



# **‘The Great Scene That Never Happened’ – A Screenwriter’s Techniques of Blending Fact and Fiction in Creating a Compelling Character Arc in Biopics**

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## **Abstract**

The biopic as a genre treads a thin line between fact and fiction. Using the theory and methods of visual storytelling and screenwriting, I will lay open the thought process and the tools of the craft that are employed to create a character arc using historical facts and figures for a movie that will resonate with a modern audience. I will also show how I tried to incorporate the producers’ expectations regarding the subject matter. I illustrate my process and techniques using my most recent screenplay *Ushba*, which narrates the unsuccessful climb of the eponymous Georgian mountain by a group of Austrian mountaineers, among them a young woman called Cenzi von Ficker.

*Keywords:* biopic, screenwriting, character arc, dominant set of values, underdog set of values, *Ushba*, Cenzi von Ficker

## **Zusammenfassung**

Das Biopic als Genre überschreitet immer wieder die Grenzen zwischen Realität und Fiktion. Anhand der Theorien und Methoden des Drehbuchschreibens präsentiere ich den Gedankengang und die handwerklichen Möglichkeiten, mit denen man von historischen Figuren und Fakten ausgehend einen Charakterbogen kreieren kann, der bei

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einem modernen Publikum Anklang findet. Illustrieren möchte ich meine Herangehensweise und Techniken anhand eines meiner eigenen, noch nicht produzierten Drehbücher: *Ushba* erzählt von der erfolglosen Erstbesteigung eines Berges in Georgien durch eine Gruppe Österreichischer Bergsteiger im Jahr 1903 - unter ihnen die junge Alpinistin Cenzi von Ficker.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Biopic, Drehbuch, Charakterbogen, dominantes Wertesystem, Underdog, Ushba, Cenzi von Ficker

Biopics enjoy undying popularity amongst filmmakers and viewers alike. Its USP (unique selling point), somewhat ironically, is the presumption of the trueness of the depicted events. An audience may experience a sense of relevance and gravitas during a biopic and attribute it to the aspect of truth. As a narrative screenwriter, though, I believe it's the fictionalised essence of a story and the protagonist's character arc, not its historical accuracy, that drive home the picture's poetic and thematic relevance.

Many a beloved, award-winning biopic in the past has ventured away from historical accuracy: *The King's Speech*, *The Imitation Game*, *Frida*, *Elizabeth*, *La Vie en Rose*, *I, Tonya* all take narrative liberties to deliver compelling stories. The act of fictionalisation, as Michael Lackey notes in the context of the biographical novel, creates symbolic truths whose significance transcends the individual life.<sup>1</sup> So while some pictures are closer to the historical facts than others,<sup>2</sup> they are all true to an *essence* or a *thesis* the writers put forth and bestowed on their protagonists. They work beautifully as movies, because the writers dared distance themselves from the shackles of constant fact-checking.

Likewise, I have started to see biopics less as renderings of wiki-facts and more as stories that are particularly enriching *because* they shed light on real people and true events. I regard historical facts as jumping-off point to inspire a script thesis that is relevant to the present day. While this attitude may be vulnerable to harsh criticism, I have realised that sticking to the facts too fastidiously during my writing process hinders me in developing a compelling theme.<sup>3</sup> As I am penning this paper as a creative and not an academic, I wish to keep the discussion of the a/morality of the genre itself to a minimum and will instead focus on the thought process and the tools of the craft I deploy when plotting a biopic.

Beforehand, a few words on the role of the producers and directors in the life of a screenwriter. What sets screenwriters apart from all other writers is that we do not own our stories. While we create the wor(l)ds, invest our time, craft and creativity, it

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is the producers who put their money on the line, hence owning our services. We know our place in the pecking order; we are artistic craftspeople, a means to an end, and movie making is a business. During the preproduction process, we maintain somewhat of a control over our stories, only answering to the producers, but once the director is on board, the writers vanish into the background. Our stories may be entirely rewritten, partially restructured, tonally turned upside down – all without our consent and, very often, even without us knowing. Such is the nature of the business and those who have a hard time letting go of their stories have to subscribe to the auteur-cinema and direct their own scripts, or switch careers. *Ushba*, the project I will be discussing here, is still in the early stages of development and a director has yet to be attached. I will mention the dutiful execution of the producers’ expectations where applicable.

*Ushba* came to me via a production company in Vienna, who were looking for a writer to pen a biopic surrounding the unsuccessful climb of the eponymous mountain in Georgia.

The historical facts of *Ushba* are thus:

In 1903, a group of Austrian, Swiss, and German mountaineers went on an expedition to Georgia to climb the Southern peak of Ushba – at the time alleged to be the world’s most difficult mountain, with its impressive twin peak resembling a double Matterhorn. The Northern peak had been conquered by a British team, and the Austrians wanted to claim the higher Southern peak. The tour was led by an extravagant explorer and climber named Willi Rickmer Rickmers. Among the climbers was the excellent German mountaineer Adolf Schulze and the mountain-savvy siblings von Ficker: Heinrich and his older sister Cenzi, the only woman among the men. The climbers made their way to the mountainous region of Svanetia, hemmed by the rising peaks of the Caucasus, and were invited to stay at the court of the local Prince, Tatarkhan Dadeshkeliani. During their first attempt at the summit, Schulze fell into a crevice, sustaining a severe head injury. Heinrich, who was his belay, saved Schulze from certain death, but was himself severely wounded – the rope had burned the skin off his hands. The weather was getting bad and the climbers had no choice but to turn back. The rescue mission was one for the books, with Cenzi and Rickmers rappelling the injured men down steep walls while the weather was thrashing them. Back at the prince’s court, Schulze, bandages still thickly wrapped around his head, prepared for a second attempt only days after the accident. At that point, Heinrich was out of the game, and for reasons unknown, Cenzi refused to join the second team, too. Schulze and his buddies did reach the summit, while Cenzi, who could have been the first human and woman to step foot on Ushba’s Southern peak,

stayed behind. She would make other news: Prince Dadeshkeliani was so impressed with Cenzi that he gifted her the mountain. The deed of gift is preserved in the Alpine Museum in Munich to this day.

The facts surrounding the events are not as well documented as an adapting author would wish (with the sources not even agreeing on where Cenzi was born), but the historical facts we do know make for a compelling story. The first big decision regarding the perspective had already been made for me by the producers: they had settled on Cenzi as protagonist. My job as a screenwriter was to make Cenzi’s story accessible to a modern viewer.

Another writer had had a go at it before me, but reading her draft, I realised she had not managed to reach a *thesis*. The screenplay lacked focus, momentum, and an overall theme visible in the protagonist’s arc. Female biopics are dear to my heart,<sup>4</sup> so I took the project on. Further research involved historical examinations of female climbers<sup>5</sup> and – with my central European protagonist in mind – first person accounts by German/Swiss/Austrian female climbers, especially Gerlinde Kaltenbrunner.<sup>6</sup>

The first draft poured out of my fingertips during two rainy weeks in April 2020, while the world outside was deadlocked:

I first consulted K.M. Weiland’s *Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful Author’s Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development* and the accompanying workbook.<sup>7</sup> Weiland, a novelist and story expert, suggests starting the plotting from the inside out – she starts with the character’s flaw, or as she calls it: ‘the lie your character believes’.<sup>8</sup> This is a very helpful approach as it links into the systemic values of the story world. The idea was picked up and further developed by Michael Arndt, writer of *Little Miss Sunshine*, who held a masterclass for the London Screenwriters’ Festival 2020 (which took place entirely online due to the Covid-19 pandemic).<sup>9</sup> He rephrases Weiland’s *lie* into what he calls the *dominant set of values*. The protagonist could have been brought up to represent these systemic values or has had to learn and adhere to them in order to survive, to find a (temporary) place in the world, to find their personal worth. Whatever the reason, when the protagonist goes on their journey, they will encounter what Arndt calls the opposing *underdog set of values*.<sup>10</sup> The difference between the dominant and the underdog set is an ideological one, operating in binaries, e.g. ego versus the collective, public versus the private, achievement versus fulfilment, status versus spirituality, hierarchy versus creativity, self-interest versus loyalty, egoism versus altruism.<sup>11</sup> Arndt goes on to say the underdog set of values is the more poetic one, as it renders the ending of the movie satisfying for the soul of the viewer. The protagonist will first have to lose something to gain another

thing that is more beautiful, more compassionate.<sup>12</sup> This assumption is, of course, only true for a specific type of story and will not work for tragedies, genre-benders, and flat character arcs.<sup>13</sup> Pixar works tirelessly with these tools, and I found they worked really well for *Ushba*, too.

The rule of thumb as put forth by Arndt is that in the end, the underdog set of values must prevail, and the protagonist has to commit to them in a *decisive act*. It is not a smooth transition from one set of values to the other; no, the protagonist has to make the active choice to commit to one and refuse the other.

Having studied the historical facts, I have decided that the crucial act happens when Cenzi decides not to climb Ushba a second time, when she stays behind with her brother even though she could be the first one to reach the summit of the most difficult mountain in the world. Cenzi is so eager to climb this mountain, her final refusal is *the* decisive act in her story.

My chain of thought continues as follows: What, then, is she refusing in this decisive act? According to Arndt’s approach, it is not essential that she says no to climbing a mountain per se, but rather that she sharply rebuffs the *dominant set of values*.

What, then, comprises the dominant set of values in the *Ushba* story world? – If I found the answer to this question, I would have my protagonist mapped out and could trace her arc. Cenzi’s world – the world of mountaineering – is one of exploratory *firsts*, sporting prowess, and sweeping bravery.

I brainstormed several truisms for the dominant set of values:

- 1) the only worth is being the *first* (on a summit), there is no second place;
- 2) *number of summits*, quantitative achievements will guide the path to public fame, national pride and illumination;
- 3) physical and mental *recklessness* and bravado lead to success.

Putting the obvious (gender) aspect on hold for a moment I concluded that the above-mentioned *beliefs* are inherent in professional athletes,<sup>14</sup> so I started thinking of Cenzi as an athlete. She is ambitious, pushy, hard on herself, hard on others. She is selfish and wants to succeed at all costs. This makes her a driven, passionate, and opinionated protagonist whose journey we might find compelling.

I always wanted to start and end the script with Cenzi in the mountains, so in the first scene, I introduce Cenzi and her brother in climbing action. Cenzi leads the rope party, Heinrich follows. When it becomes apparent that Heinrich is not as fit as Cenzi,

she is quick to leave him behind and continue on her own. She wants the summit, with or without her brother (U 3f.):

CENZI  
Hurry, Heinz. Every  
second counts.

Heinrich climbs as quickly as he can, causing him to skid and slip even more.

Cenzi, further up on a narrow jut, looks down at her brother. Then up the mountain side. Lifts her hand against the sun. She checks her watch again.

CENZI  
We're too slow. I'll  
attach you.

HEINRICH  
What, no, Cenz--

But Cenzi has already detached herself and slings the rope around a rock.

CENZI  
Wait for me here.

HEINRICH  
Cenzi!

And she's up, free climbing the naked rock like a mountain goat.

HEINRICH  
Don't chance it!

Cenzi can't hear him, has succumbed to ambition.

We see that she is a supple athlete with a tendency to reckless- and selfishness. It is part of the *lie* that she believes in the beginning. She will choose the more altruistic path later, so it is okay to have her a little blunt at the start.

Let us go back to the obvious: Cenzi is not an athlete competing in her own 'weight class', she performs as a woman in a *male-dominated* arena. According to Rickmers' adventurous accounts, he valued Cenzi as an equal member of the expedition and a highly skilled climber, so Cenzi probably did not face outright discrimination from her peers. This, however, led me to a fourth realisation:

4) If Cenzi plays by the rules of the boys (points 1 to 3), she can be worthy in her world, *even though* she is a woman.

Mountaineering as a cultural realm of masculinity means that if Cenzi copies the men in her world, she has the chance to be accepted as equal.<sup>15</sup> This assumption enabled me to attribute Cenzi a characteristic edge that I found interesting for her arc: As symptom of the dominant set of values – that is, a patriarchal system that looks down upon women – she is arrogant towards her own sex and gender.

Since Cenzi finds herself so very able and capable of operating in the world of men, she looks down on the women who are not. She is proud to be among the men and does not engage in an overt discourse on gender roles. I added a little scene to illustrate this. As Cenzi and Heinrich make it down the mountain, they encounter a climbing couple, the husband leading his wife who is clumsily staggering about in heavy skirts (Cenzi is in climbing trousers). Heinrich suggests assisting the climbers in peril, but Cenzi refuses (U 5f.):

CLIMBING WIFE  
I love your breeches,  
Fräulein. Very  
fetching.

Wife nearly slips and falls.

CLIMBING HUSBAND  
Eyes on the path,  
darling. And step with  
intent.

Cenzi gives a little nod as she moves past them. Heinrich leans in.

HEINRICH  
Shouldn't we assist?

Cenzi looks back over her shoulder and eyes the woman contempt.

CENZI  
Wrong attire, wrong  
shoes, wrong  
everything. He might be  
better off piggy-

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backing her down the  
mountain.

She strides ahead. Heinrich looks back at the unlucky couple. Then catches up with Cenzi.

Cenzi exhibits her sense of superiority and does not shy away from a personal slur against the climbing wife. Cenzi is one of the boys, and she likes it that way. She has never climbed with another woman – her initial behaviour can be understood as emblematic of a type of liberal feminism that denies systemic inequalities by stressing individual agency.

Cenzi learned mountaineering from her father, who took her into the Tyrolean Alps as soon as she could walk. Julius von Ficker was a lieutenant during the Austro-Prussian war, later a historian at Innsbruck University, and, as I presume, a less athletic climber and grittier teacher to his daughter.

Cenzi's father had played a part in the original script, but I found out through a quick Google search that he had already died when Cenzi left for the expedition. This biographical fact is, whilst tragic in reality, a convenient gift to the storyteller and led to my invention of 'Julius's summit journal'. It is a diary filled with sketches and maps, elevation and time notations, accounts of summits – a catalogue of conquests. Any half-serious climber owns such a journal, so the probability that Julius von Ficker had one is high. I have Cenzi inherit her father's journal and chronicle her own summits in it.<sup>16</sup>

Cenzi's recent loss of her father and her eagerness to continue in his footsteps, externalised in the form of Julius's summit journal, gives us a glimpse into her psyche. She has not managed yet to pry herself loose from her father's legacy and the *masculine/dominant* approach to mountain climbing. She perpetuates her father's successes instead of going her own way. She climbs not to enjoy the view, but to have another summit under her belt. Her goal, just like her male comrades', is to be the first to reach Ushba's peak.

During the talks with the producers, they called Cenzi a *heroine* and mused her story should be in the vein of the Hero's Journey.

The Hero's Journey has been discussed at length,<sup>17</sup> so I will not regurgitate its overall makeup. While I believe the Hero's Journey as a (mostly) masculine instalment is too archaic for (my) Cenzi's arc, I pondered over the notion of the *call to adventure* that seemed to have some relevance to her story.



The call to adventure traditionally occurs early on in the first act, the importance of the beat being that the hero at first refuses the call. The hero does not want to leave the comfort of the known world and go on an adventure, but ultimately accepts the challenge and delves into the *otherworld*.

The climbing of Ushba appears to be Cenzi’s call to adventure – only, it is not quite so straightforward. Cenzi is an ambitious athlete, so she really wants to climb Ushba. She cannot wait to stride into the *otherworld*. Climbing the mountain therefore cannot be the call to adventure; no, the call must be *something else*. And here is what I came up with:

I have a scene in the first act, when Cenzi visits a sports outfitters shop in Vienna, then owned by a woman called Mizzi Langer-Kauber. Mizzi was the first person to open a specialist shop for mountaineering and outdoor activities in Vienna in 1896.<sup>18</sup> I had come across her during my research and thought a scene in a sports shop would be funny and fabulous. Thus it goes:

At the time, Mizzi’s clientele would have been predominantly male, so she is excited to see a female customer in her shop. She recognises Cenzi (U 8):

MIZZI

If you don’t mind me asking... are you Cenzi, Cenzi Ficker, by any chance? I’ve seen your picture in the papers. You did a tour in the *Wetterstein*, a difficulty five, if I recall?

CENZI

Six, actually.

MIZZI

You don’t say.

We have seen earlier that Cenzi is arrogant when it comes to climbing. She will not lower herself to people who are less skilled than her, especially women. So, when Mizzi tries to recruit Cenzi to join an all-female rope team, her answer is clear (U 8f.):

MIZZI

Would you be at all interested in signing

up for an all-female  
rope team?

Cenzi hesitates.

MIZZI (CONT'D)  
We're planning an  
expedition to the  
*Hochschwab*. It's 2277  
with an easy *via*  
*ferrata*, but it'll be a  
good training ground  
for the younger ones.  
They'd be over the moon  
if you tagged along.  
You're no less than a  
pioneer!

CENZI  
I'll have to pass. I  
already have other  
plans.

MIZZI  
An expedition?

CENZI  
Of sorts. I'm... sorry.

MIZZI  
Well. Whenever you  
change your mind.

She hands Zenzi the bag. Zenzi thanks her with a nod.

CENZI  
Of course.

In this scene, I combined the call to adventure and Zenzi's refusal to engage in any gender discourse. Although Mizzi clearly plays to Zenzi's vanity ('You're no less than a pioneer!'), Zenzi refuses the call. She thinks an all-female rope party is beneath her, not worthy of her time and effort. Whether the *original* Zenzi exuded a similar sentiment is unknown and probably unlikely, but in order to tell my Zenzi's arc to altruism, she would have to be arrogant and cavalier about her exceptional status in the hegemonic culture of mountaineering.

Let us go a little further into the story:

At the Austrian Alpine Academy in Vienna, Zenzi and Heinrich attend Rickmers' declaration of exploratory intent. In this scene, Rickmers places himself as a feminist

and ally to Cenzi, when members of the academy question her involvement in the dangerous undertaking (U 12f.):

ACADEMY MEMBER 1  
There's a woman on your  
team.

RICKMERS  
I'm not an  
ophthalmologist, but  
I'd say twenty-twenty  
vision. Is there an  
underlying question in  
your observation?

ACADEMY MEMBER 1  
Ushba is the most  
difficult mountain in  
the world.

RICKMERS  
And Cenzi von Ficker is  
an extraordinary  
climber. What's your  
point?

ACADEMY MEMBER 2  
Will a woman not  
compromise the  
integrity of the  
expedition?

Cenzi suppresses an eye-roll.

RICKMERS  
Cenzi has been an  
alpine club member for,  
what, five years, so I  
find myself struck by  
your very question. A  
mountain doesn't  
discriminate. It isn't  
less lethal on men than  
on women. [...] [A]t the  
end of the day only one  
thing counts: the first  
footprints on the  
pristine summit of  
Ushba. Get used to the

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idea, Gentlemen, that  
this time around they  
may well be Cenzi's.

Rickmers is one to stand up to short-sighted, reactionary forces. He is a very flowery character, a leftover of the explorer types, carrying his heart in the right place, but, as Cenzi will have to experience later, he will do what he must to succeed. While an early ally to the young woman, Rickmers is bound to the dominant set of values and cannot abstain from them. He, as opposed to Cenzi, does not have the luxury of *change*.

The above moment also raises the stakes: If Cenzi fails, she will disappoint herself and her father's legacy. Now that she has been announced and championed by Rickmers, Cenzi has to additionally prove her worth to the members of the honourable academy and the public. The pressure is on.

During the two-months journey from Vienna to Svanetia, we learn more about the other climbers and our antagonist, Adolf Schulze. Schulze, let us remind ourselves, is the climber who will fall into the rope, injure Heinrich, still go for the summit a second time, and reach it. Schulze's positioning as antagonist was already apparent in the original draft; I merely pinned him in place and strengthened his villainy. To make it interesting, I gave Cenzi and Schulze a little kiss during a campfire scene.

Early on, the producers requested there be a deep, meaningful love affair between Cenzi and the Svaneti prince, so, rather traditionally, the magic potion to add drama and conflict is to create a love-triangle. But I did not want Cenzi to be torn between two lovers. Cenzi would not even acknowledge the existence of the triangle – it would be Schulze who feels the triangle. Cenzi kisses Schulze because he dares her, and because she is still very much on a par with his world view: They are both ambitious climbers, arrogant and egoistic. When Schulze says, ‘You won't kiss me. Not saying you don't want to, because I know you do, but you won't’ (U 22), he dares Cenzi into kissing him. She does it, because that is the person she is at this point in the story. Both Schulze and Cenzi live the dominant set of values. They are opportune, and their connection happens via their shared sense of accomplishment. It is a childish little fling, getting us ready for the big spark, when some ten pages later, Cenzi meet-cutes Prince Tatarkhan Dadeshkeliani of Svanetia.

To avoid falling prey to orientalist and/or exotic ideas for the character of the prince (cf. figures like *Game of Thrones'* Khal Drogo, also *Outlander's* Jamie Fraser) I intellectualised Cenzi and Dadeshkeliani's meet-cute and later encounters.<sup>19</sup> Historically, their battle of wits is perhaps the bit that is most true about their relationship – they were both educated and opinionated individuals. I highly doubt there was any romantic attraction between the real Cenzi and Dadeshkeliani back in

1903, certainly not from her side. As mentioned earlier though, I rank below producers, so if they wish to see a love affair between two characters a love affair is what I have to plant. Cenzi and Dadeshkeliani will not end up together (historically accurate), so their love is a short one, but their connection is clear, grown up, deep, equal. Their first encounter is quite wordy, as the Austrian climbers stand before the prince to acquire a permit to climb Ushba (U 28f.):

Dadeshkeliani steps closer to Cenzi.

DADESHKELIANI

And you. Do you wish to  
conquer Ushba as well?

CENZI

If Ushba deems me  
worthy.

DADESHKELIANI

Do you know what Ushba  
means in your language?

CENZI

As I understand there's  
several translations,  
your highness. *Weather  
witch, mountain of  
terror, the wretched  
place* - not to mention  
the double peak lends  
itself to metaphors of  
the horned one.

DADESHKELIANI

And all of that doesn't  
frighten you?

Cenzi hesitates.

CENZI

If I may, your  
highness...

Dadeshkeliani motions her to continue.

CENZI (CONT'D)

Men give terrifying  
names to mountains, in,  
what I believe, an

attempt to exaggerate  
their own bravery. No  
mountain is  
premeditative. A  
mountain *is*. They all  
offer a path to their  
summit – one just has  
to find it.

Dadeshkeliani likes what he hears.

DADESHKELIANI  
And what name have they  
given you?

CENZI  
Creszenz von Ficker,  
your highness. But my  
soubriquet is Cenzi.

DADESHKELIANI  
Cenzi... such a small  
name.

Cenzi engages in something screenwriters call *expo as ammo*: it is the deployment of exposition as ammunition in a conversation. In this scene, Cenzi can show off her knowledge to Dadeshkeliani while squeezing in her own philosophy in a potshot at the culture of her sport. Cenzi’s ‘small name’ is a foreshadowing of the dilemma she will face when she decides not to join Schulze for the second attempt. She fears her name will vanish from the history books. Only the one reaching the summit will bathe in public accolades.

Over the next twenty pages, Cenzi goes through a little switchback. An old, blind villager predicts that a foreign woman will bring about an avalanche that will smother the entire village. This set piece was included in the original script, but remained inconsequential. It is entirely made up, but I liked its potential effect on the storyline. I boosted the prophecy’s importance with a follow-up – an act of sabotage committed by a young village girl: the old man’s granddaughter breaks into the court and cuts the climbers’ ropes to pieces, hoping to jeopardise the tour and save her village from certain destruction. Hence, Rickmers disinvites Cenzi from the climbing party. She is presumed to be the prophecy’s foreign woman, and Rickmers does not want the entire village against them lest they come up with more ideas to compromise the expedition. While an early feminist in previous scenes, he plays his dominant values card: the summit at all costs. Cenzi fumes and storms off.

During the moonlit night on a hill above the village, she and Dadeshkeliani bond over their formidable and domineering father figures. Both seem to be bound to perpetuate their fathers’ agendas. Dadeshkeliani puts it in a nutshell: ‘It’s plain wrong, isn’t it? We’re copies. We plant ourselves according to what *was*, not what *could be*’ (U 48). Dadeshkeliani gives Cenzi a little nudge in the right direction. While he is fettered to his political obligations, she is free to break with tradition.

The next day, Cenzi hears she is back on the team. Her brother Heinrich gave Rickmers an ultimatum: Either both siblings climb, or none of them. Rickmers cannot afford losing an entire rope party, so he gives in. This is a bit of an unhappy sequence in my opinion as it takes action and activeness away from Cenzi. It will probably change in later drafts, but for now, it is a sweet moment between siblings and I like Heinrich’s nonchalance (U 50f.):

CENZI  
You blackmailed Willi  
Rickmer Rickmers?

HEINRICH  
So I did.

CENZI  
You have more spunk  
than brains, little  
brother. You’d  
jeopardise your own  
success for me?

HEINRICH  
Of course. Takes two to  
rope, and we’re a  
party, you and I.

Here, I also toyed with the metaphor of the rope party and the notion of pulling each other up. Heinrich is very cavalier about the dilemma. Not climbing with his sister is out of the question. Cenzi is surprised, because were she in his position, she would go without him. We have seen in the very beginning that she has no qualms about leaving her brother behind to get what she wants. I am in a craft-related pickle here: the scenario as I have it works and makes sense within the story world, but it also takes away from Cenzi’s forward momentum. For an instant, she is at the mercy of her climbing party, her hands are tied. Inactivity and stagnation are never compelling to watch. The solution will hopefully come to me in a later draft.

Between this short dramatic interlude and the climbers setting off to climb Ushba, I inserted a clash of the only two women at court: Cenzi and Dadeshkeliani’s sister Marekhi. Whether Marekhi actually existed was impossible to find out as the sources concerning Tatar Khan Dadeshkeliani and his family are sketchy at best. But dramaturgically, Marekhi made a lot of sense, so I gladly made use of her. Marekhi was present in the original draft, but her dramatic potential remained leashed, and Marekhi and Cenzi actually never met. I quickly knew I wanted to get these two women together in a room.

I drew Marekhi as a proud, political, anti-imperialist, highly dutiful character – even more so than her brother. She is what Dadeshkeliani would be if he was not enthralled by Cenzi’s spirit. Earlier, when Dadeshkeliani permits the Austrians to climb Ushba, Marekhi disagrees strongly. She dislikes the idea of countries sending out expeditions and sticking their national flags on mountains that are not theirs. Georgia is already occupied by Russia; now the West wants to come squat, too? Marekhi grumps. During the welcome dinner, she scoffs when the conversation turns to a local climber (the blind old man) who is presumed to have been the first and only man to reach the summit (U 34):

DADESHKELIANI

I know of only one man  
who has ever set on  
Ushba’s summit. It was  
a long time ago, before  
I was born. [...]

SCHULZE

So somebody local *has*  
been to the summit?

MAREKHI

Do you really think we  
look at our own  
mountains, with our  
idle hands in our idle  
laps, waiting for  
people like you?

DADESHKELIANI

Sister...

Marekhi despises the Western imperialist attitudes, and has no inhibitions expressing how she feels. She gets protective when she sees Cenzi and the prince bonding (U 52):



MAREKHI

What is my brother to  
you? Another summit?  
Another conquest for  
your journal?

CENZI

... Pardon?

MAREKHI

I know you – women from  
Europe. You think the  
world revolves around  
you. You come to our  
country, and take what  
you see and take what  
you touch and keep  
taking. You call that  
freedom. [...] Climb that  
mountain, may it give  
you validation, but  
don't seek it in my  
brother's arms.

It is not the most harmonious send-off for Cenzi, but emotionally it strengthens her intention to reach the summit – *now more than ever*. Cenzi is a truculent one.

The climbing party consisting of Rickmers, Cenzi, Heinrich, Schulze and fellow climber Helbling depart for the mountain at page 54, rendering a solid midpoint and tent pole moment in the script.

Over the next 30 pages, we see how Cenzi is different from Schulze and how she gets frustrated with his recklessness. Schulze is representative of the dominant set of values, and Cenzi is more and more distancing herself from them. A couple of scenes reveal gender disparities, and a couple of sibling-driven moments show warmth during the freezing nights on the mountain. As we are striding towards the catastrophic accident, the rope parties are interchanged – Cenzi will climb with Rickmers and Heinrich with Schulze.

The mountain sequence was the hardest part to research and reconstruct. Cenzi, Heinrich, Schulze, and Rickmers wrote respective articles in the *Zeitschrift des Deutschen und Österreichischen Alpenvereins* (DÖAV), yet the events pose many problems that contradict my thesis. Yes, Cenzi played a major role in getting the injured men off the mountain, but none of the men go into detail how precisely she did it. Even her brother only mentions her in a half sentence, concentrating instead on the forbidding landscape and his own peril.<sup>20</sup> There is not much to go on, so I decided

to pick a dramatised route and create the mountain sequence that would support my thesis. Originally, the accident occurred in a rock wall, but I chose a snowfield instead, mostly for cinematic reasons. We have spent enough time in the rocky terrain, and blood dripping in snow makes for a dramatic visual of red and white (also a very Austrian image as I found). Schulze misjudges a cornice and falls. When he dangles above a crevasse and Heinrich's hands have been shredded, Rickmers entertains the horrific idea of cutting Schulze loose. But Cenzi will not have it (U 75f.):

RICKMERS  
(somber, to Cenzi)  
He's going to pull both  
of them down. Heinz  
must cut him loose.

Cenzi turns to Rickmers, perturbed. She shakes her head.

RICKMERS (CONT'D)  
It's the only way.  
Cenzi? We're stuck. We  
can't--

CENZI  
It's not an option,  
Willi.

She stares him down, then turns back to Heinrich with instructions.

Just like that, Cenzi becomes the heroine we root for. It is an unusual development since traditionally, the *save the cat*-moment occurs in the very beginning of a script, helping us to identify our hero. In *Ushba*, it happens on page 76.

Cenzi and Rickmers are rappelling the injured climbers down the steep wall when, of course, Schulze gets stuck and Cenzi has to do more heroic stuff to get him down safely.

We know from the accounts in the DÖAV that the climbers had to leave ropes in the walls because they were too short to retrieve. Therefore, I gave Cenzi a scene of free-climbing. The way I have painted her from the beginning suggests she would not have problems with endangering herself, so it felt true. The beauty of the scene is that she does not do it to reach a summit or achieve a personal goal, but to save two fellow climbers.

The climbers reach the village and the injured men are taken in by Marekhi, who happens to be a skilled healer. Cenzi and Dadeshkeliani’s reunion is a very passionate one – they make love.

Cenzi and Marekhi have a short but crucial heart-to-heart in the sickroom, in which Cenzi thanks her and Marekhi drops a snippet of the underdog values (U 88):

Cenzi tiptoes in. Schulze’s bed is empty.

Next to Heinrich: Marekhi asleep in a chair. She has been watching over him all night.

She wakes up and straightens her back as she spots Cenzi, awfully aware of her lack of decorum.

MAREKHI

His fever has passed.

She stands up.

MAREKHI (CONT’D)

The other one insisted on getting up. I advised against it, but he wouldn’t listen, and I have no patience for jackasses.

The women share a quiet smile.

CENZI

You’ve quite the gift. Thank you, for everything you’ve done for my brother. I know you didn’t have to.

MAREKHI

What good is a gift, when one doesn’t use it for the benefit of others?

I love this moment for Marekhi’s character because she turns from an antagonistic force to a mentor-ish figure for Cenzi without much fuss. I say *mentor-ish* because Marekhi does not play the role of the mentor as defined in the Hero’s Journey – she does not show Cenzi ‘the way of the force’ as it were. She is less mentor than

embodiment of certain aspects of the underdog set of values. Marekhi does not lecture Cenzi, the two women are at eye level.

I knew I would need a character to represent the underdog values and lead by example, and I really wanted a female character to take on that role.<sup>21</sup> I quickly decided on Marekhi as I loved her ambivalence throughout the story. Marekhi is a dutiful figure, bound to her cultural environment, and not a paragon to Cenzi per se. Their set of values will never fully overlap, but Marekhi points Cenzi in the right direction, shows her the door. It is up to Cenzi to walk through it.

Luckily, that moment is right around the corner:

When Cenzi visits her brother in the sickroom, Schulze has vanished. He intends to go back and try the summit one more time, so Heinrich tells his sister.

This finally brings me to the title of this paper: ‘the great scene that never happened’. In all the pages leading up to this one, there are (good) scenes that happened, and (good) scenes that never happened. But here is the *great* one that never happened, the pivotal one for my version of Cenzi and her journey: her confrontation with Schulze, the climax of the main plot.

Schulze is the main antagonistic force in *Ushba*. He lives the dominant set of values irrevocably and is their most concentrated manifestation. While Cenzi flirted with him and his values earlier in the script, she has now come to despise these values and Schulze as their agent. Cenzi stands at a threshold and has to decide which path she will choose.

What is important is that both sides must be *right*. What Schulze believes must equally make sense as what Cenzi chooses to believe, because only then does it become a *choice* for her. She has to – sort of – slap the old values in the face and declare her new world view.

So, I decided that Cenzi would literally slap Schulze. Naturally, this is something that never happened. The historical Cenzi would never have slapped a man, but my Cenzi does. But how do I get her to slap him? What does he say that will set her off? That is where the setup of the love triangle comes in handy. I said earlier that it is Schulze’s triangle, not Cenzi’s, so he can lean into it fully while Cenzi will react with befuddlement. I believe it is worth quoting the entire scene here to give context (U 89-91):

INT. SCHULZE’S ROOM – DAY

A rope lands next to a backpack.

SCHULZE

Your rope's still in  
the wall. If we go now  
we'll be faster – more  
efficient with time and  
resource.

Schulze's head is still in the thick bandage, but his spirit  
is back to energiser level.

SCHULZE (CONT'D)

It's nothing personal.  
I want this summit.

Cenzi looks at him, incredulous.

CENZI

It's your  
miscalculation that got  
my brother injured.

Schulze's packing and rearranging equipment.

SCHULZE

When you go that high,  
you take your life in  
our own hands. We all  
go up there, knowing  
this could be our last  
sunrise, our last  
sunset, the last step  
we take.

CENZI

You were reckless.

SCHULZE

Please. You know you  
would've done the same  
had you been leading  
the party. You're no  
different.

Cenzi is dumbfounded. Schulze checks his supply of rollies.

CENZI

We saved your life up  
there.

SCHULZE  
I didn't ask for it.

He reconsiders, stops packing and faces Cenzi.

SCHULZE (CONT'D)  
I'm inexpressively  
*grateful. Thank you,*  
for saving my life. But  
I don't owe you  
anything. And you know  
what that makes me?

CENZI  
A slug?

SCHULZE  
A mountaineer.

He steps closer, puts his hands on her shoulder.

SCHULZE (CONT'D)  
You should come with  
me. We're the best two  
climbers. We could make  
it, to the summit.

Cenzi stares at him, confused.

SCHULZE  
Tell me you don't want  
this. Tell me you don't  
want to be the first  
woman to set foot on  
Ushba. Get your name in  
the books. You and I,  
Cenzi, we're two sides  
of the same coin.

Cenzi needs a moment until she manages...

CENZI  
My brother and I are a  
team. If he can't  
climb, I won't.

Schulze lets her shoulders go, not without a little extra  
shove.

SCHULZE

Of course, I didn't  
really expect you to  
say yes. I'm personally  
affected by the  
volatility of women all  
too often.

Cenzi's eyes narrow, suspicious.

SCHULZE (CONT'D)

Who is it, Cenzi? Me?  
The prince? Both of us,  
at the same time? Would  
that sate your  
appetite?

Cenzi SLAPS him. Hard. Dead angry.

CENZI

Do what you have to,  
Adolf. I've neither the  
power nor the fancy to  
stand in your way.  
(with aversion)  
We're nothing alike.  
You don't know me. But  
I see you now. I... see  
you.

She leaves him standing. Schulze holds a hand to his cheek.

I mentioned above that the antagonist must be right. Schulze says many things that are true: When you go that high, you *do* take your life in your own hands. He did not ask to be saved, it was Rickmers's and Cenzi's choice. When he tells Cenzi, 'And you know what does that make me? [...] A mountaineer', he reveals what being a mountaineer means to the dominant (masculine) set of values. It means self-interest, achievement, public accolades, denial of weakness. Climbing a mountain is 'nothing personal', it is all about the summit and the distinctions that come with reaching it. These are the values he offers Cenzi when he asks her to join him. When Cenzi contemplates not going because of her brother, Schulze resorts to firing his personal affront, thus consolidating the rift between the two world views. Cenzi feels further away from her old set of values than ever and denounces them by giving Schulze a juicy slap. She realises this is not her world anymore. The values are old and have proven destructive.

Emotionally, Cenzi is at her low point. She has not achieved her goal, and she has lost her old values. She is in a limbo, and there are a few steps she still needs to take.

Luckily, history helps out for we know Dadeshkeliani gifted Ushba to Cenzi. As they say farewell, the prince hands Cenzi a deed of gift (U 100):

DADESHKELIANI  
This is for you.

Cenzi looks confused, but takes the paper.

DADESHKELIANI  
Read it.

Cenzi, aware that all eyes are on her, pulls the paper out of the leather sling. Reads it. Stops. Looks up.

CENZI  
Your highness?  
(befuddled)  
I... cannot accept  
this. I couldn't!

Heinrich spies onto the paper. His eyes go wide.

HEINRICH  
You're gifting her the  
mountain? You're giving  
Ushba... to my sister?

Commotion among the climbers.

Dadeshkeliani nods a little bow to Cenzi.

DADESHKELIANI  
As is my intention.

Cenzi is speechless.

CENZI  
Why are you doing this?

Dadeshkeliani leans in.

DADESHKELIANI  
Please don't think me  
silly. I know you can't  
put Ushba in your  
backpack. I want  
this...



(swallows hard)  
I want this to be a  
remembrance. Of myself,  
I selfishly admit. But  
most importantly, a  
remembrance of  
yourself. What you did,  
up on this mountain,  
testifies a courage  
deserving of the  
highest recognition.  
(re: the deed of gift)  
This is *your* story. May  
it set you free from  
what *was*, and open you  
to what *could be*.

The last sentence is a call-back to their conversation earlier on, and a rather cheesy one at that, but I wanted to push the romance button for once in this highly intellectualised relationship. Cenzi has come to terms with not having her name in the history books for summitting – and she is okay with that. She wins Ushba, just not how we expected it. The underdog set of values, consisting of compassion, altruism and collectivity, is rewarded.

Every good story’s ending is also a beginning, and we still need to finish up two strands of the story: Remember Julius’s summit journal? Back in Austria, Cenzi locks it into a credenza and starts her own journal. She is ready to go her own way, make her own rules, and create her own memories. Thus, she fulfils Dadeshkeliani’s glance in the crystal ball and walks the path that ‘*could be*’.

I also send Cenzi back to Mizzi at the sports outfitters to finally accept her call to adventure (U 103):

MIZZI  
Didn’t you go on an  
expedition? I think I  
read something about  
you in the club papers.  
How did it go? Did you  
make it to the summit?

CENZI  
No. I didn’t.

MIZZI

Ah, well. There’s  
always another mountain  
to climb.

CENZI

I’m actually here to  
see whether you have an  
all female rope team  
coming up? I’d love to  
put my name down.

Mizzi’s eyes widen with surprise and excitement.

MIZZI

Oh, absolutely, please  
do.

She puts the list in front of Cenzi and hands her a pen. Cenzi writes her name on the list. Mizzi watches her.

MIZZI (CONT’D)

The young ones will be  
delighted. They can  
learn so much from you.  
You have a gift, you  
know?

Cenzi looks up. Comfortably familiar.

CENZI

And what good is a  
gift, when one doesn’t  
use it for the benefit  
of others?

She puts the pen down.

On the list: her name in line with a multitude of other women.

Cenzi repeats Marekhi’s line here, coming full circle. Mizzi’s throw-away ‘Ah, well. There’s always another mountain to climb’ also gives Cenzi an outlook to her future accomplishments. She has rid herself of the old framework with which she has valued herself and has adopted the poetic one. The one rooted in altruism, the thought of not just oneself, but of generations to come. Importantly, Cenzi’s call to adventure is a call to female mentorship. She will use her ‘gift’ to lift other women up, with the image of the rope party working beautifully on both literal and metaphorical levels. The closing

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image of the movie shows Cenzi on a mountain top beside an all-female rope team. The poetic underdogs have prevailed and Cenzi’s world has visibly changed.<sup>22</sup>

Neil Gaiman famously said: ‘Stories may well be lies, but they are good lies that say true things, and which can sometimes pay the rent.’ Never mind the last Gaiman-esque bit, the first part is as true for fiction as it is for biopics. Stories have the opportunity to tell us something about the state of humankind, something about ourselves. Picking this *something* is a deeply personal choice by the respective screenwriter, which is why different writers will write different stories using the same historical benchmarks. I tried to make Cenzi into a character that I understood and that in my opinion would make sense to modern viewers. The historical biopic can (and must) serve to reflect on issues of the present.

I believe that we, athletes or not, live in a world where numbers, achievements, ‘successful summits’ determine how we see ourselves, feel about ourselves, how we value ourselves. Social media are particularly guilty of encouraging this (capitalist) behaviour and its obsession with numbers of ‘likes’ and visual proof (‘pic or it didn’t happen’). In that respect, I have attempted to render Cenzi’s story a thoroughly modern one that can appeal to 21<sup>st</sup>-century sensibilities. Cenzi shows us that rejecting this lifestyle of public accolading can lead to something more healing, more fulfilling, more poetic. She has no picture of herself on Ushba’s summit, she will not get the ‘likes’ of the public. But she had the chance to change. Cenzi, and as she is our proxy – we, realise there is more to life than collecting summits. We, too, can change.

As David McCullough Jr. said with such eloquence during his much-quoted ‘You are not special’ commencement speech:

Climb the mountain not to plant your flag, but to embrace the challenge, enjoy the air and behold the view. Climb it so you can see the world, not so the world can see you. [...] And then you too will discover the great and curious truth of the human experience is that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself.<sup>23</sup>

This is at the heart of my version of Cenzi. It is not the only way to tell her story and it may not be the best one, but it is one possible rendering. I hope it is one that engages a modern audience once it hits the screens and does right by its inspiring subject.

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## About the Author

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lackey, Michael, *The American Biographical Novel*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2016 (251-252).

<sup>2</sup> David McCandless, a British conceptualist and professional fact-checker, dedicates part of his *Information Is Beautiful* website to the historical accuracies of Hollywood movies through impressive scene-by-scene analyses. Hereby, *The Imitation Game* ranks lowest with 42.3 percent accuracy, while *Selma* strikes a sweeping 100 percent. See: ‘Based on a True Story?’, in: *Information Is Beautiful*, <https://www.informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/based-on-a-true-true-story>, date accessed: 23 August 2021.

<sup>3</sup> The biopics on which I have worked so far centre on historical lives. I concede that ethical responsibilities may come to the fore to a greater degree when the film’s subject is still alive.

<sup>4</sup> It is probably worth mentioning my jaw dropping when I first held Dennis Bingham’s 2010 *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* in my hands and was taken aback by his assumptions about/analyses of female biopics. I had already written three female biopics at the time and found myself entirely oblivious to the issue. I was unaware there was a distinction between male and female biopics. My education championed an *ungendered* approach to storytelling. We were not taught that different genders required different storylines. So, when Bingham writes that female biopics ‘often find suffering (and therefore) drama in a public woman’s very inability to make her decisions and discover her own destiny’ and are known for ‘gravitating to public women who lost control of their private demons and were brought down, and for focusing on women more famous for suffering and victimization than for anything they accomplished or produced’, I find myself befuddled to say the least. While suffering can be a legitimate source of drama and is certainly not limited to female protagonists (e.g. *12 Years a Slave*, *My Left Foot*, *Love & Mercy*, *Theory of Everything* – granted, three of those were released after 2010), there is only one among my three biopics that features abuse. The other two neither tell of victimisation nor hold a tragic downward spiral for my protagonists. My education inadvertently kept me from fitting into Bingham’s

analytic scheme. So, in my writing, I do not consciously turn away from traditional biopics, I was always turned away. Bingham, Dennis, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*, Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010 (213, 214).

<sup>5</sup> Fink, Caroline, and Karin Steinbach, *Erste am Seil: Pionierinnen in Fels und Eis*, Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2013; Runggaldier, Ingrid, *Frauen im Aufstieg: Auf Spurensuche in der Alpingeschichte*, Bozen: Edition Raetia, 2011; Messner, Reinhold, *On Top: Frauen ganz oben*, München: Malik National Geographic, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Kaltenbrunner, Gerlinde, *Ganz bei mir: Leidenschaft Achttausender*, München: Malik National Geographic, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Weiland, K.M, *Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful Author’s Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development*, n.p.: Penforasword Publishing, 2017; Weiland, K.M, *Creating Character Arcs Workbook: The Writer’s Reference to Exceptional Character Development and Creative Writing*, n.p.: Penforasword Publishing, 2017. I have found that every script I write demands a different approach, every story a different hack. While Weiland’s book is recognised and used within the industry (for example by Michael Arndt when he worked on *Toy Story 3*), it is the first time I have used it. As far as I know, it is not taught widely at universities yet. The go-to educational book on structure is still Snyder, Blake, *Save the Cat!*, Studio City: Michael Wiese, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Weiland, *Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful* (25-27).

<sup>9</sup> Arndt, Michael, ‘Masterclass’, in: *LondonSWF365*, <http://www.londonscreenwritersfestival.com> [behind paywall], date accessed: 30 March 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Other story experts call them the *Protagonist* and *Antagonist* set of values.

<sup>11</sup> Weiland and Arndt’s suggested dynamics of dominant versus underdog values beckon to be interpreted as running counter to hegemonic Western values and patriarchal/capitalist ideologies – an assumption which translates exceptionally well to biopics about women, as women have for the longest time been underdogs in patriarchal society. While a more thorough discussion of the implications of such hypothesis may be of merit, it would indeed snap the tight belt of this paper. I do find it important to clarify here, though, that the story world of a screenplay must always be accepted for what it is: a story world limited by the borders of its own narrative. So, while many sets of values may end up reflecting and mirroring bits and pieces of the sum of impressions that we call reality or may even appear to be a critique of the same, they will always be sets of values specific and unique to their story world.

<sup>12</sup> In Arndt’s *Little Miss Sunshine*, young protagonist Olive’s dream is to win the eponymous beauty pageant – that is her A plot goal. As Arndt explains, Olive loses her A plot goal but wins something more beautiful during the movie’s climactic scene: when she is on stage during the pageant, performing to the 1982 hit *Super Freak* a dance so outrageously inappropriate, we know she will not win and get to wear the tiara. Instead, we see her revelling in the poetry of fun, silliness, and artistic/physical expression. Our hearts fly high when her family chime in, supporting their mad and buoyant little girl, while the other parents boo and grouse. Olive, her family, and us as viewers learn that the concept of *beauty* has nothing to do with competition and the narrow, superficial definition of the pageant crowd, and everything to do with fun, family, and creativity.

<sup>13</sup> In *The Godfather*, for example, Al Pacino’s war veteran, Michael Corleone, demurs against becoming involved with the mafia, shunning his own family and the story world’s dominant set of values. He wallows in underdog ideologies and strives for something more ethical, wholesome, less blood-feud-y. But the structure of the tragedy dictates that through losing family and loved ones, honest, peace-loving, morally sound Michael inevitably turns into the godfather. He departs from the underdog set of values and arrives at the dominant set – the story world enabling and causing his tragic arc. In a flat arc (as illustrated in *Gladiator* or *The Hunger Games*), the characters know the underdog values to be true and right and hardly stray from their belief system – it is the world around them that will ultimately change.

<sup>14</sup> See also: Goldman, Erica, ‘Why Climb Mountains? John Muir and Clarence King at a Historical Crossroads of American Mountain Climbing’, in: *Sierra Club*, [https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/why\\_climb\\_mountains\\_by\\_eric\\_goldman.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/why_climb_mountains_by_eric_goldman.aspx), date accessed: 23 August 2021.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed and riveting study on gendered life-writing in the context of mountaineering, see Julie Rak’s eloquent ‘Social Climbing on Annapurna: Gender in High-altitude Mountaineering Narratives’, in: *ESC* 33:1-2 (March/June 2007) 109-146. In this article the author examines rhetorical constructions of gender in accounts of expedition mountaineers.

<sup>16</sup> The idea came to me via the account of Dutch climber and hoyden Jeanne Immink, Cenzi’s contemporary, who kept a summit diary See: Muré, Harry, *Jeanne Immink: Die Frau, die in die Wolken stieg*, Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2010. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate any historical journals of Julius or Cenzi. Such journals might have offered a fascinating glimpse into the (gendered) world of father-and-daughter mountaineering.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, n.p.: Bollingen Foundation, 1949; Vogler, Christopher, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Studio City: Michael Wiese, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Ruß, Elke, ‘Gipfelsieg in langen Röcken’, in: *Tiroler Tageszeitung Onlineausgabe* (11 May 2012), <https://www.tt.com/artikel/4762419/gipfelsieg-in-langen-roecken>, date accessed: 23 August 2021.

<sup>19</sup> This is where I, as a screenwriter, am faced with the limits of my job. I can do my utmost in the script to avoid orientalist depictions, but since I have no say in the casting process, the production may well hire a Khal Drogo-lookalike who, in combination with direction, costume, and make-up, will *orientalise* the part to some extent.

<sup>20</sup> In slightly more detail: Cenzi brings the long journey from Batum to Svanetia to life with flowery language. She comments on the poetry of the landscape, relays Grigor Makandaroff’s horror stories on the malice of the local women, and writes about the strenuous traversal of the snow-covered Laila and the arrival in dreamlike Svanetia. Rickmers’ account focuses on the evenings of booze at Dadeshkeliani’s court and the ascent to Shtawler several days after the Ushba attempt. His writing is typically strong-worded and brazen, and with much drama he narrates how a horse slips down into a riverbed and loses all provisions. In his pages, Heinrich goes into detail about the difficult ascent through snowfields, icy patches, and dangerous rock faces. He lays out the constant back and forth (‘Rekognoszierungsstour’) that qualifies alpine pioneering: back to camp, up a different route, tracking through snow, back to the bivvy. The ice-cold night before the summit push is a particularly spiritual experience for the young man. Then he goes into detail about Schulze and his summit attempt. At this point, Cenzi is behind and out of sight. Schulze and Heinrich burrow through snow and reach a steep, sleek wall. Schulze is motivated and tries to climb up, but he vanishes from Heinrich’s view and falls into the rope. Heinrich is lucky not to be dragged off the mountain with Schulze. They found a way up the mountain, but were unsuccessful nonetheless. Heinrich tells us that Schulze’s transport off the mountain was a feat, among the most dangerous and difficult manoeuvres he has ever done on a mountain. Cenzi makes tea for everyone and tends to Schulze’s head wound. Due to ‘several reasons’ Heinrich does not join Schulze for the second attempt, but he makes it clear that he was afraid to go back. Without envy, Heinrich commends Schulze for reaching the summit. Lastly, Schulze’s account of the successful summit push is the shortest one. Within three pages, he patters the complete ascent, starting with the fact that the path to the summit had been found and Ushba’s secret uncovered. When he hears that four other climbers were going to have a go at Ushba’s peak, Schulze senses *danger*. He promised himself he would be the first on the summit of Ushba and so his head would have to obey. He presents himself as the daredevil athlete, proud with bravado.

<sup>21</sup> Heinrich is the only male character who has a wedge of underdog in him, the rest of the men display different degrees of the dominant set of values (with Schulze at the far end of the spectrum). None of the women in my story are fully underdog (Cenzi is my underdog pioneer, so to speak) but they offer Cenzi new ways to see the world. Thus, in hindsight, my setup is a blatantly gendered one.

<sup>22</sup> Female bonding is a crucial aspect in *Ushba*. Since the #metoo movement ruffled the movie industry, support among women has been championed. To some extent, Cenzi’s arc encompasses this altruistic development. Even though for her it is not about male abuse of power, she understands the machinations of the dominant (masculine) value system and its destructive force.

During a women filmmaker panel probably a year or so ago, the programming director of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation ORF Kathrin Zechner mentioned the lack of a female support system. She

went on to explain how men have always had such a support system, how they are trained to lift each other up and strategically position each other in the hierarchy and trade offices. The word she used to describe this support system was *Seilschaften* – rope parties.

<sup>23</sup> McCullough, David Jr, ‘The “You Are Not Special” Graduation Speech Is Just as Relevant Today’, in: *Time Magazine* (17 November 2015), <https://time.com/4116019/david-mccullough-jr-graduation-speech-wellesley-high/>, date accessed: 23 August 2021.