

International Symposium

TRANSATLANTIC MOUNTAIN CINEMA

Abstracts



an acquiescence of meaning, 2018 © Richard T. Walker, courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

November 4–5, 2024

Department of American Studies, University of Innsbruck

Monday, November 4

11:15–12:45

The Long Shadow of the *Bergfilm* I (Ágnes-Heller-Haus, Room 04K100)

Seth Peabody (Carleton College)

Skiing Across the Atlantic: Hannes Schneider and the Mobile Geographies of the *Bergfilm*

The German *Bergfilm* genre of the 1920s and 1930s played a formative role in promoting the sport of skiing, giving rise to both aesthetic and environmental impacts that spanned continents, yet studies of the genre have focused largely on the national context within Germany of the 1920s and 1930s. How might we reconsider the *Bergfilm* as an international genre that stood near the center of a developing system of transnational tourist infrastructures, media styles, leisure practices, and environmental changes?

My talk will revisit the *Bergfilm* genre with a focus on Hannes Schneider, the famed Austrian skier who starred in German mountain films in the 1920s and 1930s, was arrested after the Nazi takeover of Austria, then emigrated to New Hampshire, and became a key figure for Alpine skiing in the United States. Schneider's biography has been studied at length by historians of skiing, including the role of film in supporting Schneider's success in Austria. But these studies have not yielded new understandings of the German films, nor have they given significant attention to the role of film after Schneider's emigration. Meanwhile, among film scholars, Schneider has not been the focus of any major studies of the *Bergfilm*—and yet, his skiing has been credited as a crucial factor in the genre's success, critics raved about the films' skiing feats (in sharp contrast to their plots), and when *Der weiße Rausch* (White Ecstasy, 1931) was screened in the United States, reviewers lavished praise on Schneider's skiing but failed to even mention director Arnold Fanck's name.

The first part of my paper will reexamine a series of German mountain films with a focus on Schneider as a core component of the films' appeal and impact, resulting in a shift from the heavy-handed pathos of certain films' plotlines to the playful, motion-driven aesthetics of Schneider's ski sequences. Drawing on Caillois's theory of play, this approach re-emphasizes the centrality of *paidia* (free play) as a key component that drew viewers to these films, but that has been overshadowed in scholarly accounts by the more rule-driven (and politically troubled) themes of loyalty and struggle. The second part of the paper will draw on archival sources from both sides of the Atlantic to consider the role of film in both the cultural narratives and the physical environments of skiing after Schneider's move to New Hampshire.

Maria Fuchs (University of Music and Performing Arts Graz)

Creating *Unheard Music of Heimat*

The Italian composer Giuseppe Becce (1877–1973) was a true expert in musically staging cinematic alpine landscapes. Indeed, who has often been called the first German composer of film music. Becce worked with directors such as Robert Wiene, Fritz Lang, Georg Wilhelm Pabst, Gerhard Lamprecht, and Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau during the silent era, but after the invention of sound, he preferred collaborating with directors specializing in the *Heimatfilm* and *Bergfilm* genres, joining forces with the mountaineer and director Luis Trenker for decades. Becce's fondness for the *Bergfilm* goes back to his aesthetic affinity with silent cinema. Indeed, the *Bergfilm* stood out in early sound film for its long scenes with sparse dialog; and its

documentary-style depiction of nature remained influential during the most popular phase of the *Heimatfilm* in the 1950s. His late romantic orchestral idiom was ideally suited for musically illustrating cinematic “landscapes of attraction” (to draw on Tom Gunning’s notion of “cinema of attraction”). Becce deployed recognizable topoi (some of which became shop-worn clichés from overuse)—a mode of musically manufacturing *Heimat* that I will call (adapting Rick Altman’s notion of “genrefication” for a musical context) a *sonic genrefication of Heimat*. Becce successfully created a specific symphonic sound of *Heimat* by drawing on musical topoi that became associated with idyllic nature. He thus exemplifies the *unknown* film composer creating *unheard* music of *Heimat* seeping into the cultural unconscious of postwar *Heimatfilm*.

2:15–3:45

Ascents and Descents (Ágnes-Heller-Haus, Room 04K100)

Harald Höbusch (University of Kentucky)

To Canada and Back: Transatlantic Exchange in Donald Shebib’s *Nanga Parbat: Das weiße Tor zur Hölle*

On October 19, 2023, the Tegernsee International Mountain Film Festival screened excerpts from Hans Ertl’s film *Nanga Parbat 1953*, celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the first ascent of Nanga Parbat by Austrian climber Hermann Buhl and thereby keeping alive the memory of one of the greatest mountaineering achievements in history. Memory has faded in Germany, however, concerning another film that dramatized Buhl’s ascent, Canadian director Donald Shebib’s *Nanga Parbat – Das weiße Tor zur Hölle* [The White Gate to Hell], originally released in Germany in 1987. While Hans Ertl’s *Nanga Parbat 1953* has already received some scholarly attention, nothing has been written about Shebib’s production, a production virtually unknown to today’s mountain film audiences in Germany and English-language film scholars due to its very limited release (and success) in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain.

In my presentation, I will not only investigate how Shebib retells the story of one of the most famous ascents in the history of Himalaya mountaineering but also ask how Shebib’s version relates to previous German accounts (in both film and print) of Buhl’s unprecedented climb. I will answer these two questions by (a) looking back at several earlier Nanga Parbat films produced in connection with German Nanga Parbat expeditions between 1934 and 1953 and (b) reading Shebib’s film against the official report of the 1953 Nanga Parbat expedition authored by Dr. Karl Maria Herrligkoffer as well as the unsanctioned version of events published by Hermann Buhl in 1954.

Shebib’s feature, as I will demonstrate, sets out to present an unbiased look at the events of the 1953 expedition and the driving forces behind the actions of two of its key members. However, it ultimately falls short of this goal due to its director’s inability to avoid carrying over the ideological baggage of previous National Socialist accounts of German Nanga Parbat expeditions into his own film. By relying almost exclusively on Buhl’s book *Achttausend drüber und drunter* [8,000m – Above and Below], a text partly written and arranged by alpine (ghost)writer Kurt Maix, an ardent proponent of the German nationalistic view of mountaineering of the 1930s, Shebib unknowingly and fatefully upsets the originally intended balance of perspectives in his feature.

Charlotte Bösling (University of Frankfurt)

Spatiotemporal Potential: Aesthetics of Falling in Climbing Films

In climbing, the body primarily moves upward, but there is a constant potential of falling—a state of anticipation, balancing between the ascent and descent. It is precisely the *absence* of the fall that constitutes the 'successful' ascent: the climbing body has successfully been controlled not to fall. However, aesthetics of falling play a significant role in climbing films, serving a range of narrative, emotional, and conceptual functions. They affect the viewing body; they drive the narration, elucidate notions of danger, risk, and technical challenges inherent in the sport; and they explain processes, cruxes, and modes of play. Moreover, they may challenge traditional ideas of conquest and upward progression. This presentation analyzes some aesthetics of falling in non-fiction climbing films, such as *Free Solo* (US, 2018, Chai Vasarhelyi & Jimmy Chin), *The High Road* (US, 2019, Sender Films) and *The North Face presents: ALPHANE* (US, YouTube: mellow, 2022). In doing so, I will demonstrate that falling is, indeed, key to imagining mountain climbing and thus plays a central role in climbing films.

4:00–5:30

Transatlantic Exchanges (Ágnes-Heller-Haus, Room 04K100)

Michael Fuchs (University of Innsbruck)

Alpine and Appalachian Folk Horror Movies

In *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017), Adam Scovell defines folk horror as a work that deploys folklore (be that actual folklore or folklore created within the work in question) to produce a sense of uncanniness, eeriness, weirdness, and/or horror that is generally put in opposition to modernity. Roger Luckhurst echoes these ideas when noting that “[i]n folk horror, modernity is overcome by a resurgence of the ‘old ways,’ as pagan or occult beliefs are found alive and well, surviving out of time, in rural communities” (2022, 719). Jeffrey Tolbert and Dawn Keetley expand on this definition in a special issue of *Horror Studies* by emphasizing the genre's aesthetic dimensions: “folk horror is rustic, rural, backwards, isolated; it emphasizes [...] the ‘little community’ of erstwhile ethnographic obsession, as well as the appearance of submerged cultural (and sometimes physical) traits in the present” (2023, 161).

My presentation will interweave these narrative and aesthetic concerns to explore the role of mountains in Appalachian and Alpine folk horror movies. In these horror stories, mountains isolate groups and/or communities from “civilization” in a way that unleashes their primal urges and sometimes even causes the return to an earlier state of evolution. This historical dimension of human (d)evolution is set against the geological temporal scale represented by the mountains, emphasizing the insignificance of human lives and even human history in view of deep time.

Christine Le Jeune (University of Florida)

Mountain Tourism Commercials and the Transatlantic Diffusion of Images

For centuries, mountains have challenged the senses and inspired emotions. Overwhelming panoramic views from afar and the geographical inaccessibility of mountainscapes rendered representation complex. As transportation infrastructure developed and enabled travel to the Alps for pleasure, visitors participated increasingly in the creation and consumption of mountain imagery.

Tourists travel to images—and both circulate and shape them. The propagation of images has accompanied mountain tourism's cultivation of sensual experiences and the ways in which it entices guests. As Austria sought to re-create its image through tourism in the post-World War II era, advertising the mountain became a key component of selling Austria as a tourism destination. This entailed the reemergence and recirculation of mountain imagery evocative of idyllic traditional mountain life in a pristine natural environment. While conjuring emotions of a nostalgic past, the re-creation of mountain imagery incorporated futuristic elements of modern life and technology that made the mountain accessible to the average tourist, allowing them to envision themselves within the image.

The success of Austrian alpine tourism imagery and the popularity of winter tourism have promoted the diffusion of imagery to the United States, where mountain tourism development has incorporated elements of the Austrian alpine aesthetic. At the same time, the American public's imaginings of Austria as a fairytale-esque alpine land have influenced Austrian mountain tourism imagery. In particular, the moving image, through tourism commercials, employs views of mountainscapes and elements of the built environment to build up the senses, arouse emotions, and cultivate a longing to experience these imaginings firsthand. I discuss the facets of this transatlantic imagistic diffusion through examples of mountain tourism commercials in the United States and explore both how and why it has occurred and has effectively shaped the imaginaries of mountain tourism.

Tuesday, November 5

10:00–11:30

Other Europes (Ágnes-Heller-Haus, Room 04K100)

Daniel Winkler (University of Heidelberg)

Heights and Depths: The Neapolitan Anthology Film *I vesuviani*

In the sense of a representational challenge, this talk will undertake a kind of counter-reading by looking from the Gulf of Naples and the New Neapolitan Cinema (NNC) to the relationship between mountain and cinema. *I vesuviani* (1997) is an anthology film made up of five episodes by Papi Corsicato, Antonietta De Lillo, Stefano Incerti, Antonio Capuano and Mario Martone. These paradigmatic directors of the NNC undertake a re-reading not only of the imaginary of Naples but also of Italian cinema, in the field of tension between fairy tale, grotesque, and magical realism. In *I vesuviani* and its cinematographic locations, fact and fiction merge into an indissoluble cultural-anthropological amalgam. Starting from Walter Benjamin's famous essay on Naples, *I vesuviani* can be understood as not only a satirical-grotesque anthology film about the iconography of the Gulf of Naples, but also a landscape film that remediates geopolitical myth-making and the social precariousness and material porosity of Naples, not least by crossing aesthetically opposing genres and styles.

Eva Binder (University of Innsbruck)

Alternative Narratives? The Caucasus in the Soviet Mountain Film *Vertikal'* (1966)

For imperial Russian culture, the Caucasus was a border region in which the familiar and the exotic overlapped. In classicist aesthetics of the late eighteenth century, the Caucasian mountains were perceived, inspired by the Alps, as a sublime object. However, it was Romanticism that turned the Caucasus into a popular topos of Russian literature and culture. In the Romantic imagination, the Caucasus was conceived as an ambivalent space of attraction, seduction, and repulsion, as notions of wilderness and savagery, in particular with regard to the Islamic population, met with ideas of natural, unspoiled people populating the remote periphery of the Empire.

Whereas traditional ethnic and religious identities, together with the political and societal value system of the Russian Empire as a whole, were rejected by Soviet ideology, the nationality politics promoted by the Bolsheviks fostered the development of ethnic identities, especially in the 1920s. The Canadian historian Terry Martin summarized these contradictions inherent in Soviet nationality politics with the term "affirmative action empire," which describes the tension between ethnic identity and nationalist categories such as territory, culture, and language, on the one hand, and the anti-national Soviet program of modernization, on the other. And although the Soviet Union considered and positioned itself as an anti-imperial state, imperialist and colonialist narratives persisted in Soviet culture, particularly with regard to the Caucasus.

In my talk, I will explore the tension between Soviet imperialist and anti-imperialist narratives with regard to the Caucasus by using the Soviet film *Vertikal'*, a well-known and popular film of the political thaw and one of the few examples of a Soviet mountain film, as a reference point.

2:00–3:30 (Joint Panel with the Conference “Heilige Berge – Berge und das Heilige”)

The Long Shadow of the Bergfilm II (Haus der Musik, Lecture Hall)

Kamaal Haque (Dickinson College)

Luis Trenker's *Berge in Flammen: The Bergfilm Goes to War*

The most famous German-language novels and films about the First World War are mainly about fighting, surviving, and dying on the Western Front, with Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1928), Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern* (1920), and G.W. Pabst's *Westfront 1918* (1930) being prime examples. Less present in fiction and film are the experiences of the so-called mountain war, i.e. the trench warfare on high alpine terrain that raged from the Swiss border in the east to the Seven Communities and then further to the Isonzo River. The events in a small section of this alpine front form the core of Luis Trenker's 1931 feature film and novel *Berge in Flammen*. Trenker himself served on this front. Based on his own experiences on the Kleiner Lagazuoi and those of the famous *Bergfilm* cameraman Hans Schneeberger on the Schreckenstein, Trenker tells the story of a small troop of Tyrolean Kaiserjäger whose position was undermined and ultimately blown up by Italian sappers. This story is embedded in a framework: the pre- and post-war friendship between the Tyrolean Florian Dimai (played by Trenker) and the Roman Count Artur Franchini. This friendship is intended to give the film a touch of unification. *Berge in Flammen* is a mixture of mountain and war film. The mountain film genealogy is clearly visible in the cinematography. The skiing scenes look as if they could have come straight from another mountain film in a more peaceful time. More important, however, is Trenker's view of war in the film. Trenker ignores the major geopolitical causes and consequences of the war as best he can. What remains is the Tyroleans' struggle to preserve their own homeland. As the (non-native) lieutenant says to his troops shortly before the explosion: "Ihr wisst, worum es geht. Um Tirol. Um eure Heimat." Trenker reduces the war from a global to a local one. This allows him to affirm war as a means of protecting the homeland, even though he later always spoke of the senselessness of war. Little noticed, but of great importance, is the influence of the Treaty of Saint-Germain on the film. His entire film takes on a long-overlooked meaning due to the loss of South Tyrol to Italy after the First World War. *Berge in Flammen* is Trenker's attempt to come to terms with the bitter political reality of the post-war years for him and other South Tyroleans.

Caroline Schaumann (Emory University)

Reframing the Bergfilm: Olivier Assayas's *The Clouds of Sils Maria*

My presentation will examine Olivier Assayas's German-Swiss-French co-production *The Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014) as a site of transnational negotiation of German film traditions. In what the director called a "condensed, brutalized version" of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (1972), an aging actress (Juliette Binoche) travels from London to the Alps to see Rosa (Angela Winkler), the widow of her former director Wilhelm Melchior, and falls in love with her American assistant Val (Kristen Stewart) while rehearsing Wilhelm's play. Like the German *Bergfilm*, *Sils Maria* is framed by a tension between modernity and mountains, where protagonists escape to an isolated and privileged space high up to find meaning and face death. Unlike their heroic masculine counterparts in the mountain film, however, the women encounter no climbing dangers and conquer no peaks. As in the German *Bergfilm*, the protagonists' (homoerotic) relationship is developed, tested, and strained in the mountains, where desire, jealousy, and loneliness come to the fore, with the important difference that characters navigate different languages, nationalities, age groups, and social status as they act, mirror, and switch roles for the play within the film. Instead of the summit position as the ultimate goal

of mountaineering, the film thus outlines a mountain position less determined by gender, physique, and nationality.

Critics have mentioned the direct references to Arnold Fanck's *Das Wolkenphänomen von Maloja* (1924), excerpted in a film-within-the-film, though a closer inspection of the importance of *Sils Maria's* setting and its links to the *Bergfilm* genre have been largely unexplored. In Fanck's film, male protagonists witness with dread as a personified and feminized Maloja snake engulfs peaks, passes, and valleys in thick clouds—"tagelang wälzt sich die 'Malojaschlange' über den Pass"—seizing the land, forcing the mountaineers to retreat and boatmen back ashore. In *The Clouds of Sils Maria*, Fanck's nine-minute documentary (in its original but lost form presumably fourteen minutes) is condensed to roughly one minute, recut, and overlaid with baroque music by G. F. Handel. Assayas not only omit the gendered language of Fanck's film but in his recut film-within-the-film also excludes Fanck's low angle shots that make the clouds appear at once powerful and sinister. Instead, he uses high angle shots that he later reproduces in his own film, setting the protagonists and their point of view above the clouds. By appropriating and reframing the *Bergfilm*—Fanck's time-lapse photography is reproduced but also recut and restaged by Assayas—*Clouds of Sils Maria* offers a contemplation on deep time, memory, aging and death, technology and (mediated) nature, gender, passion, and play. The film opens a space for a contemporary mountain film, emphasizing that mountains and mountain films are not timeless but become agents of change.