



HippFest

18 – 22 March 2026



The Mountain of Destiny

Dir. Arnold Fanck | Germany | 1924 N/C PG | b&w, tinting | German intertitles with English surtitles | 1h 26m + short

With: Hannes Schneider, Frida Richard, Erna Morena, Luis Trenker
Original title: *Der Berg des Schicksals*

Performing live: Günter Buchwald (piano, violin), Frank Bockius (percussion)

Programme notes: Steve Scott

Sat 21 March 16:30 - 18:00

A film from the holdings of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung (www.murnau-stiftung.de) in Wiesbaden.

When audiences first encountered *Der Berg des Schicksals* in the early 1920s, they were not simply watching a drama unfold but experiencing a new cinematic sensation. Viewers were placed high above the ground, sharing the vertigo of sheer rock faces, as cinema learned to transmit altitude, the wind, and cold. This was no studio-bound illusion, but a film that placed its cast, crew, and camera genuinely close to danger. It also marked the birth of *Bergfilm* – Germany’s mountain movie, a counterpart to the American Western, where wilderness replaces the frontier town and nature becomes the central antagonist.

The film opens in tragedy. A mountaineer attempting the first ascent of the *Guglia di Brenta (Campanile Basso)*, one of the most forbidding towers in the Dolomites, is killed. Years later, his son, now a climber himself, is drawn towards the same peak, haunted by his father’s fate. His widowed mother extracts a promise that he will never attempt the climb, a vow undone when the son’s sweetheart tries the ascent herself and runs into serious trouble. The pull of the mountain ultimately overrides all restraint.

What sets *Der Berg des Schicksals* apart is not its melodrama but the physical reality behind it. Director Arnold Fanck was no armchair filmmaker. A former ski instructor who had already made alpine documentaries before the war, Fanck approached fictional filmmaking as a total craftsman, serving as producer, director, writer, and cameraman, and collaborating with pioneers such as Sepp Allgeier, Hans Schneeberger and in this film Hannes Schneider (to many, the Father of modern skiing). His camera did not simulate danger; it recorded it.

Shot entirely on location, the film features genuine climbs on exposed rock faces, performed by professional mountaineers including a dashing young Luis Trenker. Figures are frequently reduced to silhouettes against open tinted skies, emphasising scale and vulnerability. The mountain is not a backdrop but an active, indifferent presence. The early techniques and equipment (or lack of) used in the 1920’s still sends a chill to experienced climbers today who take for granted their modern integrated protection and safety systems and the benefits of new materials designed for use in harsh environments.



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With this project Fanck effectively established the *Bergfilm*, arguably the only film genre of distinctly German origin. Hugely popular in the 1920s and early 1930s, these works rejected studio artifice in favour of wind, snow, and altitude, offering an alternative to Expressionist interiors. Their influence extended beyond cinema: after seeing *Der Berg des Schicksals*, Leni Riefenstahl sought out Fanck, starred in *Der Heilige Berg*, and began a career that would later take a far more troubling direction.

In retrospect, the Bergfilm has become a contested form. Its fixation on heroic struggle, sacrifice, and destiny has been read as a precursor to later nationalist ideologies, with troubling images of masculine resolve forged against an unforgiving landscape.

This film remains however a remarkable achievement. Its daring cinematography, raw physicality, and elemental imagery still command respect over a century on. Strip away all the artistic analysis, and pioneering film techniques from that era and what remains is timeless – small human figures clinging to rocks, clouds churning below their feet, and the unsettling truth that the mountain is indifferent to success or failure. This story remains unchanged.

STEVE SCOTT

Steve Scott is the director of Kendal Mountain Festival.