

Second on the rope or a comrade to protect? - Women in early mountain films

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Unlike other sports, mountaineering took a long time to be accepted by society and to establish itself as a mainstream sport. The idea that people might voluntarily expose themselves to danger at high altitudes and take unnecessary risks for no good reason often met with skepticism.

It is hardly remarkable that female mountain climbers excited even more criticism than their male counterparts: Men were expected to put themselves in harm's way during wars and excelled in other dangerous and heroic activities, therefore such daredevilry tended to be forgiven more easily or even encouraged. But societies were far less tolerant of women who did such things.

However, by the 20ies mountaineering had turned from an elitist pastime for the upper classes to a popular sport. The alpine clubs counted hundreds of thousands of members. In this context also an increasing number of women took to the slopes. At the same time there were other means of expression flourishing on the continent—one of these was cinema.

In fact, the period of the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) is often considered the golden age of German movie making. Its development goes hand in hand with the historical and political development of the country. This also applies to the so-called "Bergfilme" (Mountain Films) made during this period and the later era of fascism. What images of women appeared in these contexts? What role was granted to them in Mountain Films and how did it become fashionable for female mountaineers to appear on the screen?

For the most part, these representations of women were fashioned by male directors. Only one female director in Europe took up the theme of mountaineering in the 1930s, and this was Leni Riefenstahl.

I will discuss the representation of women in 4 films that have Alpine settings during the period between the wars. Ernst Lubitsch's *Meyer from Berlin*, Arnold Fanck's *The White Hell of Piz Palu*, Luis Trenker's *The Prodigal Son* and Mario Craveri's *Maratona Bianca*.

Ernst Lubitsch's *Meyer aus Berlin*

The first is a silent film from 1919, Ernst Lubitsch's comedy *Meyer aus Berlin* [Meyer from Berlin]. The film is structured like a five-act play, and still seems to be extraordinarily modern, especially in its treatment of gender roles.

This film is about a tourist couple; Solly (played by the director himself) is a bored and rather childish husband who is a smart aleck and would-be womanizer. In order to get away from his wife Paula (Ethel Orff), he has a doctor prescribe a vacation in the mountains. He meets Kitty (Trude Troll) and with her he climbs Mount Watzmann. Meanwhile Solly's wife Paula decides to go find him. On the train she meets Harry (Heinz Landsmann) who is Kitty's fiancé. They follow the two climbers to a rustic cabin and go to sleep without recognizing Solly and Kitty who arrived earlier and are already sleeping. In the morning, first a fight breaks out, but eventually all are reconciled once more.

The film is a satire that pokes fun at urban tourists in the mountains. Solly is a ridiculous figure. Kitty is portrayed as a modern climber. She is confident and wears mountaineer's trousers (which was not at all common at this time). Unlike Solly who is a miserable and timid climber, Kitty serves as a pillar of strength as well as a guide. While she climbs effortlessly up the mountain, Solly trudges after her, gasping for breath. Despite this, Solly brags about what a good climber he is and about all the peaks that he has already conquered. He constantly gets tangled in the ropes and at times appears to be led along as if he were on a leash. Kitty is in high spirits, enjoying the views and clearly having a good time while climbing. Solly, on the other hand, can think only of eating and going home. Paula, Solly's wife, is a good and determined climber too. In this story women are the strong figures while the supposedly strong male (Solly) is portrayed as a blustery windbag and a big baby.

The mountain peaks are the places where truth and knowledge are revealed. Despite being an overgrown child and a fool even Solly is not immune to the purifying effect of the Alps. Like Dante's Beatrice, the "angelic guide" who leads him up and then back down the mountain are women. In this setting Solly is certainly not "first on the rope" because there are only women whose strength and courage are left to withstand the challenge of the mountains. The film is surprisingly modern and if a woman had made it, she would have been regarded as a man-hating virago.

German Mountain Films

Several films were made with Alpine settings in the 1920s, but it was Arnold Fanck who created the genre of the *Bergfilm* [Mountain Film]. His films were unlike any others made at this time; he succeeded in getting shots of climbing, avalanches, crevasses and ridges of snow and rock as no one had ever done before. The mountains in Fanck's films are not only wonderful settings, but they become actual protagonists in the action. However, they are places where only a certain type of people have access—brave, strong, selfless people who climb mountains for idealistic reasons. For Fanck climbers do not ascend mountains for sport, but to participate in a sort of religious experience. As the American writer and mountaineer James Ullman said, quoting a Swiss mountain guide, "We Swiss—yes, and the English and the French and Americans, too—we climb mountains for sport. But the Germans, no. What it is they climb for I do not know. Only it is not for sport."

The films of Arnold Fanck clearly show this concept of "heroic idealism" in mountaineering. Mountains are battlefields and those who climb them are like soldiers who must test themselves in combat. They carry out their human conflicts amid deep valleys, freezing blizzards and thundering avalanches of snow and rock. In this regard it can truly be said that the development of Mountain Films confirms the Nazi tendencies of the time as something with a specifically German profile. This is also the opinion of philosopher Susan Sontag who points out that "the visually irresistible metaphor of unlimited aspiration toward the high mystic goal, both beautiful and terrifying", which can be found in Fanck's pictures and other Bergfilms, "was later to become concrete in Führer-worship."

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Although women generally were not permitted to join the inner circle of mountain heroes, there were of course a few exceptions that disproved the rule. From time to time one particular young, modern, professional sportswoman found herself linked on the line along with other male climbers. This woman would play a major if not the principal role in Arnold Fanck's films. The climber was played by Leni Riefenstahl, and it was her image that shaped the conception of women climbers for an entire era. She became a popular movie star: she was later dubbed the "Nazi Pin-up girl" by American writer Budd Schulberg, and there is considerable justification for this sobriquet.

Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü

I will discuss here Fanck's film *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* [The White Hell of Pitz Palu] from 1929, a love story grafted onto a mountain drama that ends happily despite high-altitude emergencies and, horrible hardships.

Fanck always required a great deal from his actors and crew; he often exposed them to real danger when he intentionally triggered avalanches, forced them to perform or simply wait around for hours in the depths of crevasses or while storms were raging. "Trick photography," writes Riefenstahl, "simply would not do." She also learned how to scale steep, overhanging cliffs and to drive in pitons. It became more difficult when in *The Great Leap* she was forced to climb shoeless to the top of one of the Dolomites despite bleeding feet.

In *The White Hell of Pitz Palu*, Riefenstahl's character Maria is portrayed as a brave and tenacious climber. She may never be first on the rope, but she does not endanger the others on the line. She is young, healthy and fairly uncomplicated—the ideal partner on a rope. Although the men in the film pretend to be strong and heroic, they still display immature behavior, and compared to them, Maria seems to be able to cope better than they with the serious situation they find themselves in. She is a kind of superwoman—always perfect and beautiful, and a far cry from a *Mannsweib am Berg* [Mannish-woman of the mountainside], the insulting name that was often hurled at female climbers.

According to later Nazi ideology, the female figure that Riefenstahl embodied was the one that would serve as the model for the "emergence of a new, strong and healthy human generation," namely the physically strong and mentally healthy, loyal, dutiful and selfless woman. It was not by chance that Hitler defined Riefenstahl as his "perfect German woman". As an exponent of the German mountain film Riefenstahl therefore does not so much promote the female climber or sportswoman as a free and self-conscious woman, but she rather contributes to the establishment and divulgation of the ideal Nazi human being and fascist aesthetics.

***Der verlorene Sohn* by Luis Trenker**

Just as in the 1920s Leni Riefenstahl had come to the movies through acting, so did Luis Trenker. He marks the connection between the mountain film and the patriotic or nationalistic film. Compared with Fanck and Riefenstahl, in Trenker's films women play only a secondary role (if

that). In the Mountain Films, they are the good little mothers, sweethearts or wives in the valley—those who pack the rucksacks and worry about their sons, fiancés or husbands. They hardly ever go up on the mountains. If a woman climbed the mountains, she was a tourist from the city, as in the film *The Prodigal Son* from 1934.

It is precisely this cliché of the female climber that we encounter in the character of Lilian Williams (Marian Marsh) in *The Prodigal Son*: a rich and attractive American tourist who is a spoiled and ambitious young woman who has taken it into her head to climb the Weißhorn, a difficult and unconquered peak.

During the ascent an accident occurs. Lilian is entirely dependent on her mountain guide's strength and skill. She is the frail rich girl who must be protected. The biblical quote in the film's title is reflected variously in references to how Lilian (another Eve) destroys the all-male Eden (represented by the mountain) by invading it.

Maratona Bianca

Finally, we will examine the 1935 documentary film, *Maratona Bianca* [White Marathon] by Mario Craveri with the participation of alpine athletes Giusto Gervasutti and Paula Wiesinger. This is a 12-minute short subject documentary about the Mezzalama Race, a high-altitude skiing and climbing contest that runs 45 kilometers from Gressoney to the Matterhorn in the Aosta region of Northwestern Italy. It reconstructs in documentary style some extraordinary scenes of a roped skiing/climbing party led by Gervasutti. Most amazingly, after one of Gervasutti's team members must retire due to an injury, the female skier/climber Paula Wiesinger is smuggled into the race by concealing herself in the windbreaker, cap and original number of the injured man. Her disguise is not discovered until she reaches a checkpoint near the end of the race. She thus predated by forty years the first "legal" female entrant who was allowed to participate in 1975.

Of the 4 Mountain Films that have been discussed, Ernst Lubitsch's Meyer from Berlin and this short documentary is undoubtedly the most modern. It is a brief and amusing fiction in form of adocumentary that presents the female climber as the woman she is: athletic, well trained, unpretentious and second to no man in terms of athleticism. By focusing on the rules of the Mezzalama competition that allowed only men to participate, Paula Wiesinger was consciously provoking the organizers of the event.

Wiesinger was one of the best climbers and skiers of her time, winning many international ski races and recording many first ascents. It was Wiesinger who became the epitome for all female climbers in Europe and perhaps also due to the outward resemblance to the famous actress Leni Riefenstahl helped shape the image of the female climber in Europe.

Conclusion

The film critic and philosopher Siegfried Kracauer's thesis that film faithfully reflects society on the one hand and on the other hand depicts it the way it wants to be seen is confirmed in the images of the female climbers that we have discussed.

The audience for these characters corresponds to the audience that Kracauer had in mind: mainly urban shop girls – that is to say “common people from the lower classes”. Since they often found it difficult to escape from their humdrum routines, the female climbers in these films must have seemed rather exciting and exotic. The women on the screen had beautiful physiques and opportunities for adventure; they were free to move and burst into places to which only a privileged few had access. They could be heroines – not just the little heroines of everyday life as anyone might be – but protagonists in exciting exploits.

Concluding we can say that women are portrayed variously in Mountain Films as “spiritual leaders” and rescuers (like in *Meyer from Berlin*), as mythical spirits of nature (like in Riefenstahl's *Blue Light*), as “Daughters of Eve” who despoil an earthly paradise (like in Trenker's *The Prodigal Son*) or as unshakable super women and trespassers who barge into a world not meant for them in the two films we have taken into consideration in this lecture. None of these are very real, but they are indicative of the roles played by athletic women in the Interwar era. Despite the passage of time, many of these stereotypes are still present in films depicting women who are physically strong, mentally courageous and morally resilient. Nevertheless, there will always be women who are “first on the rope” whether they are portrayed in films or not.