Memories of Cold in the Heat of the Tropics: 
Hans Ertl’s *Meine wilden dreißiger Jahre*

CAROLINE SCHAUMANN
EMORY UNIVERSITY

In his influential analysis of New Objectivity, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, Helmut Lethen interprets the loss of World War I as a freezing shock, setting into motion an ethos of distance and rationality in order to cope with the traumatic aftermath of defeat. In what Lethen calls the shame culture of the interwar period, individual emotions and their expression tended to be replaced by reflexive behavior and the masking of sensation. He notes that «People, seeking escape from the heat of shame, trying to establish themselves as separate from it, assumed a variety of attitudes marked by their «coolness.» In doing so, they were obliged to elaborate doctrines of cool behavior» (10). Lethen suggests that in the decade between 1920 and 1930, codes of conduct covered feelings of guilt and inadequacy, defined both individual and collective behavior, demarcating the borders between man and woman, inside and outside. Artists and writers built on the fearful fantasies of glacial epochs at the turn of the century, attempting to outdo each other in tributes to cold in avant-garde literature (Brecht), philosophy (Jünger), architecture (Bauhaus), and even politics. Lethen calls cold the central metaphor of modernization and reads these tributes as a response to the experience of alienation from a religious, parental, and residential home.¹ According to Lethen, cinema in particular lends itself to the newfound modus of distance. After the emotional outbursts and experimentation of expressionist cinema, the films of New Objectivity celebrate realism and mechanization by staging feelings through actions and gestures rather than exaggeration and expression, and thus, according to Lethen, depict the self as «the object of others’ perceptions» (16) rather than the subject and origin of action.

Ingeborg Majer-O’Sickey, however, distinguishes the cool conduct of New Objectivity from what she calls the cult of cold, visible in the German mountain film of the same time period. To her, both artistic movements respond to urban modernity. Therefore cool conduct is a response of measured restraint; the cult of cold, as embodied in Arnold Fanck’s mountain films, is one of sentimental idealism: «Fanck’s male hero expresses himself by transferring his alienation unto sublime experiences in nature. The urbanite –
imitating the figure of the dandy or the flâneur – armors himself with a cool mask» (373–74). Majer-O’Sickeys also adds a gendered reading to studies of cold, suggesting that Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003) exemplifies the entrenched distinction between a cool, masculine space in the mountains and an urban feminized space. In Der heilige Berg (1926), for instance, Riefenstahl embodies a de-sensualized, frozen beauty on the one hand but on the other is staged as a somewhat naive and ultimately destructive girl. Majer-O’Sickey assesses that «Riefenstahl oscillates between empowerment and disempowerment, an oscillation that would find its equivalents in many of her acting roles in mountain films» (372). This axis of masculine/feminine and cold/hot is complicated even further by Riefenstahl’s prominent off-screen persona and eventual directorial influence.

Similar to Riefenstahl’s public persona, Hans Ertl (1908–2000) acquired and nurtured a persona vitally shaped by Nazi ideology, an image that invites critical engagement beyond the confines of his work in film and offers many nuanced readings of cold. This essay does not focus on Ertl’s films, rather on his memoir, Meine wilden dreißiger Jahre: Bergsteiger, Filmpionier, Weltenbummler (1982), which recalls the beginnings of his mountaineering and film career. His memoir, which is a mixture of trip reports, accounts of film shoots, and political observations, offers an astonishingly candid portrayal of interpersonal relationships and love affairs, among them an affair with Leni Riefenstahl. Conceptions of cold provide both a framework and reference point to the narrative. The Alps, Berlin, Greenland, the Himalayas, and Chile constitute the space in which Ertl’s «adventures» unfold. Specifically, Ertl reverts to images of ice and cold in order to access memories of his burgeoning career in the Nazi years. Expanding on Lethen, who views fantasies of cold as a manifestation of detachment («Trennung»), I suggest that Ertl uses the distance in time and temperature not only to detach himself from Nazi Germany but also to revel unencumbered in nostalgic fantasies of the past. Thus, in Ertl’s book cool conduct as well as the cult of cold come into play by presenting codes of behavior and an outlet for unrestrained passion in the mountains, both of which are highly gendered. In addition, ice in Ertl’s memoir fulfills three functions: it provides a portal to the past, it guarantees authenticity, and endows his sometimes questionable conquests during the Nazi rule with purity and potency.

Born in 1908 in Urschalling am Chiemsee, Ertl began climbing mountains in his early twenties and soon earned a reputation for his daring accomplishments; these include being the first to ascend the north faces of the Königs spitze and the Ortler. In 1932, he was hired as a replacement mountain guide, ice specialist, and camera assistant for the production of Arnold Fanck’s
S. O. S. Eisberg (1933), shot in Greenland. He continued his collaboration with Fanck in the fictionalized story of the first ascent of Mont Blanc, Der ewige Traum (1934), and advanced to lead cameraman in Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympia films (1938), rising to fame through his celebrated underwater diving shots. During World War II, Ertl became one of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s preferred cameramen at the front in France, Africa, and the Caucasus. After the Allies temporarily barred Ertl from filming in 1945, he worked as a photo journalist until he emigrated to Bolivia in 1950. In Bolivia, Ertl wrote Meine wilden dreißiger Jahre and a second memoir, Als Kriegsberichter 1939–1945 (1985), which begins where the first book leaves off and recalls his experiences and his work as a war correspondent in minute detail. Ertl died at the age of 93 at his residence Dolorida, near Concepción, Bolivia, on October 23, 2000.2

Meine wilden dreißiger Jahre begins with a prelude called «Die Kulisse,» and indeed Ertl’s memories unfold as if staged in front of a camera, neatly separated from his life in Bolivia, and isolated from the historical and political context. His residence in the Bolivian lowlands merely offers Ertl a ready contrast with which he highlights in diametrical tropes the differences between Europe and the tropics, cold and heat, idealized past and present, colonizer and colonized. As such, the text begins:


The description employs the classic markers of colonized tropical nature such as heat, humidity, lethargy, and primitivism. This type of nature is unmistakably coded as female and, in the spirit of nineteenth-century colonization, given pervasive and threatening power. Tracing depictions of the tropics from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Nancy Stepan notes that the tropes of representation in the wake of colonial expansion mark tropical nature in its uniqueness and otherness:

Even within European representation, tropical nature stood for many different values— for heat and warmth but also for a dangerous and diseased environment; for superabundant fertility but also for fatal excess; for species novelty but also for the bizarre and deadly; for lazy sensuality and sexuality but also for impermissible racial mixings and degeneration. (21)
While representations of the tropics have varied widely, ranging the gamut from Alexander von Humboldt’s romantic vision of sublime tropical nature to early twentieth-century images of destruction and disease, the very category of «tropical» has solidified diverse and heterogeneous environments into a world that is imagined as strangely exaggerated and innately different from the temperate regions.

Ertl’s text begins with a number of personifications that embody these themes. An overwhelming, personified nature emerges as the first subject in the narrative: the merciless sun, a steamy sky, a lazy river, and a primitive hut. The narrative «I,» conversely, surfaces only later and has to retreat into the shade, forced to discard his clothing, the distinguishing attributes of man in temperate Europe. The words «Baujahr 1935» signal yet another trope of differentiation. With the reference that his typewriter was (presumably) manufactured during the Nazi regime and is «betriebsfertig,» i.e. ready to battle the heat of the tropics, Ertl evokes, consciously or unconsciously, racial purity versus the established image of tropical degeneration. A similar reference to the very same typewriter appears in the short afterword of the book where the author thanks his second wife with the words: «Durch ihre tatkräftige Mitarbeit im primitiven Urwald-Alltag und ihre Meisterschaft an der Schreibmaschine hat sie wesentlichen Anteil am Zustandekommen dieses Buches» (325). To counter the corroding influences of tropical nature, Ertl thus invokes mastery, technology, cold, family values, and Germany’s past; in short, a cool conduct not unlike the attitude Lethen describes so appropriately of the era Ertl seeks to revive in his memories.

The temporal contrast is significant: Ertl does not draw a line of distinction between West Germany and what he calls his «asylum» in Bolivia, but sees himself as a victim of both democratic Germany and South American guerilla warfare. After his emigration, Ertl continued climbing in the Andes and the Himalayan mountains, participating in the German Bolivian Expedition in 1950 and the expedition in memory of Willy Merkl to Nanga Parbat in 1953; the latter formed the basis of Ertl’s Nanga Parbat that documented Hermann Buhl’s controversial first ascent of the mountain. Ertl’s deep disappointment with postwar democratic Germany surfaced when the Secretary of the Interior withdrew Nanga Parbat at the last minute from the German Film Award competition of 1954 along with the eagerly anticipated cash award. His petition for a reversal of the decision was rejected.

His life in Bolivia was hampered by political tensions. Ertl soon befriended Klaus Barbie who also immigrated to the country under the name of Klaus Altmann; Ertl’s oldest daughter Monika, however, parted ways with her father and became a member of the Bolivian National Liberation Army.
(ELN) originally founded by Che Guevara. Monika Ertl was most likely involved in the shooting of Roberto Quintanilla Pereira, the Bolivian consul in Hamburg who in 1967 had ordered Guevara’s hands to be cut off and sent to La Paz for identification. Reportedly, Monika Ertl, together with Régis Dubray, had unsuccessfully attempted to kidnap Barbie to bring him to justice in France. She was ambushed and killed by Bolivian security forces in 1973; Barbie is likely responsible for her death. Thus, in 1975, at the time when he wrote the preface, Ertl’s life must have been overshadowed by the brutal murder of his daughter, yet the text only mentions Monika indirectly, as «liebe Menschen, die man auf tragische Weise verloren hat.» (8). Rather than accuse her killers, Ertl turns his pain and anger into nebulous and empty complaints, grumbling that he lost his diaries, films, and photos «unverschuldet» to what he calls «das Mahlwerk südamerikanischer Guerrillero-Politik» (8) and to termites.

Deciding to emigrate in a «freiwillig gewähltes Exil» (8), Ertl, embittered, fashions his life in the postwar era as a hotbed of disappointments, unexpected blows, and unjust setbacks. Against this backdrop, Ertl revels in memories of heroic adventures in snow and ice, memories that, as if frozen in time, revive his youthful energy in the mountains, his swift career rise, cool conduct, and success in Nazi Germany. The concluding paragraphs of the foreword prove just how closely these memories are linked to temperature: Ertl proclaims to have received «unverhoffte Unterstützung direkt vom Himmel» for the book chapters «die von meinen Abenteuern in den kältesten Regionen unserer Erde berichten» (8). A sudden storm results in an uncharacteristic temperature drop below zero, and frost covers the palm trees and meadows overnight. It is this cold that puts Ertl in touch with his youth in Nazi Germany. He recounts that he feels «plötzlich jungenhaft glücklich inmitten dieser über Nacht entstandenen Winterdekoration und tobte mit meiner Leibgarde deutscher Schäferhunde ausgelassen auf den schneebedeckten Wiesenhängen umher» (9). Ertl uses the cold spell in order to conjure up his memories of the past, memories that come fully into sharp focus against a background that projects darkness, lethargy, and ambiguity as the menacing, effeminate byproduct of heat:

Mit meinen Gedanken aber klammerte ich mich fest an dieses unvergeßliche Winterbild wie an einen Ariadnefaden, der in die dunklen Tiefen der Erinnerung führt, die ich nun aufzuspulen begann. Mit der Frische, die der jähe Wintereinbruch brachte, wurde der Nebelschleier der Lethargie, den Schicksalsschläge und das jahrelange Leben in den Tropen wie ein Spinnennetz über mich geworfen hatten, schlagartig zerrissen. (9)
Ertl divides his memories in *Meine wilden dreißiger Jahre* into distinct parts: after the foreword sets the tone and temperature, a chapter with the momentous title «Wenn Berge zum Schicksal werden» outlines Ertl’s Alpine ascents in the years between 1930 and 1932 in the spirit of the so-called Munich school of mountaineering, a group of climbers joined by renewed nationalistic fervor and boldness. As the title promises, these pursuits serve as a reference point to which all later memories are related. After an extensive chapter on his film work in Greenland, he includes chapters on climbing and filming in the Himalayas as part of Oskar Dyhrenfurth’s *Der Dämon des Himalaya* (1935), and his camera work on Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* films in Berlin, Luis Trenker’s *Liebesbriefe aus dem Engadin* (1938) in Davos, and finally, Arnold Fanck’s *Ein Robinson* (1940) in Chile. The narrative abruptly ends with Ertl’s draft into the army in October 1939. Remarkably, Ertl elaborates on his exploits in frigid locales in many more and more voluminous chapters than on the progression of his work in film and on the politics in Germany. Even the account of his camerawork in the landmark *Olympia* films comprises a mere twelve pages compared to seventy-six pages about the filming of *S. O. S. Eisberg*. Snow and ice thus remain a constant theme that threads together memories of diverging activities and locales.

Written in the overdramatic style typical of many past and present mountaineering narratives, the chapter «Wenn Berge zum Schicksal werden» provides a journalistic account of Ertl’s most prominent ascents. By his own admittance, Ertl faithfully followed the advice given by his editors of the *Münchener Illustrierten Zeitung*: «Bleiben Sie ruhig bei der Wahrheit, aber verfassen Sie den Bericht so, daß es unseren 600,000 Lesern eiskalt den Buckel herunterläuft, wenn sie in Wort und Bild an so einer modernen Eiskletter-Tour teilnehmen können!» (11). Ice, which Ertl also calls «das glatte kalte Element» (17), is one of the most overriding motifs in this chapter. Ice is used to amplify the danger and daring of the expeditions as the climbing teams seek the dangerous, ice-laden north faces of mountains, and to emphasize the enormous scale of their objectives («die riesige Eis- und Felsrippe,» 13). Snow, according to Ertl, whitens the peaks («die Bergflanken von Graupelschnee frisch geweißt,» 23) and wipes away debris («Eine riesige Staublawine putzt vor Tagesende zu unserer großen Freude die Nordflanke blank,» 23). Cleansing the peaks to a virgin white, snow purifies and christens the mountaineering endeavor, even covering the corpses of those who met their fate on less agreeable terms. In this virgin territory of snow and ice, the fight for the summit can begin anew. As was customary for the day, Ertl infuses military language into his descriptions of mountain climbing, viewing, for example, the mountain as an enemy to be conquered. He recounts how men
ritualize the ascent: «ein fester Händedruck noch und Freund Hans eröffnet den Kampf» (14), and sanction it as a matter of winning or losing: «Mut, der Wille zu siegen und eine gehörige Portion Glück, das waren die Bundesgenossen bei unserer Fahrt» (18).

In contrast to Germany’s fate on the historical battlefield, Ertl can look back to a number of victorious mountain ascents, reveling in the experience of conquest: «Die letzten Zweifel um das Gelingen der Fahrt verfliegen. Wir wissen, wir haben gewonnen» (35). Furthermore, the model of a military battle provides a fitting ideology for male bonding on the mountain. While women are completely absent in the first part of the book, Ertl elevates the importance of mountain comaraderie to a matter of life and death. The climbing rope becomes an umbilical cord linking the mountaineers to a Bergkameradschaft encompassing body and soul, life and death: «Nur die platonische Idee und die kameradschaftliche Moral verbinden uns mit dem Seil» (34). The climbing partner turns into a substitute for family and friends by offering a relationship that is at once homosocial and homophobic: «Wie gut das tut, einen Menschen in der Nähe zu wissen, der alles, Freud und Leid, mit dir teilt und der dich heraushaut, wenn du nicht mehr kannst» (33). In Höhenrausch: Der deutsche Bergfilm, Christian Rapp traces the close affinity between militarism and Alpinism that surfaced in the latter half of the nineteenth century and gained renewed popularity with the outbreak of World War I and the Alpenkrieg. After the war, mountain climbing was envisioned as being able to fulfill what could not be achieved on the battlefield. As membership in the German and Austrian Alpine Club surged in numbers, the various publications of the Club touted mountaineering in increasingly aggressive, nationalistic tones as a collective recipe for German recovery and renewal. In her study Militärische Männlichkeiten in Deutschland und Österreich im Umfeld des Großen Krieges, Monika Szczepaniak suggests that masculine military values such as «Willenskraft, Mut, Unerorschrockenheit, Härte» gained increasing currency in the Wilhelmine Empire, prepared young Germans for battle in World War I, and offered quick regeneration after 1918 (20). Mountaineering not only embraced those same values but also demanded physical vigor and strength, literally hardening and steeling the body.

Ertl’s text introduces yet another timely parallel, characterizing the climbing process as mechanized and perfected: «Kein Handgriff zu viel, keiner zu wenig, alles geht wie am Schnürchen oder – zeitgemäßer ausgedrückt – wie am laufenden Band» (25). The more modern image of an industrial assembly line rather than a piece of string leads back to Lethen’s arguments and promotes cool conduct over emotional entanglement, idea-
lizing a course of action that progresses perfunctorily and robotically was idealized. Central, too, is «Trennung» (detachment) separating action and feeling as well as measured cold calculation and idle tropical excess. Despite the book’s tone of youthful fervor, Ertl embraces such coolness and combines it with the steely poise of military engagement: «Mechanisch saust der Pickel nieder und heulend entführt der Sturm die losgeschlagenen Splitter» (17).

In the description of his early climbing career, Ertl uses words coded as feminine, such as warmth, wetness, and laziness, as an antipode to cold and ice. Warmth does nothing more than seduce the men to sluggishness and pleasure: «Mein Kamerad und ich liegen stinkfaul auf warmen Schieferplatten und genießen in vollen Zügen die Wonn en eines sonnigen Rasttages» (12). In order to stay firm and focused such rest can only be a temporary respite. On a mountain’s slope, the thawing of ice results in dangerous rockfall, a process Ertl depicts in dramatic, gendered style:

Nun spitzt auch die Sonne ein wenig in die Nordwand herein, die ersten Strahlen tasten sich über Firn und Eis herab und streicheln mit gefährlich warmen Fingern über das schlummernde, eingefrorene Gestein der Türme und Zinnen vom Tschirfreck bis Rothböckgrat: Der Feind inspiziert die schußbereiten Batterien hoch über unseren Häuptern. (24)

By personifying the sun as a deadly seductress, Ertl delineates an image of female sensuality that endangers a successful struggle and jeopardizes male coldness and firmness: «Hart ist der Körper an die Wand gepreßt» (25). Yet these fearful fantasies hint at the fact that firm snow can quickly soften and acquire the very characteristics Ertl seeks to escape: «Im faulen, nassen Schnee brechen wir bis zu den Knien ein. Wir brauchen harten Firn» (23). Snow and water are not two polar opposites but changeable and dangerously close to each other, so that the ideal of cold carries with it the possibility of a destruction coded as feminine. The idea is made further explicit when Ertl makes women responsible for mountaineering accidents, repeating the warning words of his mentor, the Bergführer Emil Solleder:


The aforementioned context of perilous warmth and wetness intruding upon men’s mountain climbing leaves no doubt that Ertl views women’s involvement in mountain catastrophes as an extension of the overall opposition
between heat, weakness, and femininity on the one hand, and cold, hardness, and masculinity on the other. To counter the dangers of warmth, it seems no coincidence that many mountaineers have acquired nicknames in reference to ice, for instance the *Eispapst* Willo Welzenbach, the *Eisfloh* Hans Schneeberger, and of course, the *Eisspezialist*, Ertl himself.

The arrival of Leni Riefenstahl complicates the overall dichotomy of hot and cold since Ertl characterizes her in terms distinctly different from those used with other women. In the chapter on the filming of *S. O. S. Eisberg*, Ertl relates his brief affair with Riefenstahl, the female lead in the film, a relationship characterized by distance, passion, and competition. In Ertl’s text, Riefenstahl’s character oscillates between icy queen to naive girlie, roles similar to those Majer-O’Sickey outlined in Riefenstahl’s early mountain films. Ertl begins his most extensive chapter in the book, «Auftakt für ein abenteuerliches Leben,» by detailing the handling of three domesticated polar bears, a gift from the Hagenbeck Zoo, that were transported to Greenland and filmed swimming and walking on the ice before being killed after the filming was completed. He proceeds to depict the struggle of climbing the dynamic, unstable icebergs, a mere bantering and less earnest affair than mountaineering in the Alps, with the same vocabulary of conquest.

Im Vorüberfahren sahen wir uns diese gleißenden Ungeheuer genau an, denen wir später mit Eispickel und Eishaken und Steigeisen zu Leibe rücken sollten. Mochten diese riesigen weißen «Seepferde» noch so widerspenstig sein und uns abwerfen: bei einigermaßen Glück mussten wir ins Wasser fallen; und wenn alles gutging, konnte man sich schwimmend retten. In den Alpen aber – wenn man stürzte – lag man zerschmettert in irgendeinem Kar. (49–50)

These shifting, unpredictable icebergs, characterized as capricious and volatile animals throwing their conquerors into the water and resisting discipline and domestication, are unmistakably coded as female cold. This progression from the taming of ice bears to the taming of icebergs, amidst a shifting landscape culminating in the inferno of sounds, water fountains, and explosions of a glacier calving, sets an appropriate, if not metaphorical, stage to Ertl’s involvement with Riefenstahl. In fact, Ertl’s above description of icebergs seems a fitting characterization of Riefenstahl herself: Far from terra firma, Ertl is at once fascinated and startled by the icy queen and seeks to encounter her in full mountaineering attire, with hob-nailed boots and an ice-axe, attempting to stay put on the drifting ice. Yet Riefenstahl does not seem to yield easily to male domination, ultimately discarding him. According to Ertl, it is Riefenstahl who initiated the affair, unabashedly inviting herself into the young mountaineer’s tent. Their relationship proceeds in secret, in a «weiße Welt» on floating ice shelves and icebergs where Ertl und Riefenstahl
withdraw to be alone. Ertl seems entirely smitten with the actress who allegedly even performs private dances for him on the ice; the surreal surroundings contribute to the appeal and simultaneous detachment of their union. Despite the passion, Ertl keeps his distance from the woman he characterizes as seductive, demanding, and unpredictable. As he reports, Riefenstahl deemed him artistically non-gifted, a judgment that he secretly sought to revise by withholding from Riefenstahl his plans of advancing his career as a cameraman. Thus from the beginning, calculated competition is part of their icy affair, which ends abruptly when Riefenstahl departs from the set and Ertl concludes: «ganze 70 Tage, genauer gesagt für die Dauer ihres Aufenthaltes in Grönland, war ich ihr verfallen» (73).

Riefenstahl’s cool conduct must have titillated and dismayed Ertl who continues to detail their relationship, this time without amorous overtones, during the filming of *Olympia*. Freshly married to Aurelia Friedl, Ertl is now eager to denounce Riefenstahl’s fame and tarnish the image of the renowned filmmaker:

> Der Film «Olympia» gilt heutzutage fast ausschließlich als ein Werk Leni Riefenstahls, und die Feministinnen aller Länder feiern ihre «Filmgöttin» fast überwältigend. Bei allem Verständnis für diese besondere Art von «Leni-nismus» sollte man jedoch nicht vergessen, dass es ausschließlich Männer waren, die diesen Film gedreht haben! Gewiß, Lenis unorthodoxe Arbeitsweise, ihre besondere Ausstrahlung als bildschöne und begehrenswerte Frau sowie die künstlerische Freiheit, die sie selbstständigen Kameraleuten gewährte, weckten deren Enthusiasmus und spornnten sie zu Leistungen an, dass sie sich oft selber übertrafen. Die künstlerischen Fähigkeiten Lenis – ihre unendliche Geduld beim Puzzle-Spiel am Schneidetisch sowie ihr Durchstehvermögen – hoch in Ehren! (255)

Of course, films are always a collaborative product, with the director receiving most, if not all of the credit. By stressing that men were filming *Olympia*, Ertl not so subtly renounces Riefenstahl’s work. He does so further by cracking jokes and play on words such as «Leni-ismus» or «‘OLYMPIA’– ein Film aus dem ‘Leni Riefen-Stall’!» (256). Rather than artistic talent, Ertl grants Riefenstahl credit for the stereotypically female qualities of beauty and patience, suggesting her beauty and femininity inspired men to do their best. In a similar vein, he continues:

> Nun galt es, die einzelnen Teile des großen Puzzle-Spiels kunstvoll zusammenzufügen und in den Gesamtrahmen einzupassen; eine ebenso zeitraubende wie mühselige Kleinarbeit, zu der meines Erachtens überhaupt nur eine von ihrer Aufgabe so besessene Frau wie Leni Riefenstahl fähig war. Ein Mann hätte sich von vornherein gar nicht mit soviel Kleinkram abgegeben und wäre mit mehr Logik und dafür weniger Intuition und Basteleien vorgegangen. (241)
Aside from her good looks, Riefenstahl merely contributes persistence when editing the film, which Ertl depicts as child’s play, a puzzle of «Kleinarbeit» and «Kleinkram» born from female intuition and a desire to do handicraft. If these comments devalue her work, Ertl adds details about Riefenstahl’s personality that substantiate the impression of a spoiled, moody girl: craving attention, she repeatedly presents herself in the Olympic Stadium, disrupting the games and bursting into tears when viewers insult her. During the filming, she takes young athletes as lovers for her «amourösen Ausgleich» (219); her work suffers from the distractions. Ertl’s estimation of Riefenstahl thus changes from an icy prima donna to a huffy girl. This metamorphosis mirrors Majer-O’Sickey’s assessment of Riefenstahl’s role in Der heilige Berg, proving her malleability in responding to distinct male fantasies that became entrenched in her on- and off screen personae. In this way, a jilted and detached Ertl uses his characterization of Riefenstahl in order to reaffirm male bonding:


In Ertl’s book, Riefenstahl is the only woman who is not consistently situated in contrast to icy environs but is shown to easily adapt to them. Despite Riefenstahl’s cool reign and calculated directorship, her importance and artistic vision is ultimately diminished. Rather than heterosexual passion, cold and ice enables a homosocial bonding mirrored in the men’s evening toast in Greenland «Prost, Kameraden! Ich hab’ das Gefühl, heut nacht wird’s kühl» (109). The night’s cold encourages both drinking and male closeness but at the same time prevents erotic tensions. In other words, the plunging temperatures demand close contact and a warm community yet simultaneously make such environment safe and free of heated passion.8

In this context, it comes at no surprise that in Greenland Ertl formed a special bond with Luis Trenker (1892–1990), the Tyrolean mountaineering and skiing guide, actor, author, and director. Once again mirroring the close connection between mountaineering and warfare, Trenker served in World War I as a mountain guide for Austrian soldiers. After the war his career in film began when he was able to secure the male lead starring opposite to Riefenstahl in Der heilige Berg; he soon became a crowd favorite for his distinctive face symbolizing vivacity, dedication, and authenticity. Trenker’s
vast literary output, written with the help of ghost writers, underscored the aforementioned attributes in heroic novels and essays about mountaineering and his war experiences. Though sixteen years apart, Trenker’s and Ertl’s lives bear many parallels, from their climbing achievements in the Alps to their involvement in World War I and II, respectively, from the beginnings of their filmic careers to their entanglements with Riefenstahl, from their enthusiastic writings about snow and ice to their ambiguous roles in Nazi Germany. In the winter of 1937/38, Ertl worked with Trenker when filming *Liebesbriefe aus dem Engadin* (1938) and recalls the filming in the Alps in the most nostalgic of terms: «Nach dem Kirschblüten-Zauber und dem ewig süßen Lächeln kimonobekleideter Geishas während der Fanck’schen Japan-Expedition war mein 205 cm großer Freund gemeinsamer Grönlandabenteuer in dieser Winterfrische wieder so richtig in seinem Element» (246). Ertl remembers these times as the happiest and «unbeschwertesten» (245) of his life. A more critical reader, however, cannot help but wonder if Ertl used this light-heartedness in the snowy Swiss Alps as a way of avoiding more serious concerns back home. Indeed, Ertl’s «wild thirties» seem largely unaffected by political upheaval and Hitler’s seizure of power. Nazi politics, racial discrimination and persecution, and the outbreak of World War II are mentioned only peripherally with no apparent consequences for the author’s life. In this way, Ertl uses «Winterfrische» and «Grönlandabenteuer» as a means to escape political engagement. Thus, Ertl’s rhetoric of cleansed mountain faces, virginal snow, and an other-worldly, untouched land in Greenland, positions cold as a neutral space in the midst of Nazi Germany, a space seemingly untainted by politics and one which can safely engender nostalgic memories.

In keeping with the book’s overall apolitical bias, decisive political turns in Ertl’s career are acknowledged only in passing. During the time he filmed with Trenker, Ertl received an offer to make a color film for the Reichspropagandaleitung. He continued working for the ministry of propaganda and completed several short documentaries, such as «Glaube und Schönheit» (1940), «Der Sinn des Lebens» (1940), and, after his draft into the army, «Sieg im Westen» (1941). Ertl’s remarks on these works remain brief and elusive. Another short film features the exhibit «Entartete Kunst» in Vienna, with Ertl taking a rather distanced and disparaging view of the displayed artworks he filmed on a rotating platform:

Manche Bilder und Skizzen der Ausstellung waren eher ergreifend als abstoßend. Bei anderen «Kunstwerken» allerdings benötigte man als Normalverbraucher tatsächlich eine Gebrauchsanweisung, um überhaupt zu verstehen, was die eingerahten Kleckse und Kritzeleien vorstellen sollten. (253)
These are among the few frank observations in a text that must have been carefully edited for any questionable political content. Rather than dwelling on anything remotely political, Ertl retreats to snow and ice, treating his readers to detailed accounts of his travels.

After his work with Fanck, Ertl applied for a place on the coveted 1934 Himalayan expedition, headed by the Swiss-Jewish Professor of Geology, Dr. Günter Oskar Dyhrenfurth. Ertl mentions in passing that Hitler’s coming to power considerably impeded the planned expedition and delayed funding for the geological, cartographical, and climbing expedition that was to scale an 8,000 m peak in the Karakoram and produce a feature film. The objectives of the expedition failed on all accounts. Plagued by financial constraints and difficulties in working with indigenous Balti porters, the expedition was not able to climb an 8,000-meter peak, produce a successful film, or contribute valuable scientific findings. Ertl’s description is governed by frustration concerning the continued setbacks, but rather than elaborating on the context and ramifications of these financial hurdles, he focuses on his brief affair with Hettie Dyhrenfurth and his success in climbing a 7,000-meter peak, framing once again his achievements in categories of hot and cold.

While the weather in India is «brütend» (136) and «glühend» (146), stifling any zest for action, Ertl connects the all-encompassing heat with the «forbidden fruits» of his affair with Hettie Dyhrenfurth. In contrast to Riefenstahl’s cool demeanor, the interlude with Dyhrenfurth, almost twenty years his senior, is a product of «jene mystische Dämmerung, die klare Gedanken auslöscht und in einer Art Trance das Verlangen nährt, von verbotenen Früchten zu naschen» (147). Limited to a few heated nights in the lowlands, the affair quickly ends when Ertl admits his shortcomings to Hettie’s husband and the expedition leader oddy erupts in generosity: «So etwas kann vorkommen, mein junger Freund!» (148). In contrast to this temporary transgression, the peaks remain ever pure, and Ertl soon devotes his energies to claiming some highly desired summits, exclaiming, «der ganze Gipfelkranz ringsum erstrahlt im frischen Neuschneekleid» (174). Once again, the regions of snow and ice offer an escape that promises redemption and deliverance.

The final chapter in Ertl’s memoir touches on similar themes of heated transgression and cool climbing. Ertl resumed his collaboration with Fanck for Ein Robinson (1940), an adaptation of Robinson Crusoe’s story set in Chile. In contrast to complaints about the «greedy» local porters in India, Ertl conceives of Santiago de Chile as a veritable Garden of Eden, with its «europäischem Zuschnitt, trotz mannigfachen Kolorits aus der spanischen Kolonialzeit» (260), expunging the Incas and indigenous Mapuche civiliza-
tions. If the colonial gaze of Ertl’s descriptions foreshadows his later time in South America, he likewise continues the by now familiar themes of his book: he elaborately details his filming, escapades with wild animals, in this case sea lions, and proudly details his affair with Elisabeth Kind, Fanck’s wife. Once again he returns to the tropes of virginal snow, contrasting the purity of the mountains with his complicated love life in the lowland: «Oben in den Bergen und in der frischen Luft der Anden genossen wir die Freiheit des Alleinseins; und als unser Hochlager in 5000 m Höhe stand, war ich als Bergsteiger wieder so richtig in meinem Element» (270).

On the way back to Germany, however, both Ertl and his colleague Robert Dahlmeier are briefly arrested in Argentina for their involvement in Nazi politics. Even though Dahlmeier was a member of the SA and Ertl a participant in the Reichsfilmkammer, both were able to convince the Argentinean authorities that they were not members of the NSDAP and were let go. Ertl does not elucidate or comment on such political matters, turning, instead, to more personal details. He concludes his book with words of high praise for his wife who generously decided to forgive his extramarital affairs:


The jovial conclusion affirms the separation between private and professional life, between high- and lowland, between hot and cold. Just as Ertl claims that his romantic interludes in Greenland, the Himalayas, and Chile do not affect his relationship and marriage in Germany, the construction of a virgin territory of snow and ice exonerates him for his entanglements in Nazi politics. Utilizing snow and ice to literally whitewash his past, Ertl revels in memories of mountaineering achievements, romances, and adventures while shooting films that seemingly remain disconnected from the events unfolding in Germany in the 1930s. A brief introduction and epilogue, both set in Bolivia in 1975, the time and place of the writing of the memoir, frame his memories of cold as a counterpoint to tropical heat and to both the German and Bolivian present. Ertl’s second book, Als Kriegsberichter 1939–45, concludes with the words «Auf den wirklichen Frieden in Einheit und Freiheit aber warten wir Deutsche heute noch» (270), followed by an epilogue thanking his wife for editing and typing the book «in den schweren Regenzeit-Wochen des Jahres 1981 trotz des feucht-schwülen Klimas und der Moskito Plage bei Tag – und nachts beim trüben Schein einer Petroleumlampe in unserer Urwaldhütte»
(271). By evoking once again the markers of tropical nature, Ertl’s construction of ice and cold, so intrinsically connected to his mountaineering, love life, and film career in Nazi Germany, remains an unquestioned ideal. Creating a nostalgic reconstruction of his younger years in front of the mirror, Ertl reaches not for the hot faucet but the one that is cold, always able to adjust the temperature of his own mythology.

Notes

1 See Lethen, «Lob der Kälte» and «Kältemaschinen der Intelligenz.»
2 For more on Ertl’s life in Bolivia, see Semper.
3 For more on this, see Stepan’s chapter «Racial Degenerations,» which analyzes in detail Louis Agassiz’s photographs of nude racial hybrids taken on his trip to Brazil 1865–66.
4 See also Heissenberg.
5 Source: Historisches Alpenarchiv der Alpenvereine in Deutschland, Österreich und Südtirol.
6 See Rapp 30–38.
7 In the film, Riefenstahl plays Hella, the wife of the scientist Dr. Karl Lorenz who has become lost on an expedition in Greenland. The search party finds the missing scientist but becomes trapped on an iceberg floating off to sea, they send out an SOS that is eventually routed to Europe and picked up by Hella Lorenz. The trained pilot finds the stranded party but crashes her helicopter into the iceberg at the landing. Finally, Ernst Udet (playing himself) comes to the rescue by mobilizing Eskimos from a nearby village to come to their aid via canoe.
8 In some ways, my argument here corresponds to Susi K. Frank’s analysis of Soviet Arctic discourses in the 1930s. As Frank suggests, Stalinist fiction delineates social warmth as a way to overcome the harsh conditions of Arctic nature. In contrast to a Nietzschean rejection of community, Soviet narratives configure cold places as utopian spaces of community, solidarity, and warmth.
9 See for instance Helden der Berge, published in 1935, which glorifies mountaineering history in military terms similar to Ertl’s language.

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