

## Guy Maddin's *Careful* and the Mountain Film: A Transnational Approach to German Film History

**Abstract:** Guy Maddin is a contemporary Canadian director who has been often lauded for the national distinctiveness of his work. Maddin's *Careful* from 1992, however, poses as an unrestored German "Bergfilm" (mountain film) from the early 1930s. This essay offers a close reading of *Careful* and a critical dialogue with commentaries on both the mountain film and discussions of Maddin's oeuvre. Putting to use transnational perspectives, this analysis of a Canadian director's appropriation of a hallmark German genre problematizes previous constructions of national identity and national cinema as well as the periodization of film history.

**Keywords:** Guy Maddin, Bergfilm, mountain film, transnational German studies, national identity

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This essay is about a film that belongs to Canadian rather than German culture according to all critics and scholars who have written on it. But Guy Maddin's *Careful* vividly demonstrates why we should be *careful* with our institutional habit—or intellectual desire—to slice up the world of culture into discreet national categories, as well as time periods. An eccentric cult classic made in the last decade of the twentieth century in Canada, but playfully posing as a German "Bergfilm" (mountain film) from the Weimar era, *Careful* tells a complicated story of three families caught up in incestuous relationships resulting in disrupted genealogies, set in a fictional Alpine village perpetually threatened by deadly avalanches. Maddin's characters attempt to rewrite *family* history; throughout *Careful*, Maddin seeks to rewrite *film* history. His film's focus on complex lineages, both on the level of plot and style, playfully but powerfully demonstrates that cultural traditions are made and remade across all sorts of boundaries, rather than being passed down and received within a single nation or epoch. What can we learn about the history of Weimar cinema if we open it up

to include a film made by a contemporary Canadian director? And, conversely, what can we learn about a contemporary Canadian director if we consider his work as relevant to the history of Weimar cinema?

Exploring such questions and examining how films such as *Careful* might have a place in the history of German cinema is a timely project in an age when scholars increasingly probe its boundaries by adopting comparative, global or transnational frameworks. *The German Cinema Book* (2002), edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk (joined by Claudia Sandberg in the second edition in 2020) under the auspices of the British Film Institute, has been groundbreaking in this regard. The editors focussed on rendering visible “traveling polyglot filmmakers, international co-productions, and the reception of moving images across borders,”<sup>1</sup> given that “transnational movement has been more rule than exception in German cinema history.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, the first film star discussed in the book is the Danish actress Asta Nielsen, and the careers of other iconic figures such as Marlene Dietrich, Ernst Lubitsch, and Fritz Lang are discussed in explicitly “transnational” and “transatlantic” terms. There are also sections on topics such as representation of German colonialism in film and links between German and Indian cinema. Bergfelder, Carter and Göktürk put into practice what was still largely a theoretical postulate in *Geschichte des deutschen Films* (1993, second edition 2004) edited by Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler: that the object of German film studies should not be “circumscribed by national politics” but rather that the discipline should seek to reveal “connections that exist beyond geographic specificity and especially beyond national sensibilities.”<sup>3</sup>

This goal is shared by film scholars beyond the German context too. Andrew Higson, a scholar of British cinema, presents a “focus on the transnational” as “a way of challenging the national bias in much film scholarship, which often assumes that the national is a self-contained entity when the evidence is often to the contrary.”<sup>4</sup> Such an emphasis is now also well represented in literary scholarship. Todd Kontje has recently sought to explain it in a book on German literary history in the following terms: “in response to the increased circulation of people and ideas in the world today, scholars in the humanities have shifted their focus from national subjects to nomads, from the center to the margins, from homogeneity to hybridity, from essence to performance, from stasis to mobility.”<sup>5</sup> More traditional histories of German film still favour the former approach, though. In *German National Cinema* (2002, second edition 2008), Sabine Hake focuses on film’s “key role in the conception of national identity, in the definition of national culture,” even

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<sup>1</sup> Bergfelder, Carter, Göktürk, and Sandberg, *The German Cinema Book*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Bergfelder, Carter, Göktürk, and Sandberg, *The German Cinema Book*, 441.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobsen, Kaes, and Prinzler, *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, 7; my translation.

<sup>4</sup> Fisher and Smith, “Transnational Cinemas.”

<sup>5</sup> Kontje, *Imperial Fictions*, 7.

as she acknowledges that it is “positioned between the national and the transnational, and the local and the global.”<sup>6</sup> Her narrative closely follows historical events in Germany; it is difficult to see how a film like Maddin’s *Careful* might fit in. Similarly, in *A Critical History of German Film* (2010), Stephen Brockmann explicitly addresses Andrew Higson’s seminal work on the limitations of the national paradigm in film studies, but still chooses to analyse German film “in the context of German nationhood.”<sup>7</sup> In fact even a critic like Randall Halle, who discusses the conditions of film production in post-1989 Germany under the heading of “transnational aesthetic,” does not provide a model for integrating a film like *Careful* into the discourse on German cinema.<sup>8</sup>

How to find a way forward here? We might start by adapting Wai Chee Dimock’s questions about literary history: “what would [film] history look like if the field were divided, not into discrete periods, and not into discrete bodies of national [cinemas]? What other organizing principles might come into play?”<sup>9</sup> Dimock’s answer is to focus on the concept of genre, and it is echoed by film scholars such as Tim Bergfelder, who sees it as “a productive way of avoiding national categorisations” and “open[ing] up the possibility for a more comparative approach.”<sup>10</sup> But Jaimey Fisher decried as recently as 2013 “the almost complete lack of genre studies in German film studies”<sup>11</sup> of the kind that would support “reading against the grain of traditional periodization”<sup>12</sup> as well as across national boundaries. His own edited volume, *Generic Histories of German Cinema*, seeks to remedy the situation by discussing a range of examples, but the mountain film is not one of them. In what follows, I discuss Maddin’s take on the mountain film as a case study that puts the theoretical insights of transnational study of culture into critical practice.

Guy Maddin is a Canadian director born in 1956 in Winnipeg. Since he made his first film in 1985, he has directed twelve features, including *The Saddest Music in the World* in 2003 and *My Winnipeg* in 2007, as well as numerous shorts, including *The Heart of the World* in 2000. Maddin combines intricate, absurd plots with the appearance of silent and early sound cinema. To achieve this effect, he pairs outdated and low-budget technology, such as black-and-white 16mm film or monochromatic filters, with mannered acting and overwrought dialogue delivered in a highly stylized way. Maddin makes his works look like unrestored films from the early decades of cinema by degrading the filmic image, for instance scratching the film surface, or smearing the camera lens with Vaseline. His films have not been very successful commercially, but they have attracted

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<sup>6</sup> Hake, *German National Cinema*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Halle, *German Film after Germany*.

<sup>9</sup> Dimock, “Genre as World System,” 85.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher and Smith, “Transnational Cinemas.”

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, *Generic Histories of German Cinema*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, *Generic Histories of German Cinema*, 4.

something of a cult following, and Maddin has won many prizes for his work, including several awarded at the Toronto International Film Festival, and by the American National Society of Film Critics. He has also been appointed to the Order of Canada, the second highest national honour.

Despite these accolades, and the fact that most of his films have received state funding, Maddin occupies an uneasy position within the narratives on contemporary Canadian cinema. Looking at twenty-first-century histories of Canadian film, one finds that his films are not mentioned at all in two of them.<sup>13</sup> In two others, his work is discussed in the chapter on experimental and cult film,<sup>14</sup> and under the heading of the fantastic.<sup>15</sup> In one case, though, Maddin becomes the focal point of the argument, and the title of one of his films is used as the subtitle to the whole book.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, in the most recent and extensive book on the history of Canadian cinema, *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Cinema* (2019), Maddin's work is briefly mentioned in a couple of chapters and discussed at length in just one—on “Winnipeg Cinema.”<sup>17</sup>

All mentions of Maddin in this last volume seek to firmly reinscribe him as a deeply Canadian or even local filmmaker despite the evidence of a global or transnational lineage of his works. “Most of Maddin's early work was set in an imagined or imaginary elsewhere,” writes Andrew Burke, highlighting *Careful* as a characteristic example. But “despite this, there has always been a critical desire to return Maddin's foreign settings to Canada,” he adds, and points to the reception of *Careful* in support of his thesis.<sup>18</sup> Discussing “the national in the transnational era,” Joumane Chahine compares Maddin to “globally networked auteurs” from other countries, such as Michael Haneke, but then posits that Maddin is “the most remarkable example” of a “high-profile Canadian auteur” who “continue[s] to make essentially ‘Canadian’ films.”<sup>19</sup> Richard Cavell joins William Beard in downplaying Maddin's transnational connections—such as the fact that the screenplay to *The Saddest Music in the World* was written by Kazuo Ishiguro and the film starred Isabella Rossellini and Maria de Medeiros—and claiming that *The Saddest Music in the World* is nevertheless “a very Canadian, and very local, production.”<sup>20</sup> This critical insistence on Maddin's essential “Canadianness” is reminiscent of the approach of German film scholars such as Stephen Brockmann, who insists that despite its transnational connections, German cinema “assert[s] a

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<sup>13</sup> Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema*, and White, *Cinema of Canada*.

<sup>14</sup> Melnyk, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema*.

<sup>15</sup> Leach, *Film in Canada*.

<sup>16</sup> Pike, *Canadian Cinema Since the 1980s*.

<sup>17</sup> Burke, “Stand Tall.”

<sup>18</sup> Burke, “Stand Tall,” 278.

<sup>19</sup> Chahine, “On the Road,” 46–47.

<sup>20</sup> Cavell, “Canadian Cinema and the Intellectual Milieu,” 25.

distinct national identity.”<sup>21</sup> My reading of *Careful* as a mountain film aims to challenge both these critical positions.

*Careful* is Maddin’s third feature film. It came out in 1992 to considerable critical acclaim. The screenplay was written by George Toles, a professor of film studies at the University of Manitoba, who is one of Maddin’s favourite collaborators. *Careful* is a part-talkie shot in Technicolor, set in nineteenth-century Tolzbad, a fictional Alpine village named after the screenwriter. Due to its precarious location, the village remains under a constant threat of devastating avalanches. The daily life of the entire community is organized around the attempts to prevent a catastrophe that would wipe Tolzbad off the map. Children are trained to behave quietly and cautiously, adults speak in whispers, and the vocal cords of animals are cut to make them mute. Against this background unfolds the story of three families. Zenaida, a beautiful widow, has three sons on the verge of adulthood: Grigorss and Johann attend a prestigious college for butlers, while Franz is bed-ridden and locked up in the attic. Johann plans to marry Klara, who lives with her father, Herr Trotta, and her sister, Sigleinde. The most influential man in the village is Count Knotkers, who spends his days mourning over his dead mother. These three families are plagued by illicit and incestuous desires. Johann kills himself after an attempted rape on his mother. Grigorss intends to take care of Johann’s fiancée, but is soon distracted when he enters into the service of Count Knotkers. Grigorss discovers that the count is in love with Zenaida, and that years ago he was prevented from marrying her by his own mother. It turns out that his feelings towards Zenaida are mutual, which enrages Grigorss, who kills the count in a duel. Zenaida then commits suicide. Meanwhile, Klara secretly desires her father and is jealous of her sister. When Klara’s attempt to drown Sigleinde does not work out, she tells Grigorss that her father tried to rape her and persuades him to kill Herr Trotta. Grigorss agrees to do it by triggering an avalanche, but at the last moment Klara jumps to her father and dies in his embrace. Grigorss retreats into a cave, where he freezes to death. The film ends with Franz, Zenaida’s dispossessed son, and Sigleinde, the sister Klara hated, searching for their dead relatives around Tolzbad.

In *Careful*, like in his other works, Maddin makes references to a number of early cinematic styles, individual directors and films from the first decades of the twentieth century, various works of literature, as well as his own childhood memories. However, one source of influence is specific to *Careful* and stands out in terms of its significance for the meaning of the film: it is the genre of mountain film. The mountain film tradition gives *Careful* its overall structure: the setting in an Alpine village, and the notion that this setting is dangerous and seductive at the same time. This context has been largely neglected in the scholarship on *Careful*. While almost all reviewers and

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<sup>21</sup> Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film*, 9.

interpreters do mention it, no one has gone on to consider its implications for the interpretation of the film, let alone the impact that Maddin's film might have on the history and theory of the genre itself. This is likely due to the fact that all existing studies of *Careful* have been written by critics working largely on Canadian and US-American culture,<sup>22</sup> but this critical lens is insufficient in the case of a filmmaker like Maddin, who is interested in the complexities of cultural belonging. What was the influence of the mountain film on Maddin, then, and how can Maddin's film influence our understanding of the mountain film?

After shooting *Archangel* in 1990, Maddin was looking for inspiration for his next film. On his first ever trip to the mountains, he became fascinated by the landscape, and recalled what he had heard about the mountain film<sup>23</sup>—a German genre from the 1920s and early 1930s, very popular at the time, but today known almost exclusively to experts on Weimar cinema. This was even more so the case around 1990. In 1988, Thomas Jacobs began his overview of the mountain film by characterising it as “a genre that was well known and well established in the 1920s, but is largely forgotten today.”<sup>24</sup> Fifteen years later, Nancy P. Nenno asserted in her essay on the mountain film and the emergence of modern Alpine mass tourism that “uttering the word *Bergfilm* among film scholars tends to elicit a chorus of negatives, as ... [it] has fallen from the favored status it enjoyed during the Weimar Republic.”<sup>25</sup> But earlier periods in the history of cinema had always been Maddin's favourite, and so he started watching mountain films, and decided to make one himself.

Traditional German mountain films were shot on location and showed daring climbing and skiing scenes set against the backdrop of stunning landscapes. A substantial number was made in Austria and Switzerland too. They were created by professional skiers and mountaineers, who were able to both enact and film such titillating sequences with recourse to cutting-edge technology. The brief but intense popularity of the genre is due to Arnold Fanck—a German geologist, skier and director. He started filming mountaineers and skiers shortly after World War I and gradually began to embed his impressive portrayals of mountainous vistas and physical feats in simple melodramatic plots. Fanck made several commercially successful mountain films, including *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*), shot in 1926. The young actress who played the female lead in it was none other than Leni Riefenstahl, who went on to star in several other films directed by Fanck, including *Die Weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Pitz Palu*, 1929), on which he collaborated with Georg Wilhelm Pabst, and *Stürme über dem Mont Blanc* (*Storm Over Mont Blanc*,

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<sup>22</sup> Straw, “Reinhabiting Lost Languages,” Varga, “Desire in Bondage,” Vatnsdal, *Kino Delirium*, 71–94, Keller and Uffmann, “Careful... Canadians,” and Beard, “Maddin and Melodrama.”

<sup>23</sup> Vatnsdal, *Kino Delirium*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Jacobs, “Der Bergfilm als Heimatfilm,” 19; my translation.

<sup>25</sup> Nenno, “Postcards from the Edge,” 62.

1930). The German title of *Careful – Lawinen über Tolzbad*, or *Avalanches Over Tolzbad* – clearly “makes an ironic reference to this tradition.”<sup>26</sup>

Soon after Fanck’s frequent male lead, Luis Trenker, made his first of many mountain films, *Berge in Flammen* (*Mountains on Fire*), an independent production of 1931 co-directed with Karl Hartl,<sup>27</sup> Riefenstahl debuted as a director with her own mountain film—titled *Das blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*)—in 1932.<sup>28</sup> The following year, Hitler came to power; as is well known, it was because he admired the genre of mountain film in general, and Leni Riefenstahl’s work in particular, that she was selected to direct the most important propaganda films of the Nazi regime. Like almost everyone involved in the making of mountain films, Arnold Fanck continued to make films during the Nazi era as well, and joined the NSDAP in 1940. The genre of mountain film practically died out after World War II, although it did prove to be a source of inspiration not only for blood-and-soil films made in the Third Reich, but also for the post-war genre of Heimat films, in Germany and beyond.<sup>29</sup>

Thirty years ago, just as Maddin was starting to work on *Careful*, Eric Rentschler initiated a wave of renewed academic interest in the mountain film in the US and in Germany. He challenged the master narrative of the genre, due above all to Siegfried Kracauer, and reinforced by Susan Sontag in her 1975 essay *Fascinating Fascism*. Rentschler summarized it as follows: mountain films “glorify submission to inexorable destiny and elemental might, anticipating fascist surrender to irrationalism and brute force.”<sup>30</sup> In *From Caligari to Hitler*, first published in English in 1947 (a useful reminder of German cinema’s broader transnational entanglements), Kracauer discussed the mountain film as an example of a proto-fascist cinematic form. His account can be usefully complemented by Lotte Eisner’s take on the mountain film. She included a brief discussion of Arnold Fanck in the last chapter of *The Haunted Screen* (first published in French in 1952), entitled “The Decline of the German Film.” She mentioned the mountain film to illustrate her thesis that the advent of sound did not serve German cinema well—and went on to add that even in the silent era, these films were not any good.<sup>31</sup>

Rentschler’s essay did much to problematize this account: he showed that mountain films were extremely popular across the political spectrum in the Weimar Republic, that they did not only extol nature, but also championed modern technology, which made it possible to shoot them

<sup>26</sup> Röwekamp, “Maddinhead,” 78; my translation.

<sup>27</sup> See König, “Der Mythos vom heiligen Berg,” 109, and Rapp, *Höhenrausch*, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Riefenstahl’s authorship was recently called into question: see Gladitz, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 106–107.

<sup>29</sup> See von Moltke, *No Place Like Home*, 36–69, and Steiner, “Vom Bergfilm zum neuen Heimatfilm,” which focuses on Austria as well as Germany.

<sup>30</sup> Rentschler, “Mountains and Modernity,” 137. Rentschler’s essay was later reprinted in a German translation in Amann, Gabel, and Keiper, “Der Fall Dr. Fanck,” and Horak and Pichler, *Berge, Licht und Traum*.

<sup>31</sup> Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 312–313.

in the first place and that there was a palpable anxiety around sexual difference at the heart of the genre. However, the central tenet of Kracauer's argument—that the mountain film is ideologically tainted by its links with Nazism—retains its harrowing suggestiveness. This brief history of the genre and its reception goes to show how surprising and unusual Maddin's reference to the mountain film genre is. I will now consider how he uses it, and then why, or to what effect.

*Careful* includes several close parallels to some of the most successful mountain films. The link between mountains, danger, and feelings that Maddin is so keen to explore in *Careful* is epitomized in a memorable sequence from *Der heilige Berg*. Upon seeing his beloved Diotima in the arms of another man, the film's hero Karl imagines an explosion of an imposing mountain. He is distraught and decides to go climbing with his friend Vigo to regain his composure. During their ascent, however, they get caught in an avalanche. They find a precarious shelter on the verge of an abyss. In this setting pregnant with crude symbolism of emotional distress, Karl realizes that it was Vigo whom he saw flirting with Diotima, and instinctively pushes his friend into the abyss. He quickly comes back to his senses, just in time to catch the rope on which Vigo is suspended. The "male bond" is salvaged,<sup>32</sup> but not for long: both men ultimately perish when Karl loosens his grip on the rope, while experiencing a delirious vision of Diotima and himself entering a luminous ice cave. A similar crystal grotto is the focus of Riefenstahl's *Das blaue Licht*, where it is the source of the light referred to in the film's title and the domain of the female protagonist Junta, intruded on by the male protagonist Vigo and local villagers. Both caves anticipate the cave that Klara sets up as a love nest for her father and herself in *Careful*, which becomes Grigorss' deathbed at the end of the film.

Despite the parallels noted so far, *Careful* radically differs from traditional mountain films in many respects. Unlike them, it is full of absurd humour, as should already be clear from the summary of the plot and introduction to Maddin's style above; my discussion of his treatment of melodramatic intensity and national symbols below will furnish further examples. Figure 1, for instance, shows a seemingly innocent gathering of the inhabitants of Tolzbad for a traditional celebration, but the shot is dominated by improbably phallic mountain horns extending from the male performers to the female audience, suggestive of the town's sexual repression. Figures 9 and 10 show a close-up of a grotesquely large egg being broken into a frying pan; an entire bird, rather than egg yolk and white which might be expected, falls out and sizzles on the pan, but nobody acts surprised. Hyperbole and exaggeration are hallmarks of Maddin's style, repeatedly used to undercut the seriousness of his characters' actions and dilemmas.

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<sup>32</sup> Rentschler, "Mountains and Modernity," 155.



Another important difference between *Careful* and traditional mountain films is that in Maddin's film, the portrayal of nature—crucial in traditional mountain films—is reduced to a highly artificial set. This is especially significant since much of existing scholarship on the mountain film focuses on nature.<sup>33</sup> Thomas Brandlmeier argues that “Fanck's work represents the iconographic summa of our skewed relationship to nature,”<sup>34</sup> while Martin Seel begins his essay on the genre by asserting that “the significance of Arnold Fanck's films lies in their contribution to the cinematic representation of nature.”<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Keiper talks of a general “fascination with nature” in the reception of the mountain film.<sup>36</sup> The latter two quotes come from contributions to a special issue of *Film und Kritik* subtitled “The Discovery of Nature in the German Mountain Film.” Given the scholarly emphasis on the innovative representation of nature in the mountain film, it is all the more striking that Maddin in fact returns to the techniques of portraying mountains in film that had been used *before* the pioneering technological developments due to Fanck and his cinematographers. “In the silent film era and long after, scenes set in nature were largely shot in the studio, using replicas made of papier-mâché,” as another contributor to the special issue of *Film und Kritik* points out.<sup>37</sup>

If *Careful* renounces a focus on awe-inspiring natural landscapes, what does replace it? Its plot concentrates on emotional and sexual dilemmas of the characters, including several instances of incest, to a degree entirely off limits in Fanck's films or Riefenstahl's *Das blaue Licht*. In this sense, *Careful* might seem to resemble the “Anti-Heimatfilme” made in West Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Films such as *Jagdsszenen aus Niederbayern* (*Hunting Scenes from Bavaria*, adapted in 1968 by Peter Fleischmann from Martin Sperr's 1965 play of the same title) offered a critical take on the post-war genre of Heimatfilm which, as I indicated earlier, was inspired by pre-war mountain films. The “Anti-Heimatfilme” aimed to expose the idyllic notion of the Heimat as naïve and blatantly false, by “highlight[ing] the simmering violence that lurked in the provinces, and ... confront[ing] audiences with Heimat histories of oppression rather than social harmony.”<sup>38</sup> Those films, however, did not blend their critique with the absurdist humour that is so crucial to *Careful*; moreover, they were firmly embedded in the social and political context of the Adenauer era, while Maddin's work lacks any link to contemporary Germany.

A comparison with several other, more recent films that show affinities with old mountain films makes the uniqueness of Maddin's approach even clearer. As Caroline Schaumann shows,

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Strathausen, “The Image as Abyss,” Bush, “Moving Mountains,” and Baer, “Natural History.”

<sup>34</sup> Brandlmeier, “Sinngesetze und Gedankenbilder,” 80; my translation.

<sup>35</sup> Seel, “Arnold Fanck oder die Verfilmbarkeit der Landschaft,” 71; my translation.

<sup>36</sup> Keiper, “Alpträume in Weiß,” 53; my translation.

<sup>37</sup> Jacobs, “Visuelle Traditionen des Bergfilms,” 28; my translation.

<sup>38</sup> Von Moltke, *No Place Like Home*, 205.

two recent German films—*Nordwand* (*North Face*, 2008) and *Nanga Parbat* (2010)—remain much closer to traditional mountain films in terms of plot and visual appearance, but explicitly seek to rid the genre of its connotations with Nazism (unsuccessfully so, according to Schaumann).<sup>39</sup> Another film against which one might read *Careful* is *Cliffhanger* with Sylvester Stallone, directed by Renny Harlin: made in 1993 (almost concurrently with *Careful*), it is an action film set in the Rocky Mountains, and its daring mountaineering sequences evoke the tradition of Fanck's mountain films. Werner Herzog's mountain documentary as *Gasherbrum. Der leuchtende Berg* (1985) and his feature *Cerro Torre: Schrei aus Stein* (1991), come to mind as well. The directors of all these films handle the genre in a way that is completely opposed to Maddin's approach, though: they use the whole spectrum of contemporary cinematic techniques, breath-taking mountainous landscapes are crucial to them, and they are not parodistic.<sup>40</sup>

What to make of Maddin's take on the mountain film, then? Why is he interested in using it? It should be clear by now that part of *Careful*'s appeal is precisely the quirkiness of the whole enterprise. Disregarding academic classifications which separate film histories into discreet national categories and time periods, an eccentric Canadian director unearths a half-forgotten German genre from the 1920s and in response creates a film whose outlandish appearance is matched by its whimsical plot. But there is more to it. Maddin's departures from the generic conventions are founded on a particular interpretative investment in the genre: *Careful* is based on the melodramatic element inherent, and yet at the same time suppressed, in the mountain film. It bears repeating that Maddin was at work on *Careful* just as the first critical revaluations of the Weimar genre were starting to appear in the US and Germany. I will now summarise this novel interpretation of the genre that his film echoes.

The key moment in the development of Fanck's mountain films was the inclusion of a female lead—from 1926 onwards nearly always played by Leni Riefenstahl. While his first films focused almost entirely on athletic prowess and the intricacies of skiing and mountaineering techniques, the inclusion of a female character meant that Fanck's films now told melodramatic stories revolving around the competition between two men for the attention of a woman. "The individualistic search for one's own self ('What does one search for up there?'—'For oneself!') becomes an erotically charged compensatory behaviour," writes Thomas Brandlmeier; "the verb 'to mount' begins to scintillate with the entire obscenity of its double meaning."<sup>41</sup> The plots of these "mountain melodramas," as Ingeborg Majer-O'Sickey called them, unfold in

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<sup>39</sup> Schaumann, "The Return of the Bergfilm." See also Höbusch, "Mountain of Destiny," and König, "Der Mythos vom heiligen Berg," 122–123.

<sup>40</sup> See Cook, "Spatial Orientation and Embodied Transcendence in Werner Herzog's Mountain Climbing Films."

<sup>41</sup> Brandlmeier, "Sinngesetze und Gedankenbilder," 83; my translation.

“hyper-masculinized mountain spaces.”<sup>42</sup> Based on an analysis of contemporary press reviews, Rentschler demonstrated that Fanck’s films appealed to their audiences precisely through the “onscreen heroism that reflect[ed] behind-the-scenes feats of strength, the collective product of a male community of athletic actors, daring assistants, and feckless technicians.”<sup>43</sup> Taking inspiration from Anton Kaes’s seminal argument in *Shell Shock Cinema*, Wilfried Wilms has even claimed that several of Fanck’s films channelled the traumatic experience of defeat that German soldiers underwent in World War I—the front being arguably the ultimate “hyper-masculinized space.”<sup>44</sup>

The female lead now entered the world of the mountain film, though—and, equally importantly, she was joined by the weak, effeminate man from the lowland, in the role of an antagonist to the rugged mountain-man championed by the genre. The two men compete for the attention of the woman, but “the erotic charge ... is displaced from the physical onto the metaphysical: it is the thrill of adventure, of fear, and of death that infuses ... [these films] with erotic tension.”<sup>45</sup> This description works for Fanck’s films, but not for Riefenstahl’s *Das blaue Licht*, which subtly challenges the generic conventions in its handling of the relationship between the sexes.<sup>46</sup> In Fanck’s mountain films, though, all the danger and tension are presented as connected to the power of nature—imposing mountains and treacherous avalanches.

In Maddin’s take on the mountain film, however, this physical danger is clearly presented as an emanation of the psychological states of the characters. All tension results from problematic family dynamics in Tolzbad: disrupted family genealogies, troubled, incestuous sexualities, and the negotiation of traditionally gendered family roles. In Tolzbad, men are weak and live in the shadow of imposing women: their mothers and fiancées. This dynamic, however, does not reverse the gender system prevalent in traditional mountain films, but rather unmasks the anxieties inherent in them. Similarly, the displacement of emotional tension onto the struggle with the power of the elements characteristic of Fanck’s mountain films is taken to the extreme in *Careful*: the claustrophobic world of Tolzbad is governed by the necessity to restrain one’s emotions, since expressing one’s feelings too vehemently can result in a dangerous avalanche. This creates an absurd vision of interpersonal interactions: declarations of unabated love must be exchanged in an entirely dispassionate manner, and sultry embraces cannot be indulged in.

In this way, the latent subtext of Fanck’s mountain films becomes the overt content of Maddin’s *Careful*, and Maddin—a contemporary Canadian director—becomes an interpreter and

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<sup>42</sup> Majer-O’Sickey, “The Cult of the Cold and the Gendered Body in Mountain Films,” 365.

<sup>43</sup> Rentschler, “Mountains and Modernity,” 152.

<sup>44</sup> Wilms, ““The Essence of the Alpine World Is Struggle.””

<sup>45</sup> Majer-O’Sickey, “The Cult of the Cold and the Gendered Body in Mountain Films,” 365.

<sup>46</sup> Rentschler, “Fatal Attractions,” 59, 64–65.

inheritor of the genre by creating its “metafilm,” as Burkhard Röwekamp called it.<sup>47</sup> Maddin reclaims the mountain film tradition and writes himself into it. Just as laboriously artificial as its visual appearance, the film’s cultural lineage mirrors the problematic elective affinities that its characters feel for each other, irrespectively of their biological ties. In a scene of a grotesquely exaggerated melodramatic reunion, Zenaida declares to Count Knotkers, the man she was once forbidden to marry, that Johann and Grigorss, two of her three sons, are his—“at least in spirit: when I conceived them, my thoughts were only of you,” she assures him. In this and other moments in the film, Maddin’s characters make aggressive, often destructive attempts to overlook blood ties and forge alternative connections with people around them. This provocative negotiation and testing of the power of belonging corresponds to Maddin’s experimentation with an old German genre in a bid to rewrite film history and transcend the critical habit of slicing up the world of film into separate national categories and time periods.

*Careful* intervenes in a seemingly closed chapter in the history of cinema: the film is made to look like a Technicolor part-talkie shot in the early 1930s, and to seem as though it belonged to the German genre of the mountain film. In fact, however, it engenders a new understanding of the genre through its emphasis on the destructive power of feelings and relationships between the characters. Maddin creates a “could-have-been” cinema: in 1992, he makes a film that has the appearance of having been made sixty years earlier—except that *Careful* “could not have been” a 1930s mountain film, for it overturns the generic conventions in ways that are possible only in cultural hindsight. As Steven Shaviro wrote about Maddin’s films in general, “there has never been a time when they would have been present.”<sup>48</sup> In this sense, *Careful* is an impossible kind of mountain film: one that combines an old, discarded cinematic style with a worldview that has only been made possible through later cultural developments. The comparison between the mountain films from the 1920s and 1930s and Maddin’s film, however, does not exhaust the significance of *Careful*’s engagement with the excess of melodramatic emotionality.

William Beard has argued with reference to Maddin’s cinema in general that the director reverts to the language of early melodrama because it enables him to communicate an intensity of feeling that has become inaccessible in later films.<sup>49</sup> The starting point of this familiar argument, which has been applied, for example, to Todd Haynes’s *Far From Heaven* (2002),<sup>50</sup> is the condition that Fredric Jameson referred to as “the waning of affect in postmodern culture.”<sup>51</sup> Even if postmodernism now might seem to be waning itself, becoming something of a historical

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<sup>47</sup> Röwekamp, “Maddinhead,” 79.

<sup>48</sup> Shaviro, “Fire and Ice,” 76.

<sup>49</sup> Beard, “Maddin and Melodrama,” 79–95.

<sup>50</sup> Dyer, *Pastiche*.

<sup>51</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 10.

curiosity,<sup>52</sup> Richard Cavell was right when he wrote recently that “Maddin’s intellectual resonance is with postmodernism.”<sup>53</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s Maddin was one of many artists and critics who subscribed to the argument that the gradual fragmentation of subjectivity and scepticism about the possibility of knowing the world have forced a sense of ironic detachment onto the producers and consumers of contemporary culture. Seen from that perspective, the early stages of cinematic history seemed to promise to offer emotional purity, untainted by the destructive self-awareness of postmodernism—quite irrespective of the accuracy of this vision of early cinema. The development of Hollywood melodrama between the 1930s and the 1950s was marked by the emergence of a whole new cinematic vocabulary for conveying emotional intensity: a particular use of musical accentuation, a dramatic composition of the *mise-en-scène*, expressive diction, colour symbolism, and so on.<sup>54</sup> However, the argument goes, these cinematic effects that were once innovative and eloquent gradually came to seem clichéd and overfamiliar: over the years they had lost their power to elicit fresh and intense emotional reactions.

Maddin himself has commented on this development on many occasions. In one interview, he recounts his students’ reactions to Douglas Sirk’s last Hollywood production, *Imitation of Life* from 1959. (In the context of my overarching argument about the transnational nature of German cinema, it is useful to remember that Douglas Sirk was born in 1897 as Hans Detlef Sierck, a son of a Danish couple living in Hamburg, and, already an established director, left Nazi Germany for Hollywood in 1937.) While Maddin was moved to tears by the final scene of *Imitation of Life*, his students burst into laughter.<sup>55</sup> The melodramatic resolution of the plot seemed ludicrous to them, not touching. To Maddin, their reaction signalled that if contemporary cinema wants to convey intense emotions, it must embrace the reluctance and even ridicule that they are likely to elicit in the audience. In *Careful*, then, Maddin seeks to access the surges of emotional intensity associated with old cinematic styles, at the same time resisting a naïve faith in the authenticity of these feelings. By choosing a cinematic form that is not only old-fashioned, but also so marginal that the majority of his audience is unlikely to be familiar with it, Maddin creates a space of wilfully acknowledged artifice. For him, it is, paradoxically, only in this self-contained space outside of real life that real emotions can be experienced again.

Seen in this light, *Careful* functions very much like acoustic shelters in Tolzbad. As we are told at the beginning of the film, there are some places in the mountains where sounds are cancelled by their own echoes, permitting the inhabitants of Tolzbad to play and celebrate in safety.

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<sup>52</sup> Weigel et al., “The Birth, Death, and Rebirth of Postmodernism.”

<sup>53</sup> Cavell, “Canadian Cinema and the Intellectual Milieu,” 24.

<sup>54</sup> Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 75–77.

<sup>55</sup> Springer and Werthschulte, “If You Want Realism, Watch Security Camera Tapes,” 186.

One of such celebrations is shown in the film. It is a concert of a local orchestra of huge blowing horns, of which Johann is a member. The sounds that the orchestra is making are dreadfully cacophonic, but both the players and the audience look very pleased. Then comes Johann's solo, which is the culmination of the whole piece: a loud, unmodulated sound—but a clear one. It is the first scene in the film that imitates the look of two-strip Technicolor, and the colours are saturated and bold (Figures 1–2). All these simple elements—colour, sound, and Johann's visible elation as he masters his solo—create a feeling of serenity that is touching despite the goofiness of the cacophonic sounds of the orchestra, the improbably long and phallic blowing horns, and the provinciality of this little celebration. But this charming image is quickly undermined: a cut accentuated by the sudden silencing of the music takes us away from the scene and forces us to look at it from a distance. It turns out that this new perspective belongs to Franz—Johann's brother locked up in the attic of their house—who is watching the gleeful celebration through a pair of binoculars, bitterly disappointed that he cannot be a part of it (Figures 3–5). First swept into the emotional intensity of the film, the spectator is then forced into a position of distance. This tension between emotional attachment and detachment—or a feeling of belonging and its lack—becomes a metaphor for the presence of melodramatic elements in the whole film.

<FIGURES 1–5 ABOUT HERE>

The thorny issue of belonging that structures the plot of the film is relevant to its place in film history, too. Maddin's mountain film is not just a historical cinematic form. It is also a form that, at least on the face of it, has little to do with Canadian film—and even less with the sense of place engendered by the plains of Maddin's native Manitoba. It is Maddin's forging of a new sense of cultural belonging, beyond the confines of the nation and a belief in national particularity, that I move to now. Maddin has often commented with exasperation on the fact that viewers expect his films to have something to say about contemporary Canada. For example, George Melnyk marvels at one reviewer's "failure to situate Maddin in any sort of Canadian context," so that "the work is viewed as purely avant-garde, whose references are to cinema history itself and not to any national context."<sup>56</sup> In a less serious way, this expectation is taken for granted in a review for *The Washington Post*, which discusses *Careful* as "created by Canadian (oh, that explains it) director Guy Maddin."<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, Maddin's remarks in interviews and on the commentary track for the DVD release of *Careful* suggest that he is in fact keen to play with this imputed "Canadianness" of

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<sup>56</sup> Melnyk, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema*, 195.

<sup>57</sup> Howe, "Careful."

his works. In one interview, Maddin declares to be interested only in universal emotions and relations between people, and contrasts this theme with the discourse on national identity:

I knew that ... people would see the caution advised in *Careful* as some sort of portrait of Canada. I was aware of that, so I played it up in the interviews. But there is no allegory; I don't want an allegory. I always hated it in high school English classes when some burnt-out teacher would tell you to find the symbols in a short story. The idea of storytelling ... is that it's supposed to be entertaining and engaging, not a cryptoquote to be solved and then disposed of.<sup>58</sup>

What Maddin opposes, then, is not so much the idea that *Careful* might have something to say about Canada, but rather an allegorical interpretation that would treat the film as a cryptic but unambiguous statement about national identity. Indeed, *Careful* is overtly comical and parodistic, and any discussion of national themes in the film must take it into account.

With this caveat in mind, I now turn to a climactic scene in *Careful*: a phantasmagorical Canadian flag is shown right after Johann's attempt at having sex with his mother (Figures 6–8). It is a strikingly unexpected image, and one presented so pointedly—this long take lasts for thirteen seconds, and the flag occupies the whole screen—that it is impossible to ignore it.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, however, it is such an overdetermined image that it eludes any attempt to pin down its precise meaning. The flag is a national symbol—but the Canadian flag never looked the way it is shown here, which suggests that we have to do with a polemical treatment of the national discourse. Maddin's emphatic description of this scene on the DVD commentary track as “the Canadian moment where the film proudly declares its Canadian identity” only strengthens the impression that the main function of this image is to suggest the notion of “Canadianness,” indeed, *flag* it up, rather than to introduce a sustained narrative on national identity into the film. In a different context, Maddin referred to this sequence by calling it his “response to Canadian Content: a cutaway of a flag while a son was doing something sexual to his mother.”<sup>60</sup> It is indeed a strikingly provocative moment, and yet—as both Maddin and his screenwriter George Toles were keen to point out—the link between incest and Canada was not explored in the responses to the film, not even by those interpreters who insisted on the “Canadianness” of *Careful*. <FIGURES 6–8 ABOUT HERE>

One exception is Wolfram R. Keller's and Christian Uffmann's essay, in which they propose a reading of *Careful* as an allegory of Canadian identity. They have many interesting and pertinent observations, but they seem to ignore the decidedly tongue-in-cheek quality of the film,

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<sup>58</sup> Vatnsdal, *Kino Delirium*, 81.

<sup>59</sup> Keller and Uffmann, “Careful... Canadians,” 169.

<sup>60</sup> Vatnsdal, *Kino Delirium*, 83.

and of Maddin's cinema at large. Their interpretation draws its momentum from Kipling's poem quoted at the beginning of the film, which they take as Maddin's explicit invitation to read *Careful* as an allegory:

Something hidden – go and find it;  
Go and look beyond the Ranges  
Something lost behind the Ranges:  
Lost and waiting for you. Go!

Keller and Uffmann then list various elements in the film that ostensibly stand for national (and nationalistic) symbols of Nazi Germany and Canada, in an effort to show that Maddin proposes a complex and deliberately cryptic argument Canada's failed collective dream of building a heterogeneous nation. Most of the examples of national symbols on the list, however, are either tenuous or relatively insignificant. For instance, Keller and Uffmann note that two species of Canadian birds appear in the film, but it remains unclear how this detail contributes to their overall interpretation.

The key step in their argument considers another avian prop: an egg that Grigorss snatches from an eagle's nest and presents to Klara. Right after Johann's incest scene, between the shot of the Canadian flag and the scene of his self-mutilation, a cut takes us to Klara's kitchen, where she is breaking the eagle's egg. A bird is revealed inside, and it dies instantly as Klara tosses it onto a hot pan (Figures 9–10). The eagle is a typical heraldic bird which appears, for instance, on the German coat of arms, but its fate in *Careful* is not to hatch, but to be turned into a meal by Klara—the woman with whom Johann failed to form a successful relationship because he found himself attracted to his own mother. Keller and Uffmann interpret the whole episode as an allegorical “still birth” of the Canadian nation which does not succeed in uniting its constituent nation groups, represented in the film by the three distinct families. On this interpretation, incest stands for the desire for a straight national lineage, without any external influences—which, however, has to end in a bloody tragedy. <FIGURES 9–10 ABOUT HERE>

Keller's and Uffmann's reading of this scene is undoubtedly interesting, but it does not take into account the absurd humour of Maddin's exaggerated portrayal of national symbols. I have already suggested that the Canadian flag “flags up” the discourse on national identity, rather than actually engaging in it. The treatment of the eagle is similar: as the young of the paradigmatic heraldic bird, it is a national symbol *in statu nascendi*, but the possibility of the emergence of a national discourse is again playfully undercut—the eagle does not hatch, and is turned into a fried dish instead. In this way, Maddin first sets up the scene for an allegorical reading of the film, and then shows how national symbols fail to do their job—they do not contribute to a sustained



narrative on Canadian identity, but rather function as mere props in a cinematic gag. This explains why Maddin only displays national symbols but does not use them to argue a particular case about the condition of the nation. The quote from Kipling, the huge Canadian flag, and the young of an eagle are traps into which unwary interpreters are meant to fall—and they do, as the example of Keller and Uffmann shows.

Maddin mocks the assumption that *Careful* must have something to say about Canadian identity, but his parody of national discourse has a deeper significance. *Careful* engages with the very assumption that a film must always comment on the nation or culture to which its author belongs. Maddin exposed the gender politics underlying the mountain film just as German film scholars were reinterpreting them as characteristic of Weimar culture. But to Maddin's Canadian critics, his portrayal of sexual repression was a commentary on decidedly Canadian issues. This shows how an understanding of genre as flowing from and tied to national particularity is a critical construction rather than an inherent feature of cultural texts. In a collection of essays and research documents that accompanied an important exhibition on the mountain film in the Munich Film Archive in 1997, curator Jan-Christopher Horak asked rhetorically: "is the mountain film an essentially German genre because only Germans incorporated the underlying worldview into their culture?" and glossed further: "Americans externalise all conflicts, they visualise them as the struggle of a single individual, while Germans repress their struggle, internalise it, and transform it into a psychodrama."<sup>61</sup> But, as the example of *Careful* shows, such gross generalizations are unlikely to be helpful in writing the history of cinematic genres such as the mountain film. As Tim Bergfelder points out, transnational approaches to film and culture more broadly are "at [their] most interesting where [they are] used to question and if necessary debunk some of the exclusionary narratives and historical practices that underscore the majority of national film histories," that they "can and indeed should be used to interrogate and challenge myths of national exceptionalism." This remains "an important political task today more than ever," in 2021 as much as in 2016 when he wrote these words.<sup>62</sup>

Just as academic scholarship was beginning to take an interest in it again, Maddin revisited the half-forgotten cinematic tradition of German mountain film and challenged its conventions in *Careful*, suggesting that the real source of danger and tension in the genre is not the sublime power of nature, but the messy world of human feelings and desires. His treatment of the mountain film is humorous, but the meaning of Maddin's work transcends a purely parodistic ambition. In *Careful*, Maddin not only creates a novel interpretation of the mountain film, but also redefines his own

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<sup>61</sup> Horak, "Dr. Arnold Fanck," 30; my translation.

<sup>62</sup> Fisher and Smith, "Transnational Cinemas."

cultural allegiances by constructing a transnational cinematic heritage for himself. The director playfully addresses the expectation that *Careful* must have something to say about Canada. He introduces national symbols only to deconstruct the assumption that his film lends itself to an allegorical reading. Maddin's parodistic approach to the purported "Canadianness" of *Careful* leads to a more profound reflection on the validity of the concept of unitary and independent national culture, an interpretative strategy with which critics still all too often approach film history.

Maddin's "carefulness" thus becomes an immensely evocative and rich nexus of meanings and associations. It describes the emotional inhibitions which are forced upon the inhabitants of Tolzbad both externally—through their fear of the avalanches—and internally—through the rigid rules governing their interpersonal relations. In the opening sequence of the film, Tolzbad is literally shown as a precarious game. A child plays with lettered building blocks, erecting a wobbly tower which reads "Tolzbad," but threatens to fall apart at any moment. We can also take the title of the film as a word of warning aimed at the spectator and the critic: be careful with your interpretation, because after all, it's just a construction. In his 1990 essay on the mountain film, Rentschler placed his reading of the genre in the context of "much reevaluation of Weimar cinema" and explained his purpose in the following terms: "we take pause here to reexamine this genre and to question its critics, to comb the archives and to take a fresh look at rarely screened films. We want to know more about the reception accorded these films upon their initial release and to reconsider, with care and all due scepticism, eyewitness accounts and memoirs of their creators."<sup>63</sup> The "care" with which Rentschler set out to approach the critical reception of mountain film mirrors the "carefulness" playfully advocated in the title of Maddin's film. We know that numerous famous German directors went on to have illustrious careers in Hollywood; that the two founding works of German film history were first published in English and in French; and that even such a "quintessentially German" or "quintessentially Weimar" genre as the mountain film, as many critics have claimed, has found an inheritor in a contemporary Canadian director. *Careful* can serve as an excellent reminder to take care with our critical constructs, whether they have to do with national cinema, periodization, or genre.

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<sup>63</sup> Rentschler, "Mountains and Modernity," 138.

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## Image Captions

Figure 1. Celebration in an acoustic shelter.

Figure 2. Closeup of Johann in the orchestra.

Figure 3. Celebration seen through Franz's binoculars.

Figure 4. Franz in the attic.

Figure 5. Closeup of Franz.

Figure 6. Closeup of Johann after the incest attempt.

Figure 7. Canadian flag.

Figure 8. Johann's face and the flag.

Figure 9. Klara breaking an egg.

Figure 10. The eagle on the pan.