

Of Mountains and Men. Concepts of Masculinities in the Interwar Period Mountain Films “Blind Husbands” and “Berge in Flammen”

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Abstract

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The following seminar-paper discusses concepts of masculinities and how they are depicted in the two mountain films “Blind Husbands” (1919) and “Berge in Flammen” (1931). Both films deal with social and political issues that arise in the interwar period: while “Blind Husbands” addresses challenges to traditional gender roles in the immediate wake of the war, “Berge in Flammen” can be seen as a product of the war’s long-term effects on questions of gender identities. An analysis of the main male characters shows that in both films mountaineering skills are a key to overcome challenges and establish masculinity.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses concepts of masculinities depicted in two mountain films from the interwar period: “Blind Husbands” (1919) and “Berge in Flammen” (1931). In both films, the mountains are portrayed as primarily masculine spaces. The landscape shapes masculinity, and masculinity shapes the landscape. Therefore, the research question framing the analysis asks how mountain films from the interwar period construct different concepts of masculinities. The plural form of “masculinity” is a deliberate choice here

because, as will be shown, a singular, monolithic masculinity does not exist.¹ The following pages explore how the two films portray their main male characters and what kind of roles they play in relation to each other, to women, and in relation to the mountains. What types of masculinities do they represent and convey? These questions are of special relevance because mountain cinema from the interwar period addresses psychological issues of men, which can be linked to the (male) post-World War I and pre-World War II generations.² This paper argues that mountain cinema contributed to, shaped, and influenced the discourse of masculinity at that time.

The first mountains to appear in cinema were in documentaries and travelogues in the 1910s, before they emerged as a backdrop in feature films. While shooting films in and about the mountains was an international affair, with early productions located in Italy, France, the United Kingdom, or the United States, it was only in Germany that mountain cinema developed into a genre in its own right. The difficult legacy of the German “Bergfilm” of the 1920s and 1930s, hailed for the skilful camerawork of its directors and on-location shooting and condemned for its propagation of Nazi ideals, has been the subject of many studies.³ Siegfried Kracauer and other early scholars, for example, firmly embedded the “Bergfilm” in the context of National Socialism, describing it as a precursor of National Socialist agendas. More recent scholars such as Eric Rentschler, have questioned this one-sided approach, however, analysing the “Bergfilm” and its place within Weimar culture instead.⁴ Various articles published between the early 1990s and early 2010s focused on the gender aspect of mountain cinema, providing the background for the subsequent film analysis.⁵ Moreover, recent research has abandoned a narrow definition of the classic “Bergfilm” genre in favour of a transnational approach that examines the history of mountain cinema through geopolitical, ecological, and aesthetic perspectives.⁶

- 1 Jürgen Martschukat/Olaf Stieglitz, *Geschichte der Männlichkeiten* (Historische Einführungen 5), Frankfurt a. M.-New York: Campus Verlag 2018² [ISBN 9783593509471], p. 58.
- 2 Maximilian Büttner, *The Stage of the Mountains. A Transnational and Historical Survey of the Mountains as a Stage in 100 Years of Mountain Cinema*, Dipl. Innsbruck: University of Innsbruck 2019 [URN urn:nbn:at:at-ubi:1-56857], p. 12.
- 3 Caroline Schaumann, *The Return of the Bergfilm. Nordwand* (2008) and *Nanga Parbat* (2010), in: *The German Quarterly* 87 (2014), no. 4 [https://www.jstor.org/stable/24756522], pp. 416–439, here p. 416.
- 4 Siegfried Kracauer, *Von Caligari zu Hitler. Eine psychologische Geschichte des deutschen Films*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 112021 [ISBN 9783518280799]; Eric Rentschler, *Mountains and Modernity. Relocating the Bergfilm*, in: *New German Critique* (1990), no. 51 [DOI 10.2307/488175], pp. 137–161.
- 5 Lucy Fischer, *Enemies, a Love Story. Von Stroheim, Women, and World War I*, in: *Film History* 6 (1994), no. 4 [https://www.jstor.org/stable/3815024], pp. 522–534; Claudia Lenssen, *Trenkers Frauen. Das Frauenbild im Bergfilm*, in: Stefan König et al. (eds.), *Bergfilm. Dramen, Trick und Abenteuer*, Munich: Herbig 2001 [ISBN 3776622888], pp. 138–148; Caroline Schaumann, “In the Alps There Is No Sin”. Passion and Purity in Erich von Stroheim’s *Blind Husbands*, in: *Colloquia Germanica* 42 (2009), no. 3 [https://www.jstor.org/stable/23982150], pp. 213–228; Wilfried Wilms, *From “Bergsteiger” to “Bergkrieger”. Gustav Renker, Luis Trenker, and the Rebirth of the German Nation in Rock and Ice*, in: *Colloquia Germanica* 42 (2009), no. 3 [https://www.jstor.org/stable/23982151], pp. 229–244; Daniel Winkler, *Futurismus & Alpinismus. Szenarien der Intensität bei F. T. Marinetti, Angelo Mosso und Luis Trenker*, in: Marijana Eršić et al. (eds.), *Körper in Bewegung. Modelle und Impulse der italienischen Avantgarde* (Kultur- und Medientheorie), Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag 2009 [ISBN 9783837610994], pp. 311–332; Daniel Winkler, *Männlichkeitsentwürfe zwischen Futurismus und Faschismus. Von der Freiburger Kameraschule zu Trenkers/Hartls Kriegsfilm *Berge in Flammen* (1931)*, in: Sabine Schrader/Barbara Tasser (eds.), *Futurismo al 100% – 100% Futurismus*, Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press 2012 [ISBN 9783902811387], pp. 119–134.
- 6 Seth Peabody, *Film History for the Anthropocene. The Ecological Archive of German Cinema*, Rochester (NY): Camden House 2023 [ISBN 9781640141612]; Christian Quendler et al., *Global Mountain Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2025 [ISBN 9781399519977].

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on conceptual considerations from the field of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities. Men were first defined as research subjects in the United States in the 1970s, when the women's movement criticised the male bias in science whereby "male" was usually equated with "human" and female experiences were ignored. Advocates of women's and gender history determined that, to get a full picture of gender images in society, the experiences of all genders needed to be examined. Other roots of what was initially termed "Men's Studies" can be found in the gay liberation movement and in historical research into male-dominated social spheres such as fraternities and the military. One of the earliest and most significant contributors to this field is the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell.⁷ Connell defines masculinity not as an innate quality of an individual, but as a position within gender relations. Masculinity describes the practices through which men and women assume this position, as well as the effects of these practices on bodily experiences, personalities, and culture.⁸ Similar to the concept of "doing gender", which regards gender as a social construct performed in everyday human interaction, this praxeological approach defines masculinity through action. It has been chosen as a baseline for this paper because it allows questions to be asked about the practices that establish masculinities in the two films, and about how the characters perform (or "do") masculinity.

Gender is a relational and intersectional category that emerges in relation to others, such as race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, age, region, or (dis)ability.⁹ Accordingly, this paper does not view masculinity as a singular entity but rather analyses the concept in relation to these categories, of which race/ethnicity, class and region will be the most relevant for the discussion. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity will be used to analyse different power relations between the characters. Connell postulates the co-existence of different forms of masculinity in society, one of which is culturally emphasised and ensures the legitimacy of the patriarchy.¹⁰ Within this framework of cultural hegemony, specific relations of dominance and subordination exist between men, for example, between heterosexual and homosexual men. One such relation is expressed through the concept of complicity: while only few men can fully meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity, the vast majority of them benefit from its dominance and share the general advantages of patriarchal oppression.¹¹ The counterpart to complicity is marginalisation. Connell uses the term to describe the relationships between the masculinities of dominant and subordinate social classes or ethnic groups.¹² Finally, this paper adopts Connell's perspective that bodies are significant in the construction of masculinity. She considers them as "participants in social events" and as both objects

7 Raewyn Connell, *Der gemachte Mann. Konstruktion und Krise von Männlichkeiten* (Geschlecht und Gesellschaft 8), Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2015⁴ [DOI 10.1007/978-3-531-19973-3].

8 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

9 Martschukat/Stieglitz, *Geschichte der Männlichkeiten*, p. 56.

10 Connell, *Der gemachte Mann*, p. 130.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

and agents of practice. It is through these practices that the structures emerge within which bodies are defined and modified.¹³

The two films that constitute the primary sources for this paper were chosen to provide a geographical and temporal perspective spanning the Atlantic and the interwar period. “Blind Husbands”, an American silent film directed by Erich von Stroheim, premiered in 1919 shortly after the First World War. “Berge in Flammen”, a sound film produced in Germany and co-directed by Luis Trenker and Karl Hartl, was released in 1931 during the final stages of the Weimar Republic. Rather than making a direct comparison, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the range of topics and discussions surrounding masculinity in the post-war years in the United States and Germany. While “Blind Husbands” points to gender conflicts in the immediate wake of the war, “Berge in Flammen” illustrates the war’s long-term effects on gender and society. Both films are set in Cortina d’Ampezzo and the surrounding peaks of the Dolomites but were not shot on location. “Blind Husbands” was filmed entirely in California, and most scenes of “Berge in Flammen” were shot on the Nordkette in Innsbruck. A combined analysis of both films is in line with current transnational research, offering new perspectives on gender aspects in mountain cinema. The two films were chosen because they both deal with the Great War and its aftermath. War experiences were fundamental to the construction of masculinity in the interwar years. To begin with, this paper analyses “Blind Husbands” before moving on to “Berge in Flammen” in the second part. The results are discussed in the final chapter.

2. The European Threat to American Masculinity in “Blind Husbands”

Erich von Stroheim’s “Blind Husbands” tells the story of the American Dr. Armstrong (played by Sam de Grasse) and his wife Margaret (Francelia Billington) who spend their holidays in Cortina d’Ampezzo, Italy, shortly after World War I. There they make the acquaintance of Lieutenant Eric von Steuben (Erich von Stroheim), an Austrian military officer, who sets out to seduce Margaret. She seems susceptible to his advances because she feels disregarded and ignored by her husband.¹⁴ The story culminates on top of a mountain, where Dr. Armstrong confronts von Steuben and leaves him to his fate. On the descent, he finds a letter from Margaret declaring her devotion to him alone. Dr. Armstrong initiates a rescue attempt but does not make it in time: von Steuben falls to his death. The film ends with a reconciled husband and wife, holding hands in the coach as they leave Cortina.

The director, writer, and actor Erich von Stroheim (1885–1957) was born Erich Oswald Stroheim to Jewish parents in Vienna. Following an unsuccessful attempt at a military career in the Habsburg monarchy, he emigrated to the United States in 1909 as “Count Erich Oswald Hans Carl Maria von Stroheim”, reinventing himself as an aristocrat, an army

13 Christa Hämmerle, Zur Relevanz des Connell’schen Konzepts hegemonialer Männlichkeit für Militär und Männlichkeit/en in der Habsburgermonarchie (1868–1914/18), in: Martin Dinges (ed.), Männer – Macht – Körper. Hegemoniale Männlichkeiten vom Mittelalter bis heute, Frankfurt a. M. et al.: Campus 2005 [ISBN 9783593378596], pp. 103–121, here p. 104.

14 Büttner, The Stage of the Mountains, p. 53.

officer, and a Catholic.¹⁵ After working odd jobs for several years, he found his way into the Hollywood film industry and landed his first acting roles. He was mainly cast as a villain and became known to audiences as “the man you love to hate”.¹⁶ In 1918, after the war had ended, his career accelerated when Carl Laemmle, founder of Universal Film Studios, financed and produced Stroheim’s story “The Pinnacle”.¹⁷ Renamed “Blind Husbands” – a change with which Stroheim vehemently disagreed –, the silent film premiered in October 1919, marking Stroheim’s successful directorial debut.¹⁸

“Blind Husbands” is embedded in an ambiguous post-World War I setting. Cortina, a town formerly part of the Habsburg Empire that was conceded to Italy after the war, is described in the film as a village on “the Austro-Italian Frontier – the Mecca of American tourists”¹⁹. This obscures the new political realities while at the same time confirming that Americans ruled the post-war world – even in their leisure time.²⁰ The film is dedicated to Sepp Innerkofler, an Austrian mountain-guide, innkeeper, and soldier who died in the First World War and was later mythologised as a hero of the Alpine Front. The background of the film is highly politicised, and even though the war is never explicitly referenced, it shapes the plot and its depiction of masculinity. In the opening title card, “Blind Husbands” poses the following question:

“One of the most frequent reasons for divorce is ‘alienation of affection’ ... And the reason within the reason is the fact that ‘the other man’ steps in with his sincere (or insincere) attentions just when the husband in his self-complacency forgets the wooing wiles of his prenuptial days ... Guilty! says the world condemning ‘the other man’ ... But what of the husband?”²¹

The film’s central conflict revolves around contrasting notions of masculinity, as personified by “the husband”, respectable, well-educated Dr. Armstrong, and “the other man”, pretentious seducer von Steuben. The film represents the conflict between the Old World and the New World, between the European aristocrat and the American citizen. Quietly, it also points to male anxieties of changing gender roles in the wake of the war.²² It gives a subtle voice to its female characters, showing that they, too, have emotional and sexual needs, which is radical for a film produced in 1919. But while it hints at – and in fact, warns of – a new type of woman who might articulate a new kind of independence and self-determination, at its heart it remains a debate about masculinity, in which the upstanding Dr. Armstrong succeeds over the immoral von Steuben.²³ He only does so, however, with the aid of mountain-guide Sepp (Gibson Gowland), an

15 Schaumann, *In the Alps There Is No Sin*, p. 215.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 Erich von Stroheim, *Blind Husbands* (1919), YouTube, 92:12 min, 8.5.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIDaxMGydG4>, accessed 22.2.2026, 2:54 min.

20 Schaumann, *In the Alps There Is No Sin*, p. 218.

21 Stroheim, *Blind Husbands*, 1:51 min.

22 Schaumann, *In the Alps There Is No Sin*, p. 222.

23 Büttner, *The Stage of the Mountains*, p. 80.

almost supernatural higher instance and moral guide who interferes with von Steuben's schemes.²⁴ This constellation of characters will be analysed in the following sections.

Dr. Robert Armstrong is the upright American man, wealthy and successful, who arrives in the defeated territory as the cool and confident winner of the war and is able to prove his superiority even while on vacation on his former enemy's turf.²⁵ A flashback at the beginning of the film reveals that on a previous vacation he saved Sepp's life,²⁶ which puts an interesting twist to the typical local guide/foreign client relationship. Here, it is the foreigner who rescues the local. In a similar fashion, Armstrong answers an emergency call from the village doctor and saves a local woman in his role as a physician. In a straightforward interpretation, the film reenacts the American victory in World War I: the American arrives, sees, conquers, and departs.²⁷ Or does he? Armstrong asserts himself as the superior foreigner, mountain climber, and doctor – a victor in every sense; but he utterly fails in his role as a husband. His ignorance of his wife's needs and his continued lack of attention makes her vulnerable to the advances of another man. Armstrong even unwittingly encourages von Steuben's interest in Margaret when he leaves for a medical emergency, telling von Steuben: "Lieutenant, please look after my wife until I return."²⁸ In fact, his "blindness" remains central to his characterisation throughout the film. During the final confrontation on the mountaintop, he tries to discover what Margaret wrote in a letter to von Steuben and threatens: "I am going to give you one chance – if you speak the truth – and I shall know it – I will not harm you."²⁹ But when von Steuben feeds him a lie, claiming that he had an affair with Margaret, Armstrong does not recognise the falsehood. He only learns of Margaret's fidelity when he discovers the letter on his descent.³⁰ What is interesting about his character is that he does not undergo any real development. The ending is ambiguous as to whether the "blind husband" will finally open his eyes. As the couple departs from Cortina, Sepp offers a final piece of advice to Armstrong regarding his wife: "Be good to her. Little I know of the world – but one thing she needs: Love."³¹ Even the simple mountain-guide, it seems, knows more about women than the modern American man.

Eric von Steuben is Armstrong's opposite, and as such he embodies a different concept of masculinity. Introduced as "an Austrian cavalry officer, with a keen appreciation of three things: Wine, WOMEN, Song"³², he represents the Old World, European decadence, and aristocracy. His military attire, a comically small uniform and a monocle – Stroheim's trademark prop, signalling the voyeuristic sexual tendencies of his characters³³ – is ridiculed from the outset. He does not pose a military threat but a personal one.³⁴ When

24 Büttner, *The Stage of the Mountains*, p. 81.

25 Schaumann, *In the Alps There Is No Sin*, p. 219.

26 Stroheim, *Blind Husbands*, 5:28–6:03 min.

27 Schaumann, *In the Alps There Is No Sin*, p. 224.

28 Stroheim, *Blind Husbands*, 30:18–30:30 min.

29 *Ibid.*, 77:12–77:16 min.

30 Schaumann, *In the Alps There Is No Sin*, p. 224.

31 Stroheim, *Blind Husbands*, 89:58–90:17 min.

32 *Ibid.*, 6:53 min.

33 Fischer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, p. 523.

34 Büttner, *The Stage of the Mountains*, p. 55.

he arrives in Cortina on the same coach as the Armstrongs, Dr. Armstrong reads while ignoring his wife, but von Steuben adjusts his monocle to look at Margaret's legs. Husbands may be blind, but seducers are not. The film then demonstrates von Steuben's sexual prowess by showing him first seducing a waitress at the hotel and later a local woman at a religious festival in the village. But these dalliances only serve as a pastime; his true target is Armstrong's wife. As Armstrong continues to pay little attention to Margaret, she begins to succumb to von Steuben's advances. The European seducer knows how to charm women, and he enters the scene when the American husband fails. In this way, von Steuben does not only threaten Armstrong's masculinity but also American post-war masculinity in general.³⁵ The conflict is resolved at the end of the film with a classic man-versus-man showdown, a struggle for power on a mountaintop. In these final moments, the mountain is personified, and serves as a judge for the different concepts of masculinities that von Steuben and Armstrong represent – in the end, only the "right" concept of masculinity, or the hegemonic masculinity, can prevail. In a final attempt to save his own life, von Steuben lies about his affair with Margaret, indirectly boasting about his womanising skills. These skills are of no use in this terrain, however. When the capable climber Armstrong deserts him ("No law of God or man can make me take you down again!"³⁶), it is von Steuben's lack of mountaineering skills, a masculine quality he pointedly does not share with Armstrong, that causes him to fall to his death. "[T]he spirit of the mountain had spoken"³⁷, the film declares, ensuring that von Steuben pays the ultimate price for his sins. The villain meets a classic villain's fate.

Silent Sepp, the local mountain-guide, also embodies the Old World, but unlike von Steuben he is painted as a morally upright character. With his silent demeanour and his disinterest in everyday human life, he appears almost other-worldly.³⁸ Nearly always accompanied by his loving, faithful Saint Bernard dog – the animal symbolism reinforcing his decency and reliability³⁹ – Sepp shows no sexual desires or interest³⁹ in women and does not threaten Armstrong's masculinity in the way von Steuben does. Indeed, introduced as a "son of the eternal mountains ... strong and mute ... as they"⁴⁰, he can be characterised as a proverbial mouthpiece of the spirit of the mountain. Equally silent, he only speaks to offer well-placed advice and wisdom. He acts as a moral authority, repeatedly thwarting von Steuben's attempts to seduce Margaret. First preventing a kiss between the two at the Pass of the Three Crosses, he later tricks von Steuben, who wants to pay Margaret a nightly visit, by switching rooms with her and sending his dog to guard her door. Sepp saves Armstrong's marriage in return for Armstrong saving Sepp's life, for which the mountain-guide had sworn him eternal friendship. In the post-war context, their relationship highlights the interdependency between the Old World, Europe, and the New World, America.⁴¹ Without Sepp, Armstrong's masculinity cannot be negotiated.

35 Büttner, *The Stage of the Mountains*, p. 55.

36 Stroheim, *Blind Husbands*, 80:19 min.

37 *Ibid.*, 88:46 min.

38 Büttner, *The Stage of the Mountains*, p. 55.

39 Arthur Lennig, Stroheim, Lexington (KY): University Press of Kentucky ⁵2007 [ISBN 9780813190440], p. 110.

40 Stroheim, *Blind Husbands*, 4:40 min.

41 Büttner, *The Stage of the Mountains*, p. 71.

Aside from the three men, "Blind Husbands" pays a lot of attention to its main female character, Margaret Armstrong. The film portrays her as an unhappy wife in a neglected marriage and clearly states her emotional and sexual needs. In a key scene, she observes her sleeping husband in the mirror on her dressing table. The reflection then morphs into that of a newlywed couple who spend their honeymoon at the Armstrong's hotel and openly display their affection.⁴² When the image clears, Dr. Armstrong is still asleep and Margaret is left to sigh wistfully, eternally unfulfilled. Caroline Schaumann claims that, at its core, the film is about women's wants and needs,⁴³ but this argument is tenuous at best. While Margaret and the two other women that von Steuben seduces, the waitress and the local girl, demonstrate free will and agency to a certain extent, their sexuality is not the central focus of the film. Rather, "Blind Husbands" is a post-war debate about masculinity, addressing the challenges it faces in the wake of the war in the form of relationship conflicts and shifting gender roles.

3. The Mountain Warrior and the Gentleman Aristocrat in "Berge in Flammen"

Karl Hartl's and Luis Trenker's "Berge in Flammen" tells the story of Tyrolean mountain-guide turned soldier Florian Dimai (Luis Trenker), who serves at the Alpine Front during the First World War. After initially fighting in Galicia, he and his comrades from the Kaiserjäger-Regiment are transferred to the Alps when Italy enters the war in 1915. From then on, the war turns personal. The men fight to protect their homes in the valley below, defending the peak of Col Alto near the Lagazuoi while their families endure Italian occupation in Cortina. Unable to chase the Austrians off the mountaintop, the Italians drill a tunnel to blow up the peak along with their enemy.⁴⁴ On a perilous mission to the village, Dimai learns the precise time of the explosion and is briefly torn between staying with his wife and child and his duty as a soldier, before returning to the mountaintop in time to heroically save his men.⁴⁵ Thanks to Dimai's warning, the Austrians manage to hold the crucial position. The framing narrative at the beginning and end of the film highlights the friendship between mountain-guide Dimai and Italian aristocrat Artur Franchini (Luigi Serventi), who are shown climbing mountains before the war breaks out in 1914 and again in 1931, embodying an idea of masculine comradeship that even survives fighting a war on opposite sides. Notably, the two men do not discuss their war experiences or the political aftermath. Their "male friendship" is based on the concealment of trauma and conflict.⁴⁶

Co-director Luis Trenker (1892–1990) drew on his own experiences as a soldier on the Alpine Front. Born in St. Ulrich in Gröden, Tyrol, he studied architecture and worked as

42 Stroheim, *Blind Husbands*, 26:00–26:27 min.

43 Schaumann, *In the Alps There Is No Sin*, p. 221.

44 Wilfried Wilms, *The Alps as "Lebensraum". Cinematic Representations of the Alpine War and the South Tyrol Question in 1930s Germany*, in: *German Studies Review* 40 (2017), no. 1 [DOI 10.1353/gsr.2017.0003], pp. 61–77, here p. 64.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

46 Winkler, *Männlichkeitsentwürfe zwischen Futurismus und Faschismus*, p. 129.

a ski instructor and mountain-guide during the holidays. During World War I, he was first stationed in Galicia and Vistula Land, and from 1915 onwards in the Dolomites.⁴⁷ He first came into contact with the film industry in 1921 by chance: director Arnold Fanck, a pioneer of the German “Bergfilm” genre, initially hired Trenker as a mountain-guide for the shooting of “Der Berg des Schicksals” (Mountain of Destiny), but when the lead actor failed to demonstrate the necessary mountaineering skills, Trenker was offered the role instead.⁴⁸ In the 1920s, he worked with Fanck and co-star Leni Riefenstahl on several “Bergfilm” productions before embarking on a solo career as an actor, director and screenwriter in the 1930s. He was a successful filmmaker in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. His stance on both regimes is probably best described as opportunistic. “Berge in Flammen”, a collaboration with Austrian director and producer Karl Hartl, was his directorial breakthrough.⁴⁹ The film is based on Trenker’s novel of the same name, which was published in the same year.

Released in 1931, the film can be read as Trenker’s response to the two major anti-war movies that shocked Weimar audiences the previous year: Georg Wilhelm Pabst’s “Westfront 1918” and Lewis Milestone’s “All Quiet on the Western Front”. Rather than depicting pale, malnourished boys stumbling into the meaningless meat grinder of the war, “Berge in Flammen” promised an uplifting tale of heroic defence of the homeland by gallant German-speaking men, and as such it was met with resounding enthusiasm by German cinema-goers.⁵⁰ The film also indirectly commented on the dispute surrounding the loss of predominantly German-speaking South Tyrol to Italy in the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1919), which saw the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Trenker’s film, the war appears as an interruption to the natural order, temporarily severing the Tyrolean people from their historical living space.⁵¹ In the final moments before the explosion, Lieutenant Kall (Claus Clausen) rallies his men, telling them to hold the line at any cost: „Ihr wisst, was auf dem Spiel steht. Tirol. Eure Heimat.”⁵² The loss of the war and subsequently of South Tyrol is never explicitly discussed in the film. Instead, the framing narrative emphasises the intercultural friendship between Dimai and Franchini. When they reach the mountaintop at the end of the film, Franchini makes an entry in his tour book and, as he did at the beginning, signs his name followed by his hometown, Rome. Despite the changed political circumstances, the Italian marks himself as a foreigner and outsider who is merely visiting South Tyrol.

Dimai, the Tyrolean mountain-guide, and Franchini, the Roman aristocrat, first meet while Franchini is on holiday in the Dolomites before the First World War. Although they are characterised as friends, their relationship is clearly hierarchical, with Franchini subordinating himself to Dimai and his skills as a mountaineer. Right from the open-

47 Daniel Winkler/Sophia Mehrbrey (eds.), Luis Trenker (Film-Konzepte 73/1), Munich: Edition Text & Kritik 2024 [ISBN 9783967079487], p. 95.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Wilms, From “Bergsteiger” to “Bergkrieger”, p. 239.

51 Wilms, The Alps as “Lebensraum”, p. 65.

52 “You know what is at stake. Tyrol. Your homeland.” [translated by the author]: Karl Hartl/Luis Trenker, *Berge in Flammen* (1931), DVD, 94 min, 1931 [EAN 4037906289327], 26:30–26:37 min.

ing scene, Dimai is established as the superior man who saves Franchini from falling while they are climbing the peak of the Fanesturm.⁵³ While Dimai embodies traditional masculine bodily traits such as athleticism, size, and strength, Franchini's slender figure is feminised.⁵⁴ During the war, they find themselves fighting on opposite sides of the Alpine front, but never meet face to face. Franchini, a captain in the Italian army, oversees the occupation of Dimai's home village Cortina, while Dimai, popular hero and mountain warrior, is stationed with his division not far from Cortina on the Col Alto.⁵⁵ Notably, most of Franchini's scenes take place indoors, whereas Dimai's body is staged to perform all sorts of heroic and athletic feats in the unforgiving terrain of the high mountains. The film could easily have painted the Italian invader as a scheming traitor, but interestingly it refuses to do so. Franchini is not portrayed as a villain, but as a dignified man who knows how to behave even when occupying the home of his former friend turned enemy. In Cortina, he and his servant Mario are accommodated in Dimai's house, and there they are repeatedly shown as civilised individuals. In one scene, Mario sets the table while Franchini plays with Dimai's infant son,⁵⁶ both seemingly performing these feminine-coded tasks to ease the burden on Dimai's wife and household. Rather than asserting his masculinity through physical traits, Franchini does so through his aristocratic upbringing and gentlemanly behaviour. In this respect, he contrasts with and supplements Dimai.

Dimai embodies a concept of masculinity with which the film's male audiences in the early 1930s could easily identify. He symbolises the aesthetic, intellectual, and moral ideals of his time⁵⁷, or what one could call the hegemonic masculinity. Twice he risks his life for his comrades on patrol and both times the heroism stems from his individual actions. On the first patrol, which is intended to locate where the Italians intend to blow up the mountain and includes a daring downhill ski race under enemy fire, Dimai is accompanied by six other men. Five of these stay behind to provide cover while Dimai and his friend Innerhofer set out to scale the Fanesturm. Mirroring the opening scene with Franchini, Dimai is once again shown as the superior climber, going first and pulling his friend up after him.⁵⁸ Having spied the Italian tunnel, they take a risk and climb higher to catch a glimpse of their home village. As they look down, Innerhofer is shot by an Italian sniper.⁵⁹ Dimai returns alone with the knowledge of the enemy's positions, but he only shares this information with his Lieutenant, not his comrades. Little by little, the film's focus shifts towards his personal experience of the war in the mountains, "elevating" him in both the metaphorical and literal sense.⁶⁰

53 Winkler, *Futurismus & Alpinismus*, p. 327.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 327–328.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

56 Hartl/Trenker, *Berge in Flammen*, 59:25–60:09 min.

57 Winkler, *Männlichkeitsentwürfe zwischen Futurismus und Faschismus*, p. 127.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

59 Hartl/Trenker, *Berge in Flammen*, 51:41 min.

60 Winkler, *Futurismus & Alpinismus*, p. 327.

This is reinforced when during the second patrol to monitor the progress of the Italian preparations for the explosion, Dimai insists on going alone, claiming that a single person will be able to slip through enemy lines unnoticed.⁶¹ He completes his mission at the Fanesturm but then hesitates to return to the Austrian station. In that moment, he is not just a soldier at war, but also an inhabitant of these mountains, and the pull of home proves too strong. On his descent into the valley, Dimai acts clever and resourceful, causing a minor avalanche to bypass Italian soldiers and stealing clothes and skis from one of their camps. Thus, disguised as an Alpini soldier, he is able to sneak into the village and meet his wife, Pia. He promises her that he will stay for a few days; however, when he finds out by chance that the Col Alto is to be blown up the following evening, he decides to return to the mountaintop, stating that he cannot abandon his comrades.⁶² Even Pia, desperately searching for him in the snowy village at night with their child in her arms, cannot convince him to change his mind. He watches her from a distance, wiping a tear from his eyes – notably, one of the few moments in the film when the tough mountain warrior façade cracks and Dimai displays real emotion – before leaving to save the lives of his fellow soldiers.⁶³ Dimai's masculinity stems from moral integrity as much as it does from athleticism and patriotic dedication.

Dimai's relationship with his wife is another interesting aspect with regard to his masculinity because it is completely devoid of sexual desire. Dressed in a traditional Tyrolean "Tracht" and with her hair braided and parted like a Madonna, Pia Dimai (Lissy Arna) is modelled on Trenker's mother.⁶⁴ Indeed, her brief appearances in the film portray her more as a mother than a lover. This is true of most of Trenker's female characters in his movies from the interwar period. They are needed to confirm his masculine worldview, but they cannot be eroticised – lust would be sacrilegious to the mother-image these women represent.⁶⁵ Moreover, Lissy Arna's northern German accent and her tragic-theatrical acting style, which betray her roots in silent films and theatre, mark Pia as foreign, much like Franchini.⁶⁶ This is probably only partly intentional as dramaturgical weaknesses regarding sound and dialogue are common in Trenker's films, with none of the voices coordinated in terms of dialect and speech patterns.⁶⁷ Even so, Dimai is never drawn to Pia in the way he is drawn to his comrades and the mountains of his homeland. Earlier mountain films, such as Fanck's and Pabst's "Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü" (The White Hell of Pitz Palu, 1929), featured prominent love stories and love triangles but, evidently, there is no room for such things in the harsh reality of war depicted in "Berge in Flammen". By dismissing the notion of (heterosexual) romantic love, Trenker inadvertently creates a sense of underlying homoeroticism that Dimai's wife cannot compete with. If

61 „Ein Einzelner kommt am leichtesten durch.“ – "It's easiest for a single person to get through." [translated by the author]: Hartl/Trenker, *Berge in Flammen*, 65:09 min.

62 „Du musst dableiben, Florian, du hast es mir doch versprochen!“ – "You have to stay, Florian, you promised me you would!" [translated by the author]; „Ja, aber ich kann doch meine Kameraden nicht im Stich lassen.“ – "Yes, but I can't just abandon my comrades." [translated by the author]: Zit. nach Hartl/Trenker, *Berge in Flammen*, 79:55–80:13 min.

63 *Ibid.*, 81:41–82:10 min.

64 Lenssen, *Trenker's Frauen*, p. 140.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

66 Winkler, *Futurismus & Alpinismus*, p. 331.

67 Winkler, *Männlichkeitsentwürfe zwischen Futurismus und Faschismus*, p. 128.

there is any eroticism to be found in this film, it is on the summit of a mountain and in an athletic and vitalistic ideal of beauty purely reserved for men.⁶⁸

“Berge in Flammen” conveys an idea of masculinity that is rooted in comradeship, loyalty, and discipline – the qualities of both a mountaineer and a soldier. Other soldierly qualities include his affiliation with his German-speaking homeland: he embodies the character traits that the mountains with their glaciers and valleys, their harsh climates and long winters had imposed on men born there for centuries.⁶⁹ Like other retrospective narratives of World War I, Trenker’s film served to restore an idealised masculinity that had been thrown into crisis by the real experiences of the war, particularly in the losing states.⁷⁰ Dimai’s character celebrates comradeship, one of the soldierly virtues that was symbolically exaggerated and mythologised in the post-war period as a reaction to the social and political upheavals of the time. With “Berge in Flammen”, Trenker offered an alternative concept of masculinity in response to a perceived crisis of masculine identity in the Weimar era. It was decidedly anti-bourgeois, anti-modern, and by implication anti-democratic, and thus capable of heroic deed to the point of self-sacrifice.⁷¹ Two years before the rise of National Socialism in Germany, Trenker’s mountain warrior conveyed a primordial and elemental manhood that would soon be instrumentalised by the Nazi regime.

4. Conclusion

Treating films as a historical source, their real value lies in what they can tell us about the time in which they were made rather than the period in which they were set.⁷² Both “Blind Husbands” and “Berge in Flammen” grapple with social and political issues that arose in the interwar period. “Blind Husbands” deals with challenges that unsettled traditional gender roles in the immediate aftermath of the war, while “Berge in Flammen” can be seen as a product of the war’s long-term effects on concepts of gender identities. Both address questions of masculinity and ultimately produce similar answers. In both movies, the concepts of masculinities introduced as superior in the beginning – embodied by Armstrong and Dimai as opposed to von Steuben and Franchini – emerge victorious in the end. Neither Armstrong nor Dimai undergoes any real change over the course of their films and both come out on the other side with their masculine identities intact. They both use their mountaineering skills, framed as a decidedly masculine

68 Daniel Winkler/Sophia Mehrbrey, Luis Trenker’s Karrieren. Von der Freiburger Kameraschule zur transalpinen Medienmarke, in: Daniel Winkler/Sophia Mehrbrey (eds.), Luis Trenker (Film-Konzepte 73/1), Munich: Edition Text & Kritik 2024 [ISBN 9783967079487], pp. 3–17, here p. 8.

69 Christa Hämmerle, „Es ist immer der Mann, der den Kampf entscheidet, und nicht die Waffe...“ Die Männlichkeit des k.u.k. Gebirgskriegers in der soldatischen Erinnerungskultur, in: Hermann J. Kuprian/Oswald Überegger (eds.), Der Erste Weltkrieg im Alpenraum. Erfahrung, Deutung, Erinnerung/La Grande Guerra nell’arco alpino. Esperienze e memoria, Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner 2006 [ISBN 9783703004230], pp. 35–60, here p. 51.

70 Ibid., p. 48.

71 Wilms, From “Bergsteiger” to “Bergkrieger”, p. 241.

72 James Chapman, Researching Film and History. Sources, Methods, Approaches, in: Luc Pauwels/Dawn Mannay (eds.), The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications 2020 [DOI 10.4135/9781526417015.n28], pp. 452–462, here p. 460.

trait, to overcome the challenges they face in their respective narratives. Their bodies, defined by their athleticism, are important in the construction of their masculinity.

It could be argued that "Blind Husbands" allows for more ambiguity; because even though the husband walk away as a winner, his masculinity has been severely shaken and it is unclear whether he will succeed in securing his wife's affection in the long run. "Berge in Flammen", in contrast, presents a clear-cut hero with a strong set of morals who is never outright challenged in his role as a man. It presents a different sort of conflict, however, when Dimai leaves his troops and descends into the valley to see his family. For a brief moment, he rejects his role as a soldier and embodies a different type of masculinity: that of a loving husband and father. The short conflict is decided in favour of the soldierly masculinity when he decides to return to the mountain to save his comrades.

The analysis has shown practices that established masculinity and how masculinity emerged in relation to other categories. The main male characters are informed not only by their gender but also by their ethnicity, their social class and whether they are local or foreign to the mountains. The masculinities embodied by the aristocrats von Steuben and Franchini are portrayed as subordinate to those of middle-class Armstrong and rural Sepp and Dimai, which points to the change in political systems after World War I. Both movies contribute to culturally emphasised hegemonic masculinity by depicting their heroes as attempting to live up to its ideals. "Blind Husbands" even proposes "right" and "wrong" ways to be a man, which are rewarded and sanctioned accordingly. Thus, mountain cinema shaped the discourse of masculinity in the interwar years.

Lastly, the role of the mountains in these mountain films should be mentioned. Not only do they provide a stage for human conflict, they also significantly influence and shape the plot and characters. "In the Alps there is no sin",⁷³ declares "Blind Husbands" and, indeed, the "spirit of the mountain" ensures that the sinner von Steuben, who does not meet this moral standard, is punished. Similarly, in "Berge in Flammen", the landscape has agency because the war is fought not only against the enemy but also against the elements of nature (and, in Dimai's case, with them). In both films, the men who persevere, and with them the concepts of masculinities they embody, are those with the necessary skills to conquer the terrain of the high mountains.

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73 Stroheim, *Blind Husbands*, 60:09 min.

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