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Art or propaganda? The films of Leni Riefenstahl during the Nazi regime

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Abstract

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ART OR PROPAGANDA?
THE FILMS OF LENI RIEFENSTAHL DURING THE NAZI REGIME

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INTRODUCTION

1945 found most of Germany in ruins from Allied air and ground attacks. Many Germans fled in advance of the occupying Allies; one woman in particular took refuge in the Austrian village of Kitzbuhel. Shortly after the war in Europe had ended, there was a knock at the door of her mountain home. It was an American sergeant of the 42nd Rainbow Division. After staring at her for a few seconds, he asked, "Who are you?"

"Why, I am Leni Riefenstahl," she answered.

"Never heard of you. What do you do?"

"I act, write, and produce films."

The sergeant laughed. "Baby, I've been going to the movies for a long time and I've never heard of you. Now, get going. We need this house" ("Leni Riefenstahl", 1945).

That seemed to be the prevalent reaction of most non-Germans to Leni Riefenstahl, the sole female filmmaker of the Nazi regime. The mere fact that she had penetrated a male-dominated field in a male-dominated society made her career extremely remarkable. After the war, rumors about her flew thick and fast. Was she Hitler's mistress, brainwashed into making films for the Nazis? Was she a puppet of the party or just a genius in the wrong place?

This brief overview of her life and two of her films that were made during the Nazi years won't attempt to answer these questions but will offer possibilities for contemplation. To speculate whether her work was art or propaganda is analogous to defining these two terms; an

infinite number of answers would be generated. Instead, I hope to emphasize how effective the motion picture can be when fused with politics.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Early Years

Riefenstahl's early years were hardly any indication of a future in film production. Born in 1902 Berlin of practical yet wealthy parents, she was seen by her father, Alfred, as the successor to the family plumbing and heating business. Her mother, Bertha, realizing that the girl might not be interested in such things, encouraged training in the arts. At first, the young Riefenstahl showed a talent for painting, and then became enthralled with dancing. Her father did not approve of this, but her mother secretly helped her along by sending her to dance lessons. When her father found out what was going on behind his back, he implemented another strategy to thwart his daughter's enthusiasm. By sending her to the best dancing school in Berlin, he reasoned that she surely would be humbled by the scores of great talents that studied there.

But for the good or bad, that plan failed. It became apparent to Riefenstahl's instructors that this new pupil possessed not only great talent and ability but a drive to succeed as well. Riefenstahl studied hard and soon found herself in demand on many European stages. Accompanied by her mother and her pianist on tours, Riefenstahl often earned 600 to 700 marks a performance (Infield, 1976).

In 1924, a knee injury cut her dancing career short. She went to the best doctors in Berlin for treatment; their advice was for her to have surgery immediately or risk a permanently stiff knee. Surgery revealed that she had torn cartilage and a bone tumor (Infield, 1976).

While recovering, she began to attend various cinemas in Berlin to pass the time, noting the new vogue of mountain films that were in many theaters. Spectacular scenery and precarious plots were hallmarks of this film genre. She soon became enthralled with films that idealized heroic Germans conquering all they surveyed. It was a tremendous turn of events, but it was here that Riefenstahl left the dance stage for the world of film.

Growth of the Nazi Party

As she was making this career switch, an infant political movement was beginning to gain notoriety in Germany. This was the National Socialist, or Nazi, party under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. What made this political party unique was the intricate, subtle way in which its leaders sought to gain control. Their methods of appealing to the masses required a sound philosophy of how to appeal to the interest of the masses and a thorough knowledge of media channels currently available to do so. Hitler outlined his philosophy in his work Mein Kampf, written in 1923 while he was a political prisoner in Munich:

> The art of propaganda consists precisely in being able to awaken the imagination of the public through an appeal to their feelings, in finding the appropriate psychological form that will arrest the attention and appeal to the hearts and minds of the national masses . . . all effective propaganda must be confined to a few bare essentials and those must be expressed as far as possible in stereotypical formulae. These slogans should be persistently repeated until the very last individual has come to grasp the idea that has been put forward. Propaganda must not investigate the truth objectively, and insofar as it is favorable to the other side, present it according to the theoretical laws of justice; but it must present only that aspect of the truth which is favorable to its own side. (pp. 65-66)

This limited and controlled flow of information, called "propaganda" by Hitler, would become an integral part of the Nazi regime. It was used to gain control faster and to transform the German nation into a nation with one mind and one purpose--to serve its Fuhrer. Nazi propaganda seeped into all media channels of the day, from radio to posters to park benches, and became a distinguishing characteristic of the regime.

One media form that Hitler was known to enjoy was film; he thought it would be an ideal propaganda tool. "I want to exploit film in such a way that the audience will clearly be aware that on such and such an occasion they are going to see a political film. It nauseates me when I find political propaganda hiding under a cloak of art. Let it be either art of politics" ("Hitler on the arts," 1933).

The eventual Minister of Propaganda for the Nazi Party, Dr. Josef Goebbels, basically had the same ideas about propaganda as Hitler did. Yet, where Hitler felt that propaganda's significance would wane as party membership grew, Goebbels felt that propaganda should continue to play an important role even after the party came to power; propaganda would be necessary to mobilize the masses in support of the state (Manvell, R. & Frankel, H., 1971). Even though their views and philosophies on propaganda differed slightly, Hitler and Goebbels were able to use their communications knowledge to build an immensely successful propaganda machine.

New Successes

While the Nazis were struggling to gain popularity, Riefenstahl was enjoying success and prestige from acting in and helping to produce

motion pictures. The politics of Hitler and his subordinate political party were far from her mind, if she had even heard of them (Infield, 1976).

After leaving the stage, she began to work with Dr. Arnold Fanck, a renowned German director in the mountain film genre that she enjoyed so much. He recognized her lithe form and sensuality as definite screen assets, and since she was a novice to the field, she accepted the role of actress at first. As an actress, she learned to ski and climb. But aside from theatrics, she was gaining a different education. "I also found myself involved with the camera work and at times I collaborated with the director's crew. I never stopped watching, observing, asking questions" (BBC, 1972).

As her experience accumulated, she began to see things differently from Fanck and began to offer him suggestions, most of which he dismissed with a wave of his hand (Sarris, 1967). After all, Germany in the 1920s was not exactly a ripe environment for a woman to launch a film directing career. The women's movement had not yet reached Germany, and women were expected to concern themselves with "Kuche, Kinder und Kirche" (Kitchen, children and church). Hitler himself did not approve of working women (Leiser, 1974); that in itself made Riefenstahl's career all the more unprecedented.

By the end of the 1920s, Riefenstahl had appeared in three mountain films: The Holy Mountain, The Great Leap, and The Great White Hell of Pitz Palu (Infield, 1976). Receiving favorable reviews from many critics, she went on to star in Storms over Mount Blanc, her first

sound film (Kracauer, 1947). By this time, she decided to break away from Fanck and make a film on her own.

"I set about seeking a thread, a theme, a style, in the realm of legend," she rationalized. "Something that might allow me to give free rein to my juvenile sense of romanticism and the beautiful image" (Sarris, 1967).

Elaborating on a dance number she had once performed, she wrote, directed and starred in her "own" first film, The Blue Light, made in 1931. It is a fairytale legend taking place in the Dolomite mountain range in Italy, complete with hero, heroine and tragic ending. Here at last, Riefenstahl was able to pour her creative abilities into film without being restrained by anyone. Even criticism showed how well she had achieved her goal of creating fantasy out of reality: "There are others, where you feel the effort, the thought: I want to give the impression of romance, of mystery. The Blue Light belongs in this group" (Weiss, 1932).

Making one last film with Fanck, S.O.S. Iceberg, Riefenstahl ended her "just an actress" days. This last film was released about the same time that the Nazi regime edged its way into power, when Hitler was appointed chancellor. Two very creative and influential forces, Riefenstahl and Hitler were soon to converge and blend politics and film into an impregnable propaganda fortress.

Nazis Come to Power

The National Socialists had come into great favor, and by the 1932 election held a third of the seats in the Reichstag (Hull, 1973). Although Hitler was kept busy with politics, he enjoyed the attentions

of beautiful women, among them Riefenstahl. It is not known for certain when they first met; she has given different accounts of their first meeting (Infield, 1976).

However, Hitler wasn't totally absorbed in feminine pursuits; he kept persistently maneuvering in the government, and on January 30, 1933 was named chancellor of Germany by President von Hindenberg. Hitler didn't assume full dictatorial powers until 1934 when the aging von Hindenberg died, but many signals indicated that the Nazi party would bring loss of freedom and eventually, of life itself. Personal freedom was the first to go, and soon following was the renewal of centuries-old anti-Semitic persecutions. Hitler issued a decree "for the Protection of the People and the State" on February 28, 1933 that took away all personal freedoms and gave the Nazis the right to confiscate belongings and to search houses without a warrant (Taylor, 1979).

That was the deciding factor for many Germans, including those in the film industry. Many directors and stars fled the country, including Josef von Sternberg, Marlene Dietrich, Peter Lorre, and Conrad Viedt (Infield, 1976), not all of them Jewish. With all these traffic lights saying, "leave", why did Riefenstahl remain in Germany? "At that time, all diplomats agreed that the world needed a Hitler," she reasoned. "No one knew what he would be like years later" (Hitchens, 1965).

Indeed, she didn't have any real cause to leave; she in fact held a very coveted position in 1933. She was admired by a great proportion of movie audiences, her peers considered her an exceptional director,

and she also held the esteem of the new Fuhrer, who was impressed with her film The Blue Light. He was enthralled, not only with her cinematic talents but with her physical beauty and high ideals for Germany as well. Riefenstahl was equally enthused about him. "I believed that he would create employment and prosperity for the country," she reflected, "and I was flattered by his praise for The Blue Light" (Barsam, 1975).

Being the intelligent woman that she was, Riefenstahl saw an opportunity to further her ambitions through association with the Nazi party, Hitler in particular. Her only hurdle was the Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, who was jealous of her favored position with Hitler, and who did his best to make things difficult for her when she was making films for the Reich. Hitler would always help her out when Goebbels made trouble for her, however (Hull, 1973).

She became a member of the Reich Film Association and still kept in close fellowship with Hitler. By doing so, following the Nazi boycott of Jewish shops and businesses and the ousting of Jews from professional careers, she inadvertently was affirming her support of Hitler and his policies (Leiser, 1974).

The event of greatest political significance for the Nazi party was the annual party rally, held every September in Nuremberg. An annual event since 1923, Hitler decided that the 1934 rally should be put on film, and that Riefenstahl should be the person to direct it.

At first, she refused, citing her inexperience as a documentary filmmaker (she had only made one other short film of documentary nature in 1933) as the prime reason. She also wanted to shoot another film,

Tiefland, in Spain. She enlisted the help of a friend, Walter Ruttman, to assist with the rally film so she could go on to Spain and film as planned.

However, illness claimed her energy while there, and she spent a few weeks in a Madrid hospital. Tiefland's production plans were abandoned and she returned to Berlin in August. Once back in Berlin, she was paid a visit by Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess. He reminded her that the Fuhrer had asked her, not Ruttman, to do the film.

She went to Hitler, attempting to persuade him to let Ruttman make the film. No matter what approach she tried, he gently insisted otherwise. Finally, she reluctantly agreed, making certain that her own company would make the film with no interference from any government officials and with complete freedom to make the film as she saw fit. This was most likely a precaution against intervention by Goebbels (Infield, 1976).

Film Production

Triumph of the Will

Ufa (Universum Film A. G.), the largest employer of the German film industry, loaned Riefenstahl's company the money to make the film, entitled Triumph of the Will. Although the contract was made between Ufa and the Nazi party (Infield, 1976), the film was distinctively Riefenstahl's work. Every move and detail was carefully planned. A production assistant remembered her methods well: "She would assign you to a position, every single cameraman, and she would tell you what lens to use, what focal length, how many frames to run, what filter to

use. She knew what she was talking about" (Jaworsky, Walter, personal communication, Spring 1972).

She and her crew went to Nuremberg and prepared for the filming. Pits were dug in front of speaker platforms, tracks laid for traveling shots, elevators built for above the crowd shots, and camera mounts in automobiles were made. Architect Albert Speer, appointed by Hitler, remodeled several sites in Nuremberg and worked closely with Riefenstahl in getting effective backdrops and decorations ready for the rally. By the time the first wave of rally participants arrived in Nuremberg, the stage had been set. Riefenstahl was prepared to create the film that would establish her as a cinematic genius.

Was Triumph of the Will a great film? Critics differ; opinions range from total propaganda to total art and everywhere in between. By examining the film in detail, one can only formulate opinions. Just as in any film, there is no one correct way of interpretation.

After Triumph of the Will titles flashed on the screen, Wagnerian music enveloped the audience as the camera weaved amongst clouds and the following narration appeared on the screen: "September 5, 1934, twenty years after the outbreak of the World War, sixteen years after Germany's crucifixion, nineteen months after the commencement of the German renaissance, Adolf Hitler flew to Nuremberg again to review the columns of his faithful adherents" (NDSAP-Riefenstahl, 1934). The clouds suddenly parted and the city of Nuremberg could be seen. The camera hovered in closer to observe the rows of marching stormtroopers from a bird's-eye view, alternating this with shots of Hitler's plane beginning its descent to the city.

The airplane landed and moved toward the huge crowd and stopped. Impatient joy was felt by faces in the crowd, shown at close-up range. Cheers released the tension everyone felt when Hitler emerged from the plane, the savior descended from the heavens. The crowd then flowed forward, trying to catch a glimpse of him.

After his arrival, Hitler's car crawled through the Nuremberg streets on the way to his hotel, the Deutscher Hof. One shot was a pan of an ancient statue in the center of the city. The audience could only wonder--what conquerors has it seen, and what could it say about Hitler? That was another of Riefenstahl's trademarks, the fantasy that is always present in reality. Shots of Hitler were interspersed with well-known buildings of the city, suggesting a link between the past and modern times. The sequence ended with Hitler saluting his followers from a window at the Deutscher Hof. He was well guarded by SS troops, and the camera gave strong emphasis to the protection they give Hitler. These opening scenes establish that Hitler was revered and nearly worshipped by the masses, and that he derived his power from that reverence.

The remainder of the film profiled events of the 1934 rally. The official opening, and evening event, had party deputy Rudolf Hess' opening speech proclaiming that Hitler and Germany were one in the same. The roars of "Sieg Heil!" that follow were nearly deafening. Ten speakers followed, introduced by a shot of their last name shimmering into focus while cheers resounded in the background. In actuality, these speeches weren't all made at this opening session; they were edited cuts from many rally meetings (Infield, 1976).

A tremendous sense of rhythm was prevalent in the next sequence, which featured over 100,000 members of the German Labor Service. They were all in perfect formation, armed with gleaming shovels. Actions of each man were perfectly precise; their shovels were somewhat akin to guns in the manner that the men presented them in unison. Verbal rituals, such as "Comrade! From whence do you come" (NDSAP-Riefenstahl, 1934), were exchanged for the Fuhrer.

In the next scene, the somberness was replaced by the sunlit frivolity displayed by the Hitler Youth gathered in a stadium. Here, production planning and rehearsal were hardly needed. German children loved the Fuhrer, and it was easy for the cameras to catch the enthusiasm displayed by the children. Riefenstahl filled the screen with wildly jubilant faces. Hitler then addressed the youth. He made remarks about how they must remain hard and strong, never weaken, and hold fast to the new Germany (NDSAP-Riefenstahl, 1934).

It is interesting to note how Riefenstahl's cameras captured Hitler and emphasized him. Through angle and composition, his physical being is deceiving. He was of medium height and rather stocky build, but the camera said something different. Showing him behind a speaker platform, in a car, in a crowd and in facial closeups, he was likened to a god while his physical deficiencies were handily concealed.

The final two scenes of the film were rather foreboding in their solemnity. The first was a tribute to the German dead of World War I. Himmler, Hitler and SA chief Viktor Lutze marched down an avenue in the Luitpold Arena surrounded by storm troopers. Hitler laid a wreath at the war memorial and the three men turned and went back down the

avenue. Filmed from the elevator posts above the crowd, it was a chilling insight into the might of the Nazi war machine five years before the outbreak of war.

Hitler then made one final speech to a packed house in Luitpold Hall, promising the German nation a bright future through party unity. The background music rises to a crescendo as a shot of a fabric-draped swastika fills the screen, and the film ends.

Riefenstahl spent countless hours editing the picture. "In my cutting room, it was the most difficult work of my life. I was eighteen hours in the cutting room thinking how I can make the film interesting" (BBC, 1972). She had to make some skillful editing moves in order for the film to stay lively. The marches, speeches and militaristic flavor to everything tended to blur all together, so she made certain that the camera was almost in constant motion. Through her editing, she administered the falsehood that all the leaders appearing at Nuremberg wanted to improve Germany as one mind, with ultimate allegiance to Hitler.

She didn't have the film to her liking until early 1935. The premiere was on March 28 of that same year, in Berlin's Palast-am-Zoo (Leiser, 1974). It met wide acclaim, and the Fuhrer was especially pleased. Goebbels presented her with the German National Film Prize of 1935, and she also gratefully accepted the 1936 Italian Film Prize (Hinton, 1978). Outside of Germany and Italy, however, protests mixed in with the praise, citing evidence of propaganda in the film.

It is easy to see both propaganda and artistry in it. The film could not have been made without a great interest in the Nazi party and

its promotion. The intensity of the footage and the editing attest to this as well. Yet, artistic talent runs in tandem with the propaganda. The manner in which Riefenstahl saw things through the camera frame instead of her own eyes, the composition within the frame and the sheer ability to organize and perform a motion picture production on such a colossal scale certainly denotes artistic talents. The goal was thus attained; with her artistic talent, Hitler had achieved the status of "savior" of Germany.

Riefenstahl basked in the success of the film, knowing that her future in the cinema was secure, but only if she continued to cooperate with Hitler and the Nazis. As new laws and policies further clamped down on Jews and personal liberties, even more people fled the country. The future plans of the Nazis were becoming all the more obvious: total conquest of Europe and total annihilation of European Jewry.

The German film industry was experiencing this change as well. Riefenstahl was well aware of the restrictions, the censorship, the mass flight of film artists who refused to work under such conditions, and most of all, the elimination of Jewish directors, cast members and producers. Yet she stayed right where she was. "Whoever defends himself, accuses himself," she said after the war. "A commission was proposed to me and I accepted" (Sarris, 1967).

This commission was the new project that Hitler had assigned her: to film the 1936 Summer Olympic Games to be held in Berlin. However, the idea didn't originate with Hitler or Riefenstahl. A friend of hers, Dr. Carl Diehm, was watching her train in the Berlin stadium; she had always been an avid amateur athlete. Recalling the success of

Triumph of the Will and anticipating the upcoming Games, he put two and two together and arrived at the idea. He proposed it to the head of the International Olympic Committee and Riefenstahl, got favorable responses from both sides and the project was underway (Hinton, 1978).

Olympia

Hitler was determined to make a grand spectacle of the Olympiad; it would be another chance to show the world how superior to everything and everyone the new Germany had become. The regime by now had established itself as a master of mass pageantry, and this would be a fine instance to see the German nation's physical prowress manifested in its Olympic athletes and their victories.

In accepting this assignment, Riefenstahl also fell prey to many problems and limitations in production. Only newsreels had covered sport events until this time (Mandell, 1972). Cameramen weren't used to following athletic movement, film wasn't all that sensitive to outdoor light and there weren't any zoom lenses in 1936, so the camera would have to be placed close to the subject. Many of her peers felt that she couldn't overcome these restrictions and actually make an entertaining motion picture.

But everyone failed to reckon with her undying enthusiasm and energy. Together with Albert Speer, whom she had worked with for Triumph of the Will, she readied the sports-Palast Stadium for her production crew in much the same way as she did for Triumph. The resulting film would be an amazing feat for its day.

(Note: The film was split into two parts, Festival of the People, mostly track and field events, and Festival of Beauty, centering around

the decathalon, marathon and 100-yard dash. The film that was observed is a combined version of these two parts.)

The opening of Olympia was a linking sequence between ancient Greece and 1936 Berlin. As the camera prowled amongst ancient Greek statues, it came to rest on Myron's statue of the discus thrower. Suddenly, the statue came to life and hurled the discus. Other sports, the javelin throw and the shot put, were shown in much the same fashion. The hands of the shot putter tossing the shot back and forth evolved into feminine hands, and the shot opened up into an erotic, impressionistic dance performed by several nude women, including Riefenstahl herself (Jaworsky, Walter, personal communication, Spring 1972). The arms of the dancers dissolved into a flame which is that of the Olympic torch. Once the torch is lit, it was followed from Greece to Germany, first by footage of runners, and then by a map of Europe. When the stadium in Berlin was reached, the crowd was heard with the Olympic bell pealing. Reality had been reached. This journey from antiquity to modern times was a personal vision of Rienfenstahl's, a reflection of the standards of beauty and art.

The next sequence was of the opening ceremonies, a stirring scene in any Olympiad. The athletes of the world, under the auspices of their mother flag and fellow athletes, marched into the stadium and acknowledged the Tribune of Honor--the governing leader of the host country--Hitler. It was interesting to see how each nation acknowledged him. Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and France gave the Nazi salute; other nations dipped their flags as they passed. However, when the United States team passed the stand, they gave him

eyes right, but the Stars and Stripes remained high. The German audience was not pleased (Mandell, 1972). The torch was then put to the huge burner, it ignited, and Games began.

Field and track events followed. Women's discus throwing focused on Gisela Mauermayer, the German who captured the gold medal and seta new Olympic record. By featuring Mauermeyer so closely after Hitler in the opening ceremonies gave the impression that Germany was domination the '36 Games. Yet, Mauermeyer was graceful and skilled at her craft, and Riefenstahl would have been dissipating material if she hadn't featured the athlete.

The women's hurdles (filmed from behind the contestants at a rather unflattering angle), hammer throw and 100 meter race followed. The latter began a focus upon the American runner Jesse Owens. Riefenstahl devoted a great deal of footage to his events and award ceremonies, refuting any accusations that she discriminated against foreign, non-Caucasian Olympic athletes. Even so, Hitler resented Owens' victories and would leave the stadium before the medal presentations. "The Americans ought to be ashamed of themselves for letting their medals be won by Negroes," he told a confidante. "I would never allow myself to shake the hand of one" (Sarris, 1967). Yet Riefenstahl wasn't interested in race or color policies. She was concerned with the human body in athletic motion, and Owens' person was indeed a fitting subject. In the remainder of this film excerpt of Olympia, Riefenstahl included coverage of other track and field events, always taking care to avoid plain, ordinary coverage by using different camera angles and focal points.

The final event was the marathon race, in which Riefenstahl found another Olympic hero, Kitei Son of Japan, who was the victor of the race. Her cameras followed him, showing a full range of emotions and strain as he completed the twenty-six miles. Camera footage even showshis running feet as if Son himself were looking down at them. He climactically sprints into the stadium and across the finish line. Various other finishers are shown as they complete the race; for some the finish was anything but triumphant. The cameras capture their exhausted bodies eloquently. Fans cheered, the Olympic flame danced, and the Games came to an end. An ominous end, for it would be the last Olympics in a peaceful world for the next twelve years.

The monumental task of editing presented itself once again. One million feet of film had been shot (Mandell, 1972), so there was plenty of footage for Riefenstahl to lend her artistry to. How would audiences react to this novel form of motion picture?

Eighteen months passed until Olympia was completely finished. Riefenstahl described it as possibly the most grueling task of her life: "For Olympia I . . . lived in the editing room for a year and a half, never getting home before five o'clock in the morning. My life was tied to the material and to the film" (Sarris, 1967).

The film was ready for premiere on Hitler's birthday, April 20th, 1938 and was shown at the same theater as Triumph of the Will. It was easy to gain approval of Olympia from German critics; Goebbels had abolished criticism three months before the Olympics had ended (Mandell, 1972). But in the international arena, the eyes were sharper; the words harsher. 1936 Berlin had cleverly concealed the

Nazi plans from the rest of the world; foreign visitors could see little evidence of Hitler furthering his ambitions. But now there was no doubt that the dictator wanted to control Europe since he had sent troops into Austria and Czechoslovakia. In consequence, international critics viewed Olympia with a very captious eye. Most agreed that it was both a factual account of the 1936 Summer Games, and because of the film's beginning, and excellent soft-core propaganda source for the Nazis (Goelz, 1938).

Once again, the double content is present. Arguments for both sides could run on indefinitely. There is no question that Olympia remains as one of the finest films ever made of a sports event. It verified Riefenstahl's talents and skills she had demonstrated in Triumph of the Will. The government of Nazi Germany had arranged for the filming of the Olympics with the aim of obtaining more propaganda for Germany, however. Directly or indirectly (perhaps we will never know), this aim was rendered successfully.

No Triumph in America

In 1938, Riefenstahl made a journey to the United States upon Hitler's order. The exact reason is not known; perhaps it was to promote Olympia; maybe to ease tension between the two nations; or even to give Hitler more of an opportunity to work on his plans for conquest behind a diversion. Whatever the reason, the visit was a fiasco. Most Americans felt that Riefenstahl knew more about Hitler and what he was up to than she had revealed. Protests grew as she traveled across the nation to be received in Hollywood. On November 29th, the Hollywood

Anti-Nazi League ran this advertisement in Daily Variety, the film industry's trade journal:

> Today, Leni Riefenstahl, head of the Nazi film industry, has arrived in Hollywood. There is no room in Hollywood for Leni Riefenstahl. In this moment when hundreds of thousands of our brethren await certain death, close your doors to all Nazi agents. Let the world know there is no room in Hollywood for Nazi agents. Sign the petition for an economic embargo against Germany. (p. 16)

She was met with coldness and contempt wherever she went; only producer Hal Roach and cartoonist Walt Disney received her cordially (Infield, 1976). She didn't realize--or maybe wouldn't admit--that the reason for this holiday on ice was because of her vocal and cinematic support of Hitler. And that was the extent of her attempt at winning favor in America.

The War Years

During World War II, Riefenstahl decided against going to battlefronts and filming war. She once again began the attempt to film Tiefland, the project she had given up before Triumph of the Will. However, since fighting was underway, there wasn't the usual government support that she had become accustomed to. She plodded through production and by July of 1944 was ready for the closing shots of the film (Infield, 1976).

Personal tragedy would claim her energies in the fall of that year. Although happiness was hers when she had married Wermacht officer Peter Jacob earlier that year, death came mercilessly to her immediate family. Her brother perished in the war, and her father died of a heart attack, both within a few weeks of each other. Physical strain and breakdown from work left her to direct Tiefland from a stretcher at times (Hull, 1973).

As the tides of war turned into Germany, Riefenstahl gave up Tiefland from exhaustion and because the actors and crew had been called in to fight the war's last battles. She retired to her Austrian home in Kitzbuhel. It was here that she remained while the Nazi regime and its leader perished as it had lived, in flames.

War's Ravages

Riefenstahl would face a very difficult remainder of her life. The first of this misery was the Nuremberg Trials, held in the immediate post-war years. The Allies were determined to interrogate everyone connected with the Nazis; it didn't matter how close or distant the association. Naturally, Riefenstahl came under this jurisdiction and was blacklisted from the film industry until she could be cleared at the Trials. Through seemingly endless interrogation and viewing of her films, the commission finally gave the following statement: "The person concerned was not charged. In its action today the bureau has adopted the findings of the Baden-Baden State Commission and accordingly placed the person concerned in the group of Sympathizer without further optional reparation" (State Commission of Baden-Baden, 1949).

After being officially cleared, she went on living in Europe, collecting copies of her films when and where she could locate them. She did complete Tiefland, but it was coolly met in Europe. She started many film projects but most of them never left the writing pad. She was met with insults and unacceptance wherever she tried to work or be at the showing of one of her films. As a result, disillusionment gradually replaced her once lively joy of life. Now divorced, she

lives quietly in Munich, realizing at last that it was her association with Hitler and the decision to glorify his cause with her genius that brought about her downfall. There is not much of a chance for her to regain her fame of days gone by, but her works stand as an important reminder of something that should never be forgotten. Her films will keep those tragic memories alive so that the horrors of Nazi Germany will never be repeated.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSIONS

I always did like the word "why". Why led to all those other marvelous question words--where, when, how and who. That was always my first question when something curious happened in childhood. And now, with the master's degree within my grasp, I am once again confronted with "why"; it concerns Leni Riefenstahl.

There are the usual obvious reasons for admiring her enough to do a four month research effort about her life and works. She was a woman "doing her own thing" in a man's world in a very formidable, turbulent period of world history. She was a shining star for a brief period of her life in the most unstable of all professions, filmmaking. I guess these reasons are enough for most film buffs or those who have a fascination with Nazi Germany.

I admire her for two additional reasons. First is her use of the medium. I viewed her films Triumph of the Will and Olympia noticing some propaganda, true, but there was art to them as well. Like her, I saw lines in the saluting arms and the marching columns, composition using flags and buntings and human emotion in the facial closeups. It personally didn't matter that the Nazis were at center stage. I simply enjoyed the way that she saw things and how she used film to create her own personal visions.

Next, I found her sense of artistry and individualism the most intriguing. Here was a woman who, despite odds that could discourage anyone, practiced her art in an environment that had slapped down restrictions that stunted the growth of the arts severely. Granted,

she had to comply with the policies and doctrines of the Nazis somewhat, but she still had freedom--however small--to put her signature in the films that she made.

That freedom is something quite valuable when working with media. When man has the freedom and encouragement to create methods of communicating, then the freedom to use these methods should be boundless. Just at the human mind holds infinite creative ideas, so should the freedom to express these ideas be infinite.

As a result of the Nazi regime, "propaganda" became a dirty word, bringing visions of Hitler screaming in a speech, thousands saluting him and swastika flags billowing in the wind. And ever since her unsuccessful visit to the United States in 1938, Riefenstahl has had to bear up under such labels as "queen of Nazi propaganda", among other things. This I think is extremely unfair and is characteristic of the human race's attitude toward artists in general. If the artist chooses to represent or promote something that is morally wrong or distasteful, they live with that label for life. But it is not characteristic of an artist to be concerned with how others view his/her work. It can be in their thoughts to a certain extent, but personal conceptions and visualizations must matter more or an artist's work wouldn't be original--just the ideas of others fashioned into a tangible form. Riefenstahl's works are a tense balance of the opinions of others and her own. This mystifies many; I however am content to accept this as one of the mysteries of the human spirit that will probably forever remain unsolved and unexplained.

I could defend and discuss her works as to whether they are propaganda or art for hours, maybe even days on end. However, what I feel that she produced is art. What she chose to enlighten with her genius caused her work to become propaganda. Her works were organized efforts to bring audiences to acceptance of Nazi ideology, and with the exception of that subject matter, and works of art in the cinematic arena.

"Heil" to Leni Riefenstahl! She holds my esteem for being a media artist in the face of the very adversity that threatens art anywhere and at any time: the restriction and loss of freedom to create what is seen and felt in the imagination. I only hope that I can continue to emulate her courage and artistic abilities in the media vocation that I choose.

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