclose its uncanny properties. The pristine world of the mountains and a surveying cinematic apparatus do not conflict; rather, as the contemporary critic Fritz Walter remarked in his notice on The White Hell of Piz Palù, the two entities merge to offer scenes “in which the object and its filmic representation blend together in a remarkable, moving unity, in which the authentic, documentary, and real in fact take on stirring, sublime, and beautiful attributes.” Walter eulogizes a synthesis of mountains and machines, of natural force and technological power, of bodily energy and spiritual endeavor, all of which stand as complementary elements in a filmic hybrid, a merger between the physical world and the sophisticated scientific devices which measure and elaborate it.

Fanck revered technology as much as he did nature and constantly carried the most advanced machinery available with him on location. Modern tools not only produce the sublime; they assume natural qualities: a reviewer of The White Hell of Piz Palü describes war hero Ernst Udet’s airplane in the same sentence both as a “miraculous machine” and a “bird.” Fanck claimed nature remains mute and unexpressive unless captured by a camera. This is a striking variation on a theme of romantic transcendentalism, a modern restatement of Schelling’s belief that man’s awareness of himself and the world around him brings “the unconscious life in nature to conscious expression.” In this way, mediated effects become natural presence, formal will imparts to raw material its true identity, man’s machines render the real authentic. The gaze of an optical instrument, in short, grants life and motility to otherwise inert nature.

Finally, the customary dichotomies between art film and genre cinema, between avant-garde endeavor and mass culture, collapse when we speak of the mountain film. Besides their expressive visual patterns, these films display well-known romantic constellations, demonstrating an indebtedness to 19th-century landscape painting, modernist formalism, and melodramatic convention. Fanck was perceived both as a

25. See Thomas Brandlmeier, “Arnold Fanck,” in Cinegraph, ed. Hans-Michael Bock (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1984ff.). Fanck, for instance, was the fifth person to buy the newly available ARRIFLEX camera in 1938 (E4).

26. Lucy von Jacob, “Die weiße Höhle vom Piz Palü,” Tempo 16 November 1929. The critic even goes so far as to grant the mechanical apparatus a supernatural status: “A remarkable miracle of our times, this camera, a divine extension of our weak human eyes.” In a review of Stürme über dem Montblanc, Lichtbild-Bühne 3 February 1931, the critic praises both Fanck’s monumental nature scenes and his impressive images of an observatory, as if the two were of the same cast. Reprinted in Fanck — Riefenstahl — Trenker E4. One might add there is an unquestionable relationship between the mountain film and later Nazi films about flying. The Wonder of Flying (Das Wunder des Fliegens, 1935), for instance, features the star flyer Udet reflecting on his past exploits while we see clips from Fanck films of the twenties and early thirties. The final sequence involves yet another rescue mission by Udet in the mountains.


28. Cf. Hans Feld, “Der Fanck-Film der Aafa,” Film-Kurier 3 February 1931. Reprinted in Fanck — Trenker — Riefenstahl E6; see also the cinematographer Sepp Allgeier’s account, Die Jagd nach dem Bild, 2nd rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Engellhorn’s, 1931), esp. his description of location shooting on The Holy Mountain: “Sometimes we had to lend a bit of a helping hand when nature did not provide us with camera-ready footage” (62). Compare this to Joachim Kroll, “Die filmische Landschaft,” Der Deutsche Film 3.6 (December 1938): 148. For Kroll, landscapes maintain a photographic interest only to the degree to which they reflect human presence.
cinematic pioneer and a crowd pleaser, as an appreciation of Avalanche in Lichtbild-Bühne makes clear:

An exiting evening. Surmounting the peaks of Europe . . . . the peaks of cinematic art. Only an exhilaration which takes people to the outer limits of human capacity can manage to stir our entire being in such a manner.29

The visual impact of the mountain films rested in an overwhelming mix of aura and abstraction. Fanck’s images drew heavily on the iconography of romantic painters, evoking the impetus of artists like Caspar David Friedrich, Philipp Otto Runge, and Joseph Anton Koch to imbue landscapes with transcendent and mystical powers. Mechanically reproduced images aim to rekindle in a contemporary mass (and vastly urban) public the “pleasant stirrings” Kant once described as the mark of the beautiful and the sublime.30 The cinematic medium becomes a vehicle to simulate unmediated experience, a modern means of restoring pre-modern wonder and enchantment.

The human body acts as the sole point of comparison in Fanck’s mise-en-scène of clouds and mountains; he leaves out anything which might relativize their ineffable proportions and diminish their monumental mass.31 Nighttime torch processions across snowy scapes mesmerize with the Stimmung of haunted screen chiaroscuro. Many of Fanck’s works (particularly the early ski-films) manipulate screen space and dynamize the frame with their ornamental flourishes, silhouette outlines, and expressive blocking. The camera glides and scrambles in his films with athletic dexterity and daring.32 Scenes of downhill racers and enthusiastic onlookers reflect on the enthralling power of spectacle in a manner characteristic of many other Weimar films. On occasion,
the montage of competition scenes gives way to a formal play of angle, movement, and line, akin to the emphases of Oskar Fischinger and Walter Ruttmann.33 Figures moving in nature assume geometric shapes and approach the realm of nonrepresentation. Fanck’s images defy narrow cubbyholing; they defer to the painting of a previous century as well as to cinematic modernism, recasting nature in a dynamic array of expressive patterns.

Critics readily assented to the coexistence of mountain magic and modern machinery. They could not, however, accept Fanck’s narrative constructions, consistently complaining that his romantic plots diminish otherwise heroic endeavors. In particular, the melodramatic scenes were seen as anathema to the stunning visuals. The reviewer of the Berliner Tageblatt uses biblical language to articulate his high regard for S.O.S Eisberg, going on to lament:

In virulent contrast to this divine work of nature, the film’s tacked-on plot becomes here, quite frankly, a prime example of the human intellect’s capacity for presumptuousness.34

In his review of The Holy Mountain from 1927, Kracauer likewise lauds the film’s visual effects, but has only sarcasm for its plot. “In some of the images,” he remarks, “the malevolent spirit of the story [der Ungeist der Handlung] has taken over.”35

Recent scholars focus with enthusiasm on Weimar film’s strained relationship between story and discourse, concentrating on its unstable, elided, and ambiguous narratives, valorizing it as a significant deviation from the dominant cinema.36 Oedipal constellations may well dominate the epoch’s films, regardless of intended impact or audience appeal; nonetheless, they systematically avoid classical transparency and linear logic. In mountain films, plot contents regularly take a back

33. Fanck called his documentary film of 1921 Battle with the Mountain (Kampf mit dem Berge), a “symphony of the Alps.” Brandmeier claims Fanck is at his best when engaging in formal and abstract experimentation, proceeding to note that the director’s use of authentic locations and photographic realism also anticipate the Neue Sachlichkeit (E3). For a similar discussion that considers Fanck and Ruttmann in the same breath, see Hanno Möbius and Guntram Vogt, Drehort Stadt: Das Thema “Großstadt” im deutschen Film (Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1990) 42.

34. Wolfgang Ertel-Breithaupt, Berliner Tageblatt 31 August 1933; reprinted in Fanck — Trenker — Riefenstahl E25.


36. See, for instance, Noël Burch and Jorge Dana, “Propositions,” Afterimage 5 (Spring 1974): 43-6; and Thomas Elsaesser, 70ff.
seat to pictorial interests. Domestic conflicts and triangulated desire provide at best a loose semblance of organization, binding a variety of non-narrative foci to a basic scenario, be they protracted spectacles (competitions, races, torchlight processions), visual displays framed by advanced tools of seeing (microscopes, telescopes, binoculars, airplanes), or elaborate demonstrations of the modern media (particularly radios and telecommunication). For this reason, the Bergfilm abides as a blend of striking images and insidious stories. Fanciful, but not terribly complex, the mountain film seems to represent a somehow less intriguing byproduct of Weimar cinema.

**Generic Crossings**

There is an undeniable discrepancy between the Weimar cinema we find in contemporary trade papers and the one we encounter in recent film historiography. Looking through the pages of *Film-Kurier* and *Lichtbild-Bühne*, we read about a heterogeneous film culture with a wide range of genres and formats, about matinee idols and mass audiences, about a national cinema that produced 200 — and at times many more — feature films annually.\(^{37}\) The view is much different in Thomas Elsaesser’s influential metahistorical essay. Weimar cinema, seen from the perspective of 1984, revolved around the very existence of a strong author’s cinema, and the economic as well as ideological conditions that made it possible for Germany to develop a film industry which, for a certain period, included a prestigious thriving sector not primarily or exclusively oriented towards a mass audience.

In Elsaesser’s estimation, “The Weimar cinema has never been a particularly popular cinema. It has always been something of a filmmakers’ or a film scholars’ cinema.”\(^{38}\) This approach pares down a vast and unwieldy


\(^{38}\) Elsaesser 75, 81.
phenomenon, referring to a very small number of titles and directors, undercuts the wide variety of possibility represented even in extant holdings from the period, leaving us with a rarified art cinema in which personal style, avant-garde praxis, and formative experimentation dominate the scene.\(^{39}\) What once was a film culture’s vigorous heteroglossia now becomes a theorist’s select gathering of authorial voices.

The Bergfilm eludes Elsaesser (who does not deal with it), for here we find a cinematic praxis quite self-conscious of its double status as an artistic and a popular endeavor. Its appeal lay in primal nature explored with advanced technology, in pre-modern longings mediated by modern machines. This is a genre where visceral and visual pleasure meet, where the haptic and the optic are of a piece. It reflects all of the romantic motifs, specular obsessions, and narrative peculiarities which Elsaesser views as singular to Weimar film. And yet, it transcends any apparent dichotomy between art cinema and mass spectacle, operating as a genre with its special emphases in tandem with a host of contemporaneous possibilities. It is hardly a surprise that we encounter numerous points of convergence and shared discursive space. To comprehend the Bergfilm, we must view it in the context of other Weimar fantasies that unreeled before audiences in the same movie houses.

Contemporary reviewers insistently describe the Bergfilm in language virtually identical to that reserved for the film of the fantastic. Mountain films impart to natural forces an uncanny, threatening, and monstrous potential, rendering Alpine spaces in a gripping and a frequently frenzied manner. The Frankfurter Zeitung notice (not by Kracauer) on The White Hell of Piz Palü speaks of a nocturnal procession of torches as “uncanny, truly ghostly”; the clouds, likewise, “glide swiftly through the sky like brightly contoured ships of death.” Fanck, claims the critic, captured

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... the seductive force and mysterious power which the mountains exude and which force people into an inescapable dependence. The mountain rages and demands sacrifices.\(^{40}\)

\(^{39}\) In general, Elsaesser’s emphasis on Weimar’s film artists and his relative neglect of its popular audiences blurs the fact that works by even the most renowned auteurs like Lang, Murnau, and Pabst regularly occasioned elaborate publicity campaigns, extensive media coverage, and gala premieres. We need, I think, to question the tendency to privilege a few art films alone and to set them apart from popular culture. How are we otherwise to explain, for instance, that the two biggest German box office hits for the 1929-1930 season were Fritz Lang’s Woman in the Moon (Frau im Mond) and Fank and G. W. Pabst’s The White Hell of Piz Palü?

\(^{40}\) f. t. g., “Gletscher-Märchen,” Frankfurter Zeitung 15 November 1929.
Writing in *Film-Kurier* about the same film, Hans Feld depicts the mountain as an endangered behemoth (the formulation recalls the dragon facing Siegfried), a beast fighting for its life in a mythical showdown.41 In many phrasings, mountains take on the proportions of Nosferatu or destiny incarnate, an essence that is formidable, inscrutable, and inexorable. Inherent in the sublime experience of Alpine reaches rests a simultaneity of beauty and terror, of fascination and horror, of solace and peril.42 In this way, a consonance exists between the expressionist impulse and mountain film narcissism; in both instances, the external world becomes a projection of inner forces and the embodiment of human propensity.43 In *The Holy Mountain*, Diotima talks to the climber Robert who has just returned from an Alpine excursion:

> It must be beautiful up there.
> Beautiful — severe [hart] — and dangerous.
> And what does one look for up there — in nature?
> One’s self!

*Bergfilme*, in any event, share with films of the fantastic an affective dynamic: mountains and monsters come alive as functions of human projection.

There is likewise a structured, indeed logical opposition between the seemingly dissimilar likes of the street film (*Straßenfilm*) and the *Bergfilm*, both of which figure crucially in Kracauer’s teleology. Streets, roving males, and femmes fatales in the former correspond to the mountains, Alpine wanderers, and female intruders in the latter. The phantasmagoria of the big city — as marked for instance in the protagonist’s opening vision in Karl Grune’s *The Street* (*Die Straße*, 1923) — finds its generic counterpart in high-altitude epiphanies. The city, like the mountains, is a perplexing locus of fascination and peril. In its

41. Hans Feld, *Film-Kurier* 16 November 1929.

> We people of today are expressionists. People who want to shape the outside world from within themselves.
> The expressionist is building a new world within him. His secret and his power reside in his ardor. . . .
> The soul of the expressionist: a new macrocosm. A world of its own.
> Expressionist sense of the world is explosive. It is an autocratic sense of being oneself.
more fearful countenance, the metropolis becomes associated with female eroticism just as the threatening aspect of nature relates to energies coextensive with female sexuality. This parallels the special relationship we find between monsters and women in the film of the fantastic (e.g. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari/Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, Destiny/Der müde Tod*, and *Nosferatu*). No single instance essentializes the inherent bonds between the two genres more strikingly than Luis Trenker’s *Bergfilm* of 1934, *The Prodigal Son (Der verlorene Sohn)*: a hero from the mountains languishes in a big city after allowing himself to be lured abroad by a vampish foreign woman; in the end, he will return to the homeland and take his place in a local community as a dutiful son and husband. A single shot, a matched dissolve between the Dolomites and Manhattan skyscrapers, illustrates how Alpine reaches and urban edifices are mirror images. The *Bergfilm*, in short, is the *Straßenfilm*’s double.

In her provocative recent discussion of women and melodramatic representation in Weimar Germany, Patrice Petro privileges the melodrama — especially the chamber play film (*Kammerspielfilm*) and the *Straßenfilm* — as an expressive form concerned with everyday experience, questions of gender, and above all, female identity. Curiously, she excludes the mountain film from her inventory of melodramatic possibility, asserting that it reveals “different narrative emphases and visual preoccupations.” Weimar contemporaries, as we have seen, were quick to recognize melodramatic elements in the *Bergfilm*, viewing the romantic plot and heroine as irritations and disturbances. Taken as a corpus, the press reviews localize the mountain film’s appeal in its masculine authenticity, onscreen heroism that reflects behind-the-scenes feats of strength, the collective product of a male community of athletic actors, daring assistants, and feckless technicians. Wolfgang Ertel-Breithaupt’s review of *S.O.S. Eisberg* in the *Berliner Tageblatt* extols fearless outdoorsmen and their unflagging spirit of sacrifice while bitterly deplores how the actress Leni Riefenstahl undermines the film’s monumental impact, diminishing documentary verisimilitude by dint of her fictional presence: “In the midst of a horizontal setting larger than life, this romantic silliness struck one as unbearable kitsch.”

45. Petro 33.
46. See note 34. It is interesting how with the coming of sound and the addition of
there is a primary disruptive agency, it in fact emanates from woman. Although Kracauer ridicules the Bergfilm’s plot contrivances and “inflated sentiments” (111), as we have noted, he strangely overlooks its ultimate source of melodramatic initiative. Female players figure keenly in the generic economy of the mountain film; above all, they represent and embody a spirit potentially inimical to male images, be they Fanck’s imposing vistas or the inner landscapes of his heroes. We turn now to woman and her special effect on three exemplary mountain films, focusing on her relationship to nature and the cinematic apparatus, scrutinizing the place of gender in this genre.

II The Generic Economy of Male Fantasy

A Female Cesare out of the Cabinet of Dr. Fanck

The opening sequence of Arnold Fanck’s 1926 film, The Holy Mountain, his initial collaboration with Leni Riefenstahl, rehearses the affective energies of the mountain film. The first title informs viewers that the film’s physical stunts are authentic — not photographic sleight of hand. Our point of departure, as the credits point out, is a contradictory location, a scenario without spatial and temporal designation (“ort- und zeitlos”), which, nonetheless has its roots in Fanck’s Alpine experiences over two decades. The initial image, which follows the film’s title, provides a glimpse of rocky peaks over a stretch of ocean. Later we will learn that this is an imaginary tableau, separate entities brought together in a special effect, discreet natural images whose blend produces an artificial (indeed: fantasy) landscape. The next title

a voice-over narrator to foreign-release versions of *The White Hell of Piz Palü*, we find similar complaints about an extraneous and foreign element destroying the film’s effect. Reviewers took issue with the travelogueish commentary of Graham McNamee. See George Blaisdell’s review in *The International Photographer* 2.10 (November 1930): “The employment of McNamee as a lecturer on this marvelous subject provides partisans of silent pictures with the most potent arguments yet furnished them” (20). Even more disdainful is James Shelley Hamilton’s notice in *Cinema* 1.8 (December 1930): “For certain stretches one may look ... and marvel, with no distraction, but always at the most engrossing points comes that voice, peping the thing up in choicest MacNameesque, applauding the heroic ‘manoeuvres’ of the rescuers, prodding on the enthusiasm like a Texas Guinan, till it reaches its climax of eloquence and blah ...” (42).

47. Cf. Patricia Mellencamp’s observations about the blindspot of *From Caligari to Hitler*, “Oedipus and the Robot in *Metropolis*,” *Enclitic* 5.1 (Spring 1981): 25-6: “What is not in psychoanalysis’ ‘field of vision’ as well as Kracauer’s, except in absence or negative opposition, was female sexuality, the figure of woman, women’s sex.”
bears the ex-soldier Fanck's dedication to "my friend who was killed in the war, the mountain climber, Dr. Hans Rohde." A personal loss and a battlefield casualty thus offer an additional point of departure.

Following the title sequence, the film opens on an extreme close-up of a woman's face seen straight on. Her eyes are shut; we seem to be looking at a death mask. The introduction activates and animates her as an essence whose home is the ocean. The initially unnamed woman reappears, first as a silhouette, then as a special effect, a phantom image that arises out of coastal cliffs to assume corporeal substance. The central part of the prologue bears a title and gives the performer a name, proclaiming "Diotima's Dance to the Sea." Diotima is both a natural force and an energy harnessed by an apparatus: her free ballet by the shore unreels in slow-motion; her gestures parallel rhythmic cross-cuts of breaking waves. At the conclusion of her tribute, she looks out to the water and, in a reverse shot, we glimpse what she sees, a reprise of the film's opening shot — but with a difference. An Alpine peak slowly superimposes itself over the image of the ocean.

The film's master shot, the result of a special effect, becomes reproduced and reprojected as a female fantasy. Somehow, a deeper relationship abides between Fanck's camera and his female player's gaze; she, too, reappears as a superimposition. The artificial image that introduces the film becomes her mental creation, a merging of the fluid space by the sea (her homeland) with the mountain landscape, a toposgraphy at once allegorical and sexual. The reiterated image dissolves into a further imaginary landscape, a phallic male outline seen from a low angle, a silhouette figure on top of a rock with cloud and sky behind him, a function of the dancer's intoxicated yearning.48

Diotima's fantasy catalyzes the film's story, a story revolving around the energies her image and presence arouse in two men. Her evening performance in the Alpine Grand Hotel overcomes Robert (the climber in her dream image) and enchants Vigo, his young comrade. Distraught by the powerful feelings the dancer unleashes in him, Robert retreats

48. To quote Klaus Theweleit: "Powerful forces seem to be at work here." The ocean and mountain will, as the mother prophesies, never wed. In this regard, the film's ultimate denial of Diotima's fantasy resembles the virulently contrastive logic of the soldier male. "The defensive passages are consistently organized around the sharp contrast between summit and valley, height and depth, towering and streaming. Down below: wetness, motion, swallowing up. Up on the height: dryness, immobility, security." See Male Fantasies. Volume I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History, trans. Stephen Conway et al. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987) 249.
into the mountains, as an intertitle puts it, "to gain control over the overwhelming impression." He will later come undone after witnessing another traumatic spectacle, the image of Diotima embracing another man, whom he will learn is his best friend Vigo. Robert’s reaction is one of horror; he shuts his eyes and falls back, stunned and petrified. A close-up renders his face a death mask (cf. our first glimpse of Diotima), cutting to a mental image of a mountain landscape that explodes with the force of his inner turmoil. The climactic pilgrimage into the stormy mountains with Vigo will lead to perdition for the unwitting romantic rivals who expire in the cold. In the end, Diotima stands by the ocean, alone with her recollections of dead lovers.

If any logic sustains the narrative, it is the drive to tame, harness, and neutralize the inordinate power exercised by a woman. In a film introduced by male loss (the evocation of a fallen comrade) and in a narrative governed by Diotima’s disruptive effect on two friends, we find an obsessive and recurring attempt to counter the stirring effect of a female image and body. The film begins with a death mask and ends with living death, Diotima languishing in sorrow, bearing only the thought of her deceased lovers. The Holy Mountain is a male fantasy, a dream about a woman whose sole occupation becomes dreaming about men. It is a film that confronts the fearful dynamics that ensue when men dream too ardently about a woman: her image alone gives rise to powerful reactions; her gaze likewise transmits a remarkably arresting force. In this way, Diotima commands and distracts her male audiences, compelling them to react strongly. Robert sets out with Vigo on a suicidal climb, pushing his friend over a cliff when it becomes clear that the youth also loves the dancer. As Robert regains his senses, he grasps the cord on which Vigo’s body dangles, refusing to let go. The male bond persists as the two surrender in the stormy cold. The conclusion turns on Diotima in a ritualistic act of exorcism. Fanck transforms his female player from an agency who has a special effect over narrative to the special effect of a film, a zombie-like being characterized in the scenario’s closing lines as “a dark, diminished countenance.”

49. Das Echo vom Heiligen Berg 43. Cf. Thomas Jacobs, “Der Bergfilm als Heimatfilm: Überlegungen zu einem Filmgenre,” Augen-Blick 5 (1988): a rather banal plot line echoes the mother’s wisdom, “the fateful impossibility that incompatible principles might ever unite” (24). In a close analysis which accords a decisive visual and narrative role to Diotima, Jacobs ultimately casts issues of gender aside. Sexual opposition does not figure in his conclusions about the film’s critique of modernity and its links to blood and soil rhetoric.
"All She Thinks about is Skiing and Science!"

Mountain films in many ways reiterate scenes and images documented in Klaus Theweilets' well-known study of Freikorps subjectivity, *Männerphantasien*. Fanck's films, however, do not simply relegate women to the margins nor do they always succeed in reducing them to silence. Clearly, *Bergfilme* render exterior nature and female bodies as spaces of exploration and sanctuary, mountains and women representing unpredictable and autonomous natural forces that attract and overwhelm. The opening sequence of *The White Hell of Piz Palü* (1929) simultaneously seeks to tame both: impressive shots of mountain peaks and snowscapes lead us to the supine figure of a woman (Maria, played by Riefenstahl) over whose body we see the shadow of a man. The panoramic arrest of sublime landscapes goes hand-in-hand with a desire to shape and subdue female presence. In this sense, both mountains and women are objects of a projective anxiety, a formative will, an instrumental zeal, properties men revel in and at the same time fear, essences that arrest gazes and threaten lives, elements therefore that one tries to contain and control with the modern means at man's disposal — with mixed success.

Among all of Fanck's mountain films, no other title displays the coexistence of natural forces and modern technology as strikingly as *Avalanche* (1930). Here advanced tools permeate the text conspicuously, emphasizing a desire to measure and negotiate physical space with wind gauges, telescopes, radios, and airplanes, all of which play important roles in this narrative. The film has at its center the obligatory romantic triangle: Hella (the female lead played by Riefenstahl) comes between two comrades, a meteorologist and a musician, causing the former to despair and forsake the world when he learns that his friend has also fallen in love with her.

Hella enters the film as a disembodied hand, which in a series of close-ups engages the massive machinery of an observatory. A cut to a fuller view shows the woman (only now can we specify gender) in a laboratory uniform gazing through a gigantic telescope. Later, she ascends to the weather station atop the Mont Blanc with her father and we witness a scene where two men wash dishes in the background while Hella commands our attention as she peers through a microscope. She only cares about skiing and science, claims her father: "Oh well, girls nowadays. They're not good for anything." A subsequent passage intimates a causality between Hella's desiring gaze at the meteorologist and
the catastrophic death of her father, as if her sexuality, somehow in harmony with the treacherous terrain, provokes the calamity. (The last thing the father sees is his smitten daughter walking with the meteorologist, a scene that causes him to look downward with a troubled countenance.) The narrative closes with a female hand in control of the situation, Hella lighting a fire while her admirer stands by paralyzed, incapacitated by the cold, a shot that reverses the film’s initial image of male limbs warming themselves over a stove.

In *Avalanche*, a woman controls elements and instruments in a way that prompted vehement critical demurs upon the film’s release, impassioned outcries that Hella’s heroic rescue mission was utterly “improbable.” Precisely those factors — a woman masters the mountains in a storm and commands the narrative in its closing moments — render *Avalanche* not only an improbable film, but also a symptomatic text. Hella is, as befits a fantastic entity, many things at once, a bundle of contradictory properties: modern scientist and nature girl, sexless being and erotic projection, disembodied hand and nurturing presence. A figure introduced as an anonymous appendage, an individual who confounds fixed notions of gender, whose hands ultimately replace the male limbs which occupy the opening image, Hella represents the controlling interest of *Avalanche*, a film that suggests a connection between men’s battle with external elements and their troubled relationship to the opposite sex.

**The Seductive Power of Radical Distortion**

Leni Riefenstahl, in conceptualizing *The Blue Light*, wanted to create a *Bergfilm* in which a woman played a more prominent role than the mountains. In so doing, she clearly recognized their paradigmatic equivalence in the generic economy. The result was, we recall, a cooperative production with the progressive Béla Balázs, who gave shape to

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51. A recent analysis of the film comes to a decidedly different conclusion, stressing how the exchanges between Hella and the meteorologist lack overt eroticism and parallel the chaste and “comradely” gender relations propagated by the pre-fascist “Bündische” youth movement. This reading, however, conveniently leaves the final sequence and its curious terms of closure unmentioned. See Beate Bechtold-Comforty et al., “Zwanziger Jahre und Nationalsozialismus: Vom Bergfilm zum Bauernmythos,” in *Der deutsche Heimafilm: Bildwelten und Weltbilder*, ed. Wolfgang Kaschuba (Tübingen: Tübingener Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 1989) 44.

52. For an extended analysis of this film, see my essay, “Fatal Attractions: Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Blue Light,*” *October* 48 (Spring 1989): 46-68.
the script and apparently played a considerable role in the direction.53 Framed in a contemporary setting of tourism and automobiles, The Blue Light recounts a village tale for a modern audience, revealing the mechanisms behind the making of a myth and disclosing the psychosocial function of that text in the present. The story dramatizes the plundering of nature and the undoing of a woman, Junta (Riefenstahl starring in her directorial debut), stylizing the double violation in the form of a chronicle.

Much like Fanck’s films, but even more emphatically, The Blue Light crosses borders and defies fixities. It involved a director who would become Hitler’s premier hagiographer and a scriptwriter who was a respected leftist; it blends anti-modern sentiment and a rational solution;54 it combines romantic iconography, sophisticated technical innovation, and a generic framework. Riefenstahl’s film mines the romantic legacy with the tools of modernity, merging nature worship and instrumental reason, a preindustrialized world and the ways and means of the present.55 The film portrays a female outsider as a source of intense and dangerous fascination. A blue light (a quirk of nature caused by crystals illuminated by a full moon) issues from Junta’s mountain sanctuary. The enchanting glow becomes virtually indistinguishable from her erotic attraction: boys from the village, gripped by an uncontrollable urge, risk peril and find death in their attempts to penetrate the space that harbors the mysterious woman and the seductive beam. The film displays Junta as an (albeit unwitting) source of fatal temptation, above all to the community’s young males.

Junta’s transformation into an icon comes in the film’s concluding moments. A sublime property — both threatening and alluring — becomes an image and a commodity, a kitsch object hawked by children to tourists, a face framed by crystals which also adorns the cover of the written version of the popular village tale. Just as the townspeople mine her mountain retreat, they also recycle Junta, a metamorphosis that shapes disruptive forces — a fluke of nature and a strange woman — into more manageable forms. As a painter from Vienna stands over

54. Cf. Kracauer’s formulation in From Caligari to Hitler 259.
the expired Junta in the morning light, Riefenstahl’s camera (in a matched dissolve) changes the once vibrant character played by Riefenstahl into a stylized still image, the onscreen artist’s gaze coalescing with that of the cinematic apparatus. A male look commanded by a female director processes Junta’s countenance and body, transmuting the dead woman into a living legend.

The reconstitution of Junta in *The Blue Light* recalls that of Maria in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*.56 As Andreas Huyssen points out, Lang’s film demonstrates how woman can at once embody threatening nature and an out-of-control technology: the real Maria stirs the workers; the machine Maria runs amuck. In Patricia Mellencamp’s account, *Metropolis* amounts to a frenzied series of projections:

> There are actually four Marias: machine, virgin, mother, and whore. The crisis in the film is one of identifying the ‘real’ or proper Maria, of setting up the proper deployment of sexuality.57

In *Metropolis*, woman becomes a special effect of a man-made desire machine, a site of attraction and a source of disturbance, the bearer of a compelling gaze and the bringer of intense confusion. Whether essentialized as maternal nature or projected as an infernal machine, she poses a threat. The controlling presence in the *Bergfilm* as well, woman exerts a force equivalent to both mountains and film. Like the former, she possesses for modern men an irresistible primal fascination, bearing powers that impassion onscreen beholders and lead them to self-surrender and perdition. Like film, she exercises the captivating potential of a influential apparatus, acting as a medium of the story and desire, indeed, “*der Ungeist der Handlung.*”

Let us, in conclusion, reconsider these three examples and ponder the generic economy of the mountain film. *The Holy Mountain* articulates a wish, namely that woman be recreated in the service of man. Diotima becomes a mourning machine, a “dark, diminished figure” devoid of any arresting potential or personal volition. *Avalanche*

57. Mellencamp 33.
expresses the corresponding fear motivating that wish, the fear of emotional and erotic dissolution. The film ends with a woman’s hand in control of the scene and the situation, an incapacitated and frozen admirer looking on as Hella stands in and takes over. *The Blue Light* radicalizes the fantasy, enacting it not only in a filmic legend, but extending it beyond the realm of fiction, making the wish, as it were, come true. A woman stars in and directs her own fantasy of self-destruction, creating a film about the fateful sacrifice of a woman for the sake of a community, a martyr role cast in accordance with the painter’s look that transmogrifies Junta into a mythical essence. Leni Riefenstahl far exceeds her fictional calling as Diotima and Hella and becomes the consummate crafter of male fantasies, a person Hitler with some justification would later call the Third Reich’s “ideal German woman.” In *The Blue Light*, she is no longer just an actress who incarnates Fanck’s distortions, but a filmmaker who engenders, indeed enshrines them. With a gaze as intuitive and unconscious as it is radical, she fashions ineffably beautiful images of female abandon made to the measure of male desire.58

My comments on the *Bergfilm* are part of an ongoing project, a larger investigation of how Weimar Germany’s complex interplay between modern and anti-modern sensibilities found cinematic expression. In the mountain film, we confront a spirit of surrender and heroic fustian which, without a doubt, anticipates Nazi irrationalism. (Here Kracauer was correct — to a fault.) At the same time, it also reflects nonsynchronous energies active across the political and aesthetic spectrum in post-World War I Germany. This initial exploration has shown how the genre forged a singular alliance between pre-modern yearning and advanced technology. Mountain films addressed the needs and gained the affections of mass audiences. It would seem that the *Bergfilm* became a popular genre both because of and in spite of its melodramatic contents. To gain increased accessibility, Fanck moved from pure documentaries to semi-features. In the process, women became a narrative medium, the source of conflict and disturbance, virtually competing with the mountains for men’s affections and attentions. To comprehend the mountain film we need to fathom the genre’s inherently gendered

quality. Like other Weimar productions, but perhaps with more insistence, it enacts the male fantasies of a shattered and distraught postwar nation, casting woman in an ever shifting phantasmagoric role, making her at times a force of nature, at others a modern medium, and on occasion both. At any rate, she stands out — in the films themselves and in critical responses to them — as a problematic force, the locus of ambivalent, contradictory, and, as we have seen, quite volatile projections.