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THE WHITE HELL OF PITZ PALU / DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ

The film company *Universal Pictures* advertised THE WHITE HELL OF PITZ PALU as 'The greatest thriller of the screen!' when it premiered in London on 10 June 1930. The version shown in London was accompanied by music written by the experienced film composer Giuseppe Becce while the original, produced by the German company *Sokal*, was released as a silent movie. DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ, directed by Dr. Arnold Fanck and G.W. Pabst, was first screened in Vienna on 11 October 1929. The first screening in Germany took place in Berlin (15 November 1929) and the first French screening followed shortly on 13 December 1929.

The film became an overnight success in German cinemas. More than 100,000 moviegoers went to see the picture in the following four weeks in Berlin's *Ufa-Palast am Zoo*-cinema (Horak 1997:39). The popularity of DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ is further confirmed by several film statistics comparing the success of movies at the time. Specialist magazines such as *Film-Kurier*, *Filmblätter* and *Film-Echo* published the profitability of cinemas as well as their respective visitor numbers. They chronicle that DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ was the second most successful movie of the 1929/30 season, being beaten to the top spot only by DIE FRAU IM MOND by Fritz Lang in the top ten movies of the year (Garncarz 1993:199).

The German cinema, *Ufa-Palast* in Hamburg, at the time the largest film auditorium in Europe, with 2,667 seats, was inaugurated with this popular mountaineering drama. The picture also became an international box-office hit and contemporary reviewers regarded it as one of the world's best films. In the United States of America DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ was shown under the title PRISONERS OF THE MOUNTAIN. It was the first German film the huge *Roxy-*

cinema in New York ever opened its gates to. On account of the great success of the original, a re-edited sound version was released in 1935, which was shown again with great success in the 1960s (Krusche 1987:612).

It happens only rarely that a popular movie is received as singularly positively as *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ*. In his 1931 essay about Arnold Fanck Béla Balázs describes its surprisingly broad acceptance across political factions (Balázs 1984). The picture was regarded as one of the best German movies and this judgment on *PIZ PALÜ* was formed unanimously by contemporary film critics from different ends of the political spectrum and included writers from the communist *Rote Fahne* as well as the national-socialist *Völkischer Beobachter* (Rentschler 1997:87). This good response meets a dubious judgement of film historians like Siegfried Kracauer, as this essay will point out elsewhere. At first however, in view of many misjudgments, the film itself should be watched closely.

In fact, the advertised 'thriller of the screen' can claim extraordinary suspense. The short prologue of *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ* starts with breathtaking exhilaration and the tragic past history of Dr. Johannes Krafft (played by Gustav Diessl). Krafft, who is laughing scornfully at the high relief of the alpine mountains, demonstrating his strength while holding on to a rope his wife Maria. Seemingly safe he ignores the power of nature and the danger of avalanches. But punishment for his arrogance is not far away: his wife is swept away down a crevasse to her death in eternal ice just a moment later. Ten years later another young happy couple comes to the mountain hut of 'Diavolezza', situated in the south of St. Moritz and Pontresina. Maria (Leni Riefenstahl) and Hans (Ernst Petersen) visit to celebrate their happy engagement and receive a bottle of champagne to aid their celebrations from a passing aviator. The delight of the situation is compounded by the entrance of Dr. Krafft (whose name is very close to the German word for 'strength') who has wandered restlessly as a ghost through the high mountains since the accident ten years ago. Maria's obvious

instant attraction to this mysterious man completes the dramatic triangle. On the next day, Krafft sets out to climb the summit of Piz Palü, followed by the jealous Hans who resents Krafft's success with Maria and as a climber, and finally followed by Maria, drawn to both of them.

On the same day a second crew of mountain climbers starts to make its ascent. This group of young Swiss students, shown in the distance, serves as subplot and is meant as a spur on the three characters of the main plot; now the driving force of the plot is not only jealousy but also ambition. The suggested triangle, as well as the rivalry with the inexperienced students, are both motives that jointly will lead to the eventual catastrophe. During the ascent Hans claims leadership of the trio's climb, despite his inexperience as a mountaineer. High up in the Alps, beneath the summit of Piz Palü, he slips, falls and sustains an injury, while Krafft breaks his leg attempting to help him. Now the trio is stuck in icy altitude with no way to descend. Although they can see the students down below, any chance of help is destroyed by a sudden avalanche that buries all the students in its wake and tears them into a crevasse to their death. The trio has to spend the night on a narrow mountain ledge. An impressive scene shows Krafft in deeply stirring loneliness sending signals for help with a lantern in his hand. Parallel to this struggle for survival another plot unfolds with the onset of several dramatic rescue missions: to save the living trio, who hold out for several days and nights without food, and to recover the bodies of the dead students. Several attempts to rescue the trio and find the victims fail. Finally, the pilot of a light aircraft locates the small ledge in the rock face where Hans, Maria and Dr. Krafft are waiting, their despair increasing with the passage of time. Finally, Dr. Krafft decides to make an attempt to get help, most probably at the cost of his own life, and disappears into the white hell towards his death. While the rescue team from the small village in the valley can recover Hans and Maria and return them to safety, there remains bitterness. The last shot shows the death of Dr. Krafft, as he gets snowed in and buried in the eternal ice that will be his coffin.

The plot of **DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ** develops with exceptional speed in the first four minutes of the prologue. This action scene is edited with remarkable swiftness; camera angles change nearly every second, demonstrating the power of the natural element. In the period following the greatest suspense of the prologue, the tension seems to become lost, and indeed the dramatic tension undergoes a drastic break, now portraying quite the reverse of the preceding atmosphere. The first part of the drama begins like pastoral poetry: the rocky and icy world of Piz Palü (meaning the 'pale peak' in Rhaeto-Romanic) appears to be calm, innocent and peaceful, as it is depicted in romantic pictures of the Alps; the sunny weather around the Swiss Bernina massif is shown off to its best, serving as a symbol of paradise. Like Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis, Hans and Maria live with childish joy in their secluded pleasure ground, high up in the mountains. At this point the dramatic tension commences for a second time although this time the story unfolds very slowly for the next thirty minutes.

A lot of reviewers criticized the film's unusual length of 3353m (127 minutes) and especially the love affair in the first part of the film. In fact, the version had already been re-edited in 1935 and shortened by 35 minutes (also eliminating the relatively unimportant scenes with Kurt Gerron following his flight from Nazi-Germany). On closer inspection, however, the dramaturgy is good at developing narrative from the deepest point of tension in drama as well as seeking parallels in religious history. It is not the director's mistake but an essential point of highly effective dramaturgy to reset the narrative tension to zero in the (mountain) paradise, with the eternally banal theme of a happy couple, a story which on its own stands no chance of captivating an audience. Only by this extreme form of dramatic arrangement can the suspense which follows be created and heightened gradually towards its melodramatic conclusion. The effect of rising boredom is thus forced: from the point zero to the climax, from the innocence of mankind to the rising catastrophe.

The co-director of *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ* was no one lesser than Austrian-born Georg Wilhelm Pabst (1886-1967). The undisputed master of the art of film direction created milestones like *DIE FREUDLOSE GASSE* (*THE JOYLESS STREET*, 1925) *GEHEIMNISSE EINER SEELE* (*SECRETS OF A SOUL*, 1926) and *DIE BÜCHSE DER PANDORA* (*PANDORA'S BOX*, 1929). Pabst, the famous director of social realism cooperated for the first (and also the last) time with the Arnold Fanck, at the time the foremost director of nature documentaries. However, his contribution to Fanck's movie was important largely because of his association with the movie, as his actual input was comparatively small. He was in charge only of the indoor shots realised in the 'Grunewald Studio', Berlin. The entire film derives its life not so much from these non-spectacular takes as from the documentary and semi-documentary shots directed by Fanck.

Arnold Fanck's main characteristics as a film director is the principle of repetition. One of the images frequently shown is that of icicles. These play an important role in linking the prologue with the rising and completed catastrophe of the central plot. They constitute a visual metaphor for the long wait and also the uncompromising nature with which the time of life passes. Icicles are shown first when Dr. Krafft is sitting at the crevasse into which his wife has fallen, desperately waiting for help. The rhythm of ice-cold water drops falling and the movement of his fingers drumming on his cheek are in unison. Their monotonous, unrelenting rhythm drains Dr. Krafft's composure as he appears on the brink madness. Later on, icicles reflect Dr. Krafft's experience of impotence, reminding him of the death of his wife. In the end, icicles announce his death, when he finds redemption in the ice at last.

Further motifs are found in the dark clouds which forestall disaster, and in the twisted caves with their many passageways, reminiscent of deceased organisms. This stylistic device had already been the main subject of Fanck's documentary 1924, *DAS WOLKENPHÄNOMEN IN MAJOLA* (Kreimeier 2005:475). One other

example is the image of the summit of Piz Palü, shown in its majestic appearance in the introductory section of the film. Fanck repeats the same take ten times to demonstrate the dangerous and foreboding nature of this majestic peak. Over and over again Maria looks out of the window at the impressive massif, presenting the mountains as an unchanging constant which remain unperturbed by human emotions like ambition, and desire.

Throughout the film's history certain reviewers have criticized the somewhat lacklustre construction of the storyline of *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ*. At the time, however, there was unanimity regarding the film's artistic achievements. It may well be that the plot, based on a screenplay by Arnold Fanck and Ladislaus Vajda - and based on Fanck's idea, - is not engaging enough to be understood easily at first viewing, especially given its sacral metaphoric of immutability and moral code. However, the disputed plot is more than made up for by the stunning photography. It was without doubt the excellent lens work that made this film a masterpiece. The cameramen Sepp Allgeier, Hans Schneeberger and Richard Angst, as well as still photographer Hans Casparius, succeeded in capturing the inhospitable world of ice crystals reflecting the light, snowflakes swirling around, crevasses made of rock and ice. Casparius's stills were exhibited at the Berlin premiere and were praised for their 'subtle impressionism' and 'high pictoreographic achievement' (*Film-Kurier* 16 November 1929).

The artistic work of the cameramen resulted in extraordinary pictures of eerily beautiful landscapes, yawning abysses, frightening rock faces and imposing blizzards. Ihre 'Dokumentaraufnahmen der schweigenden Welt des Hochgebirges' (Kracauer 1984:120) are an incomparable achievement, wrote film theorist Siegfried Kracauer in exuberant praise for the expressive, almost lyrical, camera work. 'Anyone who has seen it, will remember the glinting white of the glacier against a dark sky, the clouds piling up like mountains in front of the actual mountains, the icicles that hang from the roofs and window ledges of the

mountain huts and the curious icy formations that emerge from the glacier's crevasses and become visible only through the torches of the rescue team.'(Kracauer 1984:120).

The impressive pictorial achievement was heightened by aerial photography, used for the first time by Fanck in *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ*. It portrayed modern technology in a highly symbolic shot: a light airplane high above the mountain peaks - demonstrating the triumph of mankind and technology over nature. This kind of documentary shot was a rare stylistic device in the period of silent cinema and especially in the 1920s, when German films generally offered little more than the artificial world of studio decoration. Ernst Udet's aerial photography was surely an important reason for the enthusiasm reception the film received, at least in Germany where Ernst Udet was famous at that time. In World War I he had been a fighter pilot decorated with countless medals; in the 1920s he was considered a German national hero. The fact that the admired flying as a stunt pilot and he performed that role in *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ* was utilised greatly to drive sales. Advertising for the film at the time, particularly for the German audience, did not fail to point out Udet's part in the movie by writing his name on billboards as big as the film title itself (*Kinematograph* 27 January 1930). And indeed, his 'breakneck flights and daredevil ascents' (Kracauer 1984:164) remained not only in Siegfried Kracauer's memory.

During the shooting Ernst Udet took on the double role of pilot and cameraman, and took great risks in perilous stunts close to the glacier. The film's tremendous success motivated Udet to continue collaborating with director Arnold Fanck in his subsequent films *STÜRME ÜBER DEM MONTBLANC (AVALANCHE, 1930)* and *SOS EISBERG (1933)*. Ernst Udet's character never changed, he always appeared as acting himself, Ernst Udet, performing as a real hero saving humans visible only as small dots from the height of his airborne plane. However, his character, suggestive of a *deus ex machina*, only plays a minor part in *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE*

VOM PIZ PALÜ; the most important actor in Arnold Fanck's films was nature itself.

The high mountains do not simply serve as an attractive backdrop and romantic playground, however, as in the case of the popular German genre of the Bavarian and Tyrolean 'Heimatfilm'. Instead, they become dangerous, ominous and threatening. Fanck turns the mountain stage into a principal player: literally the most powerful part in the movie. Like a living character, the natural element changes its spirit, ranging from friendly to aggressive. But unlike the human protagonists, the mountains seem to be able to punish effectively. The simple moral principle that excessive pride precedes a fall is prefigured in the dramatic prologue and remains present throughout the-story: the antithesis between the power of nature and the weakness of the human who can but surrender to the sheer might of the mountain, the true ruler of the world.

DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ is considered Arnold Fanck's (1889-1974) undisputed masterpiece and the most important example of the mountaineering film genre, usually designated by the German name 'Bergfilm' (Trimborn 2003:82). One of the first cameramen photographing in the mountains was Vittorio Sella, who accompanied an expedition to K2 in 1909. However, while on the world's second highest mountain he failed to obtain images of alpine action at altitude. Although the cinematic fascination with alpine landscape has antecedents in the period of early cinema, the 'Bergfilm'-genre is attributed to the pioneering efforts of Arnold Fanck whose first educational film, DAS WUNDER DES SCHNEESCHUHS (1920), showcased a range of artistic skiing skills. His subsequent films espoused a similar character; EINE FUCHSJAGD AUF SKIERN DURCHS ENGADIN (1922), IM KAMPFE MIT DEM BERGE (1921) and BERG DES SCHICKSALS (PEAK OF DESTINY, 1924) were all shot in authentic alpine terrain and incorporated excellent photography. The most remarkable feature of Fanck's oeuvre is the breathtaking footage of foolhardy ski- and mountain climbing-

shots: artistic documentaries featuring artistic alpine skills. So impressive were Fanck's shots that his films had promotional impact: they probably kindled, and certainly overlapped, with the emergence of alpine tourism and of skiing in the high mountains (Moltke 2002:22). Late in his life, in the early 1970s, Arnold Fanck emphasised his contribution to ski and mountaineering tourism as his most outstanding achievement (Fanck 1972).

In the early 1920s, German film production companies at first refused to finance Fanck's idea of documentaries set-in the mountains due to the unpredictable expense connected with shooting on location in inaccessible, difficult terrain and dependant on weather conditions (Trimborn 2003:65). Another reason for their scepticism was Fanck's ambition to perform heroic sport performances in a full-length feature film. Consequently, Fanck initially promoted his films alone, but the success lead to a contract with the *Universal film company*. Commissioned by 'Ufa', Fanck directed the melodramatic DER HEILIGE BERG (THE HOLY MOUNTAIN, 1925/26) and the mountain film comedy, DER GROBE SPRUNG (THE BIG LEAP, 1927), both with Leni Riefenstahl as the lead actress.

This cooperation with Leni Riefenstahl, who gained fame and infamy as a director with her documentary TRIUMPH DES WILLENS (TRIUMPH OF THE WILL, 1935) - about the Nuremberg Nazi-rally and commissioned by Adolf Hitler himself - led to the association of mountaineering movies with Nazi aesthetics. The genre was seen as an exclusively nationalist phenomenon exploiting the German predilection for heroic scenery in their films (Cook 1995:124). This argument goes back to the theory of Siegfried Kracauer, who interpreted the 'Bergfilm' as a typically German expression of yearning for a time before modernity and as a symptom of the collective German soul caught between tyranny and chaos, as exemplified in his famous book *From Caligari to Hitler*, a psychological history of the german film (1947). Kracauer writes: 'The wave of pro-Nazi tendencies during the pre-fascist era could not be affirmed more effectively than through the development

and proliferation of the “Bergfilm”. Arnold Fanck, undisputed originator of this genre, stuck to the rules that he had laid down' (Kracauer 1984:271). According to Kracauer the popularity of Fanck's films was a harbinger of the heroic appeal of Nazism. However, the supposed closeness of the 'Bergfilm'-genre to fascism only operates within the bounds of pseudo-historicism and with reference to their proximity in time. Even if Kracauer's claim of an intellectual relationship between Fanck and nationalsocialism was true, it would remain questionable if this association was specifically German. The great international success of *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ* indicates the movie's special status. Is it not true that all adventure dramas create heroes? The conventional moral code of natural power and human submissiveness in any event is neither Fanck's original idea, nor an exclusive subject of the film. This narrative pattern is also very well known from novels and adventure dramas, such as those made by the Swedish film director Victor Sjöström at the same time as Fanck (Beindorf 2001:77). In general, modern film theory argues cautiously and holds Arnold Fanck to be less than master of mountaineering movie but underlines the avant-garde elements playing an important part in his films, such as dynamism and film kinetics (Elsaesser 1999:285).

The most important feature of Fanck's films is the refusal of artificial scenery in which to film; everything had to be shot under natural conditions and nothing could be posed in film studios. This dramatic authenticity was the decisive moment for Fanck who never ceased to refer to the physical strains placed on his actors and cameramen. Every avalanche is real, not a 'studio avalanche' (Trimborn 2003:66), Fanck declared. The outdoor shooting of *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ* took place in Switzerland from January to June 1929, at Morteratsch Glacier and Piz Palü. Cameramen as well as actors had to brave inconceivable conditions in this terrain. Shooting, for example, during an avalanche and working a long time within arctic conditions when temperatures reached –50 degrees Fahrenheit and below. In a contemporary popular cinema

review actress Leni Riefenstahl claimed that she suffered frostbite waiting days and days for the right weather and light for optimal shooting. Eventually, she had to disrupt shooting because her feet were suffering severe frostbite. The actress, the only female in the film team, had to climb into a crevasse: 'I hung there, the small crevasse between me and daylight 40 metres above me and the darkness beneath me, scared to death as the glaciers melted groaningly and creakingly in spring. But what should I do? Is this not all part and parcel of a real, true Bergfilm?' (Riefenstahl 1929).

Indeed Leni Riefenstahl worked with extremely great commitment, for which she was later admired by Pabst and Fanck. She had learned climbing and skiing especially so that she would be able to act in this film. Without any safeguards and ropes she even survived shoots that involved falling backwards into a crevasse. These perilous stunts of the former dancer are also effective on screen, breathtaking to such an extent that the contemporary audience did not believe these were authentic performances from the actors on location. These rising doubts explain the fact why film director Arnold Fanck, probably unique amongst directors in his methods, signed his films with his using his fully title: 'Dr. Arnold Fanck'. At first geologist he wanted to witness the shoots under live conditions on natural locations without any room for doubt. But even experts doubted the authenticity of the shots from the Swiss locations. In fact, Arnold Fanck was a unique 'mountain maniac' amongst the film directors of the time. He claimed that his entire film crew had risked their lives when making his masterpiece *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ*. This kind of ambitious documentary film production combined with performance-oriented strain makes *DIE WEISSE HÖLLE VOM PIZ PALÜ* as well as Fanck's films in general to a peculiarity only managed later in German film history by Werner Herzog (Deeken 2004:101).

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