Arnold Fanck, most often seen as the pioneer of the Bergfilm genre, transformed the Alps into a symbolic, mythical world where sacrifice, destiny, and victory fuse in a collision of epic and existential proportions. By highlighting authentic, bold climbing and skiing feats, the mountain film presents protagonists who flee from the hustle and bustle of Alpine resort villages to seek solitude and higher purpose in the mountains above. Mountains thus demarcate a sacred space detached from conventional expectations and social bonds, as Christian Rapp elaborates:

Fancks Filme befestigen damit die seit dem 19. Jahrhundert vor allem im deutschen und österreichischen Alpinismus gepflegte Vorstellung vom Gebirge als einem zeit- und zivilisationsgelösten Territorium, in dem sich das als fragmentiert empfindende Individuum geistig und körperlich wiederherstellen kann. (8)

With Leni Riefenstahl as the female lead, Fanck’s typical plots in Der heilige Berg (1926), Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü (1929), and Stürme über dem Mont Blanc (1930) evolved to include a love triangle with women intruding on men’s terrain. It is only by withstanding the temptation, by recuperating the male bonding, and by self-sacrifice that the hero can reconstitute his authority. In view of the fact that the climax of the Bergfilm in the 1930s coincided with the rise of National Socialism, Siegfried Kracauer interpreted mountain films as mirroring collective sentiments and contemporary ideals. To Kracauer, the Bergfilm’s melodramatic plot, anti-modern emphasis, and overwrought, sentimental messages embodied pre-fascist tendencies that anticipated the ensuing propaganda films by Riefenstahl.

Recent scholarship has made significant contributions to the reevaluation of the German Bergfilm genre. Since Eric Rentschler’s decisive article «Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the Bergfilm» (1990), scholars have begun to reexamine the mountain film and revise Kracauer’s disparaging and damaging critique. In North American scholarship, Carsten Strathausen (2001), Nancy Nenno (2003), Rebecca Prime (2007), Ingeborg Majer O’Sickey (2010), and Wilfried Wilms (2012) have taken Rentschler’s work as point of departure to expand the critical analysis of the Bergfilm in new directions, focusing on the context of Weimar rather than Nazi culture and elaborating on tropes of the cinematic sublime (Strathausen), tourism (Nenno), and the cool aesthetics of
New Objectivity (Majer O’Sickey). Prime has focused on dimensions of the documentary and the ethnographic, while Wilms interprets mountain films in the aftermath of World War I.

Concurrently with the critical scholarly reconsideration in the U.S., recent commercial efforts in Germany have focused on «normalizing» the Bergfilm along with its disputed ties. In 1997, Berge, Licht und Traum: Dr. Arnold Fanck und der deutsche Bergfilm was published, containing a dedication by Arnold Fanck’s grandson, Matthias Fanck; a detailed bibliography of Fanck’s films; a German version of Rentschler’s article; as well as published and unpublished essays, letters, and speeches from Fanck’s literary estate. Between 1999 and 2004, Fanck’s most popular films were re-released in new DVD editions. Finally, in 2009, Matthias Fanck followed with the lavish coffee-table biography, Weisse Hölle – Weisser Rausch: Arnold Fanck. Bergfilme und Bergbilder 1909–1939, reintroducing Fanck’s films to a greater German-speaking public. Luis Trenker experienced a similar revival. All of his films were released on DVD in 2004 in the comprehensive «Luis Trenker Edition,» which appeared in tandem with two biographies: Bera Luis: Das Phänomen Luis Trenker, co-written by the Trenker son Florian Trenker and Stefan König and republished in 2007, and Luis Trenker ungeschminkt: Bilder, Stationen und Begegnungen (2009) by Hans-Jürgen Panitz. Matthias Fanck and Panitz also collaborated on the television documentary Faszination Bergfilm: Himmelhoch und abgrundtief (2008) that screened at numerous mountain film festivals throughout Germany. These profitable products, produced by a close-knit group of heirs, authors, screenwriters, and directors, tend to focus on Fanck’s and Trenker’s artistic talents and innovative style and carefully divorce both directors from Riefenstahl’s questionable legacy, thereby rehabilitating the Bergfilm. The interest in Riefenstahl’s career, however, also intensified after her death in 2003.

Rather than reproaching or defending the Bergfilm, this essay investigates a less-known, early example of a mountain film that manages to evade the familiar argument altogether. Before directing his first feature in 1923, Fanck likely watched another picture playing in German and Austrian theaters in 1921, Blind Husbands (in the German version released as Die Rache der Berge) by the Austrian-born writer, actor, and director Erich von Stroheim, that similarly uses a mountain setting, daring climbing scenes, and the standard love triangle to reinforce character and plot development. An in-depth analysis of Stroheim’s film by German film scholars remains outstanding. Nonetheless, North American Stroheim biographer Joel Finler maintains that «possibly Blind Husbands foreshadows the whole mid-twenties genre of German mountain films like Der heilige Berg» (10), and indeed the parallels between the films are striking. Blind Husbands brings into play the traits that later became typical for the genre: spec-
tacular climbing scenes filmed on location in the mountains, and a plot that revolves around a tragic love triangle and culminates in a confrontation between two male competitors perched high on a cliff. However, Stroheim uses wit and irony rather than melodrama to typecast his characters in easily discernable stereotypes – the neglected, flirtatious wife, the aloof American husband, the glib cavalry officer, the morally upright mountain guide – characters that lay bare the tenuous and unstable gender and national relationships in the wake of the Great War. Like the Bergfilm, Blind Husbands culminates in an overarching, symbolic message, but instead of celebrating über-human values such as sacrifice, loyalty, and faith, the film concludes with the couple reunited and Lieutenant von Steuben meeting his demise by falling from the mountain. In contrast to the German mountain film, the emphasis lies on ambiguity and ambivalence.

These different approaches are rooted in the directors’ distinctive ethnic, religious, national, and class background. Stroheim was born in Vienna in 1885 as Erich Oswald Stroheim, to Benno Stroheim, a merchant from Gleiwitz, Silesia, and Johanna Bondy from Prague, both practicing Jews. He grew up in Vienna, witnessing the decadence, hypocrisy, and highly charged sexuality so aptly described by his contemporaries Freud and Schnitzler at the turn of the century. The family often vacationed in Tyrol, allowing Stroheim to draw on his intimate knowledge of the region when directing Blind Husbands. In 1901, he was sent to a business school in Graz with the intention of taking over the family’s hat manufacturing business; Stroheim, however, aspired to a career in the military. His ambitions remained unfulfilled: after being evaluated as unfit to serve, Stroheim reapplied and was commissioned as a voluntary soldier in training, at his own expense, but dismissed after only four months. With his own career in shambles and the family business in bankruptcy, Stroheim, at the spur of the moment, made the decision to emigrate. He arrived at Ellis Island in November 1909 as «Erich Oswald Hans Carl Maria von Stroheim,» reinventing himself at once as an aristocrat, an army officer, and a Catholic. Indeed, Stroheim circulated fierce rumors that his ancestors were Viennese nobility, that his forefathers had a long history in the Austrian Dragoons, and that he had subsequently worked as an equestrian advisor in the U.S. Army. The facts about Stroheim’s life in Europe that he so carefully sought to mythologize became known only after his death when a journalist printed a copy of his birth records in 1961,² and remain nebulous to this day. Stroheim’s background is still difficult to trace to the extent that several Stroheim biographies in use today cannot be trusted.³

Despite the fanciful name change, though, Stroheim’s first years in the U.S. were tough. He took an odd variety of low-paying jobs and tried to enlist in the U.S. Army, but was discharged after two months. In 1912, Stroheim moved to San Francisco, climbed to the top of Mount Tamalpais across the Bay, and found
work by helping the Austrian innkeeper living at its base. At the mountain inn, Stroheim also met Margaret Knox, his future wife; all events which likely inspired his story *The Pinnacle*. The couple soon had marital problems, and after a little over a year, they were divorced. Stroheim moved to Hollywood, finding work as an extra and an assistant in D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1914), and later as an assistant director and military advisor on a variety of films all the while taking on larger acting roles. Playing the part of a villainous Prussian cavalry officer in several films, among them D.W. Griffith’s *Hearts of the World* (1918), he became known to audiences as «the man you love to hate.» Ironically, the Austrian rose to fame by impersonating a Prussian, and the implication that he was German incensed Stroheim who wrote: «We on the Danube loved the Germans as the Irish love the English.» Recently, Elliot Einzig Porter unearthed previously unknown military files from this time showing that Stroheim was subject to surveillance because Military Intelligence suspected he was conducting espionage activities for Germany. Stroheim, for his part, seems to have played a game of hide and seek with Intelligence, handing out business cards with the title «Lieutenant Royal and Imperial Austrian Army,» cursing both the Austrian and the U.S. Army, and giving his landlord the impression that he was «degenerate.» Perhaps this is part of the reason why Stroheim, who applied for American citizenship as early as 1910, had to wait until 1926 to become naturalized. The studio, meanwhile, advertised that he was American. In 1918, after the war had ended, Stroheim’s career took an incredible turn when Carl Laemmle, a fellow German-Jewish émigré and the founder of Universal Film studios, financed and produced Stroheim’s story *The Pinnacle*. Blind Husbands, as the film was renamed much to Stroheim’s chagrin, premiered in October 1919, marking Stroheim’s successful directorial debut.

Stroheim’s contemporary Arnold Fanck was born in 1889 into an influential and wealthy family residing in Frankenthal, Palatinate. When the child fell ill of asthma, the family physician advised a stay at Davos. Indeed, as a student at the Fridericianum, a school for pulmonary patients mentioned repeatedly in Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*, Fanck not only recovered but discovered his life-long passion for mountains and mountain sports. After finishing school, he studied geology in Munich, Berlin, and Zurich, all the while taking extensive climbing excursions. He received his doctorate in geology in 1915, and from now on consistently added the title to his name. During World War I, Fanck served as an aide in a military hospital and later worked for German counter-espionage. Like Stroheim, he launched his career only after the war when he bought two cameras, a tripod, film, and a projector, and founded the Freiburger Berg- und Sportfilm GmbH. Though short films documenting mountain ascents or traverses had been produced by the military as early as 1898, Fanck broke new ground with a twelve-minute short film featuring spectacular skiing
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scenes, 4628 Meter hoch auf Skiern. Besteigung des Monte Rosa (1913). With the two-part documentary Das Wunder des Schneeschuhs (1920 and 1922) and Im Kampf mit dem Berge (1921) he advanced to longer pictures, still without proper plot but including the highly talented cameraman Sepp Allgeier and legendary Austrian skier Hannes Schneider. Fanck’s first mountain film with dramatic plot was produced in 1923/24, involving five cameramen, Luis Trenker in his first starring role, and a new Lytax reflex camera. Der Berg des Schicksals, fictionalizing the first ascent of the Guglia di Brenta (Campanile Basso, 2,872 m), introduced the daring yet stoic mountain hero, an overdramatic story, and conflicted relationships between men and women so typical of Fanck’s later mountain films. The film also famously inspired Riefenstahl to introduce herself to Fanck and launch her own mountain film career.

World War I and all it entailed – from the initial enthrallment with the military to fervent nationalism to Germany’s shameful defeat – affected both directors in different ways. Fanck picks up on notions that made emasculated men and Weimar modernity responsible for military defeat, providing strong role models and clear symbolic messages to future generations. Stroheim also engenders the crisis of male virility. With his European background and status as an outsider, he is able to tackle sensitive issues in a provocative yet nontoxic fashion. Though thinly veiled in comedy, Stroheim addresses otherness and xenophobia along with the high divorce rate in modern marriages, calling into question the underpinnings of American society in the wake of the war. For the purpose of this essay, I compare Fanck’s Der heilige Berg and Stroheim’s Blind Husbands, both of which revolve around questions of masculinity after the Great War and seemingly confirm manhood in the mountains. Since Fanck’s film has garnered much recent scholarship, I refrain here from a distinct plot summary or comprehensive analysis, drawing instead on select scenes from the film for the sake of contrast and comparison.

In both films, World War I is ever-present even before the actual feature begins. Der heilige Berg commences with a dedication to Hans Rohde, Fanck’s collaborator on his first film, 4628 Meter hoch auf Skiern: «Dedicated to my friend who was killed in the war, the mountain climber, Dr. Hans Rohde.» Blinds Husbands likewise begins with a dedication in its first title: «Dedicated to Sepp Innerkofler, world-famous mountain guide who risked his life again and again to save others, finally sacrificing it on the Monte Cristallo. Let us remember him through the years for his pure and mighty heart.» At first sight, this title card credits the character of the mountain guide in the film, albeit in slightly ironic fashion. We are supposed to remember Sepp’s «heart» but his mountain-eering skills go unmentioned, which seems an odd tribute to a mountain guide. Even though the film introduces the notion of self-sacrifice, the viewer never finds out how Sepp meets his end, rendering the eulogy more idiosyncratic than...
moving. What goes unmentioned in the film, however, is the fact that Sepp Innerkofler was also a historical figure, namely an accomplished South Tyrolean mountain climber, guide, and innkeeper. Sepp’s uncle, Michel Innerkofler, climbed Monte Cristallo more than 300 times and died in its vicinity in 1888 when he fell into a crevasse. Sepp, conversely, became a member of the Standschützengruppen, the Austrian militia that formed in defense of Tyrol when Italy declared war on Austria. He fought for the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Tyrolean Dolomites but was fatally wounded by the Italians during an attempt to reconquer an Italian-occupied Alpine peak in August 1915. This veiled reference hints at the highly politicized background of the film, rendering a reading in purely romantic terms impossible.

Blind Husbands is set in Cortina, which was formerly part of the Habsburg Empire and the site of fierce battle during the First World War. Invaded by Italian troops, occupied by the Tyrolean Standschützen, the town was given to Italy after the end of the war and renamed Cortina d’Ampezzo. Even though Blind Husbands takes place after the war, Stroheim obscures these new realities: the title card introducing the locale reads «Cortina D’Ampezzo, on the Austro-Italian Frontier – the Mecca of American tourists.» While Stroheim uses the appropriate postwar name, he avoids a particular national affiliation (to avoid political blunder, the translated version omits the geographical designation altogether). Stroheim furthermore furnishes all signs in his film in German, has an Austrian stage coach arrive in town, and even a platoon of Austrian Alpine soldiers on a «mapping expedition» come to aid the climbers, all giving the impression that Cortina still belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the Austrian soldiers are likewise renamed in the German version). These patriotic fancies are, in turn, complicated by the arrival of the Americans. With the reference to American tourists (not only the film’s hero and his wife but three other fellows) who can afford a vacation in the quaint Alpine town to go mountain climbing, Stroheim confirms that Americans rule the postwar world even in their leisure time. Yet this touristic boom, which truly descended upon Cortina (apart from being the site of the 1956 Winter Olympics, portions of The Pink Panther (1963), James Bond’s For Your Eyes Only (1981), and Cliffhanger (1997) were filmed here), is immediately ridiculed: another title card characterizes Cortina as «set like a gem … almost chocked by the nearness of this Alpine magnitude.» Stroheim’s talent of employing the paradigmatic vocabulary of the mountain sublime yet stripping the words from a greater context and moreover combining them in a rather nonsensical way – frequently through the use of ellipses – also comes to the fore when introducing the film’s hero: «Into the solitude of the immortal mountains – where man is little and God is great – comes Doctor Robert Armstrong, America’s famous surgeon, seeking rest and relaxation.»
If Blind Husbands hints at a different world order after World War I, the same could be said of Der heilige Berg, which in its repeated references to the «fallen» climber at the end draws a parallel to fallen soldiers in 1918 and calls attention to the deep impact of the Great War. In Der heilige Berg, «The Friend» offers a new model of masculinity that mirrors his environment of rock and ice: his poise is measured, his demeanor cool, his face literally frozen. «The Friend» only feels at home on «his mountain,» seeking the «tallest peaks» to find authenticity, strength, and faithfulness. This heroic ideal loftily puts on display what early twentieth-century German and Austrian theorists on the Alps (Georg Freiherr von Ompteda, Eugen Guido Lammer, Gustav Müller) preached when touting the regions of snow and ice as an opportunity for toughening and purification. According to such ideology, the mountaineer leaves behind an effeminate and weakened civilization of the cities, testing his limits and freeing his strength to become the embodiment of the new man. With an openly militaristic undertone, these theories fashioned mountains into a country’s natural protective barriers and Alpinists into soldiers. After the war, mountaineering turned into an effective remedy for military frustrations, and membership surged to record heights in the German and Austrian Alpine Club. In Germany as well as in Austria, mountaineering became swept up in the nationalistic and anti-Semitic tide. German mountaineers were hailed as superior, their climbing skills connected with a military spirit and national character. The Alpine Club also took a patriotic turn, as chapters began to systematically bar Jewish members and adopted nationalist flags and pennons.

In Blind Husbands, Armstrong, too, seeks out the mountains to recuperate both physically and spiritually. He is not only wealthier than his European counterparts but also arrives in the defeated territory as the winner of the war, cool and confident. Even while on vacation, on his former enemy’s turf, Armstrong is able to prove his superiority: In an atypical reversal of the guide-client relationship, Armstrong saved the life of his Austrian mountain guide Sepp, remembered by Sepp at the beginning of the film in flashback. In return, Sepp, introduced in the film in ambivalent if not comical fashion as «A Son of the eternal mountains … strong and mute … as they … Silent Sepp,» vows eternal devotion and friendship to Armstrong. Not unlike Der heilige Berg, Blind Husbands stages the mountain climber as the role model of a robust and stalwart character. In contrast to «The Friend’s» demise in Fanck’s film, Armstrong proves adept in the mountains as well as in the postwar world and successfully defeats his rival, the vacationing Austrian cavalry officer, Eric von Steuben.

Dressed in full military attire, von Steuben directly evokes the Great War, yet the small man stuffed in an all-too-small uniform seems comically out of place. Indeed, the keen observer may notice that von Steuben sports a Dragoon uniform...
in use before 1910, and that his medals – the 1908 Jubilee Cross, the Annexation Medal, and the Marianer Cross – are all distinctions Stroheim claimed he earned himself. The film immediately renders von Steuben’s impeccable attire useless, introducing him in the intertitle as «Lieutenant Von Steuben, an Austrian cavalry officer, with a keen appreciation of three things: Wine, WOMEN, Song.» In the film’s original release, this was followed by an addendum: «NOTE: Shell shock, trench fever, and mustard gas necessitated his sick leave (so von Steuben said),» an explanation that not only strengthens the references to World War I but also clarified the Austrian lieutenant’s presence in Italy. The uniform thus masks von Steuben’s incompetence, including his philandering tendencies, petite bourgeois prejudice, and lack of mountain skills. With the reference to August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben’s Lied der Deutschen, the soon-to-become German national anthem, Stroheim furthermore mocks the so-called German qualities lauded in the song. The first shots of the protagonists strengthen these associations while establishing the tensions among the protagonists. As the camera, in Armstrong’s point of view, first gazes at von Steuben’s gloved hands clutching his sword, and Armstrong, in countershot, smirks just slightly, forming his opinion of the Austrian, von Steuben is solely occupied with staring through a monocle at Margaret’s slender ankles, filmed again in a point-of-view shot in close-up. In a mirroring scene just a bit later, it is von Steuben who, in a point-of-view shot, disapprovingly musters Sepp’s mountain outfit from toe to head, grimacing at the torn trousers, and Sepp, in countershot, repeats the visual examination from head to toe, sneering at the uniform. As the plot soon confirms, the uniform von Steuben uses to impress women cannot fool mountain men such as Sepp. Von Steuben, who is assigned to Room No. 13 at the Hotel Croce Bianca, proceeds to seduce first «The ‹Vamp› Waitress,» a woman most receptive to his advances, and then «A Village Blossom,» a local woman he meets at the «Festival of the Transfiguration.» But these romantic interludes only occupy his time as he pursues his true conquest, Armstrong’s wife, Margaret. And indeed, as Armstrong ignores his wife over and over again, she willingly gives in to von Steuben’s wooing.

The national stereotyping, however, is too obvious and thick to be entirely believable. In this way, the elaborate sets (an entire Tyrolean village reconstructed in the mountains of Southern California where the film was shot) mirror and lampoon an American gaze onto Europe. Accordingly, Cortina d’Ampezzo is a village free of cars and any other signs of modernity. Tourists arrive in carriages, the village folk wear traditional garb, and the mountain hut abounds – in symbolic reference to von Steuben’s advances – with hunting trophies. Yet the decidedly un-Alpine landscape near Idlewild unmistakably smacks of the desert climate of Southern California rather than the formidable, cold Alpine world of rock and snow. This peculiar mismatch extends to the film’s characters: Eric von Steuben,
played by the director whose name so noticeably resembles the character, is not entirely believable as the despicable «Other Man,» as he is called in the credits. At the film’s premiere in New York, Stroheim characterized the lieutenant as the swanking, swaggering scion of militarism, an officer in the Austrian army with all the absurd vanities, the ugly hypocrisies, the silly affectations of the kulturist. He is so obvious it seems a child could read him, yet he succeeds in entangling a high bred wife who loves her husband. I have tried to make the Austrian interloper just as hateful as possible. […] I have played this role myself to be sure it would draw out the maximum amount of hate.17

Despite Stroheim’s overblown assertions, von Steuben possesses some undeniable charms. Von Steuben knows how to please women, showering them all with compliments, gifts, and affection, and he also knows how to enjoy life, taking great pleasure in getting dressed and groomed, and constantly smoking and licking his lips. Thus, the bon vivant comes in where the modern American man – the successful physician who is either immersed in his job or in his reading materials – fails. Stroheim toys with fiction and reality, merging in his character his own life-long fascination with the European aristocracy, the military, and womanizing, and simultaneously mocking it as, for instance, when the children imitate von Steuben’s stilted, militaristic way of walking. In this fashion, the European suitor repels his audience in predictable ways but at the same time creates thrills with his luring otherness. To contemporary audiences, the character must have also called to mind the Italian actor Rudolph Valentino (1895–1926) who acted as the dark Italian lover in several silent films of the 1920s, charming American women while threatening conventional ideals of All-American masculinity.18 Von Steuben similarly dismantles the American reign of superiority, despite the film’s overt claim of an American victory.

Hence Armstrong’s unresponsiveness to his wife and Margaret’s unfulfilled desire remain the larger, unsolved issues in Blind Husbands. The freshly divorced and remarried director of the film (who later married one of the actresses on the set) offers no long-term productive solution to the dilemma of «blind husbands,» but rather leaves open the question raised in the film’s opening title:

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 pre-nuptial days … Guilty! says the world condemning «the other man» … But what of the husband?

It could be argued that the entire film – in the vein of Ernst Lubitsch’s early comedies – is about women’s wants and needs, contrasted here with men’s ambitions on snow and rock. Stroheim’s camerawork supports this reading: While the men advance on the glacier, intercut shots show Margaret waiting for her
husband, imprisoned in enclosed spaces with the windows shut. In *Der heilige Berg*, scenes with Diotima are similarly intercut with the male drama unfolding on the mountain, but her role seems limited to that of a helpless bystander who goes empty-handed at the end. Stroheim conversely lends Margaret’s yearning as much detail and screen time as the climbing scenes on the mountain, depicting the psychology of female desire by using inventive camerawork and editing. The film is dominated by medium and close-up shots, revealing emotional intensity and the female gaze. Numerous eyeline cuts illustrate Margaret’s yearning, her husband’s coldness, and von Steuben’s transgression. In one scene reflecting Margaret’s fantasies, she looks at herself in the mirror where she sees a reflection of her sleeping husband morphing into a passionate couple. In another scene, von Steuben appears in her nightmare sporting an evil grin and smoking his trademark cigarette while pointing his index finger at Margaret in accusation (and, in extension, the husbands and wives in the audience). And Margaret seems no exception. Women in general are the willing partakers in the seduction process and seem more intuitive and knowledgeable, even though their sexual and sensual needs are locked away. When Stroheim intercuts the doting between the «Honeymooners» with Margaret staring at the affectionate couple, the freshly married woman is keenly aware of unfulfilled desire, asking her husband while watching Margaret, «You’ll never neglect me like that?» The «Honeymooners» cannot take their hands off each other, with her, in a provocative shot, putting her hand in his crotch before they leave for the night. «The ‹Vamp› Waitress» happily concedes with von Steuben’s advances and shows jealousy once he turns his attention to Margaret. And the «Village Blossom» at the festival does not require much convincing to agree to the amorous affair. Von Steuben benefits from what appears to be a general dilemma when, in a cut scene from a surviving print, he comforts Margaret with the words «A husband that leaves a woman like you, to ramble around in the mountains, deserves to be betrayed. … I love you.»

Margaret and other love-lusting women in the film surely run counter to Victorian ideals, and by laying bare the frustrations of American womanhood, *Blind Husbands* quietly points to male anxieties of changing gender roles in the wake of the war. In fact, von Steuben’s sexual prowess can only be contained with the help of Sepp, the mountain guide, who as *deus ex machina* magically appears whenever von Steuben makes an advance toward Margaret. In this way, Sepp not only prevents a kiss between the two at the Pass of the Three Crosses but also moves Margaret from Room No. 1 to No. 3 to trick and wait for von Steuben at night himself. While Sepp’s St. Bernard dog is guarding Margaret’s room, von Steuben makes his predictable move. After readying himself for the seductive effort – he brushes his hair, puts on cologne, and dresses in a silky night robe – his efforts are embarrassingly thwarted by Sepp. Whereas in *Der heilige*
Berg, Diotima goes punished because she demanded too much (‘Was one man not enough for you?’), cries her future mother-in-law), Blind Husbands’s happy ending remains in odd tension with its opening title and the unanswered question of whether the couple will successfully reunite and have children.

In the mountains, these differences in attitude come to the fore. Blind Husbands opens with an image of Monte Cristallo (a mountain also featured in Leni Riefenstahl’s Das blaue Licht), with the title announcing in typical ironic fashion: ‘beneath the blue sky … as old … as the world itself … the Monte Cristallo …’ Here as in Der heilige Berg, mountains become the stage for conflicts that seem timeless and universal. Even though in both films mountain climbing is an activity reserved exclusively for men, and the environment of rock and ice the designated territory to test their skills, women figure in this eroticized realm where male passions dangerously heat up. In Fanck’s Der heilige Berg «The Friend» flees to the mountains, combating his raging emotions by swinging his axe into frozen cliffs. In Blind Husbands, the hero also invites his competitor on a perilous mountain excursion. Stroheim, however, precedes this climactic mission by several scenes poking fun at the desire to conquer summits in general. When the three other American tourists declare their intention to scale the north face of Monte Cristallo, Armstrong objects: ‘But why from the north side? No one ever made it before.’ The three respond, oblivious to the nonsensicalness of their endeavor: ‘That’s just the reason!’ Armstrong resigns with a helpless protestation, ‘Don’t try to break records. The mountains have no patience with such worldly motives,’ to which von Steuben replies, in typical sexualized manner, ‘To me mountains are life-less rocks. My pleasure has always been to master them.’ The fictitious «Pinnacle» also epitomizes fight and fulfillment, but von Steuben, apparently blind to a larger mountain sublime, seeks more immediate, material satisfaction, in the sense of what the embroidered sign in his room at the mountain hut promises: ‘In the Alps there is no sin.’ Later, von Steuben tells Margaret a keen and dead-on revelation, ‘Your husband does not think of you – he climbs the mountains.’ Thus, male conquest takes on a different meaning, and the plot quickly advances.

Armstrong is not willing to depart for Rome before climbing «his Pinnacle,» and when suspecting von Steuben’s advancements, plots revenge. On top of the Pinnacle that Armstrong sets out to climb, dragging with him a scared and unwilling von Steuben, he discovers a letter from his wife to his rival that, in the struggle between the two men, promptly floats off the cliff in the wind. When Armstrong presses von Steuben to confess its content, the latter serves him a lie by implying that Margaret was unfaithful. Armstrong cuts the rope and leaves von Steuben to his fate: disoriented and scared, he falls off the mountain to his death. Armstrong, conversely, masters the descent to find the letter in which his wife rebuts von
Steuben’s propositions and declares love only for her husband. As his name implies, Armstrong leaves the continent as a victorious man, confident in his muscle and manhood, and ostensibly showing more affection toward his wife.

In marked contrast to *Der heilige Berg*, *Blind Husbands* concludes with the bond restored between husband and wife. This happy ending to the triangular dilemma requires the rope between the mountain comrades to be cut, and mistrust and misunderstanding remedied. By diverting the values touted at the conclusion of *Der heilige Berg* and by reuniting the sexes, Stroheim altogether evades the central, melodramatic conflict of the German *Bergfilm*. Moreover, the film symbolically reenacts the American victory: in cool confidence, the American arrives, sees, conquers, and leaves. Yet Stroheim lends his film an undercurrent which consistently puts into question such straightforward interpretation. Though the prologue raises questions about the husband’s responsibility in the unfolding of events, this matter is not resolved, as the husband does not undergo any change in the film and it remains open whether he has learned anything from the experience. As a physician, Armstrong supposedly heals people, yet he seems utterly out of touch with his wife and his environment: While his wife visibly craves attention, he plays with a villager’s baby, showing his affection (and arguably, his own wish for offspring) until he promptly returns the baby to the mother once he smells its bodily functions. Later, he schemes an elaborate plot to test his wife. This maneuver that begins with Armstrong’s insistence on separate rooms at the Pinnacle hut and ends with von Steuben’s death on August 13 ultimately proves unnecessary, doing more harm than good. Indeed, Armstrong is apparently blind in more than one aspect: When he demands to know what was written in Margaret’s letter to von Steuben, threatening the latter to tell the truth because he «shall know it,» von Steuben serves him a lie, claiming that he has had an affair with Margaret. Contrary to his claim, Armstrong does not recognize the truth and only learns of Margaret’s fidelity when he finds the letter upon his descent. In the end, even Sepp seems to know more about women than the «blind husband,» advising Armstrong: «Be good to her. Little I know of the world – but one thing she needs: love.»

The muted questioning of *Der heilige Berg* ideals such as fidelity, faith, and loyalty is also evident in Stroheim’s pervasive use of religious symbols in his mise-en-scène. Crosses and other reminders of Christian values are found everywhere in the film but do not seem to prevent illicit longings. The film begins with church bells ringing at the village’s service on «The Seventh Day» but cuts immediately to the wine room at the Hotel Croce Bianca, symbolically anticipating the fact that the protagonists tend to get easily distracted. At the Croce Bianca’s hallway, a giant cross admonishes von Steuben on his way to Margaret’s room; he seduces Margaret to a kiss below three giant crosses at the Passo Tre Croci; and
in Margaret’s room at the Pinnacle Hut a crucified Jesus next to her bed radiates a Christian message. Yet these reminders of faith are apparently unable to steer the protagonists away from their worldly concerns, failing to deliver devotion and redemption. Perhaps Stroheim’s pervasive juxtaposition of religious symbolism and profane reality mirrors his own belief systems: born Jewish, he claimed to be Protestant, and in the United States assumed the Catholic faith, though without conversion or a firm commitment to the Church. Although Stroheim married his third wife in a Catholic church and frequently resorted to religious phrases, his lifestyle (two divorces and the fact that he was living with a mistress during part of his second marriage) and overall cynical attitude hardly qualify him as a devout Catholic. Lennig concludes, «in short, his religious beliefs were a host of contradictions, as simple and complex as the man himself.» (10)

Der heilige Berg also makes use of religious symbolism, as for instance in «The Friend’s» and Diotima’s imagined wedding in a cathedral made of ice, but the film generally prefers a spiritual Stimmung over concrete Christian references. As Rentschler remarks, Fanck’s mise-en-scène brings to mind a pre-modern, Romantic world of «wonder and enchantment»:

The visual impact of the mountain films rested in an overwhelming mix of aura and abstraction. Fanck’s images drew heavily on the iconography of romantic painters, evoking the impetus of artists like Caspar David Friedrich, Philipp Otto Runge, and Joseph Anton Koch to imbue landscapes with transcendent and mystical powers. (147)

Even though Stroheim takes an altogether more sardonic approach to sublime transformation, he does not relinquish Romantic Stimmung, either. In particular the scene when the protagonists ascend to the Pinnacle Hut, their silhouettes in capes and hats barely discernible in the swirling fog and mist, harkens back to nineteenth-century Romantic painting. Adding to the somber atmosphere, Armstrong, von Steuben, and Margaret come across a memorial for an adulterous sinner that reads:

On Sept. 16 1879 Franz Huber was caught by Alexis Bauer holding a secret meeting with the latter’s [sic] wife. In the ensuing fight the former was thrown by the betrayed husband down this precipice and killed. Passerby pray for the condemned soul of the poor sinner.

A graphic image of a figure falling from the mountains into the flames of hell below complements the signpost and causes Armstrong, von Steuben, and Margaret a moment of pause. The admonition is complete when, at the Pinnacle Hut, von Steuben readies himself for his nightly maneuver to the piano tunes of Schubert’s song «Der Erlkönig» (1815), the song’s famous final cadence corresponding to a screen fadeout. Despite the dramatic foreshadowing, the film’s climax sways between melodramatic tension and ironic disenchantment. On
top of the Pinnacle, the intertitle proclaims «At the very feet of God – where man forgets his baser self and the soul beneath his mind grows clean,» while Armstrong and von Steuben struggle for life and death. A deceived Armstrong cuts the umbilical rope, leaving von Steuben to his fate. The latter clutches his hands in desperate prayer, the shadow of a vulture encroaches and encircles him, and predictably, he falls to his death.

However, Stroheim's clever cinematography also anticipates the dark, psychological drama of German Expressionist cinema. In particular, the film's beginning (including the establishing shots of the town square from above, followed by church bells) call to mind F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), and in both films, the «simple and faithful» town folk become tormented by an outsider who has to be extorted from society. Stroheim's excessive use of crosses and other symbols such as signs, windows, mirrors, and hallways, as well as narrative devices such as flashback, premonition, hallucination, and dreams also points ahead to Expressionist cinema. Stroheim combines studio and on-location shooting, and following Griffith, he outfits his mise-en-scène with an abundance of (symbolic) animals including dogs, cows, horses, geese, chickens, and pigeons. With multiple dimensions in setting (enclosed rooms versus mountainscapes), character set-up (American bourgeoisie versus European officer), and dramatic plot (moral transgression versus mountain conquest), Stroheim playfully engages issues of militarism, nationalism, class, modernity, and gender. But beyond an American screwball comedy, *Blind Husbands* toys with shifting, multi-national points of view, mirroring the changing identities of its director. Ultimately, Stroheim undercuts any final genre definition as well as the over-dramatic proportions so typically attributed to the mountain film. With its emphasis on anticlimax, contradiction, and irony, *Blind Husbands* thus helps to open up the established tropes in which we tend to read the German Bergfilm.

**Notes**

1. The translated German version, which was accidentally found in the 1980s, is a good seven minutes longer than the 92-minute English original, containing some slight changes in reference to nationality and some slightly longer character shots.
2. For further detail see Lennig 4.
3. As late as 1971, Thomas Quinn Curtiss, a good friend of Stroheim, published a biography titled *Von Stroheim* perpetuating the myths that Stroheim sowed. In his biography that appeared thirty years later, Lennig claims that Curtiss's book «reads entertainingly, but it is almost entirely fiction» (Lennig 4). Peter Noble claims in *Hollywood Scapegoat: The Biography of Erich von Stroheim* that Stroheim's «father was a Colonel in the 6th Regiment of Dragoons, and his mother a lady-in-waiting to Elizabeth, Empress of Austria,» and that
Stroheim himself was a member of the Palace Guard at the Imperial Palace (Noble 4–5). Richard Koszarski rewrote his own 1983 book *The Man You Loved to Hate* into *Von: The Life and Films of Erich von Stroheim*, published in 2001. As Koszarski acknowledges, «I take into account information overlooked by other English-language writers. And I also make use of documents uncovered by the von Stroheim family only recently and not available when I interviewed Valerie von Stroheim and her son, Josef Erich, in 1978» (Koszarski xiv).

4 As Lennig notes, *Variety’s* review of *The Unbeliever* (1918) read: «German cruelty is driven home forcibly by Karl [sic] von Stroheim in the role of a lieutenant of the Prussians. It is true to life in its military bearing. He is the German officer to perfection.» Quoted in Lennig 47.

5 Quoted in Koszarski, *Von* 28.

6 These surprising findings, surely worth of further inquiry that cannot be accomplished in the scope of this article, are compiled by Elliot Einzig Porter in his article «The Two Vons: The World War I Secret Government Investigation of Erich von Stroheim» (*Film History* 22 [2010]: 329–46).

7 See Koszarski, *Von* 45.

8 By changing the original title to *Blind Husbands*, the film was immediately reduced to an illicit affair rather than a far-reaching, merely implied provocation. This might have been the reason why Stroheim so vehemently resisted the title change, writing in a full-page ad in the *Motion Picture News*: «He [Laemmle] is going to change it to ‹Blind Husbands›. ‹Blind Husbands!› Can you imagine it to yourself? A beautiful title, a meaningful title, a title that meant everything to the man who created it, a title that represented months and years of creative effort in producing this picture – all tossed away in a moment for a name which is the absolute essence of commercialism. A name in which there is no beauty – no sense of the artistic.» Quoted in Koszarski, *Von* 47.

9 See Audisio 23–27.

10 Recent scholarship (Wilms), however, has questioned such a straightforward reading.

11 This title card has since been modified and omits any mentioning of the war. See Rentschler 153–54.

12 Studio publicity materials placed the action three years after the war, which, at the time of production and release, was a date still in the future. See Koszarski, *Von* 49.

13 See Koszarski, *Von* 52.

14 In the German version, the provocation apparently proved too much, and the title was changed into «Eric Steuben, ein Hochstapler, der die Offiziersuniform benützt, um so leichter seine Gaunereien ausführen zu können (Erich Stroheim).» See *Die Rache der Berge*, Austrian version.

15 Apparently, Stroheim had somewhat of a foot fetish, featuring feet in most of his films. Billy Wilder commented: «This obsession with foot fetishism, underwear fetishism, other sexual perversions which his pictures are filled with, was the real Stroheim.» Quoted in Lennig 90.

16 Quotations are from the credits and intertitles of the film. The Festival of the Transfiguration is a church holiday to commemorate Christ’s ascent of Mount Tabor.

17 Quoted in Lennig 107.

18 On Valentino’s life and career see Leider.

19 Quoted in Lennig 114.

20 According to Koszarski, one of the promotional posters for the film showed a mountain in the form of a woman’s face being scaled by a climber. See Koszarski, *Von* 50.
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Works Cited


