Cinema in Extremis: Mount Everest and the Poetics of Monumentality

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ABSTRACT: Two British attempts to climb Mount Everest cosponsored by the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club in the 1920s, equipped with motion-picture cameras, telescopic lenses, and filters, promised to elevate Britain's reputation within international mountaineering circles, as well as claim victory for machine and humanity in extreme altitude. This essay examines how ideas of monumentality circulate textually and discursively in the two extant films, *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922) and *The Epic of Everest* (1924), homing in on how Everest's scale denuded cinema of some of its essential capabilities while paradoxically capturing saturated moments of monumentality through specific cinematic techniques. Though commercial success eluded the filmic records of the failed climbing attempts, the films' negotiation of the complex dialectics of British national identity and Tibetan life brings the poetics of monumentality into conversation with issues of culture, memory, indigenous agency, and history.

KEYWORDS: monumentality, Everest, expedition film, mountaineering, George Mallory, Royal Geographic Society, national identity, Tibetan agency

Mount Everest (known as "Chomolungma," "Goddess Mother of Mountains") is the ultimate challenge to the human body as well as cinema's technological mediation of the real, overdetermined as a geological environment and culturally imagined space. It is extremely difficult to climb and equally challenging to film, the perils of the former indubitably affecting the conditions of possibility of the latter.[1] The 1921,[2] 1922, and 1924 attempts on Everest undertaken by members of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and the Alpine Club in London, all of which failed to reach the summit, used photography,[3] and in the latter two expeditions, a motion-picture camera. This essay examines two films made on Mount Everest, the 1922 film *Climbing Mount Everest* and the 1924 *The Epic of Everest*, through three topoi of monumentality—scale, aesthetics, and nationalism—that structure each part of the essay.[4] On the question of scale, expeditions

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Fig. 1: Everest 1924 attempt climbing party at Camp IV. Andrew Irvine back row far left; George Mallory back row second from left. Image appears in filmed sequence of same group in *The Epic of Everest* (1924).

are minimonuments in motion, thrusting laboriously and obtrusively through the landscape, dependent on locally procured human and animal labor, and a minispectacle in and of themselves, often arousing suspicion and/or amusement from indigenous onlookers. With regard to the aesthetic issues raised by the two films, I argue that Everest's monumental geography and the stresses of climbing and filming at extreme altitudes paradoxically both constrain *and* open up possibilities for cinema, not dissimilar to its use in the Arctic and Antarctic, but with the added challenge of extremely high altitude.

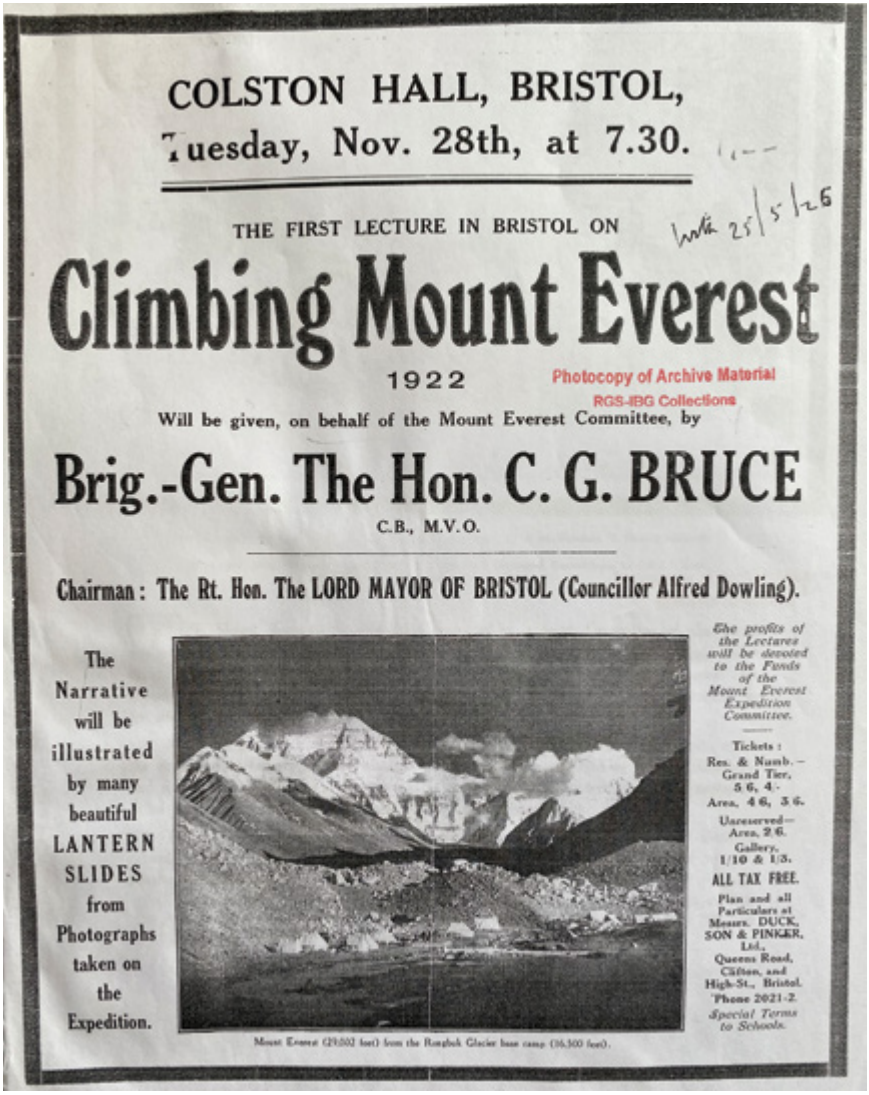
On the imbrication of nationalist discourses with monumentality, I explore how the films construct what Corina Apostol calls "an illusion of immutability," a coping strategy for managing the national shame of failure through the activation of discourses of heroism in the memorialization of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, the two British climbers who lost their lives in the 1924 attempt (fig. 1).[5] Rather than view these films merely as jingoistic hero-documents, however, I include reference to the diplomatic crisis they triggered when first exhibited in London, responses that mobilize counternarratives capable of disrupting dominant interpretation of the past and even complicating contemporary

Fig. 2: Sherpa guides described by Capt. John Noel as a "begoggled crowd moving with slow determination." (Frame enlargement, *Climbing Mount Everest* [1922])

resignifications of the film.[6] These narratives involve reading these films as historical memory for the multiple stakeholders, British and Tibetan, documenting the rise of the Sherpa climbing community in the 1920s and glimpses of Tibetan religious and cultural life (fig. 2).[7] Whose memory the Everest films parse and preserve is a charged political question, one as relevant to the art of filmmaking as monument-making. And while monuments and films may appear to be stable art forms, their associated memories are highly mutable, exposing contradictions, vulnerabilities, and possibilities for countermonumentality.

SCALE AND MONUMENTALITY

Captain John Noel's two films of Mount Everest had to steer a path between climbing as an exclusive, highly technical, genteel sport inexorably shaped by Britain's colonial history and climbing as a relatable, replicable (if not yet on the industrial level of amateur attempts on Mount Everest), and character-defining sport (figs. 3 and 4). As much as these films assumed the mantle of an official visual record of their Everest attempts, and leveraged the same romantic myth of exploration that drove the explorers themselves to pursue mountaineering, reaching a public audience via the lecture circuit was of paramount concern.



Fig, 3: Advertisement for *Climbing Mount Everest* (1922) (Image courtesy Royal Geographical Society)

Adventure, it was hoped, would lure the armchair traveler to the movie theater, especially if the film offered a thrilling vicarious immersion in Tibetan culture and snow-swept glacial landscapes. A *New York Times* journalist writing in 1923 believed that the desire to conquer was instinctive: "This is pure romance," he said, "and every man recognizes its touch. It leads into jungles and over deep waters and up through the high thin reaches of the air. Its glamorous trail

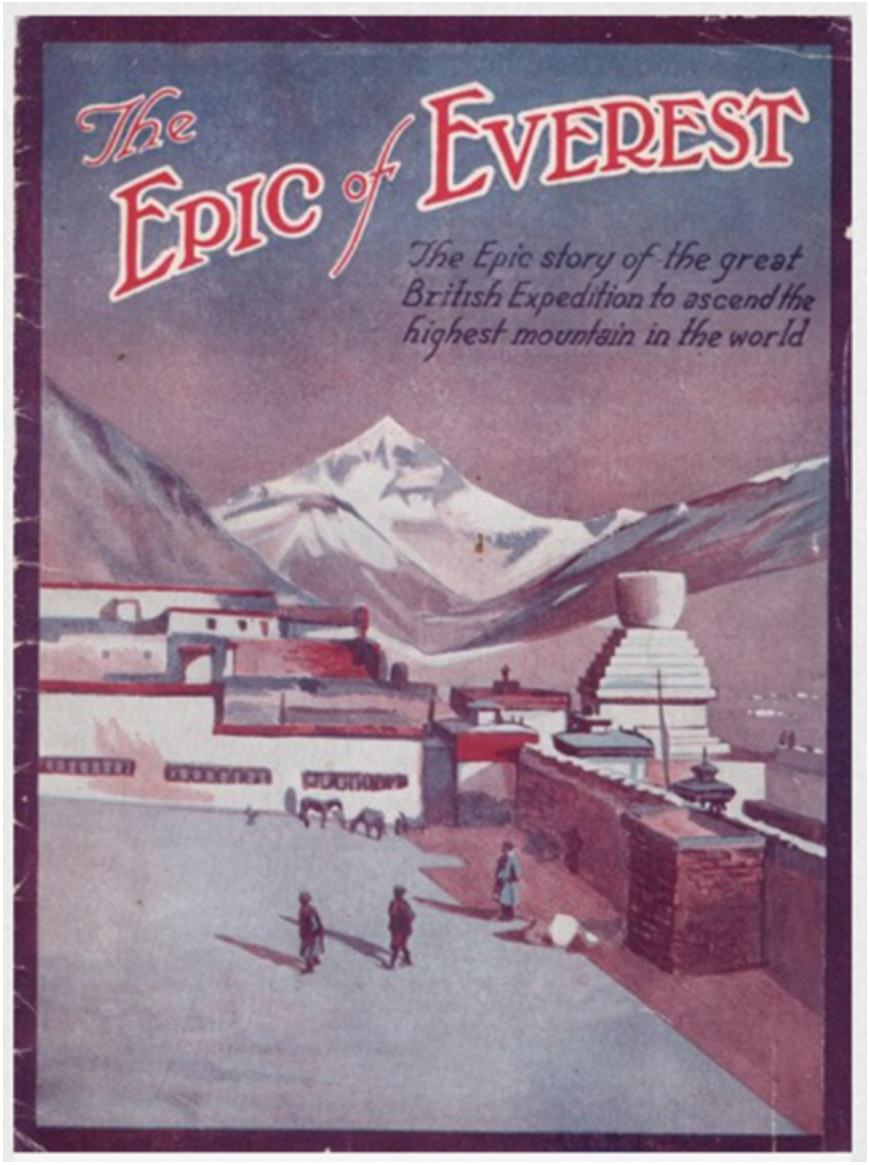


Fig. 4: *The Epic of Everest* (1924): publicity press book, Bill Douglas and Peter Jewell Collection (Image courtesy of The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum)

goes through the doors of moving-picture houses and up one flight to the chop suey restaurant. It beckons to all that is strange."[8] Thirty-eight years would elapse before Everest would be conquered by New Zealander Edmund Hilary and Tibetan Sherpa Tenzing Norgay in May 1953, two days before the coronation

of Queen Elizabeth II,[9] and while some climbers surmised that George Leigh Mallory and Edward Irvine most likely died on their descent from the summit in May 1924, without incontrovertible proof, there was no way ever to substantiate the claim.

As expedition films, *Climbing Mount Everest* and *The Epic of Everest* differ in several ways from museum-sponsored endeavors, although for the most part, the two share much in common, especially the scale of the operation, the expense, and patronage by an elite organization, in this case the RGS, a scientific institution encompassing the roles of economic/political lobbyist, shrewd promoter of the explorer as national hero, and "stuffy gentleman's club."[10] Three traits distinguished conquest-mode expeditions from museum-sponsored ones: first, the mission was one of spatial domination rather than the collection of material artifacts; second, image-making became increasingly more challenging as the expedition progressed, eventually reaching a point of cessation; and third, the mountaineering expedition film was cloaked in an aura of mysticism rather than science, the rational and the irrational comingling in a heady mix of existential reflection and crisis management as weather conditions, failing bodies, and lagging minds threatened to halt progress. Like many large-scale expeditions into inhospitable climates, conquering Everest was a monumental undertaking on several levels. Laying claim to a pioneering spirit as a national birthright, the British considered Mount Everest the "third pole," and, given their failed attempts to be the first to reach either the North or South Poles, declaring victory on Everest through what Harald Höbusch calls "vertical imperialism" would restore national pride and bolster Britain's status within the climbing community.[11] But as Georg Simmel argued, modernity itself exerted a certain pressure on the need to climb, since "the less settled, less certain and less free from contradiction modern existence is[,] the more passionately we desire the heights that stand beyond the good and evil whose presence we are unable to look over and beyond."[12] Escaping modernity in search of real adventure shaped much of climbing's discourse, pitting cinema as a uniquely modern recording device against the idea of climbing as an inner psychic triumph rather than an exteriorized show of geographic domination, although in the case of Everest, the constant presence of the camera blurred the lines between public and private.[13]

The enormous success of Albert Smith's 1852 one-man show of his ascent of Mont Blanc at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly—the six-year run was seen by more than 200,000 people, generated gross receipts of over £17,000, and offered an array of Mont Blanc merchandise—proved that audiences were interested in the imaginative pleasures of climbing. Historian Peter H. Hansen argues that part of Smith's success was his ability to channel into mountain climbing a desire for status symbols, bragging rights, and middle-class prosperity, what

J. A. Banks calls the "paraphernalia of gentility," although paradoxically, by making a vicarious version of mountaineering more accessible, Smith's performances contributed to the "declining cultural authority of the picturesque and sublime in the Alps," through a blurring of boundaries between the "genteel and the vulgar, the sacred and the profane." Mountain climbing legitimized exploration at the same time as it democratized it, since, as Hansen explains, "not everyone could travel to remote corners of the globe, but middle-class men with a few weeks' holiday could reach Switzerland and act out the drama of the empire in the Alps."[14] If the popularity of climbing as a sport coincided with the multiple Everest expeditions, the RGS attempts were nevertheless a throwback to old-school exploration, closer in style to the indelible image of the Arctic explorer "foot-slogging [in front of] his sled" rather than the motorcars and airplanes that catapulted exploration into the twentieth century.[15]

Everest is romanticized and anthropomorphized in both the written accounts and films of the expedition, a locus of anxieties around national identity, masculinity, and sexuality. The mountain is coded as female, at once a fierce warrior and coy love interest, "shy and retiring … [hiding] behind a wall of other mountains, which are nearer and appear to be higher," yet quickly angered, capable of violent acts, and guarded by holy lamas, spiritual beings, and even a snow monster.[16] Carolyn Merchant argues that the kindly, beneficent "nurturing mother" image of nature and its wild and uncontrollable antinomy were identified with the female sex, projections of human perceptions onto the external world that sinuously dwell on men's battle with both nature and their troubled relationships with the opposite sex.[17] The European conquerors would be the first men of their race to approach the mountain—the last part of the film is fittingly termed the "assault on the mountain"—a metaphor for the sexual dominance and violence inflicted upon indigenous women and men within broader regimes of British colonialism. The expedition party resembled a small invading army: eighty mules hired in the Chumbi Valley, two hundred yaks, and the advance party's luggage spread over miles of country.[18] Contrapuntally, the expedition party could also be mistaken for a religious pilgrimage, a subterfuge used by first expedition leader Brigadier-General Hon. Charles G. Bruce when he justified the British desire to climb Chomolungma to the Zatul Rinpoche, the spiritual leader of the lama religion and head lama at the Rongbuk Monastery, recalling that he was inspired to say that the entire expedition was in fact a pilgrimage rather than a sporting event with high geopolitical stakes. Quick to recuperate the endeavor from the association of Tibetan Buddhism, Noel clarified, "We were only pilgrims of adventure—Our business was to fight the mountain, not to worship it."[19]

Everest was imagined as a space of sublime vertiginous vastness, similar to what Siobhan Carroll calls "atopic space," places "presumed to lie at or beyond the

Fig. 5: Capt. John Noel, photographer and cinematographer, posing with camera in 1924.

fringes of everyday life," where human habitation is temporary and often associated with mobile peoples, such as explorers, exiles, refugees, bandits, and mutineers.[20] The cinematic records of the attempts on Everest in 1922 and 1924 might be understood as examples of "atopic cinema," environments that test the technological and ontological limits of film's capacity to record Everest's scale and monumentality but nevertheless produce images of breathtaking beauty and striking surrealism.

The iconography of gear, including boxes, pack animals, sketchpads, typewriters, and oxygen tanks, serves as a substitute for the invisible techne of the filmic apparatus, which was only ever shown in a couple of still photographs (fig. 5). Shooting and developing film on the Tibetan mountainside was wrought with difficulties; Noel established a dark room in the Rongbuk Valley during the 1922 expedition but shipped film in relays to a lab established in Darjeeling for the 1924 attempt.[21] Problems included static electricity, fogging the film when rolling or unrolling it, and the sheer effort of handling a full-size kinematograph camera in addition to color filters and extra lenses, such as a twenty-inch telephoto, in rarefied altitude. And even though the camera had been customized by its inventor Arthur Newman (it was self-threading and fitted with a tiny battery no bigger than two packs of cards that dispensed with turning the handle), it still was set up in dangerous locations for the six hundred scenes Noel shot.[22]

Noel stayed out of the way of the climbing party for logistical and other reasons; according to David L. Clark, some expedition party members showed resistance to being filmed, believing climbing to be too gentlemanly a sport for the "vulgar intrusion of cinema on the purity of the endeavor."[23] The climbers generally acclimated to both the elevation and the camera, deputy expedition leader Edward Strutt even joking about wishing that "bloody cinema were here" to memorialize for the British public the image of him dragging his body up the North Col.[24] Noel had to be opportunistic, tenacious, and strategic, overseeing a team of ten porters dedicated to the enterprise of image-making. Any 1920s expedition reaching Everest's summit would have been unlikely to capture footage of its 29,028-foot peak; the best that could be hoped for were still photographs, and, quite possibly, not even those, since the climbers often forgot about their pocket cameras above 22,000 feet, becoming delirious and fearful of stopping lest they lose any momentum. For example, George Finch, whom Noel pegged as the most "ardent Kodak snapshotter" he'd ever met, took two thousand photographs during the 1924 expedition but none above the Ice Cliff at 27,250 feet as a result of the brain fog brought on by altitude sickness.[25] Even Noel himself, suffering from what he described as "mental stagnation" at the North Col camp at 23,000 feet where he spent three days photographing during the 1922 expedition, recalled the prospect of walking to his tent to get his camera out of its box as filling him with horror.[26] Notwithstanding the logistical challenges Everest posed to filmmakers, the camera's sensory evocation of glacial landscapes containing diminutive humans heightened the spiritual and geographical significance and prestige of mountaineering, transforming the mountain into a stage upon which individual and national ambitions and conflicts would be performed.[27]

AESTHETICS AND MONUMENTALITY: *CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST* (1922) AND *THE EPIC OF EVEREST* (1924)

General Bruce led the 1922 Everest assault, recruiting Noel to create a photographic and cinematographic record of the expedition's progress as well as "the means by which the expenses of this and a future expedition might be met."[28] This second clause is significant, for it licensed Noel to think laterally and creatively about the use-value of the film beyond the circumscribed, fact-fixing realms of cartography or geography.[29] Noel needed a strong story, a narrative that would hold together irrespective of whether Everest was successfully summited; of course, travel and narrative are inextricably linked, as Wes Williams argues in "Rubbing Up Against Others": "we can no more travel without narrative than we can narrate without reference to some form of journey."[30] Russian expedition filmmaker Vladimir Scheiderov, who made films on the northern

shores of Russia from Arkhangelsk to the Pacific Ocean in the teens, went so far as to argue that an expedition film "should be prepared the same way as a fiction film" shaped by a "detailed, well-developed script." Eschewing the template of the chronicle-report or the film diary, Scheiderov believed that dramatizations involving the intrepid explorers waging battle against the Arctic ice with unexpected obstacles would be more effective at delivering propaganda than nonfiction film, emphasizing danger while constructing heroes.[31]

As an exercise in vertiginous optics, the mountain and filming conditions were unparalleled in terms of stressing cinema to the limits; not surprisingly, Noel knew he would have to front-load the summit attempt with travelogue footage[32] of the expedition party's progress as well as ethnographic footage, otherwise he would have ended up with a twenty minute rather than a feature-length film.[33] In the absence of identifiable characters, Noel banked on two thematic appeals: the mystique of Everest in the contact zone of Tibet and the plight of the deracinated Englishman.[34] Governed by the powerful quest motif of Mount Everest, the film suffers less than the typical expedition film from a depressed sense of narrative continuity, and yet the forward momentum is not as strictly linear as one might be led to believe, since the constant back and forth between camps (in order to deliver or replenish supplies), labor undertaken by the Sherpa peoples and various pack animals, is repetitive movement that is excised from the cinematic record. Overdetermined as a subject matter, mountains privilege the telling of some kinds of stories over others—to state the obvious, as a film-narrative phenomena, people on mountains are, as Adam O'Brien notes, invariably ascending or descending, and the "endpoint of either movement is largely unambiguous—the top or the bottom."[35] This does not mean, however, that climbing narratives are unassimilable to narratological systems of suspense, drama, character building, false starts and hopes, and a flood of human emotions, all of which are in evidence in *Climbing Mount Everest*. An aesthetic and conceit of monumentality holds the film together in several respects: the narrative arc of conquest, the iconography of the support systems and labor, and cinema's own self-importance as a witness to history-in-the-making shape the film's structure of feeling.

Everest's monumentality presented unique challenges to Noel; its glacial structures play hide-and-seek as the climbers appear and disappear from sight, and at times the abstraction of the image makes denotation difficult. Noel succeeds in varying shot perspective by placing the camera either behind, in front of, or perpendicular to the climbers, vantage points that create some of the most mobile perspectives in the film (fig. 6). These camera setups position cinema's mechanical eye on crags, ledges, and overlooks, sometimes looking down on the climbing party and other times gazing upward through a slow tilt; drawing our

Fig. 6: East Rongbuk Glacier, Camp III, 21,000 ft. (Frame enlargement, *Climbing Mount Everest* [1922])

gaze toward Everest's summit parallels the architectural pull of monumental sculpture that likewise harnesses the sublime to trigger a sensory overload as we absorb the towering mass looming above us.[36] Noel often shoots from locations in *Climbing Mount Everest* that the team might avoid, away from the route, making the camera less of a virtual climbing partner than a lookout or sentry, waiting for progress or for something interesting to film. Noel's camera also evokes a surveillance topos, especially when he parts company with the group and remains at camp 3, using a telescopic lens to shoot up to a distance of three miles (he used this lens to film Mallory, Norton, Morsehead, and Somervell, the first party to make the summit attempt).[37]

An extreme long shot in *Climbing Mount Everest* of the climbers reduced to tiny specks in the landscape evokes mixed emotions, pitting the human against the natural with startling effect; the camera is now a distant observer rather than a participant, a patient lookout that can only watch and wait (fig. 7). As Rebecca Genauer notes, the extreme long shots in vast ice fields simultaneously comprise visual cues about the differentiation of human figures while accentuating the magnitude of the explorer; undistinguished from the Sherpas, the climbers become a unified heroic mass, minimized within

Fig. 7: Climbers barely discernible in an extreme long shot, registering as specks of black in the center of the image, snaking up the mountain from the North Col. (Frame enlargement, *Climbing Mount Everest* [1922])

the monumental landscape.[38] Unable to ascend further, Noel deployed camera movement, telephoto lenses, camera filters, and time-lapse exposures of moving clouds to compensate for the camera's distance from the climbers. Everest's monumentality mobilizes several interesting transpositions: while the twenty-inch telephoto lens expands the realm of human vision over vast distances, the footage lacks the enriched detail one typically expects from magnification. These stylistic choices confirm Elizabeth Bronfen's argument about the visual style of the monumental, that "far from playing to a verisimilitude effect, [it] explicitly foregrounds its own cinematic textuality."[39] Noel was perfectly aware of the limitations of the extreme long shot from the vantage point of drama: "The motion pictures of this rescue, photographed in the fading light, but yet clearly, at one and a quarter miles range, are most interesting to anyone understanding the geography of the Ice Cliff and understanding mountaineering."[40] Noel admitted that the footage may have been compelling to specialists interested in the geography of the Ice Cliff, but "to the ordinary eye [it is] not so spectacular, because the figures are so small, lost in a maze of ice blocks and glistening snow surfaces."[41]

However, what the images lose in specificity, they gain through the sheer force of their existence, validating our status as spectator-witnesses and the filmic medium's role in coauthoring the narrative of heroic adventure in the land of the monumental sublime; the eight or so tiny black dots moving slowly down the frame over a series of three shots, like shifting specks of dirt on a pristine white tablecloth, captured what a critic writing in *Cinema* magazine at the time called "that atmosphere of vast solitude which the climbers encountered."[42] The slow cinema aesthetic of the long take was a perfect correlative for the distended temporality of mountain life, Mallory observing that "the whole of life was scaled down, as it were, that we were living both physically and mentally at half, or less than half, the normal rate."[43] These are saturated moments of looking where human involvement in the corporeal and mental trial that is mountaineering is conjured up in the juxtaposition of microscopic human versus blank spaces of snow; like looking at microbes under the microscope or some object in order to determine signs of life, the camera is a patient observer, willing the climbers ever closer to the summit.

Nature and technology are in dialectical tension in *Climbing Mount Everest*.[44] Siegfried Kracauer's idea of the desubstantiating gaze of photography's rendition of natural phenomena, such as the hills of the Rhine reduced to tiny slopes that look ridiculous in photographs, or in desolate spaces such as Antarctica, where Jennifer Fay argues "cinema becomes indistinguishable from photographs, or, to be more exact, from filmed photographs" gives us pause in the context of Everest filmmaking.[45] Unlike the eradication of meaning Fay sees as overwhelming the traveler to the poles (save those in search of a national record), Everest is quite the opposite, brimming over with cultural specificity given the amount of screen time Noel devotes to the expedition team gaining the blessing of the Head Lama at the Rongbuk Monastery and intertitles about Everest's purported mystical powers.[46] The ontological slippage between film and photography in these moments of intense looking, the reversal of the trope of the blurred photograph imputing movement in a still medium, triggers both a contemplative gaze and a reckoning with each medium's capacity for emotional storytelling, for representing what Svetlana Boym sees as an "affective geography" that often mirrors the melancholic landscape of the climbers' own psyches.[47] Cinema seems especially well equipped to capture moments of stasis, staring, with the ever-threatened moment of the cut looming over the shot.

Noel's second effort at filming Mt. Everest in the 1924 film *The Epic of Everest* afforded him a chance to think differently about the kind of mountaineer's eye he would need to transform the conquest attempt into a commercially successful film. Noel thought long and hard about the title for the film[48]—he realized no one would be interested in seeing a film with the exact same title

as the 1922 expedition—and admitted to RGS secretary Arthur R. Hinks that while the title was a good one as far as the public was concerned, to geographers, "it may be incorrect but still few geographers go to see movies."[49] In stark contrast to *Climbing Mount Everest*, which does not reveal the mountain until the last quarter of the film, *Epic* delivers the goods in the opening shots, pairing the flowery language of the intertitles with equally stylized images of the mountain. The motorized drive on Noel's camera allowed him to shoot at a frame rate of 5 frames per second (fps) in addition to the standard rate of 16 or 20fps, condensing the extended Everest sunset into a minute of screen time. Noel had practiced with time-lapse photography in *Climbing Mount Everest*, and along with the color filters, these effects announce early on that Everest will be framed through a romanticized, pictorial lens, one reminiscent of Victorian photography and early daguerreotypes, a technique confirmed in oval-matted long shots of Everest that construct it as a tamed view, memorialized for commercial circulation.

While not making reference to the sublime per se, reviewers of *The Epic of Everest* often parsed its philosophical valences, from a mystical, Kantian sublime derived from an eighteenth-century metaphysics of ineffability, replete with inflationary rhetoric and the paradoxical simultaneity of pleasure and pain, to a philosophical sublime, one Timothy H. Engström argues pivots around a mathematical figuration of vastness, power, and destructiveness, a force beyond normal experience.[50] Figurative images of glaciers and fantastical terrains are coefficients of the sublime and the monumental, a way of managing the abnormal and functional difference of Everest as an atopic space, distinct from other mountains in the popular imaginary.[51] Like Kant, Noel also imagined his mountain into existence, appropriating its mythological reputation and using the intertitles to shore up a discourse of monumentality when the visuals were simply unavailable, although Noel was not averse to experimentation, employing what he called "more impressionistic effects" in both film and still images.[52] Given the challenge of representing Everest's size and scale cinematically, Noel employed language to do the rhetorical heavy lifting, transforming Everest in the process into the bogeyman or bogeywoman in this instance; the intertitles also compensated for the lack of motion pictures and photographs at higher altitude, telling about rather than showing the climbers' final push on the summit.

Many of the ethnographic sequences in *Climbing Mount Everest* are filmed in the Rongbuk monastery, an imposing monument where the expedition team met Zatul Rimpoche. In addition to shooting footage of lama priests performing ceremonial dances, Noel's wandering eye lands upon an eclectic array of images, such as women spectators, a male beggar, and musicians sticking out their tongues, a Tibetan greeting gesture.[53] Noel abandons any pretense to cultural

Fig. 8: Woman unable to keep a straight face for the camera, having three attacks of the giggles. (Frame enlargement, *The Epic of Everest* [1924])

relativism in *The Epic of Everest*, however, exploiting Eurocentric and pathological phobias about the ethnographic other to pander to a tabloid ethos of disgust, singling out standards of personal hygiene and footage of pigs and children running together in an alleyway as incontrovertible proof of degeneracy.[54] And yet in keeping with the film's shifting dialectics, Noel dials back the racism in footage of men and women of status in the same village. In one especially endearing shot of a woman with an ornate turquoise-studded aureole laced into her hair, the act of posing for the camera triggers an outburst of nervous laughter as the woman raises her hands to cover her eyes and sharply turns her head away from the camera (fig. 8); the woman's laughter in the gif-like meme is contagious, suggesting that Noel was inviting his audience to use humor to manage their responses to cultural difference, although the woman's refusal to take the filming seriously complicates reading this film through a one-way colonial power metaphor.

An example of a counterintuitive mode of monumentality, the small as a metonym for something much bigger, occurs as the expedition party travels westward toward Everest's valleys in *The Epic of Everest*. Noel is unable to resist the human interest in the fate of a newborn donkey, which he shows being lifted off the ground into a precarious standing position, veering back and forth on wobbly legs. As endearing and comic as the scene reads for both historical and contemporary audiences, it nonetheless speaks to the fragility of life and cruelty that simmers beneath the surface of the expedition film, a threat of

Fig. 9: Sleepy newborn donkey posed into a standing position, barely able to straighten its legs. (Frame enlargement, *The Epic of Everest* [1924])

violence triggered by the frustration, short tempers, and fatigue of arduous travel (fig. 9).[55] While occupying little more than a visual footnote in the film, the sequence evokes the so-called animal turn in the humanities, a shift that Dan Vondersommers describes as "thinking *about* and with the category of 'animal.'" Given the prominent place of animals within the geohistory of expeditions and in monument building—as Vondersommers argues, "the standard narratives of civilizations, societies, and nations are built upon the backs of animals, large and small, even invisible"—occluding them from this history is shortsighted and unethical.[56] The rag-doll donkey not only signals the reality of animal births occurring en route in expeditions but points to the broader commodification of working animals and their welfare, an economic context that is as relevant today with the ongoing use of pack animals and porters as it was one hundred years ago. Forming the transportation networks of remote landscapes, animals interceded in human affairs in a multitude of ways, exploited not only as means for carrying supplies and photographic equipment but also for their cuteness and vulnerability as objects of the camera's gaze.

At the limit of where they can deliver resources, the donkeys and yaks are shown for the last time in *Epic* at 16,500 feet. The human-supply chain necessary to attempt Everest is vividly grasped in a stunning shot of the aforementioned donkey group in the midground, mountain peaks in the distance, and in a tighter angle, images of yaks, Sherpas, and closer still, members of the expedition party sitting on packing boxes that double as tables. Noel uses the iris in/out technique in selected shots at this point on in the film, an aesthetic choice that doubly

Fig. 10: "A Fairyland of Ice." (Frame enlargement, *The Epic of Everest* [1924])

frames the image as a consumable view. Most memorably he uses an iris for a group shot of Norton, Somervell, Mallory, Odell, Beetham, Bruce, and Hazard posing for the camera in front of a tent (see fig. 1), an image often reproduced in books about the 1924 expedition. The film shot at the same time as this famous photograph includes the "before and after" moment, visual information that reminds us of the camaraderie of mountain climbing and the camera's ability to corral human subjects into poseable groups, whereupon they become actors in their own memorialization. Seeing the climbing party chatting, milling around, and then turning their backs to the camera, offers us a rare glimpse of Everest as a space of private intimacy, homosociality, and waiting, either for weather conditions to improve, supplies to be delivered, or for a signal to move forward or backward. The photograph's posed group, immediately followed by its filmed dissolution, is a reflexive moment in which the public view of Everest, the locus of "untamed nature, a wild arena in which one could test the bounds of human frailty" is juxtaposed with the unposed image of the men's backs.[57]

In a final flurry of aesthetic virtuosity, Noel used a blue filter on panchromatic stock, which he believed gave a "beautiful rendering" of blue sky, sky with cloud, and excellent gradation, to shoot a small group of climbers walking next to a giant ice wall with jagged protuberances thrusting up from the ground (fig. 10).[58] The monumental is suddenly rendered fantastical, as if in defiance of topographical reality, a landscape evocative of the surrealism of Georges Méliès's magical film sets. Leaving the Gothic ice sculptures, Noel showcases the visual vocabulary of the mountain film in the final scenes before resorting

almost entirely to filming with a telephoto lens, including high-angle shots of climbers and Sherpas walking toward the camera and reverse angles of them walking away. Noel scrambled up the rocks above Snowfield Camp (22,000 feet) to a ledge he named "Eagle's Nest Point," where, using the high-powered lens, he filmed an extreme long shot of Edward "Teddy" Norton and Howard Somervell at 28,000 feet, a distance of about 1.75 miles; suffering from snow blindness, Norton barely made it back to Snowfield and the shots of him being carried by Sherpas into a tent foreshadow the tragedy of the last assault undertaken by Mallory and Irvine, although in Mallory and Irvine's case, they were not rescued in time.

When Noel repeats an oval-matted shot taken from a distance of two miles, this time with Mallory and Irvine's climbing party rendered miniscule, rather than dissolve to the next intertitle, there is a blackout, a sudden, dramatic shift in style. Across four intertitles, separated by dissolves, we learn of Mallory and Irvine's deaths; the film does not end, however, but rather places us as spectators in a liminal zone of imagined uncertainty about the demise of Mallory and Irvine and a glimmer of hope that Noel might have been wrong and they were in fact rescued. Intertitles speculating as to their fate are crosscut with a medium shot of a Sherpa keeping watch with a telescope, another shot of Everest's face with clouds obscuring the summit, a fitting metaphor for the lack of information about Mallory and Irvine, and a third shot taken with a telescopic lens of Noel Odell at the Ice Cliff, having returned from searching for the missing men at their last known location. "What would their signal be?" asks Noel in an intertitle only to tell us that the sight of Odell laying out six blankets in the shape of a cross—a symbol we can barely make out in an extreme long shot but one whose meaning was unambiguous to the climbers —signified that Mallory's and Irvine's deaths were all but certain. Noel recalled the emotional impact of seeing the cross through a high-powered magnifying lens in his memoir *Through Tibet*: "An electric battery was operating the camera. I was so agitated to read the message that I could hardly have turned the handle of the camera myself."[59] Responding to Odell via the same system of blanket signals, Noel films the men laying down three blankets, a signal conveying the message "Abandon hope and come down."

In contrast to the nationalist, masculinist arrogance of Noel's earlier intertitles about Everest's pending domination by the British explorers and mocking of Tibetan beliefs about Everest's supernatural powers, Noel performs a 360-degree move, embracing the idea that benevolent or malevolent forces can inhabit the natural world: "I tried to compose my pictures as to interpret, if possible, the soul-meaning of these mountains. For me they really lived. I was in love with their beauty just as I was awed by their majesty and power. Everest assumed an extraordinary living character, a living thing of fascinating beauty,

of fearful power. Even frowning down on us, she was angered, so it seemed, that we should come to violate her sanctuaries that never before had suffered the foot of man."[60]

As a fitting visual metaphor for Chomolungma, Noel includes time-lapse footage of clouds creeping up the mountain from the bottom of the frame, followed by a medium long shot of men building the memorial stone cairn. The obituary-style headshots of Mallory and Irvine shown near the end are in tension with a pantheistic discourse about nature and death, suggesting that as an anthroposophical process of self-interrogation, mountaineering has long negotiated both a Taoist tradition of celestial transcendence as well as darker forces of destruction.[61] Having ratcheted up the revenge narrative—an intertitle quotes the Rongbuk Lama's prophesy that "The Gods of the Lamas shall deny you White Men the object of your search"—Noel reprises footage of fast-moving clouds, this time filmed with a red filter, a move that imputes agency to the world's tallest mountain while evoking its demonic power. Noel can't seem to decide on who to blame for the expedition's failure and loss of life, and while he banked on the fact that his poetic indulgences might go down well with audiences, he misread the British public, one reviewer even suggesting that the intertitles about Everest's powers at the end should be excised.[62]

NATIONALISM AND MONUMENTALITY

As repositories of national aspirations and geopolitics, Noel's Everest films serve as allegories of the professional and popular perceptions of geography and exploration in the first third of the twentieth century, cosponsored as they were by the Alpine Club and the RGS, institutions that adopted a surprisingly mercenary attitude with regard to the commercial value of film, far more interested in its capacity to generate much-needed funds than as an official record. In some respects, the public life of the 1920s Everest films offers an example of geography that Joseph Conrad, writing the same year as the last expedition, called a "blameless science," though one that enticed mortals "away from their homes, to death maybe, now and then to a little disputed glory, not seldom to contumely, [and] never to high fortune."[63] If the science of geography was blameless, its foundational organizations and cartographic methods were most certainly not blameless, serving as handmaidens to colonial and imperial policies and practices.[64]

Everest tested the limits of the human body and filmmaking technology, as well as the level of audience interest in the expedition film by the mid-1920s. Noel and the RGS sought to balance the goal of maintaining national pride and dignity with the commercial imperatives of the theatrical film market, including bureaucratic battles over financing, distribution rights, third-party

vendors, collaborators, charlatans on the lecture circuit with fake Everest films, and management of press and public relations, while dealing with widespread public disappointment and the loss of life in both expeditions.[65] Despite charting the British nation's dogged determination to declare victory on Mount Everest in three highly publicized expeditions, neither film was a commercial success, and Noel suffered huge personal losses as a result of *The Epic of Everest*'s failure to secure theatrical screenings. Problems started long before the release of *Epic*; right around the time bookings started coming in for *Climbing Mount Everest*, a Lt. Col. E. Pottinger, managed by the reputable Gerald Christy's the Lecture Agency Ltd., began a lecture tour entitled "The Conquest of Mount Everest and other Himalayan Explorations," an intellectual property infringement that infuriated Hinks and led to an extremely testy exchange between the agency and the RGS. And even though this ended up being a case of mistruth in advertising—95 percent of Pottinger's lecture focused on climbing in the European Alps, and he had been touring with the Everest lecture for almost two years before the 1922 expedition—the misleading title and implication of a connection with the RGS attempt naturally led to considerable frustration, although in a bold move, the Lecture Agency threatened to publish all the correspondence between them and the RGS unless secretary Arthur R. Hinks apologized for his attacks on Pottinger and the league.[66]

Competition from Pottinger was the least of the film's problems, however. The RGS's Everest Expedition Committee realized only after the fact that they simply did not have the organizational infrastructure or capital to distribute or promote *Climbing Mount Everest* effectively.[67] From the start of the initial ten-week run at the London Philharmonic in the lecturer format with Tibetan music as an accompaniment and its subsequent theatrical release, *Climbing Mount Everest* faced complications. It only turned a profit at the Philharmonic because the managers and lecturers agreed to a smaller than contractual share of the receipts. The first lecture tour was handicapped because of the unanticipated cost of the music, and Noel barely covered his expenses in the second and third lecture tours.[68] Foreign exhibition yielded little profit, and despite a modest return in France, Switzerland, and Austria, Hinks mistakenly gave the French company Gaumont the rights to German exhibition, an expensive mistake that resulted in hefty legal fees and a settlement payment.[69]

Anticipating that the third Everest attempt in 1924 would yield success, Noel fronted costs of film and photography, establishing the company Explorer Films to fundraise the £8,000 needed to bankroll the enterprise. This was perceived as a win-win situation by the RGS; in exchange for giving up the film's distribution rights, they would not have to finance any of the costs related to the image-making and would own a complete set of the photographs and motion pictures. Noel arranged for a group of seven lamas to return to the

UK with the film, something he had planned even before departing for the 1924 expedition, and perform live before its premiere at the Scala Theater in London. This perceived exploitation of the lama priests for commercial gain infuriated the Dalai Lama and the conservative monastic factions in Lhasa, the anger directed at a derogatory scene showing a Tibetan man purportedly eating lice (the scene is no longer extant).[70] The complaint escalated, making for tense diplomatic relations between the UK and Tibet, so much so that Tibet refused to grant permits for subsequent Everest attempts for eight years, and even when permits were obtained for a fourth (unsuccessful) attempt in 1932, motion pictures were banned.[71] (Tibet refused to give permission for film crews on Everest expeditions until the late 1930s.) As anthropologist Sherry Ortner argues, the Sherpas' involvement with the British climbing parties was marked by a double disjunction, a misalignment of motive and power that gives rise to the Orientalism shaping much of the West's perceptions of the Sherpas over the course of the twentieth century.[72]

Also present inside the Scala's auditorium during the film's premiere was dense London fog, a fitting metaphor for the spirit of Chomolungma. Absorbing about 75 percent of the light, the fog obscured some of Noel's virtuoso cinematographic moments, one reviewer complaining that it made it near impossible to appreciate "some of the marvelous photography at high altitude."[73] Everest's white infinity met its match in London's pea-soup viewing conditions, ironically imbuing the screening with an ahead-of-its time 4D effect of plunging audiences into similar dense clouds as the climbers at precipitous elevations.[74] The event augured badly for the film, since even in the absence of fog, some critics referenced the audience's inability to appreciate its unrivalled status as the highest altitude motion picture ever shot, as well as a world record in climbing, although the majority praised Noel for producing "remarkable pictures of the fantastic ice formations through which the climbers passed" and there are references to rounds of spontaneous applause at various points in the screening.[75] This was not the first time that fog in the British capital had interfered with an Everest film screening; when Noel initially exhibited *Climbing Mount Everest* at Central Hall in London for a Joint Meeting of the RGS and Alpine Club in November 1922, the enormous hall filled with a dense, white mist.[76]

As powerful symbols of nation-building, conquest expedition films, like all effective propaganda, must strike deep emotional chords with viewers, drawing, in the case of the mountain film, upon visual tropes associated with the picturesque, Romanticism, the Gothic, the sublime, and the horror genre. Unlike the institutionally sponsored expedition film in which scientific or ethnographic data collection are the primary goals, the conquest-mode expedition film was engaged in a different type of exploration business, one in which empirical

knowledge was superseded by spatial occupation. Cinema was added to the list of authorized instruments of exploration, techniques of observation, and inscription that were part of a "whole methodology of observation" in cultural geographer Felix Driver's words.[77] The monumentality of the conquest has somehow to be matched in the monumentality of the film, not through a poetics of the epic necessarily, but through a simple act of witnessing, of being there with the explorers who are within reach of their goal or who might be filmed victoriously planting their flag. We might therefore think about how ideas of monumentality are resignified in the context of natural phenomenon such as mountains *and* in the medium of cinema and how films of exceptional human effort form a link between the past and the future in similar ways to human-constructed monuments. Julian Thomas's argument about ancient tombs "presencing" the memories of ancestors in the landscape through embodied symbols of power points up the phenomenological and discursive correspondences across films of human loss and the monument, and if the similarity was not enough, there's even a scene of monument building at the end of *The Epic of Everest*.[78]

The cairn stone constructed by members of the 1924 expedition in honor of the climbers and Sherpas who lost their lives on the three Everest expeditions doubles as both a memorial and figural mass grave, not dissimilar to war memorials that group casualties into a collective body count spanning several years, countries, and nationalities. There's a mise-en-abyme quality to the monument within the film-as-memorial, evoking Gianni Vattimo's argument that it is only ever memory rather than actual peoples, events, or values that are inscribed by memorials.[79] This feels counterintuitive in the case of cinema, whose indexicality, what we might think of as its fleshy invocation of the human and animal, might seem far more tangible than the ancient structure or bronze sculpture. And just as monuments can be deconsecrated, broken down both literally and metaphorically through countermonumental practices of performance art, so can expedition films be resignified as part of a larger effort to decolonialize the archive; as Apistol argues (and I take the liberty of including film), when a monument begins to "come to life, to shrink, change form, or speak back, [it] becomes threatening," possessed of agency and even out of the maker's control.[80]

As we contemplate the meanings of the extant footage of the two Everest films—which were not the exact versions that were screened theatrically—we are inevitably faced with the "so what" and "now what" questions with regard to disentangling contemporary valences of these expedition films, which obviously come into being in different ways with different audiences in different contexts.[81] As the ur tragic climbing film, *The Epic of Everest* has been remade both for global audiences, consider the 1998 Imax film *Everest* (David Breashears, Stephen Judson, and Greg MacGillivray, 1998), an Everest VR experience as

well as the large number of Everest documentaries posted on YouTube and on social media. In these remakes, we see evidence of the recursive quality of the mountain film, its ending in either tragedy or triumph. Everest's place in the cultural imaginary and the dangers presented to modern climbers is significantly heightened almost a century from the initial 1921 attempt. The environmental cost of commercialized climbing, as noted in the 2018 Netflix documentary *Mountain* (Jennifer Peedom) that laments the traffic jam of May climbers on Everest when the change in weather creates an optimal, if narrow, window of time in which to mount an attempt, escalated to near-catastrophic levels in May 2019 when eleven climbers died, prompting the Nepalese authorities to enforce stricter guidelines on issuing permits.[82] The dead bodies littering the route to the summit have become macabre monuments to the sacrificial toll of attempting Everest (while numbers are approximate, just over 300 of 4,000 climbers have died on the mountain since the second Everest attempt in 1922, and Andrew Irvine, who died with Mallory in 1924, is the third youngest person to lose his life on the mountain).

Climbing Mount Everest and *The Epic of Everest* function as national memory for Sherpa peoples, memorializing their sacrifice, labor, and ongoing role in the climbing industry. The films also gave nonclimbing Tibetans an opportunity to take a closer look at the British mountaineering party, a sentiment evoked in the recurring return gaze; for example, when the Tibetans saw the films before they were exhibited in the UK, they were fascinated by the camp culture and images of Westerners. Gurkha officer John Morris who traveled with the 1922 expedition recalled that "at every camp site we were under close observation all through the day; not from any sinister motive but out of sheer curiosity."[83] Absent the intertitles, which in the village sequences are unapologetically racist, the films negotiate the emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives of the cross-cultural encounters with a surprising complexity, the repeated stares of the Sherpas at the camera inviting us to recuperate their agency and feelings about the risks and benefits of working as guides and laborers. Noel's extensive footage of Tibetan religious culture in *Climbing Mount Everest* and village life in *The Epic of Everest*, footage that can be added to a sizeable visual library of early images of the Himalayas, goes largely unremarked in press coverage of the restoration print (see below), and while space precludes analysis of it in any depth in this essay, its significance for visual anthropologists and stakeholder communities cannot be underestimated.[84]

The British Film Institute's 2013 restoration[85] and release of the restored *Epic of Everest* which premiered at the 2013 BFI London Film Festival was framed by discourses of national patrimony and monumentality, described as an "enduring monument to Mallory and Irvine" by BFI Head Curator Robin

Baker.[86] The *Guardian* newspaper's inflated claims that the film had been a "huge hit" when it toured the UK and the US was a case of wishful thinking, since there is ample archival evidence of Noel's frustration with the 1924 film's box office, and Explorer Films declared bankruptcy in 1926. In a letter to Hinks in 1927, Noel confessed that he had "lost everything in consequence of this unfortunate company [Explorer Films] and general affairs over the Expedition," while Hinks called *Epic* "an unsatisfactory enterprise which ought not to have been undertaken in the shape it had," complaining that there was no money to be made in travel films.[87] Noel second-guessed many of his own business, strategic, and even aesthetic decisions, and considered transforming the footage into two films, one a travelogue focused primarily on the ethnographic material shot in Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan, the other documenting the Everest attempt.[88] He even toyed with the idea of integrating parts of *Climbing Mount Everest* into *The Epic of Everest*, in order to compile a cinematic equivalent of the greatest hits from each attempt and engaged in lengthy correspondence with Hinks.[89] Few would dispute, however, the visual quality and timeliness of the film's restoration anticipating its centenary; as silent film curator Bryony Dixon notes in an essay on the film's restoration, John Noel's daughter Sandra Noel collaborated with the BFI, since it was Noel's higher-quality print, albeit one missing the intertitles and original color tints and tones, that he had used for lectures that enabled the BFI to substitute damaged sequences from their original nitrate print, the team selecting the best shots from each of the prints to maximize quality.[90]

The two Everest films most certainly "fill in the picture" of early mountaineering on the world's highest mountain, George Santayana's phrase for aggregating the truths, facts, and circumstances of historical events. Squeezing Everest's vast scale into a rectangular frame that engages the monumental in complex and dialectical ways, capturing at some moments the too-muchness of Everest while at other times resorting to repetitive shots of people walking across the landscape or mountain crags, was no mean feat, and Noel's tenacity, resilience, and creative approach to filming on Everest cannot be underestimated.[91] Of course, the imagination fills in no small part of the rest of the picture, and through a triangulation of information from photographs, published accounts, and memoirs, we can add more detail. Ultimately, though, the picture remains incomplete.[92] Henri Lefebvre's idea of monumental space as a poetic world that the spectator moves through is a useful metaphor and heuristic for understanding expedition films as a synthesis of several modes of experiencing space, from the construction of somatic space, our sense of copresence with the climbers through cinema's virtual, mobile gaze, to perceptual space, what Christopher Tilley sees as a space of "personality, of encounter and emotional

attachment."[93] The 1920s Everest films invite us to think more broadly about cinema's ability to construct and imagine monumentality; Tilley's idea that "what space is depends on who is experiencing it and how," is doubly signified in the case of cinema, where the meanings of Everest are encrusted layer upon layer by historical actors and audiences encountering the films one hundred years apart.[94]

Notes

1. Gratitude is owed Julie Carrington, librarian at the Foley Reading Room, the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), London, for guidance navigating the large Everest Expedition collection, especially obtaining reviews of the two Everest films, and Charlie Boddy, for assisting immeasurably with the completion of primary research at the RGS. I also want to thank my former research assistant Maria Vinogradova, an anonymous reviewer, and *Film History* editor Gregory Waller for their input.

2. General Bruce was the first to propose an Everest expedition in 1893, but it took several decades for the right political moment. The 1921 expedition included one hundred men, eight of whom were British expedition members, and four hundred yaks traveling 350 miles over difficult country from India to the foot of Mt. Everest. The large bells around the animals' necks and smaller ones on their tails created a loud musical accompaniment, punctured by the whistling and singing of the Tibetan drivers. John Noel, *Through Tibet to Everest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1927), 122, 128.

3. T. S. Blakeney described the 1921 expedition as a "surveying-cum-mountaineering party," and notwithstanding the aim of climbing Everest, the goal was also to "explore the eastern, northern, and western sides of the mountain, with a view to finding a practicable route to the summit. Survey and mapping were essential, for almost nothing was known of the northern approaches." Blakeney, "A. R. Hinks and the First Everest Expedition," *Geographical Journal* 136, no. 3 (September 1970): 335. The Mount Everest Committee had considered hiring a professional cinematographer to accompany the 1921 attempt but worried about the fit between commercial filmmaking and the culture of British mountaineering, believing that it would be better to wait until Captain John Noel would be available the following year than run the risk of having a picture produced that might be "rather out of tune with the spirit in which the expedition was conducted." Noel had shot instructional films while on the staff at the School of Musketry in Hythe, Kent. "The Mount Everest Kinematograph Film," *Geographical Journal* 61 (1923): 49.

4. I want to thank the organizers of two symposia: Vanessa Schwartz, for inviting me to present an earlier version of this essay at the Finding One's Place: Photography and Its Many Dimensions symposium coorganized by LACMA, USC Dornsife Visual Studies Research Institute, and UCR/California Museum of Photography (January 31–February 1, 2019), and head of the Getty Scholars Program, Alexa Sekyra, for inviting me to deliver a lecture as part of the Getty Research Institute's Monumentality Symposium at the Getty, Los Angeles (May 7–8, 2019). For the program, see https://www.getty.edu/visit/cal/events/ev_2594.html.

5. Corina Apostol, "Anti-Monuments: Afterlives of Monumentality and Specters of Memory," *Close-Up: Post Transition Writings* (Prague: Artyčok.TV and the Academy of Fine Arts, 2014), 125.

6. D. H. Alderman and O. J. Dwyer, "Memorials and Monuments," in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. N. J. Thrift and Rob Kitchin (Boston: Elsevier, 2009), 53.

7. For more on the idea of countermonumentality, see James F. Osborne, "Counter-Monumentality and the Vulnerability of Memory," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 17, no. 2 (2017): 172.

8. "Climbing Mount Everest Is Work for Supermen," *New York Times*, March 18, 1923, 151.

9. For more on the symbolism of the successful ascent in the British imaginary, see Gordon T. Stewart, "The British Reaction to the Conquest of Everest," *Journal of Sport History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 21–39. For a cross-cultural analysis of the conquest, especially how the event was co-opted by different stakeholder nation-states, see Peter H. Hansen, "Confetti of Empire: The Conquest of Everest in Nepal, India, Britain, and New Zealand," *Comparative Study of Society and History* 42 (2000): 307–32.

10. Dane Kennedy, "British Exploration in the Nineteenth Century: A Historiographic Survey," *History Compass* 5, no. 6 (2007): 1886.

11. For more on the "third pole" concept, see Tom Holzel and Audrey Salkeld, *First on Everest: The Mystery of Mallory and Irvine* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 27. See also: Harald Höbusch, "Narrating Naga Parbat: German Himalaya Expeditions and the Fictional (Re)-Constructions of National Identity," *Sporting Traditions* 20, no. 1 (2003): 19, cited in John Hughes, "The Exhilaration of Not Falling: Climbing, Mountains, and Self-Representation in Texts by Austrian Mountain Climbers," in "Austria and the Alps," special issue, *Austrian Studies* 18 (2010): 160.

12. Georg Simmel, "The Alpine Journey," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 8 (1991): 97.

13. Sherry Ortner discusses mountaineering and the critique of modernity in *Life and Death on Mount Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 36–39.

14. Peter H. Hansen, "Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 34, no. 3 (July 1995): 305, 308, 322–23. For more on the cultural background of members of the Alpine Club, discourses of masculinity and national identity circulating around climbing, and the milieu of gentlemanly, amateur sports in Britain, see Hansen, "Albert Smith," 309–18.

15. Roy Chapman Andrews, *Beyond Adventure: The Lives of Three Explorers* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1962), xi. Andrews praised the speed, convenience, and comfort of car travel during exploration, saying that "instead of lurching back and forth between the humps of a camel for two months, one could do the journey in a car in five to seven days—if he were lucky." He first used a car in Outer Mongolia as part of the 1922 American Museum of Natural History (AMNH)–sponsored Central Asiatic Expedition. Andrews, *Beyond Adventure*, 201. Even Everest's summit, official Everest photographer and cinematographer Captain John Noel predicted, would one day be accessible by plane, climbers dropped off at the top and only having to make the descent with the assistance of oxygen; Noel, *Through Tibet*, 109.

16. Noel, *Through Tibet*, 27. As legend had it, Noel says, the Snow Men or Niyikanji, killed men, kidnapped women, and bit the necks of yaks and drank their blood. Also called Sukpa by the locals, these strange beings had long hair that fell over their eyes, which made it hard for them to see if a human trying to escape ran full-speed down the mountain (144).

17. Carolyn Merchant, "Nature as Female," in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (London: Routledge, 2015), 10; and Eric Rentschler, "Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the Bergfilm," *New German Critique* 51 (1990): 157.

18. Brigadier-General Hon. C. G. Bruce, *The Assault on Mount Everest 1922* (London: Longman, Green, Edward Arnold, 1923), 25, 27, 34.

19. Bruce, *Assault on Mount Everest*, 46; and Noel, *Through Tibet*, 41.

20. Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space and the British Imagination, 1750–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 6.

21. For more on the technical aspects of filming, see David L. Clark, "Capt. Noel's 1922 Conquest of Everest," *American Cinematographer* 71, no. 8 (August 1990): 36–40. Arthur Pereira oversaw the lab work of the film in Darjeeling; see letter from Hinks to Noel, 15 January 1923, EE/31/4, Royal Geographic Society, London (hereafter RGS); and Pereira, "Personal Reminiscences of the Mount Everest Expedition, 1924," *The Year's Photography*, October 1925, 21–30.

22. "Story of Everest Retold," n.d., unidentified newspaper clipping, EE/6/6/5, RGS.

23. Clark, "Capt. Noel's," 37.

24. Holzel and Salkeld, *First on Everest*, 104–5.

25. Both Finch and Bruce had taken cameras with them on their ascent in the 1922 expedition, but due to altitude sickness, neither of them remembered to take photographs; T. Howard Somervell, "Notes," in Bruce, *Assault on Mount Everest*, 306.

26. Noel, *Through Tibet*, 168.

27. Nanny P. Nenno, "Projections on Blank Space: Landscape, Nationality, and Identity in Thomas Mann's Der Zauberberg," *German Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 308.

28. Francis Younghusband, introduction to Bruce, *Assault on Mount Everest*, 7. Noel had traveled in the Himalayas in 1913, and given his photographic and film experience, he was eminently qualified for the assignment.

29. The 1922 photographic outfit included five hundred plates, five different cameras (two stand cameras, a reflex camera, panoramic film camera, and several Vest Pocket film cameras). For mountain and cloud photography Noel included isochromatic light filters for the stand cameras [EE/7/1/2, RGS], an 8-by-8-foot portable dark room with folding table, canvas water buckets, a stool, and mule yakdans (baskets) for transporting equipment; the budgeted costs for the outfitting was £250, with the idea that the equipment could be reused on subsequent expeditions (the film budget was £848). See "Photographic Equipment, Dark Room Equipment, Plates etc.," 16 February 1921, EE/7/1/2, RGS; Noel to Hinks, 16 January 1921, EE/16/3-18/3 EE/18/3, RGS. Kodak donated their pocket cameras fitted with Cooke lenses proffering advice on lenses that would work best in the contrastless snow conditions (Kodak Limited representative to Hinks, 18 February 1921, EE/7/1/33, RGS).

30. Wes Williams, "'Rubbing Up Against Others': Montaigne on Pilgrimage," in *Voyages and Visions: Toward a Cultural History of Travel*, ed. Jaś Elser and Joan-Pau Ribiés (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 123.

31. Oksana Sarkisova, "Arctic Travelogues: Conquering the Soviet North," in *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic*, ed. Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerstahl Stenport (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 230–31.

32. Noel was not the only cinematographer to shoot motion pictures in Tibet in 1924; American photographer and explorer Col. Herford T. Cowling, who started his career making government-sponsored films before working for travelogue showman Burton Holmes and Paramount newsreels, entered Tibet with the assistance of Indian prince Hari Singh. His lecture, "To the Roof of the World in Tibet," illustrated with footage of native ceremonies and dance, described Tibet as a land of "Yaks, Devil Dancers, and Polyandry." See Doris Kanter, "Memories of an Old-Time Newsreel Photographer," *Washington Star Magazine*, March 14, 1954, n.p.

33. Surgeon, painter, musician, and expedition member Howard Somervell recorded indigenous music: songs sung by the Nepalese porters; the airs played by the wandering villagers on their fiddles; and the music of the monastery clarinets, including the sound of their drumming and long trumpets. See "The Mount Everest Kinematograph Film," 50.

34. Michael T. Bravo, "Precision and Curiosity in Scientific Travel: James Rennell and the Orientalist Geography of the New Imperial Age (1760–1830)," in Elser and Ribiés, *Voyages and Visions*, 178.

35. Adam O'Brien, "Nonindifferent Mountains: Ecocriticism, 'The Thin Red Line' and the Conditions of Film Fiction," *Film Criticism* 38, no. 2 (Winter 2013–14): 5.

36. See Terry Kirk's discussion of what he calls "monstrous monumentality," the idea of transgressing aesthetic limits in monument design and construction, "Monumental Monstrosity Monstrous Monumentality," in "Monster," special issue, *Perspecta* 40 (2008): 6–15.

37. For additional information on Noel's filming technique along with technical issues encountered in the field, see his letter to Hinks written from Tibet, 24 June 1922, EE/7/2/62, RGS.

38. Rebecca Genauer, "Frozen in Motion: Ethnographic Representation in Donald B. Macmillan's Arctic Films," in MacKenzie and Stenport, *Films on Ice*, 292, 295.

39. Elisabeth Bronfen, "Monumental Cleopatra: Hollywood's Epic Film as Historical Re-imagination," *Anglia* 131, nos. 2–3 (2013): 219.

40. Noel, *Through Tibet*, 247.

41. Noel, 247.

42. "The Epic of Everest," *Cinema*, December 18, 1924.

43. George Lee-Mallory, "The First Attempt," in Bruce, *Assault on Mount Everest*, 212.

44. For more on romanticism in the mountain film and nature/technology dialectic, see Christopher Morris, "From Revolution to Mystic Mountains: Edmund Meisel and the Politics of Modernism," in *Composing for the Screen in Germany and the USSR: Cultural Politics and Propaganda*, ed. Robynn J. Stilwell and Phil Powrie (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 79–80.

45. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 56, cited in Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 174, 185.

46. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 31, cited in Fay, *Inhospitable World*, 172.

47. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 12. Boym mentions the early twentieth-century photographs of Jacques-Henri Lartigue that captured the motion of his subjects by leaving blurry, overexposed shadows in the dark backgrounds of his images; according to Boym, "intentional technical failure makes the images at once nostalgic and poetic" (21). American photographer A. C. Vroman's 1895 photographs of a Moqui snake dance in Walpi, Arizona, also captured movement in the form of blurred dancers, frustrating Vroman and yet raising provocative questions about the ontological overlap between film and photography and in the process capturing precisely what is missing in the perfectly focused shots of the dances.

48. The film's title is no doubt an homage (or aspirational nod) to the classic poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the ancient Mesopotamian work of literature that also contains a long and perilous journey. For more on *The Epic of Gilgamesh* see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_of_Gilgamesh.

49. Noel to Hinks, 5 August 1924, Everest Expedition 1923–26, EE/31/4, RGS.

50. Timothy H. Engström, "The Postmodern Sublime? Philosophical Rehabilitations and Pragmatic Evasions," *boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 192–93.

51. We might productively compare the creative endeavor of *The Epic of Everest* to Nietzsche's relationship to mountains, one that Sean Ireton describes as "fraught with complexities and interpretive entanglements." Both Nietzsche and Noel forged rhetorical as well as lived relationships

with mountains, and even though Noel climbed far higher than Nietzsche, each man employed "literary devices [in the form of intertitles in the films in Noel's case], vicarious encounters, and … technique[s] of hyperbole." Sean Ireton, "'Ich Bin ein Wanderer und ein Bersteiger': Nietzsche and Zarathustra in the Mountains," *Colloquia Germanica* 42, no. 3 (2009): 193–94.

52. Noel to Hinks, 2 June 1922, EE 16/3-18/3 EE/18/3, RGS.

53. For more on the Sherpa religion and role in the history of mountaineering, see Sherry B. Ortner, "Thick Resistance: Death and the Cultural Construction of Agency in Himalayan Mountaineering," *Representations* 59 (Summer 1997): 148.

54. These scenes were also commented on by reviewers, one noting that the images of "dirty [people] living in wretched and apparent poverty, [were still] interesting in a strange way"; J. A. F. K, "The Epic of Everest," *Cinema*, December 18, 1924.

55. James F. Osborne uses the Guennol Lioness, sold for a then-unprecedented $57.2 million at Sotheby's, as an example of a diminutive object that while not typifying the formal scale of a monument, nevertheless exudes a certain monumentality, what he defines as an "ongoing, constantly renegotiated *relationship* between thing, between monument(s) and the person(s) experiencing the monument." See James F. Osborne, ed., *Approaching Monumentality in Archaeology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 3.

56. Dan Vondersommers, "The Animal Turn in History," *Perspectives on History*, November 6, 2016, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2016/the-animal-turn-in-history. Also see Akira Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

57. Tait Keller, "The Mountains Roar: The Alps during the Great War," *Environmental History* 14, no. 2 (April 2009): 255.

58. See Noel to E. Loveday of Kodak, 11 August 1922, EE/7/1, RGS, for more on the panchromatic stock.

59. Noel, *Through Tibet*, 265.

60. Noel, 176. Noel also described coming under the influence of indigenous beliefs about the mountain: "In wild countries the cast of the native mind … not obviously but in subtle ways …[can] mold your own. You begin to feel subconsciously the fears that they feel, and to you also, in the deep recesses of your mind, the mountain becomes possessed of a fearsome spirit" (197). This shift in tone did not go down well with the film critic for *The Nation*, who complained about the string of "absurd sub-titles of a high-flown, sentimental kind, full of pseudo-mystical clichés about the mountain, which spoil an otherwise good film" ("The Epic of Everest," *Nation*, December 12, 1924). Hinks also objected to the quality and tone of the intertitles; see Hinks to Noel, 29 December 1924, EE 31/4, RGS.

61. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1995), 413.

62. Reviewing the film in *Cinema*, J. A. F. K wrote "we would suggest … that the speculative captions at the end of the film, as to whether or not Everest is real, human, actually a spirit deity, be cut out" ("The Epic").

63. Joseph Conrad, "Geography and Some Explorers [1924]," in *Joseph Conrad: Last Essays*, ed. Harold Ray Stevens and J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

64. For an excellent overview of the RGS's emergence against the backdrop of British imperialism and empire, see Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 1–48.

65. Seven Sherpas died in an avalanche during the 1922 Everest attempt: Thankay Sherpa, Sangay Sherpa, Temba Sherpa, Lhakpa Sherpa, Pasang Namgya Sherpa, Norbu Bhotia, and Pema Sherpa.

66. Lecture League to Hinks, 4 April 1923, EE/13/13A, RGS. For more on the Pottinger debacle, see correspondence in EE/13/3A and EE/25/4, RGS.

67. Mallory toured the US with the film in winter 1923, securing few bookings and garnering little press coverage. For a postmortem analysis of what went wrong with the US tour, see Lee Keedick to Gerald Christy, 22 March 1923, EE/25/4/33, RGS. Also see correspondence in file EE/25/4, RGS.

68. Arthur R. Hinks, "Mount Everest Film, 1922: Report to the Mount Everest Committee," 2–3, EE/6/5/57, RGS.

69. Hinks, "Mount Everest Film," 3.

70. For more on the diplomatic crisis, see Wade Davis, *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory, and the Conquest of Everest* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 562–64. For a discussion of the lice-eating scene, see correspondence between Hinks and Noel, 19 November and 6 December 1924, EE/31/4, RGS. The lamas' stay in London generated considerable press coverage; they were taken to the Houses of Parliament, a Punch and Judy show, the London Zoo, and an Army and Navy supply store; see "Tibetan Visitors at Westminster," *Times* (London), December 17, 1924, and "The Lamas at the Zoo," *Children's Newspaper*, December 12, 1924.

71. For a detailed discussion of the diplomatic fallout, see Peter H. Hansen, "The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (June 1996): 729–47. The lamas Noel hired had not gained the proper permission to leave Tibet so he was blamed for the diplomatic fiasco; Kenneth Mason, assistant surveyor general of India, told Hinks that "neither Tibet, nor Sikkim, nor Bhutan will have Noel in their countries"; Hansen, "Dancing Lamas," 737.

72. Ortner, "Thick Resistance," 139. Also see Ortner, *Life and Death*.

73. "Film Notes," *Lady*, December 18, 1924.

74. For a sample of reviews of the opening screening, see "The Epic of Everest," *Cinema*, December 18, 1924; "The Epic of Everest," *Bioscope*, December 18, 1924; and "The Epic of Everest," *Nation*, December 12, 1924. For an example of spontaneous applause, see "The Epic of Everest at the New Scala," *Gentlewoman*, December 12, 1924.

75. "Ex Cathedra," *British Journal of Photography*, December 19, 1924.

76. The lack of musical accompaniment during the screening, along with a projection booth that was still under construction, undermined the film's success; "The Mount Everest Kinematograph Film," *Geographical Journal* 61 (1923): 49.

77. Felix Driver, "Distance and Disturbance: Travel, Exploration and Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century," *Transactions of the RHS* 14 (2004): 82. For a discussion of suitable methods and equipment for data collection in the field and the RGS's infamous 1854 handbook *Hints to Travellers*, see Driver, *Geography Militant*, 49–67.

78. Julian Thomas, "The Hermeneutics of Megalithic Space," in *Interpretive Archaeology*, ed. Christopher Y. Tilley (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993), 83.

79. Gianni Vattimo, "Postmodernity and New Monumentality," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 28 (Autumn 1995): 45.

80. Apostol, "Anti-Monuments," 131.

81. The first aerial film shot of Mt. Everest was *Wings Over Everest* (1934), produced by the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation, a compilation film comprised of footage taken during three flights over Everest in 1933. As Priya Jaikumar notes in *Where Histories Reside*, the film became the source footage for the *Indian Town Studies* series as well as appearing in *Secrets of India* (1934); see *Where Histories Reside* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 47–74.

82. For press coverage of the deadly 2019 climbing season in which eleven people died, see Megan Specia, "On Everest, Traffic Isn't Just Inconvenient. It Can Be Deadly," *New York Times*, May 23, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/world/asia/deadly-everest-traffic-jam.html; Kai Schultz, Jeffrey Gettleman, Mujib Mashal, and Bhadra Sharma, "'It Was Like a Zoo': Death on an Unruly, Overcrowded Everest," *New York Times*, May 26, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/26/world/asia/mount-everest-deaths.html; and Karen Zraick and Derrick Bryson Taylor, "These Are the Victims of a Deadly Climbing Season on Mount Everest," *New York Times*, May 29, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/asia/everest-deaths.html. For a discussion of efforts to curtail the large number of climbers, see Bhadra Sharma and Kai Schultz, "New Everest Rules Could Significantly Limit Who Gets to Climb," *New York Times*, August 14, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/14/world/asia/everest-climbing-rules.html.

83. John Morris, *Hired to Kill* (London: R. Hart-David, 1960), 163, cited in Hansen, "Dancing Lamas," 174.

84. See photographic works by Captain Melville Clarke, *From Simla through Ladac and Cashmere* (Calcutta: Savielle & Cranenburgh Printers, Bengal Printing Company, 1862); Philip Henry Egerton, *Journal of a Tour through Spiti, to the Frontier of Chinese Thibet, with Photographic Illustrations* (London: Cundall, Downes, and Company, 1864); Colonel Alexander A. A. Kinloch, *Large Game Shooting in Thibet* [*sic*], *the Himalayas, and Northern India* (Calcutta and London: Thacker, Spink and Co. and W. Thacker and Co., 1885); N. A. Tombazi, *Account of a Photographic Expedition to the Southern Glaciers of Kangchenjunga in the Sikkim* (n.p., 1925); and Samuel Bourne's three Himalayan expeditions starting in 1863. For secondary material on Himalayan photography, see Claire Harris, *Photography and Tibet* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016); and Hugh Rayner, ed., *Early Photographs of Ladakh* (Bath: Pagoda Tree Press, 2013). My thanks to curators Duncan Forbes and Karen Karyadi from the Department of Photography at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, for sharing information and providing access to this impressive photographic collection.

85. The restoration was supervised by Bryony Dixon, with Ben Thompson placed in charge of the technical elements.

86. Mark Brown, "Everest Film of Mallory and Irvine's Doomed Trip to Get World Premiere," *Guardian* (UK), August 27, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/aug/27/everest-film-mallory-irvine-world-premiere.

87. Brown, "Everest Film of Mallory." Also see Tim Dams, "An Epic Film Restoration," October 16, 2013, http://www.televisual.com/blog-detail/An-epic-film-restoration_bid-503.html; Noel to Hinks, 7 December 1927, EE/31/4, RGS; and Hinks to Sidney Spencer, 1 and 29 March 1927, EE/6/5, RGS.

88. Noel to Charles G. Bruce, "Photographic Rights Mount Everest Expedition 1924," EE/31/4, RGS.

89. Hinks to Noel, 12 December 1925, EE/31/4/27, RGS.

90. According to Dixon, the images were "scanned at a resolution of 4K using a wet gate to eliminate scratches. A new technique was developed by our image quality specialist to scan selected scenes using our individual colour LED's to get the best possible results from parts of the image compromised by deterioration of the blue toning and the severe mould damage." Dixon, "Restoring the Epic of Everest," updated 24 April 2019, https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/restoring-epic-everest.

91. George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy and Character and Opinion in the United States* (1911; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 10.

92. The discovery of George Mallory's body at 26,760ft on May 1, 1999, by American climber Conrad Anker working on a BBC "Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition" set off a flurry of media coverage, books, and the National Geographic documentary *The Wildest Dream* (2010).

93. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), cited in Osborne, *Approaching Monumentality*, 15; Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 16.

94. Tilley, *Phenomenology of Landscape*, 11.

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