

“Reality doesn’t interest me...”

# Leni Riefenstahl—propagandist for the Third Reich

By Stefan Steinberg  
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The German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl died September 8 at the age of 101. Riefenstahl is above all known for her close collaboration with the Nazi regime in the thirties, when at Hitler’s personal instigation she played a major role in establishing the public image of National Socialism in Germany and abroad. Shaken by the collapse of the Third Reich and discredited by her role in Nazi Germany, Riefenstahl had problems picking up the pieces of her film career after the Second World War. Among her better-known projects in the post-war period were photographic books of African Nuba tribesmen. Her last assignment was an underwater film.

To her last days, Riefenstahl always disputed the significance of her role in promoting Nazi Germany. In memoirs and interviews, she constantly claimed she was “naïve,” a non-political person who never joined the Nazi party and was only interested in her art, someone who only did what many others did, and so on. In interviews after the war, she asserted that the driving force in her life was the search for “beauty and harmony”—“reality does not interest me.” [1] Her career clearly shows, however, that far from being just an innocent victim of Nazi political propaganda, she was instrumental in creating a charade of “beauty and harmony” for the most barbaric and reactionary regime in modern history.

Over the past few years, numerous publications and biographies have appeared devoted to Riefenstahl. Most biographers concede her links to National Socialism and point out that on numerous occasions her interests coincided with those of the Third Reich, both ideologically and practically. Many of these authors, however, go on to claim that, despite her dubious relations with the National Socialists, it is a mistake to assume that such considerations affected her art. For such commentators, Riefenstahl was a pioneer, someone who revolutionised film, and even “gave it a new language.”

Leni Riefenstahl was born in 1902 into a well-to-do family and was able to fully indulge her considerable intellectual and physical interests. As a young woman she enjoyed dance, favoring the spontaneous and romantic forms of dance aimed at “liberating the soul” introduced to Germany by the American Isadora Duncan. Riefenstahl read widely and was interested in modern schools of art, including the expressionists. She was less interested in theory, but combined her inclinations towards the romantic and mystical in the sphere of literature and art with a down-to-earth interest in practical and technical issues. When an injury to her knee put an end to her dancing, Riefenstahl switched to skiing.

Skiing was her first real introduction to the attractions and mysteries of the mountains. Her skiing proficiency and good looks were noticed by geologist, mountain climber and filmmaker Dr. Arnold Fanck, who cast her as leading actress in his silent film *The Holy Mountain* (1926). Fanck was responsible for a new film genre in the twenties, *mountain films*, which took up a popular theme of German Romanticism—the struggles of

the individual against the forces of nature.

Riefenstahl used her experiences with Fanck to make her own feature film *The Blue Light* (1932), which is also set in the mountains. Some of her previous romantic inclinations are evident in *The Blue Light*. The blue light is the reflection of a full moon that falls upon the houses in the mountains. It embodies beauty and completeness, but at the same time has disruptive consequences. The plot of the film centers on a crystal with magic powers. When local peasants try to remove the crystal from its grotto, believing that this would rescue them from a life of poverty, the crystal loses its magic powers. The peasants’ lack of faith, their unwillingness to put up with the hardships of everyday life, leads to catastrophic consequences for them.

Not surprisingly, the papacy in Rome was impressed with the film. Riefenstahl reported that the film “made a big impression in the Vatican. Above all, it was the mysticism of the film which so appealed to the churchmen.”

The mystical and religious elements of *The Blue Light*, combined with a strict sense of class hierarchy, harking back to a mythical past when man lived happily at one with nature, reappear in Riefenstahl’s second feature film *Tiefland (Deepland)*, which she began in 1940 but was only able to complete in 1954.

Riefenstahl’s first film appeared in cinemas in a period of crisis for the unstable Weimar Republic and was popular with the German public. It evoked a long-lost world in which stability ruled and social relations were cast in stone. This appealed especially to those petit-bourgeois layers whose lives had been ruined by years of hyper-inflation and political instability during the Weimar Republic. Riefenstahl’s family was also hit by the crisis, and the 30-year-old director became one of the many seeking a political alternative. On February 27, 1932, she attended a meeting of the German National Socialist Party (NSDAP) at the Berlin Sportpalast, where the main speaker was Adolf Hitler. Riefenstahl was immediately gripped by what she saw and heard.

Hitler’s feelings for Riefenstahl were equally enthusiastic. In May 1932, Riefenstahl met Hitler for the first time. The would-be artist Hitler had admired *The Blue Light*, and was interested in meeting an acclaimed artist who already had an international reputation. After his election as chancellor in January 1933, Hitler immediately gave Riefenstahl the job of filming the annual NSDAP conference in Nuremberg.

At the time, Hitler was keen to improve the public image of the NSDAP. During the social polarisation under the Weimar Republic, Hitler’s shock troops had terrorised the streets and gained a reputation for their brutality. In the “new Germany” of 1933, Hitler moved immediately against the workers’ movement. All political parties and unions were banned, the press was censored, and a brutal dictatorship reigned.

Now Hitler sought to portray himself as statesman and invent a

historical continuity for his party based on a completely distorted portrayal of German history. For her part, Riefenstahl was prepared to assist. No doubt, there was an element of personal infatuation on her part with the figure of Hitler, but such infatuation was bound up with definite political conceptions. In one newspaper interview she declared: "To me Hitler is the greatest man who ever lived. He is really faultless, so simple yet so filled with manly power... He is really beautiful, he is wise. Radiance streams from him. All the great men of Germany—Friedrich, Nietzsche, Bismarck—have all had faults. Hitler's followers are not spotless. Only he is pure." [2]

In her personal reminiscences, Riefenstahl maintained she was opposed to accepting the assignment to film the Nuremberg party conference, but the differences were hardly profound. Riefenstahl claimed she told Hitler that she had no experience in making documentaries, and couldn't even tell the SS from the SA. Hitler is alleged to have replied: "That's good, then you will only see what's essential"—and emphasised—"I would like...an artistic document on film."

After filming the party conference of 1933 (under the title *Victory of Belief*) to the considerable satisfaction of her paymasters, Riefenstahl was asked to repeat her work for the 1934 rally. This time they gave her not only artistic but also total organisational control of the project. To create the best working conditions for herself, Riefenstahl did not shrink from intimidating co-workers. When the cameraman, Schunemann, refused to work on the film, Riefenstahl complained to the Propaganda Ministry film department that he was boycotting an "order from the Fuhrer." [3]

Half a million NSDAP members and 250,000 guests came to the party congress at Nuremberg. In an interview after the war, Riefenstahl maintained in her typically disingenuous fashion that in her film of the event, *Triumph of the Will* (1934), "Not a single scene is staged.... It is history, pure history." In fact, extremely thorough preparations were undertaken for the conference, which for the first time lasted an entire week. Large, elaborate and expensive stage structures and props were erected, and the choreographed crowd scenes were rehearsed to perfection. Several unsuccessful film sequences, such as the appearance of Julius Streicher, were later reworked in the studio.

The rally takes the form of a gigantic ceremony—on the one hand, massed ranks of disciplined party faithful marching rigidly in unison, and on the other, the leader, the expressive and artistic Fuhrer uniting the masses as he swears allegiance to the spirit of national unity. Appeals to the "voice of blood" at the rally, together with the hatred expressed against "overdone Jewish intellectualism," were two sides of the same racist coin.

Riefenstahl's film opens with aerial shots suggesting Hitler's arrival, a hero stepping down from the clouds to greet a people that have come together from all over the country. The conference praises the achievements of the recently deceased Reich president Hindenburg, and greets the numerous foreign guests, press representatives and diplomats. Defence forces, army, SS and SA all demonstrate their total loyalty to the Dictator. Central to the film is the loyalty creed of the Fuhrer's followers. "They are Germany. When they act, the Nation acts," Hitler's representative Hess calls pathetically into the throng. For his part, Hitler explains that the "great command" for Germany to take the lead, "was not given by any earthly superior. It was given by god, who created our people."

The armed forces, participating for the first time in the NSDAP conference, were dissatisfied with the final version of the film. Part of the footage involving the army was unsatisfactory due to bad weather, but Riefenstahl agreed to make up for this. So at the instruction of the party leadership, she completed the short film *Victory of Unity—Our Armed Forces* in 1935.

Riefenstahl won a number of prizes for *Triumph of the Will*, but many filmmakers were more circumspect. The renowned director and film

theoretician René Clair was disturbed by the suggestive power of Riefenstahl's films, and when Charlie Chaplin saw a short version of *Triumph of the Will* in the US, he fell off his chair—with laughter. Presumably, it was Hitler's closing speech in the film that served as the basis for a famous scene in *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin's 1940 film showed the "Thousand-Year Reich" as an overblown, fragile façade and demystified Hitler at a time when he still enjoyed sympathy among the international elite.

The German author Jürgen Trimmborn comments on *Triumph of the Will*: "No documentation of National Socialism today is released without pictures from this film, no other film has formed our visual impression of what National Socialism was, as much as this film." (Trimmborn, p. 200) Writer Lutz Kinkel is more perceptive: "Few filmmakers understood that this picture was a get-up, a 'beautiful sham,' with which the Nazis and their helper Riefenstahl tried to delude the public" under conditions where "a unity of the people never existed." (Kinkel, p. 87) [4]

The Nazi regime regarded the 1931 decision by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to award Berlin the 1936 Olympic Games as an enormous opportunity to conduct propaganda for Nazi Germany. Three years after the Nazi takeover, Germany was to be portrayed as a society rid of social and political conflict with a sound economy and the latest in science and technology. The world's largest-ever sports grounds were dug out in the first construction of a futuristic "Germanic" metropolis. The Games were planned on a scale hitherto unknown and were broadcast for the first time on television. After her success with *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl was the undisputed choice of the Nazi leadership for the filming of the Games.

Like the Nuremberg party conference, the Olympiad was staged as a festival. The NSDAP poured huge resources into the project and mobilised artists and professionals to help. Hitler gave Riefenstahl everything she needed for her production: finances, materials, manpower. Working with a massive production team, her budget of 1.5 million reichsmarks (rms) was later augmented by a further 300,000 rms. Backed by such resources, she could film with an omnipresent camera and then choose and edit from literally kilometers of film footage. [5]

The internationally acclaimed German composer Richard Strauss wrote a hymn for the Games, which he dedicated to Adolf Hitler. The poet laureate Carl Diem wrote verses for the Olympiad referring to the "heroic martyrs for the fatherland." (Carl Diem was a sports official who in 1905 had called for military pack marches to be recognised as a sporting discipline.) The architect Albert Speer was largely responsible for the staging of the opening ceremony. At the end of the Olympiad, a dome of light rose above the athletes and the audience. The sources of this mystical light, expressing harmony, were in fact more prosaic—a large proportion were anti-aircraft illumination lamps.

Preparations for staging this "work of art" included mass arrests of political oppositionists, Jews and gypsies by the police and the Gestapo, with the stated aim of making Berlin "safe and attractive" for visitors to the Games. Together with the construction of the Olympiad, the Oranienberg concentration camp was also built and in September already held around 1,000 prisoners. For international consumption, however, signs prohibiting Jews from entry to parks and other public facilities were temporarily dismantled and German sports journalists were requested to tone down the nationalistic and racist comments in their commentary.

This time, the central figure of the film was not Hitler (who had little interest in the Games and had to be pressured to attend at all), but international sporting elites. The Olympiad films demonstrate Riefenstahl's willingness to explore new techniques and camera shots, as well as her fascination with the human body; but as was the case with *Triumph of the Will*, the Olympiad films (*Festival of the People* and *Festival of Beauty*) were meticulously shot and edited to present fascism in the most positive light. The opening shots of the film immediately

make this clear: a painstakingly contrived prologue harks back to the glories of ancient Greece and corresponds entirely to Hitler's own efforts to ascribe to National Socialism a long historical tradition based on a mythical past.

Riefenstahl was evidently shattered by the collapse of the Third Reich. Along with National Socialism, her career lay in ruins. Immediately after the Second World War, allied forces arrested Riefenstahl but then set her free as "unchargeable." She was subject to further investigations between 1948 and 1952, but was eventually declared innocent of any participation in the crimes of the Nazis. Nevertheless, she had problems finding producers willing to finance her films. During the Third Reich, she could stipulate her own conditions regarding the budget and production of her films. In post-war Germany, recovering from the devastation of the war, the sort of massive projects favored by Riefenstahl were no longer viable. But she was able to make a living, not least because the German government agreed to continue paying her royalties for the showing of her films made under the Nazis.

In the 1960s, Riefenstahl traveled to Africa and began a series of photography projects of primitive African tribesman. The results were published as glossy photography books in 1973 and 1976. While removed from the themes she dealt with during the period of National Socialism, the Nuba books do recall themes from her earlier films—her fascination with the physical form, but now the black, slim bodies of the naked Nuba tribesmen daubed with religious markings involved in the celebration of primate rituals.

In many respects, her move to Africa reflected her disenchanting turn away from civilised society—her next move was to turn her back on humanity altogether. At the age of 80, she learned a new sport—deep sea diving—and spent her last years underwater filming aquatic life. She joined the environmental organisation Greenpeace and devoted her energies in the last decade of her life to preserving aquatic life.

In a post-war interview in the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, Riefenstahl articulated her view of culture, which regards beauty and reality as mutually exclusive opposites: "I can simply say that I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful... It comes from the unconscious and not from my knowledge... Whatever is purely realistic, slice of life, which is average, quotidian. Doesn't interest me... I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living. I seek harmony."

This outlook is evident in her Nuba books, which show the self-inflicted violence of the tribesman arising from rituals, but fails to deal with any of the hardships and privations that characterise the day-to-day life of primitive forms of society. At a time in the 1970s when theories of cultural relativism were being widely disseminated, Riefenstahl's books represented a glorification of backward society.

Riefenstahl's declaration of enthusiasm for beauty at the expense of reality is instructive with regard to her work, but also deceitful. Many great artists have regarded the depiction of beauty and harmony as central to their work. At the same time, they recognised that beauty is a property of the real existing world, which must be uncovered. This in turn requires that the artist show genuine interest and curiosity in how people live out their lives. In his book on Fascism and art, *Old Dreams of the New Reich*, Jost Hermand warns against any notion of a pure "beauty" divorced from reality: "National Socialist art is thus not unproblematically 'beautiful,' not merely devoted to perfect forms and empty content; it is also imminently brutal, an art based on convictions which, when realised, literally left corpses in their wake."

Riefenstahl declares her disdain for reality, but her intimate collaboration with the Nazis demonstrates clearly that she was quite conscious of the reality and consequences of Nazi rule, and at the same shared in many respects their perspective.

Although no evidence exists that she was ever a member of the NSDAP,

the films she made before, during and even after the Third Reich continually deal with themes that have a firm place in Nazi ideology—a patronising and contemptuous attitude towards the broad mass of the population, the glorification of past societies at the expense of modernity, the embrace of ritual and religion combined with a fierce individualism. Her films offer a welter of evidence to demonstrate that Riefenstahl shared much of the outlook of her Nazi mentors.

At the same time, Riefenstahl was entirely conscious of the implications of National Socialism in practice. She was acquainted with the law passed in 1933, at Goebbels's behest, restricting the work of Jews in the film industry—a measure that forced many of the most talented German artists to emigrate. She was familiar with the decision, also made by Goebbels, at a meeting of the Bureau of Culture in 1936, to declare a complete ban on artistic criticism in Germany. She was aware of the book burnings and the Nazis' campaign against progressive art (which the Nazis termed "degenerate"). Recently published material also reveals that she was a witness of war-time Nazi atrocities and was also complicit herself in allowing extras in her films to be sent to concentration camps. [6]

Well aware of the disastrous consequences of the Third Reich for society and art, Leni Riefenstahl employed all of her talents to drape National Socialist barbarism in a mantle of "beauty and harmony." Only those who are either completely ignorant of, or utterly disinterested in, the most important experiences of the 20th century could regard such an artist as a "pioneer."

#### Notes:

1. "When you photograph a Greek temple and at the side there is a pile of rubbish, would you leave the rubbish out?" Riefenstahl: "Definitely, I am not interested in reality." Source: Matthias Schreiber, Susanne Weingarten: *"Realität interessiert mich nicht." Leni Riefenstahl über ihre Filme, ihr Schönheitsideal, ihre NS-Verstrickung und Hitlers Wirkung auf die Menschen.* (Spiegel 18.08.1997)

2. The extent of Riefenstahl's personal relation with Hitler is demonstrated by an examination of his library. Leni Riefenstahl gave him two books on the Berlin Olympics and an eight-volume set of the complete works of the 19th-century German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte in a rare first edition. The Fichte volumes were inscribed with the dedication: "'To my dear Führer with deepest admiration,' Leni Riefenstahl."

3. To further her career, Riefenstahl was also quite prepared to take measures against Jewish co-workers on her films. In her post-war memoirs, she seeks to rebut any accusations of anti-Semitism by emphasising her friendly relationships with Jewish artists, but this did not prevent her from forming a close friendship with Julius Streicher, the publisher of the notorious anti-Semitic hate-journal *Der Stürmer*. When scriptwriter (and Communist) Béla Balázs reminded her that he had not yet been paid for his work on *The Blue Light*, she gave Streicher the job of challenging him in court and, in the process, used the vocabulary of the new state power, against the "Jew."

4. Quotes from *Riefenstahl—Eine deutsche Karriere*, Jürgen Trimmborn, and *Die Scheinwerferin—Leni Riefenstahl und das Dritte Reich*, Lutz Kinkel.

5. The work was also remunerative for Riefenstahl herself. She pocketed an honorarium of 250,000 rms—an amount to which Goebbels, entranced by the film, later added another 100,000 rms. (The annual average wage for a skilled worker at that time in Germany was around 2,000 rms.)

6. Riefenstahl used members of the Sinti and Roma community in her film *Tiefland*. After completing their roles, the Sinti and Roma were shipped to the Berlin refugee assembly point in Marzahn, transported to the Gypsy collection point at Salzburg-Maxglan, and then later sent to Auschwitz.

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