

6. SCALING THE MOUNTAIN, ELEVATING THE NATION: THE “GOLDEN AGE OF HIMALAYAN CLIMBING” ON FILM

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Between 1950 and 1954, the first half of what Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver have termed the “golden age of Himalayan climbing” (Isserman & Weaver 2010, 295), four of the fourteen hitherto unscaled 8,000-meter peaks were climbed in quick succession—Annapurna in 1950, Mount Everest and Nanga Parbat in 1953, and K2 in 1954—by French, British, West German, and Italian mountaineering expeditions, respectively. Occurring during a period of political, economic, and psychological reconstruction in the aftermath of World War II, these expeditions, as Isserman and Weaver point out, were of “national importance” (276), covered extensively in the media, and “followed by the general public with an interest second only to soccer” (234). In short, they provided these four nations, as the American climber Charles Houston observed in connection with the Italian K2 expedition, a “great shot in the arm at a very necessary time” (qtd. in Isserman & Weaver 2010, 318).

Taking its cue from Isserman and Weaver’s general observation about the popularity and importance of post-World War II Himalaya expeditions in these four nations, this article will explore how cinema and in particular expedition films inscribed the exploits of the successful mountaineers into the national imagination in four widely screened documentaries—*Victoire sur l’Annapurna* (*Victory over Annapurna*, Marcel Ichac, 1953), *The Conquest of Everest* (George Lowe, 1953), *Nanga Parbat 1953* (Hans Ertl, 1953), and *Italia K2* (Marcello Baldi, 1955)—and, more importantly, how, each in their own way, these documentaries contributed to the reconstruction of a French,

British, West German, and Italian (self-)image in the trying decade after World War II.¹ The analysis of these films from a transnational perspective will not only allow us to identify the specific contemporary ideological desires and concomitant renegotiations of the past in these four nations, but also to elucidate Roberto Mantovani's claim that in the postwar years "[o]n the big screen, mountains and ascents were recounted in a completely different way" (Mantovani 2020, 71), in these specific instances via the creation of new mountain hagiographies, the reimagining of human interrelations, the internationalization of nationalism, and the scientification of mountaineering.

VICTOIRE SUR L'ANNAPURNA

In Marcel Ichac's account of the successful French Annapurna expedition, the "Victory over Annapurna" is due to one man, and one man only: Maurice Herzog, the expedition leader. While at first glance Ichac's film contains all the traditional elements of a documentary about a mountaineering expedition, it is the specific framing and distribution of these individual elements within Ichac's film that sets it apart from the other documentaries explored here. In fact, *Victoire sur l'Annapurna* contributes to what Gilles Dhers, in a November 2, 2019 *Libération* article on the 1950s French press coverage of the expedition, identifies as the "hagiographiz[ation]" of Herzog in a time of "Annapurnamania" in 1951 and the establishment of the expedition leader as "the hero of a France that had set out to regain its grandeur" (Dhers 2019). This happened at a time when the country "still lay mired in the humiliation of World War II" (Roberts 2000, 30) and the Fourth Republic (1946–1958) "presided over the decline of the French Empire," suffered from "political crisis and ministerial instability," and experienced "twenty-six governments between 1944 and 1958" (Gildea 1996, 35). By focusing solely on Herzog's "heroic" deeds, his suffering, and his sacrifice, *Victoire sur l'Annapurna* reflects (and plays into) the nation's desire for a specific kind of leadership that would arrive seven years later in the person of another national hero, General Charles de Gaulle.

Herzog's "hagiographiz[ation]" in Ichac's film begins with the help of a frame narrative that focuses exclusively on the expedition leader. Prior to recounting the story of the expedition proper, the first words spoken are those of Herzog, who is depicted leading a rope team in the Mont Blanc region. Even when later in the film he is shown following on the rope during several rock-climbing scenes, the camera focuses exclusively on him. The opening frame concludes with Herzog speaking directly into the camera, as if to place his imprimatur on the remainder of Ichac's film. The pronoun "I" dominates the sequence, and only once does Herzog mention his "companions" and his former climbing partner, Louis Lachenal, respectively. There is no mention of the suffering and sacrifice of others, as if they simply were not part of the expedition.

The story of the expedition proper that follows reinforces the initial impression of Herzog at the center of victory, suffering, and sacrifice. Narratively speaking, Herzog is clearly "in the lead": during the approach to the mountain, during the "assault" phase, and during the "attack" on the summit when Herzog once again speaks directly to the viewer (albeit in the form of a voice-over), thereby tightening the grip on his version of Annapurna's ascent that began with the opening (frame) sequence. Even, and especially, on the summit itself it is yet again Herzog who dominates, this time in visual terms: He triumphantly raises the French flag over his head; his partner, Louis Lachenal, is literally out of the picture.

But it is not just in victory that Herzog is first; more importantly, he is also first in terms of suffering and sacrifice. Two sequences, together almost fifteen minutes in length (and thereby occupying almost a third of the film), document Herzog's and Lachenal's painful and protracted descent, first from the summit into base camp, then back into civilization. Already when returning from the summit, the focus is on Herzog's (and not Lachenal's) injuries:

The first one to come towards us, at the top of the avalanche cone, is Maurice Herzog. He walks very straight, like an automaton. His face is ravaged by fatigue. We can guess that without his iron will, he would have been lying for a long time in the snow, giving up fighting. His first words are to tell us: "We bring a beautiful victory. We did the Annapurna, Lachenal and I did the Annapurna the day before yesterday, but my feet and hands are frozen."

Herzog's injuries are also the focus of the portrayal of the second stage of the descent, the return to civilization. During this "endless return journey" the true nature of Herzog's and Lachenal's injuries becomes clear: "Our doctor is looking at those who have been badly affected by the frost. Lachenal, who will have to have all his toes amputated, and Herzog, who will lose not only the tips of his feet but also almost all his fingers." Herzog, this passage reveals, trumps Lachenal even with respect to the degree of their injuries. A bit further on (both during the return trip and in the film), the state of health of the wounded is assessed once more. According to the narrator, "The wounded are getting worse. Herzog's weakness is extreme." The story of the expedition proper in Ichac's film concludes by putting Herzog's (current and future) suffering and sacrifice above everyone else's—he is the very embodiment of it (see Figure 6.1):

After forty days of walking, we reach the Indian border. For the first time, a smile appears on Herzog's devastated face. That day, we understand that he is saved. Feverishly, he talks about his plans. He knows that



Figure 6.1 Maurice Herzog in *Victoire sur l'Annapurna* (1953)

on his return to France, other trials await him; months in hospital and further suffering. But his thoughts go further, towards a future that is still chimerical, and Lachenal keeps the same hope; [...].

The fate of Lachenal in this passage, it seems, is nothing but an afterthought.

Victoire sur l'Annapurna concludes the way it began, by returning to its frame narrative and thereby the face and voice of Maurice Herzog himself, who has the last word on the meaning of past suffering and sacrifice for the future: "Despite our injuries, we returned to the mountains. It was a natural arena where we fought to the limit of our strength for the accomplishment of a freely chosen adventure. A new existence begins, where it still has its place. There are other Annapurnas in the lives of men." In other terms: Our ordeals have prepared us for the challenges that lie ahead. With this message, the hagiographization of Herzog is complete.

The story of a triumphant return after a devastating defeat and several years of forced exile (from the mountains) as told by Herzog in *Victoire's* frame narrative, of course, would have recalled for his contemporary audience the story of another French national hero, General Charles de Gaulle. Defeated by the Germans during the Battle of France in June 1940 and forced into British exile in London, De Gaulle had returned to a liberated Paris in late August 1944 as leader of the "Free French," a government-in-exile opposing the Vichy regime. In April 1947 he launched the "Rassemblement du Peuple Français," a movement conceived as an "extension of the wartime

France Combattante, offering salvation from the 'degradation' of the country and its Empire" and guided by three themes: "to reform French institutions, strengthen the Union, and restore French grandeur" (Gildea 1996, 37). During the elections of 1951, the year of *Victoire*'s release, de Gaulle's "Rassemblement" emerged as the country's largest party, and de Gaulle subsequently "demanded the right to form a government, insisting [...] that he would change the constitution" (Gildea 1996, 38). The constitutional change envisioned by de Gaulle was revealed in 1958, when he was finally elected president of the Fifth Republic. Pursuing "a highly personal and presidential regime" (Gildea 1996, 45), he proclaimed in December of that year that as "Guide of France and head of the republican state, I will exercise supreme power over the whole range that it now encompasses and according to the new spirit that entrusted it to me" (qtd. in Gildea 1996, 45). His subsequent claim in January 1960 of "the national legitimacy that I have embodied for twenty years" (qtd. in Gildea 1996, 45) underscores this vision of leadership; for Robert Gildea, in de Gaulle's mind "the authority to speak for France he had asserted on 18 June 1940 ["Appeal of 18 June"; the first speech made by de Gaulle after his arrival in London and considered the origin of the French Resistance] had never been interrupted" (Gildea 1996, 45). The kind of leadership envisioned by de Gaulle as the ultimate "Guide of France" and the exclusive voice of the nation, however, bears an almost uncanny resemblance to Herzog's self-portrayal in *Victoire sur l'Annapurna*: It is Herzog who leads the expedition from the front, and it is Herzog—and exclusively Herzog—who speaks for it. The story of Annapurna, as David Roberts correctly observes, is "the property of the expedition's patron [Lucien Devies] and its leader [Maurice Herzog]" (Roberts 2000, 43), not surprisingly two "staunch Gaullists" (30).

The story of Herzog's suffering and sacrifice (for the French nation) that dominates the portrayal of the expedition proper in *Victoire sur l'Annapurna*, too, would have rung familiar for the film's contemporary audiences. As Robert Gildea explains in his chapter "The Myth of the Resistance," 1951 not only saw the emergence of several Resistance organizations (Committee for the History of the Second World War, National Association of Ex-Servicemen of the French Resistance) and hundreds of local Resistance associations, but also marked the beginning of a "cult of the Resistance" (a cult actively supported by de Gaulle) that "rested on four key articles of faith," chief among them the belief that "the Resistance had been a heroic struggle, with a long roll-call of martyrs" and complemented by the claim that "though active resisters were a minority, they had been able to operate because of the support of the nation" (Gildea 1996, 64). The Resistance, Gildea concludes, "recreated national unity, and in turn imparted the grace of having participated in the Resistance to the nation as a whole" (65). The story of Herzog's own suffering and sacrifice,

then, indirectly inscribes the 1950 expedition leader (who had indeed been a captain in the Resistance) into this grand, “redeeming, unifying, heroic story of the wartime years” (Gildea 1996, 65) via his own “guilted myth” (Roberts 2000, 24) of the expedition. Herzog’s appointment in 1958 by de Gaulle to the post of Minister of Youth and Sport would eventually join the two national “heroes” and these two national myths.

These surprising parallels, then, reveal that *Victoire sur l’Annapurna* is more than simply an account of the first successful ascent of an 8,000-meter peak by the French in 1950; through its symbolic hagiography of the expedition’s leader, Maurice Herzog, it is very much also a political vision for the return of the French nation to its old “grandeur” by way of a “strong presidential regime” (Gildea 1996, 32).

THE CONQUEST OF EVEREST

A hagiography of a very different kind marks the opening sequence of George Lowe’s *The Conquest of Everest*. It depicts the newly crowned Queen of England, Elizabeth II, returning from Westminster Abbey in her golden carriage, surrounded by all the pomp and circumstance of nearly a thousand years of British history and cheered by adulating citizens. Interwoven into this celebration of the supposed beginning of a new chapter in the history of the British Empire—“everything was new and exciting”—is, both visually and narratively, the news that “men had climbed Everest!” British newspapers depicted in this sequence headline “The Crowning Glory—Everest Is Climbed” (*News Chronicle*) and “The Crowning Glory—Everest Conquered” (*Daily Mail*), thereby interweaving royal and mountaineering news. Further on in the sequence, the narrator tells the viewer that there was “[t]he procession in London, another in Central Asia,” the latter showing the successful mountaineers on their trek down the mountain. But the parallels extend even further: Tenzing Norgay, just like the Queen, is shown “riding in state,” so the narrator, in a flower-adorned coach surrounded by cheering crowds; and John Hunt, Edmund Hillary, and Tenzing are “throned on a balcony,” very much like the new Queen presented herself on the balcony of Buckingham Palace with her family on June 2, 1953. The story of the first ascent of Everest, therefore, is intricately linked to the story of Empire: British subjects had “conquered the peak that we now call Everest,” and “Britain had won a new victory”; “after 30 years of defeats, men have achieved the impossible” [all emphases mine]. The story told in *The Conquest of Everest*, then, is not just an account of a memorable mountaineering expedition, but also an idealistic vision for the British Empire in a “new Elizabethan age”² at a time when that very Empire was already in steep decline, a decline forever symbolized by the loss of India, the former British Raj, to national independence on August 15, 1947. This

vision focuses on three clearly identifiable ideas: exploration, innovation, and cooperation.

The notion and language of exploration form the center of the film's introduction to the mountain. "When men were first drawn to Everest," the narrator tells us, "it was an unknown quantity." The first climbers "hardly knew where it was, and what it was was something entirely beyond them." Over time, "the early expeditions [...] did make the picture much clearer," and Shipton's 1951 reconnaissance expedition provided "new knowledge" about it. In 1953, Hillary and Band "discover the route" through the icefall, and the Western Cwm is a "strange high world," its floor consisting of "frozen snow to a depth no one can guess," the heights above it yet "unknown." Higher on the mountain still, the South Col is "a place that is outside man's experience," and Bourdillon and Evans conduct a "reconnaissance" of the South summit and try to "see what lay beyond it."

Through this focus on and language of exploration, the 1953 Everest expedition is connected not only to the previous British attempts on the mountain, but also the British exploration of cold places in general: Everest, after all, was the "Third Pole," and its conquest the declared goal of the British after they had "lost" both the North and the South Pole. The notion of a mysterious and undiscovered world, finally, ties the explorers of Everest to yet another generation of British explorers, those of the Victorian age, first and foremost the men engaged in the search for the elusive source of the Nile: Speke, Burton, Livingstone, and Stanley. In those "boom days of Empire," as James Morris has observed, "[e]very adventurous taste was provided for," among them the "frissons of expedition" (Morris 1978, 410). But by the time of the first attempts on Everest—the "supreme remaining earthly objective of exploration and adventure" (Morris 2003, 1)—in the 1920s and 1930s, "self-doubt, self-recognition had [...] become part of the imperial condition" (Morris 1978, 419). Twenty years later still, when the remaining power of the Empire was rapidly fading, the suggestion in various parts of Lowe's film that the British—attested to by their most recent expedition to a mountain that had become, in Morris's words, an "Empire-substitute in itself" (Morris 1978, 421–22)—are still a nation of explorers, then, must be read as yet another attempt at reclaiming the past greatness of the Victorian explorers and their expanding Empire, a virtual "rebirth of Britain" (Morris 2003, 5). According to Lowe's film, the imperial impulse is still alive in Britain, waiting to be rejuvenated and carried into a "new Elizabethan age" by the next generation of explorers.

But what does it mean to be explorers in the mid-twentieth century, an age when virtually all blank spaces—and now even the "Third Pole"—on the world's geographical map have been filled in? Lowe's film provides a possible answer: The explorers of today are (once more) masters of innovation,

specifically scientific innovation. *The Conquest of Everest* makes this point in an extended sequence that focuses on the challenge to “equip [the] team with the very best possible equipment.” The viewer is presented with images of climbers, scientists, and technicians in various laboratories in Farnborough, complemented by images of the laboratory equipment itself, including gauges and dials in close-up (see Figure 6.2). During this “planning and testing phase,” innovation, the viewer is told, was a must: “What most needed checking and double-checking was oxygen, for *no apparatus hitherto* had filled the bill upon Everest.” Innovation was also required as regarded the matter of tents: “[T]ested at Farnborough was a *new material* for tents, extremely light and 100% windproof, a kind of nylon-cotton.” But the ingenuity of British scientists, the film tells (and shows) the viewer, extended even further. It extended to boots—“known” ones were tested against “unknown” (i.e. new) ones, and it extended to the all-important rations: “[F]or this expedition, something *quite new* was used: a method known as vac-cooking” [all emphases mine]. As this sequence implies, scientific innovation was key for the expedition to succeed on Everest (and, in extension, for Britain in the “new Elizabethan age”).

Lowe’s focus on scientific innovation and the attendant suggestion that this kind of innovation was key to the renewal of the British Empire in the second half of the twentieth century recalls for the viewer the era of scientific innovation in the nineteenth century, the so-called “steam age.” As Morris observes, “[t]heir original mastery of steam, and all that came from it, had given them [the British] a technological start over all other nations, an advantage they put to imperial uses” (Morris 1978, 27) as “the mastery of technique was the key



Figure 6.2 Science in *The Conquest of Everest* (1953)

to authority" (53), the "truest foundation of British power" (344). During the first half of the twentieth century, however, "[t]he British were paying for their old success. The overwhelming superiority of their Victorian technique had made them complacent, even timid of new ideas" (345). According to Morris, it was all a matter of attitude: "It was not that invention had failed. [...] [T]he nation seemed to lack the flair, the will or perhaps the incentive to translate ideas into solid achievement" (345). This and other factors led to the result that, "when peace came again [in 1945] British technology could not compete with American" (466). In order to regain British power, so Lowe implicitly suggests in his film, Britain once again needed to take the lead in scientific innovation and technological development and actively apply them for the good of what remained of its Empire.

There is, however, a third—and most consequential—element that completes *The Conquest of Everest's* vision of the British Empire in a "new Elizabethan age": the human element. As the narrator observes, "[y]et however good the equipment, and however meticulous the plans, the Goddess Mother of the World, as the Tibetans call her, can only be conquered by man." Key to this conquest is a new kind of collaboration, a collaboration hinted at in a sequence depicting the expedition members gathered at the British embassy in Kathmandu. Here, two "milestones" are identified in connection with the first meeting between climbers and Sherpas:

1. The meeting between "Major Charles Whiley, who, being an officer of the Gurkhas, can speak to the Sherpas in Nepali";
2. The meeting between Tenzing and Hillary, the two individuals who would eventually reach the summit of Everest.

What is suggested here is the idea that the conquest of Everest was possible only through communication and collaboration between mountaineers from the West and the East who overcame their cultural differences to pursue a common goal—truly a new vision for a revamped British Empire that had recently lost its greatest possession, the subcontinent of India, and therefore was in dire need to redefine its relationship with its former colonies in a new era. This theme of collaboration carries through the remainder of the film, both visually and narratively. Hillary and Tenzing, for instance, are repeatedly shown together in one frame, and upon reaching the village of Namche Bazar, the narrator informs us that "every one of the climbers knew that he was among friends. Lowe from New Zealand knew that, and Gregory from Blackpool knew it, too. Yes, they are all pleased to meet the Sherpas." Again and again, Western and Eastern mountaineers are depicted working together, especially during crucial stages of the expedition, a fact reinforced by the narrator: "Lowe and Ang Nema [...] spent nine days on the Lhotse face and

pioneered a large part of the route [...]”; Noyce and Sherpa Analu assured that “the way [up the Lhotse face] was open” and “the great lift [to the South Col] was on”; and “Hunt and Anamgal” carried important loads up the last stretch towards the South summit. In the end, and through this collaboration, the narrator concludes, “[t]he top of the world has been reached. Sherpas and British alike, all had their share in this. [...] Only two men in the world have reached that height [29,000 feet] on their feet, one of them born in New Zealand, the other born under Everest.”

A new kind of collaboration has secured the victory; a collaboration defined by Queen Elizabeth II in her 1953 Christmas message as a “world-wide fellowship of nations [...] [in which] the United Kingdom is an equal partner with many other proud and independent nations” (qtd. in Stewart 1980, 29) and confirmed in 1961, eight years into this “new Elizabethan age,” during her visit to Ghana, as one between “[a] group of equals, a family of likeminded peoples, whatever their differences of religion, political systems, circumstances and races, all eager to work together for the peace, freedom and prosperity of mankind” (qtd. in Morris 1978, 557).

NANGA PARBAT 1953

Whereas George Lowe in *The Conquest of Everest* had used the story of the first ascent of the world’s highest mountain to provide a vision for the British Empire in a “new Elizabethan age” and a way to write forward nearly a thousand years of British history, Hans Ertl, cameraman and director of *Nanga Parbat 1953*, had to do the exact opposite: to find a way to separate the story of the first ascent of Nanga Parbat from a National Socialist regime that itself aspired to last a thousand years but met an inglorious end only twelve years after its rise to power. For Ertl, this challenge was threefold:

1. How to distance Dr. Karl Maria Herrligkoffer’s *Deutsch-Österreichische Willy-Merkel-Gedächtnis-Expedition* from the troubled legacy of previous German Nanga Parbat expeditions;
2. How to provide a new path of access to Germany’s “mountain of destiny” for a post-World War II audience during the time of the West German *Wirtschaftswunder*;
3. How to distinguish his own film from the documentaries of previous Nanga Parbat expeditions.

As I have detailed elsewhere,³ Ertl, in trying to distance himself from the troublesome history of previous German Nanga Parbat expeditions and the subsequent appropriation of its documentary film material for propaganda purposes, can do so only with the help of a cinematic language that today is

recognized as (pre-)fascist. Furthermore, Ertl, in trying to present the first successful ascent of Nanga Parbat in an international context via repeat references to British mountaineering as well as the shared format of the western free market economy, can only do so via a mystification of the mountain; that is, via a uniquely national, German concept. Ertl’s film therefore marks a position that, among others, Georg Seeßlen has identified as symptomatic of the years of the West German *Wirtschaftswunder*; a position at once characterized by the partial adoption of the “new” (the new economics, the new role of the individual, the new power of the product [see Figure 6.3]) and the partial retention of the “old” (the old relationships, the old language, the old ways of seeing) (Seeßlen 1989, 140). Viewed from this angle, *Nanga Parbat* 1953 not only documents the successful ascent of one of the world’s highest mountains in 1953 but also reveals the central identity problem of the young West German republic: Despite focusing on the present, it simply cannot escape the past.

ITALIA K2

The categories of the “old” and the “new” found in Seeßlen’s cogent analysis of 1950s West Germany prove illuminating also in regard to the last expedition film discussed here, Marcello Baldi’s *Italia K2*.⁴ Here, too, the “old” and the “new” play a prominent role: In fact, the film makes the argument that it was only through the deliberate combination of traditional Italian values such as family, faith, and the connection to one’s home (the “old”) with modern concepts such as a focus on science, technology, and efficiency as well as a



Figure 6.3 Celebrating the German ascent in *Nanga Parbat* 1953

unified nation (the “new”) that the Italian mountaineers were able to scale K2 and, by extension, Italy itself may chart a course into a successful post-World War II future at a time of “national rebirth” when the country suffered from a national “memory divided by a civil war” (Serafin 2004, 217) and “was still, in many respects, [...] underdeveloped” (Ginsborg 2003, 210).

Italia K2 sets up its argument via a carefully crafted, three-part exposition. The first part introduces climbing as a sporting activity, its territory as well as its risks. It also poses the question as to why men engage in this dangerous activity, a question it revisits and answers in part two of the exposition, which provides a brief history of mountaineering, both in the European Alps and the Himalayas: “It’s in the natural order of things [...]. One is born with the passion of the mountain, thus, by destiny.” Part three, finally, introduces the viewer to K2 via its mountaineering history, a history indelibly linked to Italy itself via two previous expeditions—the 1909 expedition of the Duke of the Abruzzi and the 1929 expedition of the Duke of Spoleto—and engrained into its visual memory by the photographic images of Vittorio Sella. Together, the three parts of the exposition suggest to those Italians whose attitude toward the expedition is being characterized by the film’s narrator as “ignor[ance],” “normal indifference,” and “skepticism” that they should in fact take an interest in the exploits of the mountaineers on K2, for two reasons: One, at least for some of their fellow Italians, the activity of climbing is in their “blood,” i.e. part of the Italian national identity; and, two, K2 is essentially an Italian mountain, albeit in the Himalayas.

Italia K2 then proceeds to present its argument proper. Several key (modern) concepts comprising the “new” in Baldi’s film are featured prominently in an extended sequence documenting the scientific groundwork for the expedition conducted in various human physiology labs at the University of Milan and underscored via several additional scenes in the film. Preparing the expedition, the narrator informs us, was “a difficult assignment, complicated by the brief length of time available,” only to conclude that the Italians addressed this challenge in a fast and efficient manner with “surprising speed,” countering the oft-repeated commonplace about Italian inefficiency in the eyes of the world. Key to preparing the expedition was identifying “the men [...] to be chosen from the numerous Italian climbing experts,” and it is this science-based selection process the film depicts at great length. First is a scene featuring a “*camera di compressione*,” in which two climbers are exposed to ever-increasing altitudes. This scene is characterized by frequent intercutting between the two climbers in the pressure chamber; the scientists in their white lab coats outside the chamber; and the hands, dials, and graphs that conduct, control, and record this altitude experiment. This type of intercutting between test subjects, scientists, and lab equipment, suggesting the importance of science for the Italian mountaineering success on K2, can also be observed in the portrayal

of two additional experiments in this sequence: a man writing while exposed to decreasing oxygen levels, and another man walking to exhaustion on a treadmill. The sequence ends with an example of materials testing, part of a series of experiments designed to "perfect the gear used for this [expedition]." The result of this rigorous and efficient scientific selection and testing process, the narrator proclaims at the end of this sequence, is "almost the definitive national team."

Other scenes dispersed throughout the film aid in promoting this message of national success through reliance on science, technology, and efficiency. Prof. Ardito Desio, the expedition leader, reacts "coolly and objectively" to a porter strike that threatens to halt the Italians' approach march to K2; once on the mountain, the Italian climbers are referred to as "*academici delle montagne*"—scholars of the mountains. The expedition itself is characterized as "well organized," the crates containing its equipment all have a "precise destination," in the base camp "everything works perfectly" and "nothing is lacking," not even a fast and reliable mail service. High on K2 the climbers check the fixed ropes quickly, but carefully ("*un controllo minutioso*"); ascend via a "methodical advance"; and, like true innovators, are the first to capture "images of themselves" on an 8,000-meter summit.

The "new" in Baldi's film also extends to the concept of a truly unified Italian nation, a nation above and beyond the traditional *campanilismo*, the ancient regionalism typical of all Italy. This can be seen most clearly in a scene immediately following the previously observed pronouncement of an Italian "national team" in which the team members and their hometowns are introduced to the viewer. Although from different mountain regions and towns, they have joined together in support of this national enterprise. On the mountain itself, their interactions are characterized by collaboration and mutual support: More than once the narrator informs the viewer that "no one stands around idle," "each one strives to his own ability," and "everyone will dedicate themselves." The traditional, culturally important acts of collaboration, cooperation, and community among the Italian climbers are now instrumentalized to create what is commonly referred to as "horizontal solidarity," i.e. wider social participation beyond individual or family interests. The notion of Italian unity reaches its most visible expression in a scene—about halfway through the film—that shows the tent of the expedition leader, Prof. Ardito Desio, adorned with the flags of various Italian cities, and even more so in a similar scene at the very end of the film where the camera moves up a line of Italian city flags suspended on a pole, all the way to the Italian "*il Tricolore*" at the top, a clear expression of the "nation united" theme (see Figure 6.4).

But it was not the "new" alone, the film suggests, that made the Italian success on K2 possible. In fact, it was only the combination of the "new" with the "old"—family, faith, and the connection to one's home—that enabled



Figure 6.4 Italian unity in *Italia K2* (1955)

Lino Lacedelli and Achille Compagnoni to get to the top. The importance of family, this traditional Italian “basis of solidarity” (Dunnage 2002, 2), can be discerned in yet another extended sequence following the low point of the expedition: “awful weather,” “violent storms,” and the death of Mario Puchoz. Acknowledging the dwindling public interest in the expedition and the real possibility of its failure, the narrator asks poignantly: “Who still believes in the conquest of K2?” As if on cue, the following scenes provide the answer—family and friends—by depicting, among others, Mrs. Desio, the wife of the expedition leader, who “writes [to her husband] every day” despite “the ephemeral possibility that her husband will reach the top;” the parents of Enrico Abram, the “two old folks [who] don’t give in to discouragement” even when they receive “discouraging news” on the radio; the sons of Achille Compagnoni who “in their evening prayer [ask] that their father returns to them soon”; and, finally, the friends of Lino Lacedelli who “are so sure that [he] will do it that they swear to climb the parish church spire to attach the flag the day of the great news.”

The second, equally important reason for the Italian climbers’ success on K2, the film suggests in several scenes that recall the two religious references identified in the preceding discussion, was their Catholic faith, another traditional mainstay of Italian identity. Not by accident, the segment documenting the preparation phase of the expedition opens with an image of the Duomo di Milano, as if to put the entire enterprise under the protection of the Divine. Again and again, the film’s narrative relies on religious references to tell its story, utilizing a language that every Italian could understand: The local Balti porters prepare their food by “perpetuating an ancient rhythm that belonged to

the fishermen of Galilee," they conduct their prayers "in a dissonant psalmody of voices," the mountains lining the Baltoro glacier are likened to "cathedrals," and the Italian climbers high on the mountain are sustained by "manna from Heaven." But nothing suggests the reliance of the Italian expedition and its members on the Catholic faith more than the depiction of "la Madonnina," a Virgin Mary statue donated by the Archbishop of Milan, Alfredo Ildefonso Schuster, in a little ice shrine in the base camp. Finally, there is the sound of Italian church bells rung all over Northern Italy announcing the success of the expedition, a sound that carries over into the base camp on the Baltoro glacier at the end of the film, enveloping the expedition in far-off Pakistan in the familiar sounds of home.

This connection to one's home, then, is the third reason given in *Italia K2* for the expedition's success. The crucial and ever-present link between "this world"—the base camp on the Baltoro glacier—and "that world"—Italy, the home country—is represented in various ways: repeatedly in the form of "hoped-for mail," the letters and packages sent by the climbers' mothers, wives, and children; in the form of the "smell of home" in the climbers' clothing; in the form of food—*prosciutto*, the quintessential Italian meat; and, most importantly, in the form of the base camp itself in which "nothing is lacking" and all the amenities of home are present, together creating a "home away from home." Even the sounds of home are present, if only in the director's imagination: The bells of Italy also ring in the base camp.

Marcello Baldi's *Italia K2*, then, is not just a film that documents the exploits and success of Italian mountaineers on the most difficult 8,000-meter peak in the world, but it also poses and answers, in the most detailed and surprising fashion, the question of why the average Italian should take an interest in the expedition. *Italia K2* is as much a film about a successful Italian Himalayan expedition as it is a vision for the future of the Italian nation—with all its evident contradictions. In the words of Enrico Sturani, it occurs at a "pivotal point of our national appearance: it is the culminating point of a heroic-military-national tradition, dating back, through Fascism and D'Annunzio, to the fathers of the Fatherland. But it is also located at the start of the new Italy which, with the economic boom, is becoming a modern nation" (Sturani 2004, 140).

The preceding comparative analysis of *Victoire sur l'Annapurna*, *The Conquest of Everest*, *Nanga Parbat 1953*, and *Italia K2* demonstrates that Charles Houston's observation about the Italian K2 expedition—that it provided the nation "a great shot in the arm at a very necessary time"—is clearly applicable to the French, British, and West German Himalayan expeditions of the early 1950s, as well. As sporting achievements, they elevated their nation's (self-)image in very much the same way as any other major sports victory of the period; the "Miracle of Bern," the unexpected German triumph in the

1954 World Cup final, immediately springs to mind. But while these sporting achievements may have provided a powerful but temporary lift, it was their subsequent portrayal in the four expedition films discussed here that truly elevated these nations by providing their respective audiences—both in the home country and abroad—with a lasting vision for their country’s future. By placing the four films side by side for the first time, we were able to specify Isserman and Weaver’s general observation about the “national importance” of these expeditions: The “golden age of Himalayan climbing” triggered powerful visions for a new “golden age of the nation” that ranged from one man’s longing for strong national leadership all the way to a Queen’s demand for revised relations among her Commonwealth’s subjects. Furthermore, the analysis of these films from a transnational perspective revealed to us the paths shared across national borders into a new chapter of mountain film cultures: the creation of new mountain hagiographies in *Victoire sur l’Annapurna* and *Nanga Parbat 1953*; the reimagining of human interrelations in *Conquest of Everest* and *Italia K2*; the internationalization of nationalism in *Conquest of Everest* and *Nanga Parbat 1953*; and the scientification of mountaineering in *Conquest of Everest* and *Italia K2*.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank my colleague in Italian Studies, Dr. Gloria Allaire, as well as Dr. Josée Lauersdorf for their translation/transcription of *Italia K2*’s and *Victoire sur l’Annapurna*’s voice-over, respectively.
2. I am borrowing this term from James Morris, the London *Times* correspondent who accompanied the 1953 expedition to Everest and relayed the news of its summit success back to England (Morris 1978, 498).
3. Space considerations permit only an abbreviated discussion of Ertl’s documentary here; for a detailed treatment see Höbusch 2016, 207–18.
4. I would like to thank Aldo Audisio, former director of the Museo Nazionale Della Montagna “Duca degli Abruzzi” (Turin, Italy), for providing me with a viewing copy of the film.

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