Mother of All Spectacles

Ray Müller’s *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*¹

When Ray Müller, director of *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, attempts to film Riefenstahl walking and talking at the former UFA film studios in Babelsberg, Germany, she refuses and responds angrily, “Talk? As I’m walking? No!... I’ve never done that in my life... absolutely not... I’m not a ghost!” Riefenstahl is right; she has no need to prove her continued existence. This one-time favorite daughter of the Third Reich knows she’s very much alive, well, and with us. She’s no ghost. Indeed, the film proclaims her the still living “mother of documentary,” and shows her waiting implacably for a historical restitution she hopes is yet to come. This strange state makes Riefenstahl the ultimate “undead” figure of postwar culture. Her lingering presence testifies not to our great progress from a much darker era, but rather to the fact that we remain, most terrifyingly, under her aegis.

*The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (1991), which consists of interviews with Riefenstahl, flashbacks, and film sequences, tells the story of Riefenstahl’s remarkable life and her relationship to National Socialism. The documentary presents a subject who fascinates because, morbid as it may sound, she is still alive and remains “the last great surviving image-maker of the Nazis.” However, Riefenstahl does more than simply survive. She presides as the “mother” of modern media, whose controversy remains her role in Nazi cultural politics and its legacy after the Second World War. In 1946 Riefenstahl testified in front of
postwar denazification tribunals, and was exonerated but judged a “sympathizer.” There have been many other legal battles since, and she has won every time. But if the courts have found her innocent of crimes committed during World War II, her public has nevertheless been divided. For some, her works present the clearest example of Nazi aesthetics. For others, she has unfairly shouldered the blame for “the real culprits of the regime, most of whom, as far as film making goes, were quite happily reintegrated into the industry.”

For still others, she is an artist who requires recuperation from her past association with the National Socialism. Whether exonerated or excoriated by her postwar audience, Riefenstahl enjoyed a role in the Third Reich that was both unique and of her own making. Goebbels’ diaries proclaim her womanly charms; Hitler admired her dancing in Arnold Fanck’s Der heilige Berg (The Holy Mountain [1926]), and praised her own feature film, Das bleue Licht (The Blue Light [1932]). Riefenstahl once gave and still gives the impression of an individualist creative personality, and this ethos proves her greatest defense in front of Müller’s camera.

Promoting herself as a dancer in the 1920s and thereby winning the attention of Max Reinhardt; sending pictures of herself to Fanck and capturing the role of female lead in his mountain films; inventing herself as Junta, the ill-fated mountain girl in The Blue Light and using this film as a testimony to her apolitical auteurism; and then attempting to mount a comeback as an African adventureress and photographer, Riefenstahl has made her 90 tenacious years into a series of spectacular media vehicles for herself. She entertained no different hopes for Müller’s film, which began as her own idea. Over the last few decades, Riefenstahl had many offers to make a documentary about her life and work but consistently rejected them all. But when she learned that her old friend and former mountain-film costar, Luis Trenker, had died, she called a producer with whom Trenker had worked, and asked if he would be interested in making a film about her. He was interested. Ray Müller, however, a maker of National Geographic-style travel films and culture documentaries for German television, was not especially sanguine about associating himself with Riefenstahl. But when the producer told him that 18 filmmakers, including many of the big-name European directors such as Ophüls, had already declined the project, he accepted the offer. The documentary turned out to be three times its originally contracted length of 90 minutes; it was aired on French and British television before making the rounds at film festivals in Toronto and New York in 1992. In Germany it was shown on a small cable channel. That The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl circulated so widely but premièred with such a low profile in her native land attests to her continued controversy. Her connection to Nazism renders her at once a pariah and a source of fascination, and Müller’s comments on the experience of making the documentary suggest this much:

Just being associated with the name of Riefenstahl is bad for your reputation. When rumors spread around that I was going to make the film, I was personally insulted by some people. . . . They called me “Nazi Mueller,” things like that. Even within the TV station that was co-producing the film there was tremendous tension. Many people didn’t want the project.
Yet despite the opposition Müller encountered, he found he couldn’t say enough about Riefenstahl. Asked why he made the film three hours long, Müller responds with a statement that reveals much about his own position on Riefenstahl as well as her recent source of fascination:

We didn’t want to [make a three-hour film]—the contracts were for ninety minutes—then we found such a wealth of material. Another thing is that people, mostly for commercial reasons, wanted to concentrate on the political stuff. But if you want to be fair to her... I mean, she had a creative life of seventy years, and to show only the eight years she worked under Hitler is not fair to the personality. Even if the other stuff may be less thrilling or less controversial, it’s still what she did. Perhaps the film could be shortened twenty minutes, but not much more. I wouldn’t cut it down to ninety minutes, that’s not possible.6

While Müller understands his controversial subject’s potential for creating a salable spectacle and hopes to counteract this with a more in-depth look at Riefenstahl’s life and work, his comments suggest he sees no continuity in her career. That is, Müller implies that he views Riefenstahl’s films made under the Third Reich in isolation from the rest of her oeuvre. This film is thus of two minds. Müller proves a most persistent interviewer who attempts to solicit a statement about the social responsibility of film-making—Riefenstahl apparently complained his questioning was worse than her denazification trial—and he devotes much reverent attention to her as an auteur whose art should be judged for its technical contributions to film-making. When Müller is asked how the experience of making this film changed him as a filmmaker, he responds:

You can learn a lot from this enormous power she has... It was tough for her to do this film because we asked a lot of her, like going up in a helicopter at her age. She never complained once. Even now, if you would say, “Come on, Leni, you have to get up at four in the morning, it’s pouring rain, you have to stand on top of a mountain for three hours because the camera is going,” she would do it if she could be convinced it was a good shot. Even at her age, she would do anything for a good shot. In that respect, she’s a model for every filmmaker.7

This sense of awe about Riefenstahl as both a filmmaker and a charismatic personality at the age of 91 translates into the image on the screen. Consistently dazzling the audience with images of this old woman on top of mountains, under the sea, and in the studio, Müller presents Riefenstahl both “as a model for every filmmaker” and as an icon of vitality who inspires an image-conscious 1990s audience to identify with her.

The opening sequence establishes Riefenstahl as a fascinating “personality.” It begins with a montage of shots of Riefenstahl scuba diving at the age of 90, clips of her Africa trips from the 1960s, and scenes from her films made under the Third Reich. It then cuts to a shot of Riefenstahl’s house at night. The camera moves like a stalker thorough the bushes outside and pauses on a shadowy figure seen only through the blinds. The voice-over begins:

We are in the presence of a legend with many faces: Loathed by many, admired deeply by others, her name is still taboo in Germany today. ... Leni Riefenstahl, the last great surviving image-maker for the Nazis: A feminist pioneer, or a woman of evil?

These two options give us little choice. The suggestion that she might be a feminist pioneer sounds like the 1990s revisionism that attempts to recuperate Riefenstahl on the basis of her gender. There is nothing feminist about Riefenstahl or her work, and simply being a woman director does not qualify her for this designation. The suggestion that she’s a woman of evil, meanwhile, is an ad hominem attack that allows Riefenstahl to stand in for the larger evils of the Third Reich. This latter position reduces the complexity of the relation of culture and cultural producers to politics with the rather crude assumption that culture has the powers to implement official policy and enact evil deeds. Müller states that his film will avoid such received positions and approach Riefenstahl “without preconceptions.”

Having articulated his reservations about associating his name with a one-time Nazi director only to find himself fascinated by his subject, Müller also attempts to gain some critical distance. His filmic solution to the problem of representing Riefenstahl is to offer no solution in particular, but instead to vacillate in postures and approaches—sometimes critical, sometimes lurid, sometimes fawning, sometimes parodic. Part I begins as a flashback, with the aged filmmaker looking at glamorous promotion photos of herself. Riefenstahl comments that she experiences
the photos as she would looking at another person. The film proceeds to tell the story of her early years in German cinema. Parody frames Part II, which opens with a sequence of Riefenstahl's god-like Olympic humans, Greek statues, and mysteriously photographed landscapes. The film then cuts to a shot of the creator of this heroic vision on her way to the Olympic stadium. The camera swings behind Riefenstahl and shows her back-lit, larger than life, striding through the Grecian columns in a pink raincoat and demure matching handbag. The music swells and Riefenstahl finds herself alone in the stadium. Here, her aesthetics are made to seem corny and self-inflated. Elsewhere, in the darkened hallway at UFA, Riefenstahl appears in the same pink raincoat and handbag as she approaches another old haunt, but the tone is melancholy, showing her to be old, frail, and quite literally outside the mainstream of German film history. While this scene at Babelsberg is deflationary, inviting Riefenstahl back as history's loser to a place where her one-time rival Marlene Dietrich has been honored, Riefenstahl herself remains impervious to insult and holds herself triumphantly before Müller's camera. Moreover, she appropriates the conceit of her outsideriness as her own. Riefenstahl would like to claim a certain modesty in having occupied only the smaller of UFA's studios for the production of Fanck's mountain films, and she would also have it that her art and person were estranged from the centralized Nazi film machine under Goebbels. Here, Müller reinforces these positions.

If parody offers little beyond the suggestion that Grecian fantasies have gone out of style with the Third Reich and if melancholy runs aground on Riefenstahl’s own spurious account, Müller refrains from employing these modes in excess. For the most part, the documentary plays it straight and follows a linear chronology of Riefenstahl’s life intercut with film clips and interviews which endeavor to expose the truth about its subject. This effort at presenting Riefenstahl in a style of “objectivity,” or as the voice-over claims, “without preconceptions,” proves immediately problematic with a personality like Riefenstahl, whose entire life and sense of self are about drama and fictive diversions. Müller copes with this difference in documentary approaches by including marginal commentary and cut-outs. This footage, which appears between actual film sequences, thematicizes the struggles between the two directors, and shows Riefenstahl wanting very much to direct this picture while her director appears often at a loss. Above all, these sequences depict a subject who knows exactly what the German title of the film, Die Macht der Bilder, suggests: the power of pictures.

The scene at UFA where Müller asks Riefenstahl to walk and talk in front of the camera is one such moment in his film. Another occurs during a discussion of Sieg des Glaubens (Victory of Faith [1933]), her nearly forgotten first documentary effort for the Nazis. Riefenstahl’s attempt at filming the 1933 Nazi party congress in Nuremberg depicts the Nazis wandering somewhat aimlessly about. The voice-over comments, “The Nazis had not yet learned to march like Nazis. . . . Hitler and Riefenstahl were still trying to get it right.” Both aesthetically and historically, the film is an embarrassment to her.

Riefenstahl objects when Müller refers to Sieg des Glaubens as her “film.” “It’s not even a proper film, it’s just a few shots I put together . . . it has nothing to do with my technique,” she insists. Standing in the empty stadium on the site of the 1934 rally, Müller pushes the point that she made not only one infamous documentary of the Nuremberg rallies, but two. She does not respond to his suggestion that she had more interest in official Nazi promotions than she’s now willing to admit, but continues instead in her effort to deny the 1933 documentary’s status as a film. When Müller persists, she objects angrily to the poor lighting, telling him she’s glad to speak about this other film at length, “Aber bei diesem Scheißlicht doch nicht.” (“But not in this bloody lighting”—the British translation of Scheiß as “bloody” sounding a bit tame to American ears.) As she grabs him by the arm and shakes him, telling Müller it’s important that he understand the difference between the two films—one being a proper artistic effort in which she was able to employ her “technique” and the other not—Riefenstahl displays strength at once remarkable for a woman of her age and yet unsurprising given her determination to have history depicted to her liking. After swearing about the lighting, Riefenstahl gets to replay the scene. Shot this time in low, theatrical light at her home, she explains the reason for two documentaries in melodramatic terms. It was a struggle between Hitler and Goebbels, whose enmity she’d aroused after refusing his advances.

Riefenstahl’s diversions to melodramatic narrative in no way contradict her interest in the material events that have shaped her life and work. Indeed, despite all her protestations to Müller about her lack of interest in politics, she also shows herself quite willing to engage in amateur political historiography. In a sequence shot at the Olympic stadium, the voice-over tells the audience that Riefenstahl and her old “cam-
paigners” are about to take a coffee break; the picture shows one of Müller’s cameramen pausing to readjust his lens. Then the camera rolls again, this time framed in brackets so the audience knows the footage is not part of the official filming process. Seen sitting with Guzzi Lantschner and Walter Frentz, two of her old cameramen who helped film Olympia, Riefenstahl relates an anecdote in which Churchill was supposedly impressed by Hitler and initially wanted to emulate him. She tells them, “In 1935 Churchill said, ‘I envy the Germans for their Führer,’... and then two years later he said, ‘The German swine must be slaughtered.’” The story is vague, but its intent is clear: Riefenstahl depicts herself among the great political powers of the Second World War, purports to have known their personal political aspirations, reduces all political positions to questions of charismatic leadership, and then revises this bit of history to suggest Allied and Axis interests were initially the same. Riefenstahl’s old friends nod dutifully. She goes on to marvel with Walter Frentz at his own proximity to the Nazi elite. Müller, meanwhile, has captured this discussion while on-the-prowl and off-the-record, and frames it as evidence of Riefenstahl’s interest in politics which he’s caught unbeknownst to her. As if to reinforce the sensation of having caught Riefenstahl talking politics, Müller includes a voice-over that says: “Riefenstahl refuses to discuss politics in public.” This is a telling moment both for Riefenstahl and her director. While it shows that Riefenstahl never relinquished her admiration of the Nazis, the sequence also reminds the audience Riefenstahl really has nothing new to say and that this film itself can only provide a spectacle in which she attempts once more to restore her reputation. Müller thus finds himself in the reactive position of contesting her case.

The segment on Triumph of the Will, meanwhile, reveals the film’s central ambivalence. On the one hand, like the “off-the-record” sequences, this part of the film hopes to expose the problems with Riefenstahl’s self-understanding as an artist. It shows Riefenstahl disparaging Triumph of the Will for all the misfortune it has brought her while she also attempts to recover it as part of her artistic oeuvre. She even goes so far as to claim this documentary of the 1934 rallies, which has been called “one of the few aesthetic monuments of German fascism that has attracted serious critical scrutiny,” is unimportant in its contents. Whether she was filming fruit or vegetables or Nazis, it was all the same to her, she tells Müller. Sitting at her cutting table, glowing with un Concealed artistic pride as she views a copy of Triumph of the Will, Riefenstahl calls attention to her spectacular editing. She shows Müller a sequence with Nazi troops descending the stadium in step with the music—this is the same clip he uses in the opening sequence—and presents it as an example of her precise formalism and filmic technique. While this segment displays the absurdity of Riefenstahl’s disclaimers about the contents of Triumph of the Will, it
also adopts Riefenstahl’s vocabulary and thereby undermines its own critique. Asking the rhetorical question of whether Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* was a “triumph of her own will or a pact with the devil,” the documentary offers only two choices: *Is Triumph of the Will*, which the voice-over dubiously names “the best propaganda film of all time,” an unfortunate commission which nevertheless inspires film-making awe, or is it the result of a naively mistaken alliance with a demonic force. In either case, Riefenstahl comes off as an artist whose “tragic” flaw lies in her “talent”—Müller even says “her talent is her tragedy”—and in the bad company she kept.11

The film’s attempt to recover Riefenstahl as an artist is most clear in Müller’s extended and sympathetic sequence on *The Blue Light*. With clips, interviews, and lavish attention to her directorial techniques, the sequence on *The Blue Light* presents an image of Riefenstahl as a director who seems to have produced genuinely innovative films apart from her explicit efforts for the Third Reich. But *The Blue Light*’s production history complicates such an account. Riefenstahl, who collaborated on her 1932 feature with a Jewish leftist intellectual scriptwriter, Béla Balázs, excised his name from the credits upon its 1938 rerelease after the success of *Olympia*.12 For a 1990s audience, she appears to have reinstated Balázs and even recruits him as a political alibi. Shown leafing through the original film script, which she proffers as both an authenticating document of her early artistic efforts and proof of her political openness, Riefenstahl refers to her work with Balázs as a “wonderful collaboration.”

But it is not merely her treatment of Balázs that has raised questions about Riefenstahl’s film. If her first feature has appeared to some—including Müller—as an early masterpiece worthy of praise for its pioneering techniques,13 it has also been denounced as an aesthetic precursor to Nazism. In his *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Siegfried Kracauer categorized Riefenstahl’s *The Blue Light* as part of a “surge of pro-Nazi tendencies during the pre-Hitler period” that was characterized “by the evolution of the mountain film.”14 Identifying similarities between the images of cloud-enveloped mountains of the mountain film genre and the clouds surrounding the machine-borne Führer in *Triumph of the Will*, Kracauer also saw a continuity between Riefenstahl’s Junta character and “a political regime which relies on intuition, worships nature and cultivates myth.”15

Kracauer’s efforts to establish a continuity between Riefenstahl’s pre-Nazi work and Nazism informs Susan Sontag’s examination of the continuity between Riefenstahl’s Nazi-era and postwar work. Sontag, like Kracauer, offers an anatomy of Nazi aesthetics:

Fascist aesthetics include but go far beyond the rather special celebration of the primitive to be found in *The Last of the Nuba*. [Riefenstahl’s book of photos of the Nuba tribe] More generally, they flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain: they endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude.16

Reserving special status for Riefenstahl among artists like Céline, Benn, Marinetti, Pound, Hamsun, and others who became Fascist sympathizers, Sontag depicts Riefenstahl as “the only major artist who was completely identified with the Nazi era and whose work, not only during the Third Reich but thirty years after its fall, has consistently illustrated the many themes of fascist aesthetics.”17 But where Kracauer’s analysis is too schematic, suggesting perhaps a “linear route from glaciers to *Gleichschaltung*,”18 Sontag’s analysis suffers similar problems. In fact, her portrayal of Fascism also maintains a now largely disputed view of Nazi culture as purely retrograde: “Nazi art is reactionary, defiantly outside the century’s mainstream of achievement in the arts.”19 Elaborating and modifying Kracauer’s and Sontag’s respective arguments, Eric Rentschler contends that Riefenstahl’s seemingly “romantic sentimentality” and “antimodern persuasion” constitute in fact a “reactionary modernism,” that is, a nonsynchronous blend of pre-modern fantasies and technological instrumentalism.20 Riefenstahl’s debut feature, a film which employs high modernist techniques and technology to form its vision of a mythical pre-urban Germanic existence, is a “master text” in the history of Nazi cinema. Rentschler concludes: “As a work of art and an artifact, *The Blue Light* anticipates and embodies the operations of the cinematic machine under National Socialism.”21

The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl attempts to address these debates about Riefenstahl’s aesthetics, raising similar questions about Riefenstahl’s representation of the human body, of nature, of heroic sacrifice, of an idealized Germanic existence. At one point, Müller even asks Riefenstahl to reply to Sontag’s analyses. Riefenstahl maintains she has no
idea what a Fascist aesthetic might be and responds: How could an intelligent woman like Sontag write such things? This evasive personalized refutation is strangely apposite in the context of a film so heavily focused on Riefenstahl’s own person. Neither Müller’s film nor its subject succeeds (hers is a more willful failure, to be sure) in penetrating the question of filmic aesthetics and their larger social significance.

But, where Müller’s absorption in Riefenstahl’s person and personal achievements as a filmmaker disables his critique of her aesthetics, it nevertheless provides insight into Riefenstahl’s views on culture and cultural production. These views, while cloaked in a discourse of artistic creation and individualism, in no way contradict the conformist culture of National Socialism. For Riefenstahl represents a kind of anti-establishment aesthetic that in fact became instrumental to Germany’s film establishment. This aesthetic enabled Nazism to present itself as the rebellious reformer of a “corrupt” Weimar culture.

Assailing both mass culture and the fetishization of high culture (Riefenstahl’s categorical refuge), Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer theorize the relation of culture and collective understanding in their darkly hyperbolic essay “The Culture Industry.” Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the seeds of Nazi mass manipulation and the destruction of public life appear in Weimar film and persist after the war:

In Germany the graveyard stillness of the dictatorship already hung over the gayest films of the democratic era... The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The old experience of the moviegoer, who sees the world as an extension of the film he has just left (because the latter is intent on reproducing the world of everyday perceptions), is now the producer’s guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the world outside is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen.22

Mobilizing a medium already widely popular in Weimar Germany, National Socialism attempted to libidinally bind and persuade the German public. Hollywood, the Frankfurt theorists exhort, displays no different intent. Film is thus a fraudulent mimesis that displaces reality and beguiles its viewers with a fantasy world that uniformly reproduces and masks a situation of social domination. Although Adorno himself retains a much more complex view of film and mass culture, the “Culture Industry” essay, in its all too simple continuity from Weimar to German Fascism and postwar culture, overlooks the creative and political potential manifested in Weimar’s fantasy, horror, and workers’ films as well as in Riefenstahl’s modernist features and documentaries. Riefenstahl, who rejects a notion of film that endeavors to represent reality at all, thus seems to evade Adorno and Horkheimer’s categorization. Her claim to fame, which Müller discusses at length in the segments on Triumph of the Will and Olympia, lies in her introduction of visually exciting narrative/fictive techniques into the traditionally “objective” form of documentary.

But she is far from being one to buck tradition. Firmly locating herself within the dialectic of enlightenment outlined by Adorno and Horkheimer, Riefenstahl employs categories of a now defunct bourgeois liberalism to ideological ends. In appealing to the category of art-for-art’s-sake in effort to disavow the political content of her work, Riefenstahl shows herself to be a cultural fetishist whose strategies of self-exculpation rely on a fetishized reception of high culture. Although she refuses the mimesis of Nazi and Hollywood cinemas, she nevertheless embraces an equally fraudulent formalism, which reveals itself to be simply a technical prowess she attempts to marshal to her defense. The ideological nature of this pseudo-formalism becomes clear in her assertion of indifference to the contents of a film like Triumph of the Will. Technique alone is transcendent for her, and she hopes postwar students of film will exonerate her on this basis. Presenting her films as art in opposition to what she derides as Nazi “kitsch,” Riefenstahl endeavors to gain distance from popular culture while she sustains the operative lie of Nazi cultural politics—that its cultural products were disinterested and unpolitical.

The Nazi spectacle of massive public events, monumental architectural projects, and standardized mass media bequeaths to postwar culture a more diffused type of media spectacle, which has been theorized in another critical context by Guy Debord, whose focus is the postindustrial situation of capitalist domination in Western nations.23 “Spectacle” with regard to Riefenstahl refers not so much to Debord’s deeply pessimistic notion of a spectacle that “duplicates” its passive consumers as to her claims to a hermetically sealed world of art. Her view recalls the second paragraph of The Society of the Spectacle:24

Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart,
an object of mere contemplation in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself.25

Riefenstahl’s own world of the autonomous image was not only especially compatible with Nazi cultural politics, it could also be subtly recycled in discourses of cultural fetishism about art and auteurist film after 1945. Müller’s camera, meanwhile, surely beholds a liar: She had no erotic contact with Goebbels? What about the entries in his diaries? Or, Hitler? Or Nazi millenarianism? How about this triumphalist telegram to Hitler when he marched into Paris? Did Riefenstahl use gypsies from a concentration camp in her film Tiefland, made during the war? How much did she know about the concentration camps? As she denies all knowledge and emphatically answers all questions in the negative, Müller consistently supplies evidence to the contrary. His efforts to expose these “lies” in the positivist sense do much to indict her as a public figure. Yet Riefenstahl’s spectacle—her will to mendacity, as Debord would have it—transcends the particular facts of her own existential choices. This nonagenarian director appears in Müller’s documentary as one particularly fascinating originator of the specular “pseudo-world appâr” and certainly the most historically tainted defender of cultural disinterest and indifference. In this sense, she is the “undead” of Nazism, its ever vigorous spirit in postwar culture.

Popular response to Müller’s documentary intuitively understands Riefenstahl’s legacy in postwar culture, where beguiling image-making is now so ubiquitous that “lying” may well be too strong a word. A review in the Canadian popular weekly, Maclean’s, offers an example:

As an interrogator, Müller is no match for his subject, who often talks back to him like a temperamental diva. . . Almost nothing is revealed of Riefenstahl’s personal life (she has lived with technician Horst Kettner, 42 years her junior, since 1968), not to mention how she has managed to preserve herself so miraculously well—where is Barbara Walters when you need her?26

Like a true celebrity, Riefenstahl stages tantrums and elicits tabloid-style interest in her love life and perhaps also her plastic surgeon. Riefenstahl, however, is no Hollywood denizen. She may fascinate as much as any, but her powers of voyeuristic seduction arise from her connection to Nazism and the role she played as one of National Socialism’s most visible and personally intriguing imagemakers. Postwar viewers look back upon her still dazzling images and are even more captivated by the works and personality that made them because of their radical specular innovation and the social force they represent. Susan Sontag offers the most provocative analysis of Riefenstahl’s increased powers of fascination—only she assumes Riefenstahl’s sudden rediscovery in the 1970s was due to public indifference to National Socialism:

It is not that Riefenstahl’s Nazi past has suddenly become acceptable. It is simply that, with the turn of the cultural wheel, it no longer matters. Instead of dispensing a freeze-dried version of history from above, a liberal society settles such questions by waiting for cycles of taste to distill out the controversy.27

Sontag is both right and wrong in her estimation of Riefenstahl’s renewed powers of fascination in the last few decades. She is right in so far as efforts to rehabilitate Riefenstahl tend to operate in the world of laissez-faire aestheticism where art is autonomous from politics and films are seen as free from their contexts of national cinemas. However, Sontag is wrong if she thinks Riefenstahl’s connection to Nazism no longer matters. Rather, such a past simply figures differently. It becomes a source of interest and perhaps also reaction. Where Sontag refers to auteurs and their claims for the recovery of Riefenstahl’s work apart from her past, Müller’s film elicits a less highfalutin, increasingly titillated, and emphatic response, as typified by the reviewer in Maclean’s.

But, if Riefenstahl is the star and diva of Müller’s film, for all her mesmerizing and willful individualism she maintains an aesthetic to the contrary. Ultimately, she insists on the inevitable powerlessness of the individual before history, social institutions, and culture, and in so doing, perpetuates the idea of inescapable collective submission under National Socialism. As Müller questions her about the past, her every answer suggests that both she and her fellow Germans had little choice but to be duped and drawn in by Hitler and his Nazi institutions. But it does not follow that because Hitler and Goebbels attempted to administer culture to the German people, the Germans had no ability to form their own opinions about it. Nor does it follow that such a high-profile individual as Riefenstahl remained so utterly incapable of shaping her own life choices. Yet this is exactly how Riefenstahl views her personal history as well as that of the German public, whom she diagnoses as suffering from an unlucky combination of obedient character and authoritarian
social conditioning. When Müller plays Riefenstahl a tape of Marlene Dietrich’s comments on Germany’s desire for conformity in the 1930s, Riefenstahl appears more than willing to concur. Müller and Riefenstahl sit listening to the voice of the absent Dietrich as she slurs her words in that famous whisky tenor:

We Germans wanted a Führer, right? We got one, right? We Germans are like that, we want a Führer. . . . And what happens? Along comes this ghostly Hitler and we say, great, finally someone who will tell us what do.

Although Riefenstahl merely affirms Dietrich’s none too sophisticated lounge-speak theory of the Germanic will to conformity, these words spoken by an irreverent Weimar “outsider” resonate differently when sustained by Riefenstahl, the Nazi insider. Riefenstahl elaborates on Dietrich’s statements by asserting that all Germans learn discipline at school and at home (Müller cuts to a photograph of Riefenstahl as a small child with her family) and come to desire an authoritarian model. These universalizing claims about the German disposition are, however, particular to her own aesthetics, which she expounds upon during The Blue Light and Olympia sequences. Whether she essentializes Germanic culture or plays the victim exposed to inauspicious historical events, Riefenstahl attempts to remove the burden of responsibility both from herself as a public figure and from the German public who once admired her and consumed her images.

Towards the end of the film, there is a montage of the eyes of Riefenstahl’s Junta character and a black-and-white close-up of Hitler’s demonic-looking gaze, suggesting perhaps that Riefenstahl played Hitler’s muse, or that she might have been a female Faust figure to Hitler’s Mephistopheles.28 This image intends to answer Müller’s earlier question: whether Riefenstahl’s dealings with Hitler were a “triumph of her own will, or a pact with the devil.” But Riefenstahl is not simply the vain artist who got in over her head with the Nazis, because she, like Faust, was hungry for knowledge and power. She was and remains a key player. If Nazi cinema was, according to Eric Rentschler, an “other-directed cinema,”29 which “enabled the Germans to withstand awful truths and ignore hideous presentiments,”30 Riefenstahl figures as one of its contributors whose own persona and aesthetics of rugged individualism ultimately served the conformist ends of the regime.

Riefenstahl is an auteur, unlike many of the Nazi directors, and it is her unique film talents which compromise rather than, as she would hope, absolve her. The brand of image-making which once served the centralized cultural politics of the Third Reich now persists in other more diffused media spectacles that aim to excite the emotions and elide the material circumstances of their given context. Though not the lone source of postwar media spectacles, her work forms a caesura, after which it is impossible to think of film without its instrumental social function and its ideologically defensive claims to substantive aesthetic merit. This combination of politically volatile image-making and political disavowal is Riefenstahl’s special contribution to twentieth-century culture.

Every disavowal is a spectacular performance, and the documentary is full of these. Asked to reflect on the aesthetics of National Socialism and the mobilization of culture under the Third Reich, Riefenstahl retorts with impatient theatrical innocence, “What is a fascist aesthetic? A Heil Hitler greeting?” Early in the film she also makes an off-handed remark about the Sieg Heil, pitting herself and her own personal aesthetics against
history and Nazism. After arguing with Müller on a mountain top about the best way to frame her against the peaks, telling him he has to find a “filmic solution” to the problem of framing her properly, she finally acquiesces, reads herself for the cameras and then says, looking somewhat persecuted, “Don’t tell me you want a Hitler salute?” The crew laughs in good humor, because she’s agreed to follow Müller’s direction and seems to be showing a little self-reflexive irony. Nothing could be farther from the case. Appearing in a shot that conflicts with her aesthetics and technical expertise, she acts as though the one-time Nazi gesture of faith is being foisted upon her against her will by a postwar generation that understands nothing of her personal contributions to film form.

But although Riefenstahl doesn’t know it, Müller has indeed found a filmic solution to representing her. Either unable or unwilling to emulate Riefenstahl’s technique, The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl offers a resolutely unartistic spectacle. To be sure, this is not the only filmic solution to representing Riefenstahl. It is possible to imagine other kinds of efforts that engage rather than avoid her style, but The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl devotes its energies to content and to eliciting a statement from its subject. Riefenstahl’s pronouncements in the film prevent her from being seen solely as an auteur whose techniques alone merit study—even if merely to study them as a blueprint for persuasive image-making. On the contrary, studying Riefenstahl means taking her ideas and status as a public figure into account alongside her oeuvre. For it is not simply enough to recognize the technical contributions of Olympia in contemporary sports photography, or to acknowledge her influence in the artfulness of officially sponsored media events, or to understand how seemingly apolitical feature films do in fact reinforce cultural values. The mother of modern image-making is also the guardian of postwar cultural cynicism. Riefenstahl’s insistence that art inhabits a sphere separate from politics and that individuals remain without agency or responsibility before institutions might sound strikingly unoriginal and somewhat trite were it not for the fact that she was on the Nazi scene when such ideas were being tested in practice.

Ruth Starkman is Visiting Assistant Professor of German at the University of Utah. She has written on Theodor W. Adorno, recent German documentary, and German-speaking culture after World War II.

Notes

1. Two preliminary versions of this essay were given—in Toronto at the Post-projections II conference and in Chicago at the German Studies Association conference, both in 1995. I benefited from the commentary of my fellow panelists Marcia Klotz, Nora M. Alter, Geoffrey Waite, and Marc Silverman, and am indebted to Alex Cohen, who read and commented on all of the versions.


3. Eric Rentschler documents efforts by auteurists in 1960s and 1970s to rehabilitate Riefenstahl on the basis of her art. In his article “Fatal Attractions: Leni Riefenstahl’s The Blue Light,” October, nr 48 (Spring, 1989), he quotes Kevin Brownlow’s passionate defense of Riefenstahl: “Art transcends the artist. . . . Art and politics must never be confused . . . the old adages are forgotten instantly as the name Riefenstahl is raised. And it is our fault!” (67). Critic John Simon asks if the past could “wipe out the fact of her greatness as an artist,” and concludes that Leni Riefenstahl “may have compromised her humanity. But her artistic integrity, never” See his front-page review, “Leni Riefenstahl,” New York Times Book Review (September 26, 1993):1.

4. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg complained, however, that in Germany his work has received “less acclaim from the public at large than is given to Riefenstahl when she is shown in art film theaters.” See Marilyn Berlin Snell, “Germany’s Heart: The Modern Taboo: An Interview with German Filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg,” New Perspectives Quarterly v10, n1 (Winter, 1993):23.


6. Ibid., 22.

7. Ibid., 24.

8. The respective fates of Riefenstahl and Dietrich are also telling. After Dietrich’s death, it becomes clear that at least from a German perspective, she has not fared as well as Riefenstahl. The urbane foil to Riefenstahl’s mountain-girl fantasy, who fled into exile and became an American citizen in 1939, was refused a public burial in Berlin in 1992 because many Germans still perceived her as a traitor. Gertrud Koch reflects on the controversy over Dietrich’s internment in Berlin, which suggests many Germans still think of Dietrich as atraitor for having entertained American soldiers during the war. Gertrud Koch, “Dietrich’s Destiny,” Sight and Sound v2, n5 (September, 1992):22. See also Marjorie Garber, who has recently described Dietrich’s cult status as a icon for gay culture and contemporary Madonna watchers: Marjorie Garber, “Strike a Pose,” Sight and Sound v2, n5 (September, 1992):25.

9. Unlike many recent documentaries, which explore their subjects with formally innovative techniques that reflect on the film-making process itself, The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl adopts a traditional mode of documentary representation. Müller most employs what Bill Nichols calls the “expository” mode; see Bill Nichols, Representing Reality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). For a recent article which discusses new documentary modes, Linda Williams’ discussions of
29. Downcast Mephistopheles.” Higgins, Red the recently chronicized 30s of ory,” Reich, by Brian Debord’s
27. Ibid., 48.
26. Siegfried Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film (Princeton: Princeton
22. Russell A. Berman, Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School
19. On her treatment of Balzás, see Rentschler, “Fatal Attractions: Leni Riefenstahl’s The Blue Light.”
18. Eric Rentschler has commented that this film “functions as crucial evidence in any apologia for Riefenstahl.” Ibid., 48.
17. Ibid., 259.
15. Ibid., 90.
14. Ibid., 140.
13. Ibid., 94.
11. Ibid., 51.
10. Ibid, 102.
9. Ibid., 102.
8. Ibid., 102.
7. Ibid., 102.
6. Ibid., 102.
5. Ibid., 102.
4. Ibid., 102.
3. Ibid., 102.
2. Ibid., 102.