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Sharon R. Sherman, Mikel J. Koven

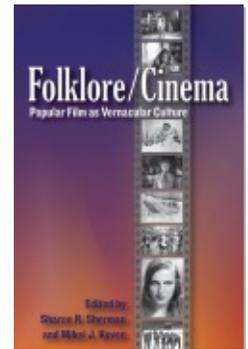
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## A Strange and Foreign World

*Documentary, Ethnography, and the Mountain Films of  
Arnold Fanck and Leni Riefenstahl*

REBECCA PRIME

WITH ITS CELEBRATION of mountains and masculinity, of pure white landscapes and strong white men, the popular genre of Weimar cinema known as the mountain film (*Bergfilm*) lends itself readily to interpretations that emphasize its relation to Nazi ideology. A number of factors have encouraged the perception of the mountain film as Aryan-myth wish fulfillment. The growth of the genre closely mirrors the rise of National Socialism, with production petering out once the Third Reich was established in 1933. Additionally, the content of the films conforms to popular conceptions of Nazism: the white, athletic characters can be seen to represent the ideal Aryan “super race,” while the narrative emphasis on heroism, self-sacrifice, and submission to force (nature, in this instance) seems tailor-made to educate ideal fascist subjects. Finally, film history has been instrumental in casting the mountain film in the role of Nazi collaborator. In his study of Weimar cinema, Siegfried Kracauer set the tone for much subsequent scholarship in characterizing the mountain film as “an exclusively German genre...rooted in a mentality kindred to the Nazi spirit” (1947, 110, 112).<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Kracauer’s interpretation bears the mark of his historical circumstances as a German exile trying to understand the horrors of the Third Reich, a number of recent, revisionist studies have brought a more nuanced eye and contextual approach to the mountain film. Eric Rentschler has called attention to the connections between the mountain film and two other popular genres of Weimar cinema: the fantastic and the street film (1990). In separate analyses, Nancy Nenno discusses the mountain film in relation to the rise of mass tourism during the Weimar period and the cultural significance of the Alpine landscape (2003, 1996). What both Rentschler and Nenno bring to the fore is the highly complex relationship between modern and antimodern impulses characteristic of Weimar Germany and expressed in the mountain

film's distinctive mix of technology and tradition. Compared to that of Britain and France, Germany's experience of industrialization was late and sudden, and the arrival of modernity consequently had a greater impact. What resulted was a form of "reactionary modernism" that harnessed new technology to the rhetoric and ideals of the past (Herf 1984, 2). By relating the mountain film to the paradoxes of Germany's embrace of modernity, Rentschler and Nenno open up the interpretive playing field dramatically.

In this chapter, I contribute to this process of unearthing the layers of signification buried in the mountain film by taking as my focus two important, but as yet little studied, dimensions of the genre: the documentary and the ethnographic. During a period when film production was almost exclusively studio based, mountain films were exceptional for their commitment to location shooting in the Alps. While concessions to narrative wormed their way into the genre as it developed during the course of the 1920s, they were never at the expense of the documentary component; the spectacular Alpine landscape remained a significant character in these films, lying at the heart of the genre's appeal. Related to the genre's documentary aspects is its engagement with the ethnographic, by which I mean the depiction of traditional culture and people in these films. A peripheral presence in films such as Arnold Fanck's *The Holy Mountain* (1926) and Fanck and Georg Pabst's *The White Hell of Pitz-Palü* (1929), the Alpine villagers play a much more significant role in one of the later mountain films, Leni Riefenstahl's *The Blue Light* (1932). In view of the central political role that folklore and the idealized notion of the *Volk* came to play in the construction of the Third Reich, emphasizing the ethnographic may prove a revealing intervention into the debates surrounding the relationship between mountain films and Nazism.

### "A Strange and Foreign World"

In her account of her early career, Leni Riefenstahl describes her reaction to seeing her first mountain film, Fanck's *Mountain of Destiny* (1924):

Beginning with the first shots, I was strangely affected by what I saw: mountains and clouds, alpine slopes and naked rock cliffs moved past me. I was looking at a strange and foreign world. Who would have thought that the mountains were so beautiful? I knew them only from postcards; they seemed lifeless and rigid, but yet they intoxicated me with their undreamt of splendor.... The beauty and strength of the film attracted me so much that, even before the film was over, I had decided to visit the mountains and see them for myself. (Hinton 1978, 4-5)

Riefenstahl spent four weeks touring the Alps, at the end of which she met Luis Trenker, the star of *Mountain of Destiny*. Despite her lack of acting (not to mention mountain-climbing) experience, Riefenstahl persuaded Trenker to pass along a becoming photo of herself to the director, Dr. Arnold Fanck. In doing so, she set in motion the transformation of the genre Fanck had pioneered. A geologist by training, Fanck was drawn to motion pictures not by his cinephilia (his directorial debut, *The Miracle of Skiing*, made in 1919, was only the second film he had seen!) but by his desire to capture the beauty of the mountains (Hinton 1978, 1).

Fanck's initial forays into film were documentary depictions of the alpine landscape, where the primordial battle waged between man and nature suggested by titles such as *The Struggle with the Mountain* (1921) fulfilled any need for narrative. Despite the box-office success of these early films, Fanck felt that to keep the public's interest, the mountains needed human costars. For his first dramatic film, *Mountain of Destiny*, he selected a narrative—the true story of a son conquering the mountain that had killed his father—rich in Oedipal overtones, a choice that connects the mountain film to the broader cinematic milieu of Weimar Germany.<sup>2</sup> As had Fanck's earlier films, *Mountain of Destiny* depicts the Alps as a masculine domain, a realm of male camaraderie and bonding.<sup>3</sup> Making her debut in Fanck's *The Holy Mountain* (1926) just two years later, Leni Riefenstahl carved a permanent niche for herself in this exclusively male preserve, becoming the star in the majority of Fanck's mountain films.

With the addition of Riefenstahl, the mountain film took a turn toward melodrama, with plots revolving around love triangles in which Riefenstahl provided an alluring center.<sup>4</sup> These changes were not always well received, with critics quick to heap scorn on Fanck's formulaic narratives and lofty sentiments. Kracauer and Lotte Eisner echo the views of many contemporary critics in calling attention to what they see as a fundamental opposition between the documentary value of the images and the cliché demotions of the narrative (Kracauer 1947, 110; Eisner 1952, 312).<sup>5</sup> Reviewing *S.O.S. Iceberg* (1933), the *Berliner Tageblatt* laments that 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" (Rentschler 1990, 148). The reviewer singles out Leni Riefenstahl for criticism, arguing that by her very presence, she undermines the power of the film's documentary qualities. "In the midst of a horizontal setting larger than life, this romantic silliness struck one as unbearable kitsch" (Rentschler 1990, 152).

How would the mountain film have evolved if Leni Riefenstahl had not seen *Mountain of Destiny* and tracked down Luis Trenker, if Trenker had not passed along her photo to Fanck, and if Fanck had not become enraptured by her image? With *Mountain of Destiny*, Fanck was already moving away from documentary and toward melodrama, a trajectory in line with the direction of cinematic development during the period. Indeed, Johannes von Moltke sees Fanck's career as "exemplary in that it leads directly from the early 'view' aesthetic" [the static framings characteristic of travel and landscape films]"through its gradual dynamisation by way of technical innovations and heroic stunts, to its more or less successful (in)fusion with fictional narrative in *The Holy Mountain, Battle for the Matterhorn* (1928), and *Avalanche* (1930)" (2002, 21). Considering these broader trends, the mountain film likely would have met melodrama with or without Riefenstahl. However, the complex conjunction between gender and aesthetics she introduces bears fuller exploration and provides the focus for my next section in which I situate the mountain film vis à vis other developments in the documentary genre during the 1920s.

### "We Really Froze"

Since its inception, cinema has shown a fascination for the real. Some of the earliest films, the documentary actualités of the Lumière brothers, were simple depictions of scenes from everyday life. The appeal of natural landscapes contributed to the extreme popularity of early nonfiction travel films and expedition films (Gunning 1997). While these types of films may more or less correspond to our contemporary conception of the documentary—based upon the presumed authenticity of the indexical relationship between the image and external reality, or the objective presentation of verifiable "facts"—during the 1920s documentary was a rather more fluid and undefined concept. As Kevin Brownlow puts it, "In the silent days, film-makers never realized they were making documentaries. They set out to make pictures about actual events, and they failed or succeeded, according to their individual talents. There was no formula" (1979, 403). Perhaps the most involved attempts to define the documentary occurred in France, where a number of influential early film critics had succeeded in legitimizing the cinema as an art, and therefore worthy of serious consideration (Abel 1988; Williams 1992). In 1923, the critic Riccioto Canudo wrote that the mission of the documentary was to "integrate the lives of men with that of their surroundings" (Ghali 1995, 292; my translation), an elegant formula that emphasizes documentary cinema's ties to social realism.

For others, the essence of the documentary lay in its ability to reveal reality's secret poetry, to capture the expressive potential of the material world. Documentaries could be realistic or poetic, "pure" (where "lived realities filmed on the spot" are related in "a relatively dry fashion") or fictional ("in which the facts are more often selected, interpreted, and idealized by the artist for a better cinematic rendering") (Dréville [1930] 1988: 42–43). Yet another early attempt to define the documentary came from Paul Rotha, whose 1935 survey of the genre delineates the following divisions: the naturalist (romantic) tradition (Flaherty, Cooper and Schoedsack); the realist (continental) tradition (Cavalcanti, Ruttman, and Ivens); the newsreel tradition (Vertov); and the propagandist tradition (Grierson, Riefenstahl, Dovzhenko).

Where does Fanck fit into this constellation of documentary directions? It is worth recalling that Fanck's obsession lay not with cinema but with the mountains. Even in his later films, with their hackneyed, melodramatic plots, Fanck's depiction of the dramatic beauty of the Alps remains fresh and engaging. In the opinion of Kracauer, the "fictional element, rampant as it was, did not interfere with an abundance of documentary shots of the silent world of high altitudes. As documents these films were incomparable achievements" (1947, 110–11). This enduring fascination with landscape suggests connections both with travelogues and educational films and, more specifically, with the French landscape (and seascape) films of André Antoine, Jean Grémillon, and Jean Epstein, all of whom grasped the narrative power immanent in the physical world.<sup>6</sup> Fanck's mountain films conform most closely to the naturalist (romantic) tradition—to adopt Rotha's terminology—characteristic of the films of Robert Flaherty, Merian Cooper, and Ernest Schoedsack.

Flaherty, Cooper, and Schoedsack all saw themselves first and foremost as explorers, not filmmakers (Rony 1996, 99). As "camera explorers," they embodied the nonsynchronicity characteristic of Weimar Germany and modernity more generally in their attempts to capture the timeless struggle of Man against Nature through the use of modern technology (the cinematic apparatus). Although Fanck's explorations were limited to his own backyard, comparatively speaking, his was nonetheless a similarly romantic quest for a lost, ahistorical past to be recovered in the Alps. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Alps were culturally constructed as an antiurban, antimodern space, fulfilling the "quintessentially modern desire for the ahistorical" (Nenno 1996, 310).

Another defining feature of films of exploration is the cultural fascination with the heroic that they reflect. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the explorer was a prominent public figure, appealing to a

desk-bound society's dreams of freedom and adventure. And although more efficient means of transport put explorers in danger of becoming a thing of the past as undiscovered territories became an increasingly rare commodity, modern media made it possible for their endeavors to impress a broader public than ever before, magnifying their glory.<sup>7</sup> The exploration filmmaker trafficked in this rhetoric of courage and daring, making the film's production a spectacle equal to the finished product. Merian Cooper's filmmaking motto—Distant, Difficult, Dangerous—could equally apply to Fanck, who routinely placed himself and his actors in danger, most perilously during the filming of *S.O.S. Iceberg* in Greenland, when the iceberg on which Fanck and his crew were standing began to crumble (Infield 1976). Eric Rentschler observes that contemporary reviews emphasized the "onscreen heroism" and "behind-the-scenes feats of strength" undertaken by a community of "athletic actors" and "daring assistants" (1990, 152). Marc Sorki, assistant director on *The White Hell of Pitz-Palü*, describes his work on the production in terms suggestive of the heroic mindset Fanck demanded:

That was a wonderful picture. The original was shot on location in Switzerland, and it was terribly cold in the mountains in winter. Most of the cast and crew came down with pneumonia. Pabst and Fanck both had a sadistic drive. We really froze. All night long we drank hot wine and punch just to keep breathing (Infield 1976, 28).

How "wonderful!" "We really froze!" The conjunction is telling. The ideal of self-sacrifice central to the plots of many mountain films was a lived reality during their production.

Considering Fanck's mountain films in the light of other films of exploration helps to illuminate why Leni Riefenstahl's presence was considered so disruptive. Explorers traded on their masculine authority, using their cameras as tools of conquest and control. They also reaffirmed traditional notions of masculinity, satisfying the public's need for "an antidote to anxieties about the depletion of agency and virility in consumer and machine culture" (Shapiro 1999, 59). With a few rare exceptions, expeditions were male endeavors.<sup>8</sup>

The Alps themselves were another factor in the mountain film's discourse on masculinity. Reflecting its historical construction as the repository of German national identity, the Alpine landscape provided an effective setting for the reassertion and recuperation of German masculinity in the aftermath of World War I (Nenno 1996, 312). By welcoming Leni Riefenstahl to the mountains, Fanck committed an act of generic transgression. But transgressive acts are compelling, and the conflict

between Riefenstahl's gender and the dangerous world of the mountain film helped propel her to stardom, and, in addition, earned her the admiration of her colleagues.<sup>9</sup>

Having situated Fanck's films in relation to other documentaries of the period, I now move into a more detailed discussion of the mountain film's specifically documentary qualities. David Hinton, one of the few scholars who have paid much attention to Fanck's conception of cinematic realism, credits the director with initiating "one of the earliest realist film movements in cinema history" (1978, 2). The claim is jarring in its breadth but is not without merit in that Fanck's innovations were contemporaneous with advances in realist aesthetics in French cinema, to note just one example.

What made Fanck's a realist cinema? First and foremost was his commitment to location shooting. As Kracauer concedes, "These films were extraordinary in that they captured the most grandiose aspects of nature at a time when the German screen in general offered nothing more but studio-made scenery" (1947, 110). Perhaps because of his limited exposure to film, Fanck had not internalized cinematic conventions and consequently found them easy to reject. He was opposed to the stylized, expressionistic acting that dominated German cinema in the years following World War I. His directorial style was minimal; he gave his actors few instructions but insisted they be natural in both their movements and appearance. Particularly in his nonnarrative early films, physical ability counted for more than acting expertise in any case. Accordingly, he hired athletic amateur actors and unknowns such as Luis Trenker with the ironic result of transforming them into stars. With regard to film structure, Fanck disliked the linear narratives and quick tempo of Hollywood films, aiming instead for a cinema of "contemplation and meditation" (Rentschler 1990, 142). Echoing both the Russian avant-garde filmmaker Dziga Vertov's notion of the *kinoeye* and the French concept of *photogénie*, which referred to the transformative power of the camera, Fanck believed that in its capacity for revelation, the camera surpassed the human eye, claiming "nature remains mute and unexpressive unless captured by a camera" (Rentschler 1990, 146).

Because of the crucial narrative role played by the natural landscape in the mountain film, maintaining the illusion of documentary verisimilitude remained important even after Fanck had made the transition to narrative. The opening titles of *The Holy Mountain* broadcast Fanck's anxiety about authenticity: "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



The awesome mountain slopes of *The White Hell of Pitz-Palü* (1929).

(Photo from the collection of Kevin Brownlow.)

Alps, over the course of one and a half years." Assertions aside, the literature on mountain films includes much debate regarding whether or not Fanck used studio reconstructions for certain scenes, particularly the dramatic climax on the ledge in *The White Hell of Pitz-Palü* (Hinton 1978, 12; Eisner 1952, 312). Eisner's claims that these scenes were recreated in the studio using salt and white powder to simulate the frozen landscape are countered by Riefenstahl's insistence that what distinguished Fanck from other mountain filmmakers was his refusal to compromise his commitment to cinematic realism (1952, 312). "The difference between our mountain films and those made by other directors," Riefenstahl explains, "is that Dr. Fanck never wanted to use a double, didn't use tricks. He wanted everything to be real, like the time I was buried by an avalanche" (Infield 1976, 28). However, I believe that Fanck's (and Riefenstahl's) overarching commitment was to their notion of heroism; realism was merely the prerequisite to maintain the illusion since the power of Fanck's films as spectacles would be severely diminished if the audience did not perceive the dangers faced by his characters as real.

With their clumsy, conventional narratives, Fanck's mountain films would today never be mistaken for documentaries, although they do bear similarities to other documentary approaches of the period. Like the



Leni Riefenstahl and co-star Gustav Diessl keep each other warm in *The White Hell of Pitz-Palü* (1929).

*(Photo from the collection of Kevin Brownlow.)*

French realist film, they reveal an elective affinity between the cinematic medium and natural landscapes. Like the expedition film, they revel in the images of heroism they evoke. Modernity provides the connective tissue among these documentary styles; it is the context they are responding to and reacting against. In Fanck's case, it is a reaction infused with German romanticism and its celebration of the self. His conception of the camera's potential for revelation updates "Schelling's belief that man's awareness of himself and the world around him brings 'the unconscious life in nature to conscious expression'" (Rentschler 1990, 146). The films' intra- and extratextual celebration of a juvenile and self-sacrificing heroism recalls romanticism's elevation of passion and irrationalism (Kracauer 1947; Herf 1984). Where Fanck departs from his own purported aesthetic ideals is his casting of Leni Riefenstahl: her status as a woman disrupts the mountain film's generic ties to the expedition film, her renown as a dancer shatters any illusions of documentary authenticity.

### "A Wild, Innocent Mountain Girl"

As noted earlier, Fanck's claims to realist cinema were undermined by his attachment to melodrama, at least in the opinion of contemporary reviewers, for whom Fanck's narratives departed too dramatically from the conventions of other documentary styles, such as the expedition film.

Leni Riefenstahl likewise considered this disjuncture between form and content problematic; as she told director Ray Müller in his 1993 documentary about her life, “Dr. Fanck’s films, although realistic, were set in fairy tale landscapes. I found that a conflict.”

Riefenstahl’s directorial debut, *The Blue Light*, represents her attempt to address the stylistic contradictions of Fanck’s films by recasting the mountain film in the narrative mode of a fairy tale, complete with a “crystal mountain,” magical stones, and an outcast heroine. However, *The Blue Light* contains plenty of intriguing aesthetic disjunctions of its own, experimenting with techniques associated with realist modes of production to achieve effects that pay tribute to romanticism. Eric Rentschler has characterized these discordances in terms of Weimar Germany’s particular brand of reactionary modernism: “Riefenstahl’s debut, a film that mines the romantic legacy with the tools of modernity, provides a curious merging of anti-modernism and instrumental will, a blend of romanticism and enlightenment, a pronounced double talk at once conscious of the appeal of the past and equally wise to the ways of the present” (1989, 50).

Another lens through which to read the curious disjunctions of *The Blue Light* is an ethnographic one. Perhaps to an even greater degree than the documentary, the ethnographic film was an ill-defined genre in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), usually considered the first ethnographic film in standard texts in the discipline, was hailed for its contribution to the development of *documentary* film in contemporary reviews. Nor was Cooper and Schoedsack’s depiction of the epic migration of the Persian Bakhtiari tribe in *Grass* (1925) praised for its ethnographic qualities, although it was lauded for its “startling novelty” and the power of its “simple emotional and esthetic honesty” (*Literary Digest* 1925, 27).

As a discipline, ethnography was still in its salad days, with a number of foundational texts such as Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and Franz Boas’s *Anthropology and Modern Life* (1928) published in the 1920s. More generally, the interwar period presented an “ethnographic moment” during which the rise of modernism fueled a corresponding fascination with the primitive. While ethnographic film may not yet have been articulated as a genre, films such as *Nanook of the North* nonetheless incorporated—intentionally or not—ethnographic principles such as Malinowski’s concept of participant observation.<sup>10</sup>

Historical context aside, what makes a film ethnographic? Ethnographic filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall foregrounds the intercultural aspects of ethnography: “An ethnographic film may be regarded as any film which seeks to reveal one society to another. It

may be concerned with the physical life of a people or with the nature of social experience...the aim of interpreting one society to another is what underlies its kinship with anthropology. Without this aim, a film like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, so revealing of Nazi psychology and values, could properly be called an ethnographic film" (1969–1970:16). Yet offering *Triumph of the Will* as a counter example to the ethnographic film's intercultural emphasis may not be entirely apt if we consider the film in light of the cultural climate of 1930s Germany and the political mission of the Reich. In its concern to construct a unified German identity, the Reich mobilized the concept of the Volk, the true German people or race. The traditional peasant was thought to embody this desired racial and cultural purity, a symbolic transformation of the internal Other to the national ideal.<sup>11</sup> By the early twentieth century, the majority of Germans lived in towns and cities, and the creation of the peasant cult so central to National Socialist ideology can be considered an intercultural act, between urban and rural, if not national cultures (Peukert 1993, 10; Kamenetsky 1972).

With this notion of the intercultural in mind, to what degree can *The Blue Light* be considered an ethnographic film? Based on "a mountain legend from the Dolomites," a phrase overheard by Riefenstahl while on a hiking tour and used in the film's opening credits, *The Blue Light* draws its source from folklore, a discipline allied to ethnography in its emphasis on traditional culture. While both concerned with customs and rituals, the folkloric film and the ethnographic film differ in the latter's traditional focus on *non-Western* societies and the collaborative role frequently played by anthropologists (Sherman 1998, 57–63).<sup>12</sup>

Rather than recreate the traditional culture of the Italian Alps using actors or constructed sets, Riefenstahl wanted to film the real thing and spent four weeks location scouting in the Dolomites until she found a village that matched the picturesque ideal she had imagined. However, her plan to persuade the villagers to participate in her project proved challenging as David Hinton's account of Riefenstahl's experience in the village of Sarentino suggests:

It was no easy task to get them to perform before her cameras, since none of them had an idea what a film was, and few of them had ever ventured beyond the secluded valley in which they were born. Riefenstahl's first attempts even to converse with them were silently rebuffed, so she rented a room in the village's small boarding house and spent days slowly making acquaintances in the village. She was determined to win their confidence, since their rugged, individualistic faces, which seemed to her to be right out

of a Dürer etching, mirrored the right amount of suspicion and distrust for the villagers of Santa Maria. Slowly but surely the villagers came to trust her, and finally agreed to do what she was asking. (1978, 20–21)

In establishing herself in the village and gaining the people's trust over time, Riefenstahl adopted a modified version of the time-intensive approach advocated by other early ethnographic filmmakers such as Flaherty, Cooper, and Schoedsack, who spent at least a year (significantly more in the case of Flaherty) in the field with their subjects. What this description also makes clear is the extent to which Riefenstahl was dealing with a foreign culture; not only did the villagers speak a different language, but they lived in a different era, their geographic isolation having sheltered them thus far from the onslaught of modernity.

Riefenstahl's visual treatment of the peasants also recalls that of indigenous peoples in other ethnographic films. In a manner reminiscent of Flaherty's famous portrait of Nanook, she lets the camera linger closely on the villagers, their wizened faces a synecdoche for their traditional way of life. Riefenstahl's "ethnographic gaze" did not go unnoticed; Hinton mentions that the "*Berliner Morgenpost* was particularly excited about the performance of the villagers, noting that, 'appearing as if carved out of hardwood, they give the film background and color'" (1978, 21), while the Nazi film historian Oskar Kalbus "praised the racial hardiness of their physiognomies, the features of people who had descended from the Visigoths" (Rentschler 1989, 61). *The Blue Light* was also the film that brought Riefenstahl to Hitler's attention. Considering his perception of the peasant as the "cornerstone of the whole nation," his approbation further suggests the alignment between Riefenstahl's romantic representation of the villagers and the function of the peasant in Nazi ideology (Kamenetsky 1972, 228).

But with visual representation comes the risk of exploitation, for, to varying degrees, reality is almost always manipulated to serve the filmmaker's purposes. This risk is particularly acute in ethnographic film because of the cultural differences and imbalance of power that divide the filmmaker from the subject. The disjunctions of *The Blue Light* surface in relation to this issue of exploitation. Set amidst dramatic Alpine scenery, the film tells the story of Junta (Riefenstahl), a mysterious young woman who is treated as a pariah as a result of her unique ability to access a remote mountain grotto whose crystals emit an entrancing blue light. An admirer of Junta's succeeds in following her to the grotto and shows a map of the route to the villagers, thus putting an end to her mountain sanctuary and indirectly leading to her death.

On the one hand, *The Blue Light* can be read as a critique of the pillaging of nature at the hands of modernity. Not only is Junta's cave destroyed by rapacious villagers eager to sell its crystals for a profit, but the legend that surrounds Junta after her death contributes to the village's transformation into a tourist site. On the other hand, outside of the text, Riefenstahl takes full advantage of the setting and the innocence of the villagers to realize her romantic vision of purity and beauty. Similarly, although she repeatedly describes her character, Junta, as an innocent mountain girl, this designation "contrasts with the less than innocent strategies of Riefenstahl's camera, its presentation of the mountain girl as an erotic presence and a seductive force" (Rentschler 1989, 65). Belying its veneer of simplicity, *The Blue Light* is technically sophisticated—Riefenstahl developed a new method of shooting day for night—and assured work in which the fledgling director expertly packaged both herself and the national past.

Like most fairy tales, *The Blue Light* is an ambiguous text, open to a number of interpretations. In the film's simultaneous critique and practice of exploitation, Rentschler sees "a striking self-legitimizing brand of instrumental rationality" that foreshadows the actions and ideology of the Third Reich (1989, 62). Taking an opposite position, Hinton argues that the film should be read as "a warning against Hitler, not a preparation for him" because of its negative depiction of the Volk as avaricious and closed minded (1978, 23). If we believe Riefenstahl, the film was just a chance to give free rein to her "juvenile sense of romanticism and the beautiful image" (Infield 1976, 29). That the film won the approval of no less an audience than Hitler suggests the success of Riefenstahl's ethnographic endeavor; by deeming traditional culture an appealing background for her film, Riefenstahl both reflects and reinforces the concept of the Volk cultivated by National Socialism.

### Fantasies of *Fernweh*

In her memoirs, Riefenstahl ascribes the impetus for *The Blue Light* to her subconscious. "I began to dream," she writes, "and my dreams turned into images of a young girl who lived in the mountains, a creature of nature. I saw her climbing, saw her in the moonlight" (Rentschler 1996, 30). What this description suggests and the film confirms is that *The Blue Light* is the dream of a romantic tomboy. Junta succeeds where men fail, affirming her superiority by ascending the mountain that has caused the death of many men. Yet she is also the film's object of sexual desire, always attractively disheveled and winning the heart of the handsome young



Leni Riefenstahl as Junta in *The Blue Light* (1932).  
(Photo from the collection of Kevin Brownlow.)

man from Vienna. By foregrounding the exceptional physical abilities of its female heroine, *The Blue Light* challenges the mountain film's conflation of masculinity and heroism. However, the film's fairy-tale structure contains this challenge within acceptable social norms, transforming the independent outcast into a more conventional damsel in distress. The folkloric framework provides the ideal setting for Riefenstahl's "dream"; the semiethnographic depiction of peasant life lends the film the air of authenticity and legitimacy Riefenstahl craved, while the generic familiarity of the fairy-tale narrative works to neutralize the more transgressive aspects of the film's treatment of gender. In its marriage of the ethnographic and the fantastic, folklore likewise provides a way for Riefenstahl to reconcile the formal incongruities of Fanck's earlier mountain films with their documentary realism and melodramatic plot lines.

Riefenstahl was not the only filmmaker demonstrating an interest in traditional culture during the 1930s. Departing from the non-Western focus of his earlier films, Robert Flaherty returned to the land of his forebears to film *Man of Aran* (1934) on the Aran Islands, off Ireland's western coast. Flaherty's desire to depict Irish traditional culture was so strong that he encouraged the islanders to revive activities—such as the use of harpoons in the shark hunt depicted in the film—they no longer practiced. Yet, as in his other ethnographic films, Flaherty went abroad in his romantic quest for an ahistorical past unpolluted by modernity.

What distinguishes *The Blue Light* and the mountain films of Arnold Fanck from other expedition and ethnographic films of the period is that, while these genres are portraits of "elsewhere," of foreign people in foreign lands, in the mountain film, elsewhere is right here in Germany. The German concept of *Fernweh*, the impossible dream of the far-away place where wholeness awaits, may suggest an explanation. By definition, *Fernweh* is a state of unfulfillment, of longing, of becoming, a dream of elsewhere that must remain unrealized. Instead of another country, in the mountain film, elsewhere is the idealized landscape of beauty and purity articulated by German romanticism and made all the more attractive through contrast with modernity. Unlike the propaganda films produced for the Nazi's "Blood and Soil" program, the mountain films of Fanck and Riefenstahl remain shrouded in a romantic, egocentric quest for self-fulfillment that to some degree sequesters them from the realm of the political. And in choosing to adopt an ethnographic approach in her version of the mountain film, Riefenstahl underscores the extent to which traditional culture was considered distinct from that of modern, urban Germany, an observation that distances her work from the Third Reich's attempt to naturalize the peasant as a symbol of German national identity.

## Notes

1. In her essay "Fascinating Fascism," Susan Sontag recapitulates Kracauer's position in suggesting that the mountain films present "an anthology of proto-Nazi sentiments," although she does acknowledge that such political interpretations are anachronistic considering the genre's apolitical contemporary status (1980, 76). Other popular studies follow Kracauer's lead in promulgating the erroneous view of the mountain film as "an exclusively German" genre (1947, 110); see also David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (second ed, 1990, 129–30n, cited in Rentschler (1990, 138). Such interpretations ignore the fact that Switzerland, Austria, and France also produced films set in the Alps during the 1920s as well as the influence of

- earlier Swedish landscape films, such as Victor Sjöström's *The Outlaw and His Wife* (1918) and Mauritz Stiller's *Snows of Destiny* (1919). See Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (1984, 102).
2. Kracauer popularized this perception of Weimar cinema in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), in which he suggests the “master narrative” of both Weimar cinema and culture to be that of Oedipus. According to Kracauer's analysis, the Oedipal logic of the dramas depicted on screen served to reflect the crisis of male subjectivity that ensued from Germany's defeat in World War I and the political and economic instability of the 1920s. For a critique of this perspective, see Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (1989, 9–17) and Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (2000).
  3. The relationship between the mountain film and the crisis in masculinity is discussed in Rentschler (1990) and Nenno (1996). Rentschler notes the emphasis on “masculine authenticity” in contemporary reviews of mountain films, while Nenno persuasively suggests that in the mountain film, the Alpine setting—through its cultural construction as the German national landscape—provides a site of recuperation for German masculine identity damaged as a result of defeat in World War I.
  4. The structure, while most clearly observable in *The Holy Mountain*, also exists in variation in *The White Hell of Pitz Palü* (1929), *Avalanche* (1930), and *S.O.S. Iceberg* (1933).
  5. Kracauer writes disparagingly of Fanck's fondness for “combining precipices and passions, inaccessible steppes and insoluble human conflicts” (1947, 110), while Eisner notes “the discordances inherent in the conjunction of natural images and melodramatic plots, which is what we get in most mountain films” (1952, 312).
  6. See Antoine's *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1919), Jean Grémillon's *Gardiens de phare* (1929), and Jean Epstein's *Finis Terrae* (1929), all filmed on location using non-actors, at least in part (Abel 1984, 500–513).
  7. Documentary accounts of the Antarctic voyages made by Scott (*The Undying Story of Captain Scott*, 1913) and Byrd (*With Byrd at the South Pole*, 1930), and of Mallory's ascent of Mt. Everest (*Epic of Everest*, 1924) were among the popular expedition films of the period (Brownlow 1979). In *S.O.S. Iceberg* (1933), the story of a search party sent to rescue a missing expedition in Greenland, Fanck references the expedition genre directly.
  8. Francis Flaherty accompanied her husband to the Canadian arctic for the filming of much of *Nanook of the North*; and the husband and wife team of Osa and Martin Johnson made numerous films of their travels in Africa and the South Seas (Brownlow 1979). Marguerite Harrison, a journalist and spy, accompanied Cooper and Schoedsack on their arduous Persian trek, but her presence in the film is minimal.
  9. Marc Sorki's praise for Riefenstahl is predicated upon her gender: “Riefenstahl was wonderful...in this picture (*The White Hell of Pitz-Palü*) she was driving herself as hard as anybody and more. She worked day and night...She would work extremely hard, harder than anybody. Even Pabst had to admire her. He said: ‘It's terrible. What a woman!’” (cited in Infield 1976, 28).

10. Some critics and scholars consider *Nanook* a collaborative work because Flaherty showed rushes to his Inuit crew and encouraged their participation in all aspects of the production. See Rony, 1996, 118.
11. Marianna Torgovnick notes in her study of modernist primitivism, "fascism had both positive and negative versions of the primitive...the Aryan folk were the 'vital' primitive" (1990, 253–54).
12. Since the 1970s, a paradigm shift has occurred within ethnographic film-making practice as filmmakers have increasingly trained their cameras on themselves and their own societies. Another important recent development within ethnographic film is the advent of indigenous media production. For further discussion of these changes in relation to folkloric film, see Sherman (1998:63).

## Filmography

- Avalanche [Stürme über dem Mont Blanc]* (1930). 73 min. Arnold Fanck  
*Battle for the Matterhorn [Der Kampf ums Matterhorn]* (1928). 82 min. Mario Bonnard and Nunzio Malasomma  
*The Blue Light [Das blaue Licht]* (1932). 70 min. Leni Riefenstahl  
*Epic of Everest* (1924). J.B.L. Noel  
*Finis terrae* (1929). 80 min. Jean Epstein  
*Gardiens de phare* (1929). 80 min. Jean Grémillon  
*Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925). 70 min. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack  
*The Holy Mountain [Der heilige berg]* (1926). 106 min. Arnold Fanck  
*Man of Aran* (1934). 76 min. Robert Flaherty  
*The Miracle of Skiing [Das Wunder des Schneeschuhs]* (1920). Arnold Fanck  
*Mountain of Destiny [Der berg des schicksals]* (1924). 60 min. Arnold Fanck.  
*Nanook of the North* (1922). 79 min. Robert Flaherty  
*The Outlaw and his Wife [Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru]* (1918), 102 min. Victor Sjöström  
*Snows of Destiny [Herr Arnes pengar]* (1919). 122 min. Mauritz Stiller  
*S.O.S. Iceberg [S.O.S. Eisberg]* (1933). 90 min. Arnold Fanck  
*The Struggle with the Mountain [Im Kampf mit dem berge]* (1921). 54 min. Arnold Fanck  
*Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1919). André Antoine  
*Triumph of the Will [Triumph des Willens]* (1935). 110 min. Leni Riefenstahl  
*The Undying Story of Captain Scott* (1913). 90 min.  
*The White Hell of Pitz-Palü [Die weiße hölle vom Piz Palü]* (1929). 150 min. Arnold Fanck and Georg Wilhelm Pabst  
*With Byrd at the South Pole* (1930). 82 min. Joseph T. Rucker and Willard van der Veer  
*The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl [Die macht der bilder: Leni Riefenstahl]* (1993). 181 min. Ray Müller

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