

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



THE EIGHT MOUNTAINS
(Language: Italian)

Director: Charlotte Vandermeersch, Felix van Groeningen, 2022.
Running time: 147 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 1 November 2023.

“This rich, beautiful and inexpressibly sad film is about the friendship between men who can’t talk about their feelings and about winning and losing at the great game of life. It is set in the breathtaking and wonderfully photographed Italian Alpine valley of Aosta, which includes the slopes of Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn. But the “eight mountains” of the title refers to the eight highest peaks of Nepal: a mysterious symbol of worldly ambition and conquest.

Belgian film-makers Felix van Groeningen and Charlotte Vandermeersch have adapted the award-winning 2016 novel by Italian author Paolo Cognetti and have created a deeply intelligent meditation on our capacity for love, and how it is shaped by the arbitrary, irreversible experiences of childhood, and by our relationship with the landscape. The Aosta valley is depicted with magnificent sweep, and van Groeningen and Vandermeersch find a stratum of sadness under it, a kind of water table of tears.

We begin with the friendship of two 12-year-old boys, Pietro and Bruno, who get to know each other when Pietro’s mum and dad – to get away from the petrol fumes of Turin – come to the (fictional) village of Grana for the summer; Pietro befriends local lad Bruno, who is staying with his farmer uncle and aunt. They roam far afield in this magical place.

But their Edenic friendship is ruined by Pietro’s parents, who make a heavy-handed and misjudged offer to let Bruno live with them in the big city and attend high school there. Bruno’s absent father objects to this condescension, and takes the boy away to work with him on a building site while Pietro starts a troubled middle-class student career. Pietro never forgives his father for splitting them up, and for being more impressed by the tougher and more alpha Bruno, who is a real outdoorsman. He never speaks to his father again.

But fate reunites Bruno and Pietro as tough, bearded young men, played with subtlety and gentleness by Alessandro Borghi and Luca Marinelli. After a reticent, wary start Bruno suggests that, as neither have any work on, they spend an Alpine summer building a shack in the valley that will be their special place.

It is not being too facetious to call this the straight *Brokeback Mountain*. In building this rudimentary stone hut, they have attempted to rebuild their childhood, rebuild their love for each other. But Pietro is to make a terribly painful discovery that, in his long and bitter absence, his wounded father actually became a friend to the grownup Bruno, hiking with him in the valley and becoming a quasi-father to him. And, to add to the mortification of having his dad stolen from him by Bruno, Pietro finds that the young woman he is sort of interested in, is more interested in the unassuming Bruno. So poor Pietro leaves all over again, travelling in Nepal and becoming a celebrated writer, but consumed with the thought that his friendship with Bruno was the best of him – and Bruno was in some elemental sense the better man.

This is a movie with air in its lungs and love in its heart. It is spacious and unhurried in its devotion to beauty and to what it means to be human. Bruno is a compelling character who becomes impassioned when talking about the mountains, and it is his tragedy that he ultimately prefers them to human beings. When some of Pietro's Turin friends come to visit and one starts rhapsodising about "nature", Bruno snaps contemptuously that "nature" is an abstract idea for city types: he prefers the solid realities of mountains, trees and rivers. This film has mystery and passion, it climbs mountainous heights and rewards you with the opposite of vertigo: a sort of exaltation."

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian* 10 May 2023.

"The Italian-language film *The Eight Mountains (Le Otto Montagne)* is based on the popular 2018 novel by Paolo Cognetti. The winner of the 2022 Cannes Jury Prize is the story of an on-again, off-again 40-year platonic relationship between two men, Pietro (Luca Marinelli) and Bruno (Alessandro Borghi). They first meet as 12-year-olds when Pietro's dad, Giovanni (Filippo Timi), takes him to the mountain town where Bruno is the only remaining child in residence.

Young Bruno and Pietro (played by Cristiano Sassella and Lupo Barbiero, respectively) establish a warm rapport early on, leading Giovanni to think Bruno would benefit from joining his family in Turin so his lonely son can have a best friend nearby. But Bruno is the country mouse to Pietro's city mouse; in his heart, he longs to live his familial tradition of mountain rancher and cheesemaker.

The mountains will become the duo's meeting place for several decades to come. Even after not seeing one another for 15 years, they are both drawn back to the place where they originally met. The plot sounds a bit like a heterosexual

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Brokeback Mountain. The Belgian filmmakers, Felix van Groeningen and his actress-partner Charlotte Vandermeersch, must have sensed that, because they never allow their actors to do anything that could be remotely read as gay.

Rather, the film wishes to establish the kind of bond between men that you normally see between women in films — that strong “I’ve got your back” message you’d find in *Steel Magnolias* or *Beaches*. I have no doubt Pietro loves Bruno and wants to provide such a bond because Marinelli’s narration violates a certain “Encanto” song’s advice: He can’t stop talking about Bruno.

The problem is, so many movies subscribe to the notion that the only way to be manly is to either be stubborn or toxic; there’s an unspoken rule to never show or discuss one’s emotions. *The Eight Mountains* rewards this type of behavior, giving the one character who most adheres to these tropes of masculinity a hero’s send-off, as if his ultimate fate were somehow noble instead of unwise.

The Eight Mountains does at least attempt to evoke the feelings of its protagonists by using several musical interludes by the film’s composer, Daniel Norgren. Whenever there’s a pause in the action, a folk song will occupy our time. Your mileage may vary, but I found these songs to be quite grating. Imagine Neil Young singing emo songs by Morrissey. And a film that runs two-and-a-half hours long can accommodate a lot of songs.

Marinelli captures his character’s wanderlust well. Pietro travels through various mountain ranges (including the Himalayas) searching for a place to belong. When he learns that his late father, with whom he hadn’t spoken in 20 years, forged a strong bond with Bruno during their estrangement, Pietro’s quest takes on a deeper resonance. It also provides a safe excuse for him to re-establish contact with Bruno.

As Bruno, Borghi has the harder role. His stubbornness costs him dearly, and we’re meant to sympathize with a man who chooses to abandon his family for some macho ideal. He is seen through Pietro’s rose-colored glasses, which makes our understanding based on a possibly unreliable narrator. But hearing Pietro ramble on about him in voiceover is not as effective as seeing him show affection to Bruno.

The real power of *The Eight Mountains* comes from its visuals. This is a stunning movie filled with vertiginous shots of people expertly walking narrow, dangerous mountain passes. Cinematographer Ruben Impens wisely lets the scenery do the work; the camera is just an observer recording the majesty. The

look of the film is so spectacular that I almost want to recommend you see it solely for that reason. It wasn't enough to save the film for me.”

Odie Henderson, *Boston Globe*, May 25, 2023.

“...*The Eight Mountains* moves through [the protagonists'] adolescence, when they lose touch with each other, and into adulthood, where Pietro (Luca Marinelli) and Bruno (Alessandro Borghi) find their way toward one another again. In many cases, their friendship is the only stable thing in the flux of life. Bruno stayed in the mountains. He could never leave. His dream is to take over his aunt and uncle's abandoned dairy farm, where he can make cheese and live the life of his ancestors. Pietro is not as certain about his destiny. He wanders. He writes. He waits tables. Every summer, he returns to the mountains to hang out with Bruno. The passage of time, and Pietro's voiceover, show the film's novelistic source material.

Vandermeersch and van Groeningen, in collaboration with cinematographer Ruben Impens, capture the mountains' changeable moods, their daunting heights and dizzying valleys, peaks upon peaks, the way the dawn hits the mountaintops, the steepness of the slopes where Bruno and Pietro lie on their backs, nearly vertical, soaking up the sun. Some real mountain climbing is done in *The Eight Mountains*, and some of the footage is awe-inspiring. The men go on hikes, stalking across the trails at the top, abysses opening up on either side. Bruno is comfortable in the mountains—he couldn't live anywhere else—and Pietro, whose workaholic dad really only came alive when he went on mountain hikes, becomes one of those wanderlust backpackers flooding into Tibet.

Some obvious drone shots are included, but much of the hiking sequences appear to have been done with Steadicams, following the men through their treacherous treks. Andrea Rauccio is listed as the Steadicam operator, but the credits for camera operators are lengthy, and the entire crew deserves credit. There are times when the camera is so far back that all you see is an entire expanse of white, with a tiny person trekking across the blinding snow. It may be a cliché to say the mountains are the third main character in the film, but it's the truth.

The mountains are important. Time is given to allow us to soak up the atmosphere, and to get to know the familiar slopes in different weathers, at dawn, dusk, winter, and summer. Swedish composer Daniel Norgren's score is a huge contribution. Music plays almost throughout, sometimes a long keening note, with muffled percussion underneath, creating an eerie, lonely feeling. There are songs, too, utilized to smooth over the passage of time. The film

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works cumulatively. There is conflict on occasion, but it's not the driving force. Lifelong friendships aren't made up of intense highs and lows. They're made up of time spent, of being mindful and thoughtful towards your friend and ensuring to stay in touch, even with the distance between them.

The friendship feels real, and this is crucial. The film wouldn't work without it. There are depths to be plumbed, and the film takes the time to do so. There are relationships with parents, women, finances, and big questions like: What should I do with my life? Am I on the right path? *The Eight Mountains* is a reminder of how rare it is to see a film about male friendship that doesn't involve crime or hangover-like shenanigans. Some people have a wide circle of friends. Others have just one good friend, the friend with whom you cannot hide, the friend with whom it is always easy: even the fights won't threaten the bond. Maybe a friendship like this has to start in childhood, before you know better before you squint at people trying to "vet" them. Children say to each other, "Wanna play?" with no other words necessary. If Bruno and Pietro met for the first time as adult men, it might not have happened. We become closed off, set in our ways, and cautious of others.

The Eight Mountains, and its dedication to the slow rhythms of Bruno and Pietro's friendship, call to mind the famous final lines of William Butler Yeats' poem *The Municipal Gallery Revisited*:

‘Think where man’s glory most begins and ends
And say my glory was I had such friends.’”

Sheila O'Malley, *Peter Ebert.com*, April 28, 2023.