

Professor Studies Impact of Mountain Films on Post-World War I Germany  
by Janette Ballard



You won't find a Weimar mountain film in theatres this fall. The once popular German films haven't been on the silver screen in 80 years. Yet they once bolstered the psyche of a defeated nation. Wilfried Wilms, associate professor of German, studies the impact of defeat in World War I and the development of mountain films in Germany.

"No other country produced mountain films. They are a peculiarly German phenomenon in the aftermath of World War I," Wilms said of the films primarily made during the years of Weimar Germany (1919-1933), the time following the signing of the constitution for the postwar republic in the town of Weimar in South Eastern Germany.

"Mountain films, and those dealing with arctic exploration, are centered on a remarkably coherent set of themes – exploration and triumph, survival and perseverance, loss and defeat – all notions that determined the front experience of the modern soldier fighting the First World War," said Wilms.

"The hugely popular films projected health, virility and masculinity at a time when the German nation was experiencing defeat and humiliation," he said.

Born and raised in Koblenz, Germany, Wilms earned a PhD in Germanic Studies from Indiana University. As a student, he became interested in the two World Wars and the ensuing effect of defeat, particularly the intellectual reactions in Germany. Although he primarily studied German intellectual history, he developed an affinity for German film, including "rubble film," popular in Germany after World War II, and mountain films.

Today his research focuses on the history, memory and representation of war and conflict in literature and film. His new book project, *Cool Conduct in Cold Places*, investigates the mountain film as a particular cultural response to Germany's loss of World War I.

"I show that mountain films exhibit psychological mechanisms for coming to terms with defeat," he said. "Triumph of calm and collected German speaking men at the top of Montblanc or in the snow- and icescapes of Greenland were meant to aid in the healing process of a humiliated German nation."

"I also pursue peculiar issues such as the presence of German World War I flying ace and postwar phenomenon Ernst Udet in many of these films, asking whether we can we look at German climbers and explorers as avengers of national honor who perform for an excited German audience rituals of mobilization and restoration," he added.

As a professor at the University of Denver since 2005, Wilms enjoys helping students

hone their critical/analytical thinking skills, to enable them to become self-reliant and capable of analyzing closely what is around them.

“An added component in terms of teaching German language and literature is that the other culture adds perspectives not readily available for individuals who do not know a second language very well. Not only do students discover a new and different culture; they also look at their own, seemingly familiar one, with a fresh set of eyes. I truly enjoy watching how their worlds simply expand, and how our students look around, sometimes in amazement,” he said.