

INTREPID MOUNTAINEERS AND DAMSELS IN DISTRESS: THE SPORTSWOMAN IN THE BERGFILM

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INTRODUCTION

The municipal museum in the Tyrolean city of Kitzbühel, one of the cradles of mountain sports tourism, contains an extensive collection of works by the artist Alfons Walde (1891-1958), who dedicated much of his art to portraying the world of Alpine sport. Notable among the pieces on display is a drawing titled *Winterträume* ("Winter Dreams", circa 1925), which shows a skier contemplating snow-covered mountains whose slopes appear to form the shapes of nude women lying side by side as if floating in a white cloud. This picture is surrounded by other works of Walde's, many depicting skiers. The vast majority are of men, but there are exceptions, such as the oil painting *Zwei Skifahrerinnen* ("Two Female Skiers", 1914). However, in the same room of the museum there is also a diverse collection of Walde's photographs and drawings of women, completely naked or exposing their thighs or

breasts, constituting a sample of erotic portraits that reflect the relaxed customs and the sexualisation of the female body that characterised the interwar period. All in all, this room of the Kitzbühel museum offers both sides of the artist: his

Image 1. *Winterträume* (Alfons Walde, ca. 1925). Pencil on paper. Das Museum Kitzbühel - Sammlung Alfons Walde. Photograph by author





Image 2. Bucolic contemplation and extreme adventure in *The Holy Mountain* (Arnold Fanck, 1926)

passion for mountains and his passion for women, which are combined in *Winterträume* in a fusion of the living landscape and the erotic in the eyes of a sportsman.

In the same period that Walde drew his erotic Alpine daydream, the German filmmaker Arnold Fanck was using the same landscapes to develop the genre of the *Bergfilm*, mountain films in which a spectacular display of sporting activities, especially mountain climbing and skiing, along with footage of weather phenomena, would come into tension with plotlines constructed within the parameters of melodrama and the love triangle story. In the 1920s and early 1930s, during the transition from silent films to talkies, Fanck made documentaries and fiction films with the support of a stable team of athletes who were willing, like him, to turn a film shoot into an adventure, or vice versa. Notable among his collaborators were Leni Riefenstahl, Luis Trenker (who had Alfons Walde illustrate some of the covers of his novels) and the cinematographers Sepp Allgeier and Hans Schneeberger. The main corpus of *Bergfilme* directed by Fanck is comprised of six titles starring Leni Riefenstahl: *The Holy Mountain* (*Der heilige Berg*, 1926), *The Great Leap* (*Der große Sprung*, 1927),

The White Hell of Piz Palu (*Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü*, co-directed with Georg Wilhelm Pabst, 1929), *Storm over Mont Blanc* (*Stürme über dem Mont Blanc*, 1930), *The White Ecstasy* (*Der weiße Rausch*, 1931) and *S.O.S. Iceberg* (*S.O.S. Eisberg*, 1933). Also worthy of inclusion in the corpus are two other films that help define and delimit the genre: *Mountain of Destiny* (*Berg des Schicksals*, 1924), directed by Fanck but without Riefenstahl, as it contains numerous narrative and aesthetic elements that are similar to the other films, and was in fact what led Riefenstahl, who at the time was a dancer, to seek out the opportunity to work with Fanck; and *The Blue Light* (*Das blaue Licht*, 1932), Riefenstahl's directorial debut.

The *Bergfilm* enjoyed its heyday in the years of the Weimar Republic, coinciding chronologically with the progressive rise of National Socialism that would bring Hitler to power in 1933. For this reason, it receives special attention in Sigfried Kracauer's landmark work *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1985), originally published in 1947. For Kracauer, with its exaltation of nature the *Bergfilm* represented a hymn to irrationality and anti-modernity that paved the way for the reactionary sentiments of Nazism. Kracauer's theory

is supported by the prominence in the corpus of Riefenstahl, who would go on to make *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1935). For decades, this perspective was taken as the guiding principle for the analysis of the *Bergfilm*, until Eric Rentschler (1990), based on both historical archive sources and the analysis of the films themselves, questioned Kracauer's assertions and explored the complexity of the production, text and reception of these films.¹

According to Rentschler, one of the most important issues that Kracauer overlooked in his analysis was the question of sexual difference and the roles assigned to women: "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" (Rentschler, 1990: 153). This potential for harm is expressed in ominous female characters whose sexuality is equivalent to the dangerous and devastating forces of nature: "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" (1990: 156). This identification of women with mountains recalls Walde's eroticised landscape and the connection it makes between female sexuality and the mysteries of nature. Later in his analysis, however, Rentschler nuances the identification of the woman with a pristine nature when he also identifies a force of modernity in the depiction of Fanck's female characters, especially in *Storm over Mont Blanc*.

This article offers an analysis of the *Bergfilm* based on a feature of the genre that defines gender roles in similar terms: mountain sports. Athletic activities in nature always played a central role in Fanck's filmography, whether in their

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dimensions as mystic experience, adventure or sport, thereby documenting a historical process of capitalist development that saw a shift in the human relationship with mountains from a religious experience to their use as a setting for sports and tourism, without these ever completely replacing the earlier dimension. In this way, a productive relationship was established between nature and technology, tradition and modernity, which Rentschler uses to argue against the perspective of Kracauer, who dismisses these films as anti-modern (1990: 145-148).²

The purpose of this article is to analyse the *Bergfilm* from a gender perspective in order to explore the role played by female characters in the skiing and mountaineering world depicted in this genre. To this end, it focuses on the figure of the sportswoman in all six films directed by Arnold Fanck that feature Leni Riefenstahl, in addition to the films *Mountain of Destiny* (in which the female character is played by Hertha von Walther) and *The Blue Light* (directed and starring Riefenstahl). The next section offers a brief outline of the gender conflict provoked by Riefenstahl's entry into the male-dominated world of Arnold Fanck's films. This is followed by an exploration of the films from a narrative perspective that considers the role and agency of each female character in relation to sport.

LENI RIEFENSTAHL'S ARRIVAL

In Fanck's book *Wunder des Schneeschuhs ein System des richtigen Skilaufens und seine Anwendung im alpinen Geländelauf*, which he co-wrote with the skier Hans Schneider in 1925 and which was subsequently translated into French under the title *Les Merveilles du ski* (The Wonders of Skiing), the authors dedicate only one section to women in this sport, titled "Le vêtement féminin" (Women's Attire). Arguing that their outfits should be both pretty and practical, they suggest that "in general, women should seek a compromise between the demands of pure practicality and those of aesthetics. But the latter should not be neglected. Because, and this is simply true of all that they do, women only ski for men; they need to have an elegant appearance while skiing, in order to please men" (Fanck & Schneider, 1931: 36-37).

Fanck and Schneider wrote these observations around the same time that Leni Riefenstahl, who was taking a break in her career as a dancer due to an injury, discovered *Mountain of Destiny* and got in touch with its director (Fanck) and its star (Trenker) in the hope of working with them. According to Steven Bach's biography of Riefenstahl, sport had permeated every aspect of her life since her teenage years, including her performance at school, her training as a dancer, the way she expressed her sexuality in social interactions and, most notably, in the fact that her first performance in a film was in a small role in the documentary *Ways to Strength and Beauty* (*Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, Wilhelm Prager, 1925). A clear precursor to Riefenstahl's own film *Olympia* (1938), *Ways to Strength and Beauty* presented sport as an activity inherited from Greco-Latin culture that could help strengthen the race (Bach, 2008: 43-44). But although Riefenstahl was quite familiar with playing sports, she had no experience in the mountains. She worked hard to correct this shortcoming so that she could take part in Fanck's films. She was thus able to join the director's select

group of collaborators, a male-dominated community in which she developed some rocky romantic and professional relationships. Her efforts to learn mountaineering and skiing gave her professional legitimacy despite the reservations of others in the group who had been doing these sports since childhood, who saw her as an intrusive upstart trying to move up in the film world and become a star (Bach, 2008: 75).

This conflict needs to be understood in the context of the Weimar Republic, which was characterised by a relaxation of social norms, especially in the cities, and by greater freedom for women in the public sphere. Riefenstahl was representative of this phenomenon, which was seen as a threat by certain social groups that would subsequently play a key role in the rise of Nazism.³ Moreover, her participation in Fanck's films had consequences for the film text. Rebecca Prime locates Fanck's work in what Paul Rotha referred to in 1935 as "the naturalist (romantic) tradition" of documentary, which also included Robert J. Flaherty and the duo of Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack. Like these directors, Fanck was an explorer who used filmmaking technology to capture the eternal struggle of Man against Nature, and who was fascinated with heroism, both in the finished film and in its production process. According to Prime,

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. (2007: 59)

In the particular case of Fanck, this kind of masculine authority encapsulated the symbolic significance of the Alps, a place where the German man could recover his identity after the disaster of the First World War (Prime, 2007: 59). Prime argues that Riefenstahl's arrival not only consti-

tuted an intrusion by a woman into this male-dominated professional world, but also consolidated the *Bergfilm* genre's shift from documentary to melodrama, a shift that Fanck had initiated with *Mountain of Destiny*.

How was Riefenstahl's integration and rejection in this cinematic community of mountaineers and skiers reflected in the fiction films? How did Fanck's camera document this intrusion by a sportswoman into a sportsman's world? Fanck and Schneider's assertions about skiing attire mentioned at the beginning of this section, together with the Alfons Walde drawing discussed at the beginning of this article, might lead us to assume that Riefenstahl was admitted to Fanck's films as a decorative athlete, with an emphasis placed on the eroticisation of her body. This would tie in with the concept of "expected femininity" posited by Tatiana Sentamans in her fascinating text *Amazonas mecánicas*, which analyses photographic representations of sportswomen in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s. Sentamans uses "expected femininity", a term associated with Pierre Bourdieu's *pose*, to refer to photographs in which women in sporting gear are presented in repose, passive, never playing the sport, sometimes lined up in rows like choirgirls, or in artificial poses, with no trace of fatigue and more interested in smiling for the camera than breaking a record (Sentamans, 2010: 171-191).⁴

Riefenstahl is hardly representative of this docile, submissive "expected femininity". In fact, she would be more suited to another concept used by Sentamans, "unexpected masculinity", referring to cases where the sportswoman is photographed apparently spontaneously, at a moment of "strain" or "action" in which the absence of a pose effectively strips away the mask of "expected femininity" to reveal another construction: the masculinity of female athletes, constructed here on the basis of the idea of "naturalness", normally associated with the male (Sentamans 2010: 192-213). Although cinema is

quite a different medium from photography, this concept, whereby the line between the sexes is presumably blurred, is quite fitting for Riefenstahl's visual presence in Fanck's films: from *The Holy Mountain* to *S.O.S. Iceberg*, it is hard to identify a clear distinction between the way Fanck films sportsmen and the way he films this woman, whether in terms of the attention given to particular parts of the body, the choice of clothing or the mise-en-scène in general. Moreover, although, as Rebecca Prime suggests, Riefenstahl's background as a dancer introduced a certain artificiality to Fanck's films (2007: 62), in the climbing and skiing sequences her actions appear as real as those of the men, with the priority always on the "naturalness" analysed by Sentamans, and with a clear intention to imitate the male. Riefenstahl therefore does not seem to bring about any visual shift in the representation of mountain sports in Fanck's films.

However, this does not mean that Fanck's female characters go unnoticed. On the contrary, there is always a woman in his films whose relationship with the mountain is different from that of the male characters, and that relationship is often revealed to be central to the plot. It is always a single character, played by Riefenstahl in all her appearances and by Hertha von Walter in *Mountain of Destiny*. If there are other female characters, they are invariably associated with the do-

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mestic space, such as Bergsteier's mother and wife (played by Frida Richard and Erna Morena, respectively) in the same film. For the male characters, the mountain is a beloved world, but it is also a rival to be beaten, as well as an encapsulation of or trigger for a father-son relationship (*Mountain of Destiny*) or brotherly loyalty and camaraderie (*The Holy Mountain*). Conversely, the woman's relationship with this world is nearly always one of estrangement. The storylines of these films and the specific role played by the female character in her relationship with mountaineering, skiing and aviation will be explored below, with the aim of identifying some constants that can shed light on how these films construct gender roles and relationships through sport.

ADMIRERS AND PUPILS

The female characters in Fanck's films are first and foremost spectators, either of nature or of the athletic feats of the men, whom they admire and from whom they are keen to learn. In *Mountain of Destiny*, Hella (Hertha von Walther) uses a pair of binoculars to catch a glimpse of her boyfriend, Bergsteier's son (Luis Trenker), on the mountain summit. Then she decides to go to him: she removes her skirt to reveal a pair of trousers; she kisses her father goodbye and begins climbing up the mountain. Sport thus simultaneously produces a logic of admiration for the male and a desire to ascend. At this moment, the man becomes her teacher, not only in mountain climbing but also in life: as his mother remarks, her son is the only one capable of taming this wild woman. When Hella asks him to scale the Guglia del Diavolo as proof of his love and he refuses, she attempts the climb herself, but she fails: when she witnesses the accidental death of another climber on her way up, she lets out a scream of terror. She then decides to go back down but ends up trapped on the mountain. She sends a distress signal that is received by her father, who asks her boyfriend to rescue

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her. Sport thus turns into an operation to save a damsel in distress, and the liminal experience of the mountain is what tames the woman, who in the end will hang up her adventurers' boots and become a wife.

The Holy Mountain, Fanck's first film featuring Riefenstahl, takes the idea of the woman as a stranger to nature and a spectator to the extreme. At the beginning of the film, Diotima (Riefenstahl), a dancer, is associated with the sea: she lives there beside the crashing waves; the sea is her great love, and she is able to alter its movements with her dances. In this way, a powerful dichotomy is established: on one side, the sea, dance and the feminine; and on the other, the mountain, sport (skiing or climbing) and the masculine, a world that fascinates Diotima.⁵ In his detailed analysis of the film's opening sequence, Eric Rentschler notes that the first images of mountains shown in the film are the product of Diotima's imagination (1990: 154), and he stresses her status as a dreamer, arguing that the film is "a male fantasy, a dream about a woman whose sole occupation becomes dreaming about men" (1990: 155). This admiration is reinforced when she arrives in the country, opens the window and is overtaken by ecstasy, while the mountains are visually enhanced by means of a spectacular framing device, and completed with a bucolic scene in which she gathers flowers that she will subsequently wear on her head. Later, during the skiing competition, Diotima becomes a spectator of the men's mastery of the sport, while the skiers, as one of the in-

tertitles tells us, no longer appreciate the “fairy tale beauty” of the mountains, as they are more concerned with racing down the slopes to finish first. Her love story with the mountaineer, Karl (Luis Trenker), will bring her closer to this dreamworld as he teaches her how to ski, but in the end she will prove unable to enter that world because, as Karl’s mother foretells: “The Sea and the Stone can never be wed.” In a dialogue between Diotima and Karl, her understanding of nature, based on beauty, clashes explicitly with his, based on transcendence and risk. In another sequence, an intertitle with the word “Fear” expresses her reaction to the rugged peaks.

Distanced from nature, Diotima seems to be trapped in her role as a dancer and *femme fatale* who spreads corruption across the lowlands while men find purity on the mountain summits. However, this will change when her performance in a theatre is interrupted by the announcement that Karl and Vigo (Ernst Petersen), both of whom have had amorous exchanges with her, have not returned from their expedition, and someone must climb up to the skiers’ cottage to raise the alarm so that a rescue squad can go in search of them. The men in the audience are all too cowardly and it is left up to Diotima to strap on her skis and embark on the adventure herself.

Image 3. Imitation and learning to ski in *The White Ecstasy* (Arnold Fanck, 1931)



In this way, after her admiration for the sporting feats of the men, and after her phase as a pupil, the woman now takes the step of going out on her own; and unlike Hella in *Mountain of Destiny*, this time she achieves her goal. However, when she reaches the skiers' cottage, it is the men there who will take over and set out on the rescue mission, which will prove a failure because Karl ultimately jumps from the peak with Vigo's dead body, in a leap of faith (Garin & Elduque, 2013). Diotima waits in the cottage, like a long-suffering Penelope. At the end of the film, she will return to her beloved sea, far from the mountain peaks of the sporting world. Although the hero's role is reserved for men, Diotima in *The Holy Mountain* is a much more athletically capable character than the damsel in distress in *Mountain of Destiny*; Riefenstahl's entry into Fanck's world thus also represents the entry of a sportswoman who can achieve what she sets out to do.

The female athlete who learns from the man is a key figure in Fanck's films. As Tatiana Sentamans points out, in depictions of women in sport the women are generally shown as individuals who want to discipline their bodies in line with masculine standards: "*ludus* (training to develop a particular skill; greater intensity ≈ masculinity) would supersede the *paidia* (improvisation, disorder, merriment, etc.; greater intensity ≈ femininity) of women's physical exercise, pursuing greater discipline in order to improve physical performance (*agon*) and to neutralise the potential risks of vertigo (*ilinx*)" (2010: 201). Sentamans associates this vertigo with high-risk sports such as skiing, mountaineering and aviation, the very same sports that Riefenstahl plays in Fanck's films, and many of his female characters follow a similar path. It is thanks to a man that these characters learn a sport, disciplining their bodies and their lives and abandoning dissoluteness to embrace (albeit only partially) the higher values of the mountain men. This is clearly the case of Diotima.

Another significant example can be found in *The White Ecstasy*, an entertaining story about the world of skiing that takes the formula of the female pupil to the extreme. The film revolves mainly around young Leni (Leni Riefenstahl) learning to do ski jumps under the expert guidance of Hannes (Hannes Schneider). Leni is introduced as a spectator, with a close-up showing her excitement as she watches a skiing competition; she is then shown in her bedroom, standing on the edge of her bed imitating the pose on a skiing poster hanging on the wall behind her. She simulates a ski jump, shown in slow motion, landing on a feather-filled mattress. In the course of her learning process, Leni simulates jumps on a small scale, takes children's classes (inspiring a mixture of admiration, curiosity and ridicule from the children), and finally decides to train with the ski expert Hannes Schneider. Clumsy both with and without skis, but with a laudable degree of determination that gives her character an appealing charm, she proves that she has learned the lesson with a triumphant descent in the second half of the film, and the ridiculous aspects of her skiing are mitigated by the presence of two carpenters who are trying to learn how to ski with the help of a couple of books. However, the teacher-student model is invariable: it is always the woman who learns from the man, even displaying moments of recklessness, particularly in the scene where she gets drunk and needs Hannes to help her to get skiing again.

EQUALITY, SPECTACLE AND TECHNOLOGY

In other films by Fanck, the formula of the female pupil gives way to more active characters who are given equal agency with the man in relation to the sport, although often reasserting the patriarchal models that relegate the woman to a subaltern role. In this respect, the films *The White Hell of Piz Palu* and *Storm over Mont Blanc* are two very interesting cases. In the first, Maria (Leni



Image 4. Gender swapping in *Storm over Mont Blanc* (Arnold Fanck, 1930)

Riefenstahl) is a spectator of masculinity, an active adventurer, a caregiver, and finally, a damsel in distress. In this case, there are not one but two female adventurers, with one replacing the other during the film. In the first part of the film, Professor Johannes Krafft's wife (Mizzi Götzel) is a reckless adventurer. She accompanies her husband (Gustav Diessl) on an expedition to a glacier, but she is depicted as a distraction to Johannes, who at one point on their descent grabs her to give her a kiss, momentarily forgetting the dangers of the mountain; a moment later, she falls to her death. This character is then conceptually replaced by Maria, who stays with her husband, Hans (Ernst

Petersen) in the same hut where Johannes and his wife had stayed; Johannes himself is now a kind of lost soul, wandering the mountains like an almost mythical figure. The connection between the two women is revealed in the editing of their close-ups, especially from the perspective of Johannes, who sees in Maria the ghost of his lost wife and attempts some romantic overtures, thereby creating a love triangle. When the men set out for the glacier, Maria decides to join them, despite the reservations of Johannes, who tells her that this is no place for women. And yet on the climb she is as much a mountaineer as her two companions, just as skilled as her husband, al-

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though when things get tough and the three find themselves trapped on a mountain ledge, her role will change.

In addition to being a mountain climber, Maria is a spectator of masculinity. She witnesses the debate between the two men over who should lead the expedition. Hans ultimately takes the lead, only to be swept down the slope and have to be saved by Johannes, who rescues him with a rope. She is also a witness to Hans's fit of madness later on, when Johannes restrains him to keep him from tumbling down the mountain. On Johannes's orders, Maria takes an active role to save her husband on both occasions: by holding onto the rope in the first case, and by tying him down in the second. There is no hint here of the damsel in distress, as she is an active woman whose presence is key to Hans's survival and to the consolidation of the friendship between the two men, eliminating the previous suggestion of a love triangle. However, on both occasions she is acting on the instructions of Johannes, whose wisdom and experience with the mountains is ultimately what keeps them alive. In fact, after these key moments of action, along with a few moments where she cares for both men, Maria will end up as frozen and helpless as her husband, and it will be Johannes who looks after the couple, and who in the end will sacrifice himself for them. When Hans and Maria are rescued, their stiff bodies must be gradually brought back to life. What this film depicts is thus not a damsel

in distress but a couple in distress, both dependent on the rugged masculinity of the traditional mountaineer.

On the other hand, Hella (Leni Riefenstahl) in *Storm over Mont Blanc* does not need any lessons from anybody. As in the case of the other two films, she will begin engaging in the sport out of desire: from the window, she sees men skiing and decides that she wants to do the same, although in this film she is by no means a novice. The film highlights her skills while placing an emphasis precisely on the fact that she is a woman: in the same sequence, when she comes across a skier who is apparently being chased by a team of skiers, they swap clothing so that she looks like a man while he looks like a woman. This provides the opportunity to play with transgressing while at the same reaffirming gender roles: on the one hand, she can ski as well as a man would and can therefore deceive the others; and on the other, he pretends to be an inexperienced skier so that he looks more like a woman, enabling him to go by unnoticed.

Hella skis and climbs throughout the film, and in the final sequence she joins the group of skiers who go to the weather station to rescue the meteorologist, Hannes (Sepp Rist), who is on the verge of freezing to death. Although the film stresses Hella's subordination to the male characters, such as her close bond with her father (Friedrich Kayßler), her patient waiting at the weather station and her love story with Hannes, in whose lap she will finally lay her head, she is depicted throughout as an active woman and a good athlete, and never as a damsel in distress. Eric Rentschler highlights this agency in relation to her mastery of technology (in her first appearance she is shown operating a telescope at an astronomical observatory), which, apart from her skiing, is the only thing that matters to her, and what ultimately turns her into a character who takes control of both the mountain and the narrative (1990: 157).

The association of this character with technology foreshadows Riefenstahl's last collaboration with Fanck, *S.O.S. Iceberg*, which tells the story of a rescue mission in the Arctic. The film had two versions: Fanck's German version, and an English-language version directed by Tay Garnett for Universal Pictures, with a different cast of actors in each one but with Riefenstahl in both casts. In this film, Hella Lorenz (Leni Riefenstahl) is not the protagonist, but she is depicted as an active, modern woman capable of flying a plane all the way to Greenland without a problem. However, her sporting prowess soon

comes undone, when she accidentally crashes her plane and then turns into a woman unfit for the adventure she has been caught up in: she recoils at the fish she is offered to survive in the Arctic; she screams in terror and clings to her husband when she sees a man fighting a polar bear; and when it seems that the rescue plane will save the expedition, her gestures on top of the mountain of ice look like those of the prototypical damsel in distress. Fanck and Riefenstahl thus concluded their partnership with a female character who was helpless against the forces of nature.

Image 5. Athletic feats in a wide shot and in close-up in *The Great Leap* (Arnold Fanck, 1927)



THE MOUNTAIN WOMAN

While most of Fanck's female characters are strangers to nature, in two films Riefenstahl portrayed native mountain women. One was *The Great Leap*, her second collaboration with Fanck, and the other was *The Blue Light*, her directorial debut. In contrast to the female characters in other films, women from other climes who want to learn to ski or climb in order to win a man's love, these two films feature characters who have grown up in nature and are expert climbers, who are visited by men who are strangers to their world.

The Great Leap is a comedy influenced by the slapstick genre, which, from Buster Keaton to Harold Lloyd, often linked displays of athleticism to success in a romantic relationship.⁶ In this case, Riefenstahl is a shepherdess named Gita, who lives in the Italian Alps, in full communion with nature, caring for her numerous brothers and sisters and her goat. She is a woman who belongs to the domestic world, but she is also a wild creature, able to climb great slabs of stone and to cut rope with her teeth as easily as others might tie their shoes. Fanck shows this with wide shots that can capture her displaying her athletic skills, while also including closer shots that show her proud

and defiant expression, and detail shots of her limbs. Michel (Hans Schneeberger), an inveterate city-dweller, comes to the mountains on his doctor's recommendation, to play sport in the great outdoors with his faithful servant, Paule (Paul Graetz). He tries to win Gita over by becoming a proficient mountain climber and skier under the tutelage of the rugged Toni (Luis Trenker), whose flirtations with Gita turn him into both Michel's trainer and his rival. Playing with the dichotomies of nature vs. city and sporting skill vs. ineptness, *The Great Leap* proposes a radical inversion of Fanck's other stories. Paradoxically, a role that was apparently inspired by a derogatory remark made about Riefenstahl by Trenker, who once referred to her in the press as a "greasy goat" (Bach, 2008: 63-65) and seemed to dismiss her erotic appeal in *The Holy Mountain*, resulted in a character with real athletic agency.

However, halfway through the film the plot takes a 180-degree turn. When she sees an advertisement for a skiing competition, Gita offers herself as the prize for the winner, along with her goat, and Michel works hard to learn how to ski so that he can take first place and win her love. Although on a few occasions Gita straps on her skis and displays her skills, in this second part of

Image 6. The final climb in *The Blue Light* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1932)



the film she is essentially a spectator of Michel's learning process, while also obviously becoming a trophy wife. In this way, *The Great Leap* takes a great leap backwards in terms of the sportswoman's agency, as it takes her from female expert who inspires the man's admiration with her skill to female spectator and a prize for the winner.

A few years later, *The Blue Light*, Riefenstahl's first feature film as director, would return to the character of the wild woman, but with numerous variations. Although it also belongs to the *Bergfilm* genre and is clearly influenced by Fanck, who assisted with the editing and at times came into conflict with the director (Bach, 2008: 95-96), *The Blue Light* is quite different from the films discussed above in a number of ways. According to Rentschler, "Riefenstahl's film mines the romantic legacy with the tools of modernity, merging nature worship and instrumental reason, a pre-industrial world and the ways and means of the present" (1990: 158). It is presented not as a sports film set in the 1930s but as a *Berglegende*, which, despite its contemporary framing device, is set in a past age, in which the physical relationship with nature is characterised not by play or competition, but by everyday necessity and heroic feats. Riefenstahl plays Junta, a shepherdess in the Dolomites who lives in the shelter of the rocks with only a shepherd boy, Guzzi (Frank Maldacea), for company. She climbs with ease over Mount Cristallo, whose summit emanates a mesmerising blue light, yet every time one of the young men of the village try to scale the mountain he falls to his death. This sparks rage amongst the villagers, who accuse Junta of witchcraft. However, a painter from the city named Vigo (Mathias Wieman) will get to know Junta, establishing a friendship with her and ultimately discovering her secret.

Compared to Fanck's films, *The Blue Light* is very sparing in its use of sporting footage. Although the story focuses on Junta, there are barely any scenes of her acrobatics or displays of her physical dexterity. Instead, the emphasis is placed

on the character's body: not an athletic body, but an eroticised body, frozen in an ecstatic dimension that is taken to the extreme when Vigo paints her. Paradoxically, in none of Fanck's films does Riefenstahl appear as eroticised, distant and spiritual as she does in *The Blue Light*; according to Rentschler, "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" (1990: 160).

Riefenstahl's memoirs repeatedly suggest that while she learned filmmaking techniques from Fanck, her work with him hardly served at all to improve her acting skills (Riefenstahl, 1991: 68). The transformation of her character in *The Blue Light* might therefore have been aimed at shifting the emphasis away from displays of athletic ability in order to change her star image, which until then had been too closely associated with sports films. On the other hand, the fact that the ending to Riefenstahl's film does include footage of Junta scaling Mount Cristallo suggests another possible reason, related to the storyline, for the absence of such images until then. By leaving her ascents up the mountain off screen, the film maintains the mystery surrounding her character: instead of explicitly showing her athletic prowess or her ability to climb the mountain via a certain route, spectators have the same limited knowledge as the villagers, who believe her to be a witch with mystical powers. The athletic realism of Fanck's films, their genuinely masculine "naturalism" (to use the term proposed by Tatiana Sentamans), is replaced here with the magic of legend. The absence of sports thus marks the tone of the story. In the end, however, when Vigo discovers the route Junta takes to scale the mountain, we do get a glimpse of Riefenstahl the athlete, who climbs up a mountainside with ease. But when she discovers that the cave of crystals that emit the blue light has been pillaged,

her strength falters and she falls to her death. In this way, the luminous power of the mountain and her athletic skills are fused, confirming that in this film she belongs to a world to which she was almost always depicted as a stranger in Fanck's work.

CONCLUSIONS

Alfons Walde's *Winterträume*, exhibited at the Kitzbühel municipal museum, was cited at the beginning of this article for the opposition it presents between a male sporting body and a fantasised female body drawn into the mountains by the male gaze. In the *Bergfilm*, on the other hand, the woman was always a dissonant element in a male-dominated world, a disruption reflecting the context of women's emancipation that characterised the Weimar Republic. In the six films that Arnold Fanck and Leni Riefenstahl made together, and in *Mountain of Destiny* and *The Blue Light*, the female character was always essential, with the power of the story revolving around her. That power was more narrative than visual: the *Bergfilm* did not usually emphasise the eroticisation of the female characters and generally placed them visually on an equal footing with the men, probably due to their skill as athletes. However, the gender tensions that this "unexpected masculinity" (Sentamans, 2010) could provoke were channelled elsewhere by means of conservative storylines that depicted women as strangers to nature, admirers of beauty, dedicated pupils or damsels in distress.

In this context, the formula of the woman as pupil was especially important: thanks to the man, the woman was able to enter the world of nature and perhaps even achieve the odd athletic feat, once the man had trained her potentially dissolute energies and subjected her to a conservative order. Thus, just as Fanck's films combined the innovations of technology and sport with the tradition of the Alps, the characterisation of women's bodies in his films ranged from modern independence to submissive obedience to the tradi-

tional patriarchy, while making women's sport a key factor for understanding the historical value of these films and the constant tension they establish between what was presumably timeless and what was truly modern.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 In the Spanish context, in *Sombras de Weimar: contribución a la historia del cine alemán 1918-1933*, Vicente Sánchez-Biosca also expresses reservations about what he considers to be "the allegorical—even racist—excesses that Kracauer is often keen to uncover in every corner" (1990: 336) of Fanck's films.
- 2 A more recent discussion of the *Bergfilm* and its complex relationship with historicism can be found in "Natural History: Rethinking the *Bergfilm*" (Baer, 2016). I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for this reference.
- 3 See *Männerphantasien, Volume 1. Frauen, Fluten, Körper, Geschichte* by Klaus Theweleit (1977), which analyses the murderous sexual fantasies of the Freikorps in the interwar period. As Barbara Ehrenreich suggests in her prologue to the English version, the Freikorps believed that all images of women could be reduced to three kinds: the absent woman, the white nurse and the red woman. The last of these three is sexually active and poses a mortal threat to the Freikorpsman, who must therefore try to kill her (Ehrenreich, quoted in Theweleit, 1987: xiii-xiv). I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for the reference to this key book.
- 4 From a different perspective, in her analysis of erotic photography in early 20th-century Spain, Maite Zubiaurre studies cases of female cyclists in impossible poses, giving rise to an eroticised motionlessness that she posits in opposition to the dynamism of modernity, which is expected of these women's bodies but is ultimately absent (2012: 261-283).
- 5 A detailed discussion of the gendered nature of the landscape in *The Holy Mountain* can be found in Nicholas Baer's text, based on the division between mountain and sea in Georg Simmel's philosophy (2016: 289-293).

- 6 I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for the reference to the connection between sport and romance in the slapstick genre.

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INTREPID MOUNTAINEERS AND DAMSELS IN DISTRESS: THE SPORTSWOMAN IN THE BERGFILM

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse the German *Bergfilm* of the 1920s and 1930s from a gender perspective in order to explore the role played by female characters in the skiing and mountaineering world depicted in this genre. To this end, it focuses on the figure of the sportswoman in all six films directed by Arnold Fanck that feature Leni Riefenstahl, in addition to *Mountain of Destiny*, in which the female character is played by Hertha von Walther, and *The Blue Light*, directed by and starring Riefenstahl. The article begins with a brief outline of the gender conflict provoked by Riefenstahl's entry into the male-dominated world of Arnold Fanck's films, followed by an exploration of the films themselves from a narrative perspective that considers the role and agency of each female character in relation to sport. While the visual representation of the sportswoman in these films is similar to that of the sportsman, the storylines position these characters as strangers to mountain sports and often as pupils of men.

Key words

Bergfilm; Leni Riefenstahl; Arnold Fanck; Women's Sport; Skiing; Mountain climbing.

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Article reference

Elduque, A. (2024). Intrepid Mountaineers and Damsels in Distress: The Sportswoman in the *Bergfilm*. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 37, 45-60.

ALPINISTAS INTRÉPIDAS Y DAMAS EN APUROS. LA MUJER DEPORTISTA EN EL BERGFILM

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es abordar el *Bergfilm* alemán de las décadas de 1920 y 1930 desde una perspectiva de género para estudiar el rol que juegan los personajes femeninos en el universo deportivo del esquí y el alpinismo. Para ello, nos centraremos en la figura de la mujer deportista en las seis películas en las que Arnold Fanck dirigió a Leni Riefenstahl, sumándoles *La montaña del destino*, en la que el papel femenino lo interpreta Hertha von Walther, y *La luz azul*, dirigida y protagonizada por Riefenstahl. En primer lugar, presentaremos brevemente el conflicto de género que produjo la llegada de Riefenstahl al mundo masculino de Arnold Fanck y sus películas, y, a continuación, abordaremos las obras desde una perspectiva narrativa que se pregunte qué roles y agencia juega el personaje femenino en relación con el deporte. Si bien la representación visual de la mujer deportista no reviste grandes diferencias respecto a la del hombre, las tramas narrativas sitúan a estos personajes en una relación extranjera respecto al deporte de montaña y con frecuencia los convierten en alumnos del hombre.

Palabras clave

Bergfilm; Leni Riefenstahl; Arnold Fanck; Deporte Femenino; Esquí; Escalada.

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Referencia de este artículo

Elduque, A. (2024). Alpinistas intrépidas y damas en apuros. La mujer deportista en el *Bergfilm*. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 37, 45-60.

recibido/received: 16.10.2023 | aceptado/accepted: 21.11.2023

Edita / Published by



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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com