

5-2004

# Leni Riefenstahl: Laid to Rest

Jacob Destree

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp\\_theses](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp_theses)

---

## Recommended Citation

Destree, Jacob, "Leni Riefenstahl: Laid to Rest" (2004). *Honors Theses*. Paper 248.

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

***Leni Riefenstahl: Laid to Rest***

**A University Honors Thesis for SIUC  
By Jacob Destree  
5/5/04**

***Leni Riefenstahl: Laid to Rest***

So many things have been written about me, masses of insolent lies and inventions, that I would have perished long ago, had I paid any attention. One must take comfort in the fact that time has a sieve, through which most trivia run off into the sea of oblivion.

(Albert Einstein)

Leni Riefenstahl accomplished much during her lifetime. She was an acclaimed dancer, actress, director, producer, editor, photographer, author, feminist pioneer and mountain climber, as well as one of the world's oldest active scuba divers. Additionally, she has been included as one of *The 100 Most Influential Women of All Time*.<sup>1</sup> Her films, including *Triumph of the Will* (1934) and *Olympia* (1938), have won numerous awards, are frequently hailed as cinematic landmarks, and are still studied in film schools today. Yet her accomplishments will be forever overshadowed by her connections to the Nazi Party, her ties to the Ministry of Propaganda, and her first-hand encounters with the likes of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels and indeed Adolf Hitler himself. There is no way to deny these facts, but they have often been twisted and misconstrued by authors both intent on attacking and defending the late film auteur. Exhausted by the conflicting opinions of her life and work, Riefenstahl appropriately quotes Albert Einstein in the opening passage of her *Memoir*. Referring of course to the "trivial" attacks of her critics, Riefenstahl holds, "One must take comfort in the fact that time has a sieve, through which most trivia run off into the sea of oblivion." If this statement is true— that the truth will remain stable while trivial lies are washed away by the sands of time— then there is no

---

<sup>1</sup> This list was compiled by Deborah G. Felder for her 1996 book of the same title.

better time to reexamine the life and work of Leni Riefenstahl than the present. We are now as far removed from the Nazi period as ever before, and with the death of Leni Riefenstahl in September 2003, hopefully many of the most hotly debated aspects of her career may be laid to rest with her. The facts which have survived "the sea of oblivion," however, frequently contradict rather than aid in Frau Riefenstahl's defense. By all appearances, her involvement with the Nazi Party was not as superficial as she claims, and it is perhaps Frau Riefenstahl who has been spreading the "masses of insolent lies and inventions" which cloud any discussion of her past.

Were she still alive, one may ask, "If so many things have been written about you over the years, then why must you disregard *all* authorship on the subject as 'lies and inventions?'" It does not take a genius to infer what her answer might have been. No doubt Frau Riefenstahl would remind us of the many rumors and half-truths which have been attributed to her by even the most impartial and even-handed of authors. For years, Riefenstahl has been accused of having been Hitler's mistress and attacked by critics who claim the filmic resources with which Hitler provided her were merely his form of reciprocation for her affections. Fortunately, in this instance, time *has* acted as a sieve and exposed this fabrication for what it is. Although Riefenstahl was allowed access to the highest ranking Nazi party officials, and seems to have been on social terms with several of them including Adolf Hitler and Propaganda Minister Goebbels, her contacts in this regard are now widely accepted to be strictly professional. In many other cases, however, the claims made by Frau

Riefenstahl remain in conflict with claims purported by various authors, and the line between truth and fiction remains hopelessly blurred. The only option which remains if we are to successfully distinguish between the facts and the “lies and inventions” of Riefenstahl’s attackers is to rely only on those sources which Riefenstahl had a hand in creating. These primary sources include quotations from interviews she has conducted over the years (especially in the 1993 documentary *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*), as well as her films *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*. Carefully analyzing these primary sources is the only approach which will yield a fair and balanced look at the life of the late auteur and answer the most fundamental questions which continue to haunt her legacy.

### **Part I: Nazi Sympathizer**

Perhaps the most often asked question about Frau Riefenstahl is also the most basic: Was Leni Riefenstahl a Nazi? The answer, most assuredly, is ‘No’. First of all, she was not an officially registered Nazi party member. Secondly, her ideology clearly differs from that of the Nazi persuasion in several respects. She was a “working woman” with drive and ambition, bearing no children. Although she was proud to be of German descent, she was not particularly nationalistic (having traveled broadly on account of her film career), and neither was she anti-Semitic. Anyone who doubts this contention need only examine Riefenstahl’s films. At a time when propaganda films (such as 1940’s *Der Ewige Jude*) were crammed full of hasty generalizations and flat-out lies about non-Germanic

peoples, Riefenstahl focused her films solely on party events, shying away from racist and discriminatory content.

Was Leni Riefenstahl a Nazi sympathizer? This question is not so easily answered and has sharply divided scholars into two main groups. The first group, those who support Frau Riefenstahl's character and integrity, naturally argue that she is not a sympathizer. The second group, conversely, feel the ruin of Riefenstahl's reputation is well deserved because she should rightfully be branded a supporter of the Nazi cause. In polarizing themselves into two opposed "camps," Riefenstahl's critics and supporters alike have failed to take into account, simply put, the changing conditions of human nature. To sympathize with a cause at one time does not mean one will remain sympathetic for *all* time.

Leni Riefenstahl, like so many of her German brothers and sisters, sympathized with the Nazis *before and during* World War II, but, having been enlightened by the post-war perspective and the evidence of Nazi atrocities it provided, changed her mind. This is the key to unraveling much of the conflicting and inconsistent evidence surrounding Riefenstahl's life. Following World War II, any admission of sympathy towards the Nazis, in any way and at any time, was construed as an admission of guilt. This is precisely why Riefenstahl has disassociated herself from the Nazi regime as much as possible— to the point of contradicting past statements outright— in spite of the ample evidence to the contrary. For her to have admitted a change of heart (from sympathizing with the Nazis before the war and during the war, to turning her back on them at wars

end) would only validate the “masses of insolent lies and inventions” which Riefenstahl would like to forget. Such a validation would have destroyed her life and career. Thus, Riefenstahl’s only option was to embrace her post-war anger at the toppled regime and insist that she *had never and would never* sympathize with the Nazis, a claim which is not exactly true.

Bearing this revelation in mind, the case can now be made that Riefenstahl *did* sympathize with the Nazi cause for a time, even if she were to claim otherwise out of necessity. It is now also quite obvious why certain statements made by Riefenstahl seem hard to square with the historical facts. Consider, for example, her vehement denials of “socializing” with Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler as though they were friends. During interviews for the documentary film *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, she says of Goebbels, “I can almost say he was an enemy.” Yet, as the filmmakers are quick to point out, there is no sense of this in Goebbels’ published diary entries. On the contrary, several entries made by Goebbels in 1933 indicate that Frau Riefenstahl was on visiting terms with both the Fuhrer and himself. Goebbels claims Riefenstahl and Hitler attended films with him, dined with him, even popped by for unexpected visits.<sup>2</sup> Riefenstahl is quick to counter, “You must show me these entries. I’ve never read them. I’ve never read anything saying I was on visiting terms. It’s sheer fantasy.” Upon being confronted with the entries by the filmmakers, Riefenstahl does not take the opportunity to explain away the inconsistency, for she cannot. Instead, she stands her ground, makes no

---

<sup>2</sup> See various entries from 1933, *Die Tagebücher des Doktor Joseph Goebbels*. By Peter-Ferdinand Koch. Hamburg: Facta Oblita, 1988.

attempt to clarify the contradictory statements, and refuses to continue filming the scene.

Who are we to believe? Goebbels, who was writing in his own, personal diary, had no reason to lie about socializing with Leni Riefenstahl. His diaries—which were not published until years after they were written— were not an instrument of propaganda, and so Goebbels had no reason to “spin” the truth. On the other hand, Frau Riefenstahl has everything to gain by lying. The target of near-constant lawsuits, Riefenstahl has tried vehemently to disassociate herself from the Nazi regime she once embraced so heartily.

Riefenstahl's ties to Goebbels, however, are not nearly as incriminating as her ties to Hitler (who is the only reason Riefenstahl and Goebbels may have socialized in the first place). Although Riefenstahl often claims to be disinterested in politics, she was apparently interested enough to see Hitler speak at the Sports Palace in Berlin in 1932. She had never encountered the Fuehrer before, but says she was “curious” about Hitler and that the event had “changed her fate.” She shares her memories of this experience with the filmmakers of *The Wonderful, Horrible Life*:

“It was the first time I'd ever seen a political meeting. I found it immensely impressive and I was carried away by the atmosphere. Hitler really fascinated me, so I wrote him a letter. I wanted to meet him. I thought, maybe he *is* the man who can save Germany.”

Writing fan mail to politicians is not the sort of activity you would expect from someone claiming to be disinterested in politics, but Riefenstahl did anyway. Upon receiving the letter, Hitler responded personally, claiming to be a fan of the



mountaineering films in which Riefenstahl had starred. Their correspondence continued until finally they agreed to meet:

“[Hitler] radiated something which had a kind of hypnotic effect that frightened me a little. I didn’t want to lose my own will and my freedom. I already felt I had to avoid this atmosphere at all costs. It would paralyze one’s free will.”

Riefenstahl’s intuitive understanding of Hitler’s brand of “hypnosis” is both accurate and prophetic, but she never acted in accordance with these feelings. She did not avoid the atmosphere “at all costs,” but on the contrary, *increased* her exposure to Hitler’s “atmosphere” by staying in Germany and agreeing to make films for him.

While German filmmakers were emigrating *en masse* to the United States, Riefenstahl chose to remain behind, in National Socialist Germany. She recalls in *The Wonderful, Horrible Life* that Marlene Dietrich, the famous German actress, and Josef von Sternberg, the famous German director, were amongst the throngs leaving for Hollywood. Riefenstahl, who was often abroad on account of her film career, was stunned, in 1933, to discover how many of her colleagues in the German arts scene had emigrated to America: Manfred George, Max Reinhardt, UFA film producer Erich Pommer, stage star Elisabeth Bergner, and Harry Sokal among them.<sup>3</sup> She tells the filmmakers:

“My friends who’d emigrated... urged me to stay and stick it out. By staying we could prevent the spread of anti-Semitism. We were to be a bulwark against it. And we all thought it was just electioneering— a temporary thing that would die down. We didn’t foresee the danger.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Taschen, 307

When Riefenstahl says, “We didn’t foresee the danger,” perhaps she should speak for herself. The actions taken by many of Riefenstahl’s colleagues in the German film industry at the time clearly indicate that flight from the motherland may have been the best option available. Nonetheless, Riefenstahl believed that by staying she could “prevent the spread of anti-Semitism.” Curious, then, that she should make *three* films over the next half-decade for the Nazi Party— the main proponents of anti-Semitism in Germany at the time.

However, Frau Riefenstahl was no anti-Semite. During a visit with Hitler at the Reich chancellery, she spoke to him about the emigration problem. She recalls Hitler’s response in her memoirs:

“Hitler raised his hands as if to stem my flow of words. Rather angrily he said, ‘Fräulein Riefenstahl, I know how you feel; you told me as much in Horumersiel. I respect you. But I would like to ask you not to talk to me about a topic I find disagreeable. I have great esteem for you as an artist... *But I cannot discuss the Jewish problem with you.*”<sup>4</sup>

It is clear from this response that the rabid anti-Semitism sweeping through Germany was not just “electioneering,” as Riefenstahl so naively seemed to believe. It was not a “temporary thing that would die down” either. Hitler’s brand of anti-Semitism was consistent, deliberate, and effective. It would remain so for as long as he ruled Germany. And yet Leni Riefenstahl chose to stay in Germany, and chose to stay at her Fuhrer’s side.

Riefenstahl was soon persuaded by the Fuehrer to make an official documentary film for the National Socialist movement. Although she claims that Hitler was quite forceful in making this request, it is nevertheless surprising that

---

<sup>4</sup> Riefenstahl, 137 (The *italics* are my own.)

Riefenstahl should accept his offer in the first place. Firstly, she has often claimed to be disinterested in politics. Secondly, if Riefenstahl really felt she “had to avoid this atmosphere at all costs”— that is, the atmosphere of Hitler’s presence and Party rallies— it is odd that these should be the very focus of her filmic life for the next few years.

The immediate result of their arrangement was a film widely thought to have been lost, but which has recently resurfaced. Perhaps the reason for the obscurity of *Victory of Faith* (1933) lies in Riefenstahl’s own opinion of the film. She was very frustrated by the lack of control, and does not regard the end result to be a “film” in the proper sense. Her next film, the hugely influential *Triumph of the Will*, was a far more successful outing for Riefenstahl, and is considered to this day to be the greatest propaganda film of all time.<sup>5</sup> Again, Riefenstahl insists she did not want to make the film, claiming the workload would be too big, and again, Hitler’s persuasion won her over. “I’ll make it,” she said, speaking to Hitler, “if you promise me I’ll never have to make another film for the Reich, for you, or the party.”<sup>6</sup>

Riefenstahl’s *next* film for the Nazis— her third overall— was released in 1938 as a two part feature, titled *Olympia*. Her grudging agreement to produce one film, and only one film, seems to have been forgotten along with her fear of large workloads. Indeed, watching *Olympia* is like watching three or four films in one. This time, however, Riefenstahl cannot place the blame for the film’s production at Hitler’s feet, but only at her own. “Hitler wasn’t pleased I was

---

<sup>5</sup> Downing, 24

<sup>6</sup> Taken from *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* interviews

making the film," recalls Leni in *The Wonderful, Horrible Life*. "Hitler wasn't in the least interested in the Olympics... Hitler wouldn't enjoy watching blacks win." The only conclusion one can infer from such statements is that Frau Riefenstahl must have had a real desire to continue working for the Nazis and made *Olympia* out of her own free will. After all, why shouldn't she have been pleased with her working conditions? After the initial struggle Riefenstahl encountered filming *Victory of Faith*, she had been granted additional authority and nearly unlimited resources for *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*. Both projects were enormous undertakings, and only by working for someone like Adolf Hitler could they ever have been made in the first place.

In the Third Reich, it was not uncommon for exceptionally gifted (German) artists and scholars to overlook the nastier aspects of National Socialism and take advantage of its many benefits. Nazi swing bands were made to play anti-Semitic tunes, but the musicians jumped at the chance to be heard. Famous rocket engineer Werner von Braun enabled Hitler's war machine, but really only wanted to build rockets; he later worked in the American space program. Ferdinand Porsche, likewise, met with great success in the automotive industry thanks in part to the Nazis. Leni Riefenstahl, too, seemed willing to make moral compromises for the sake of success. By dealing with Adolf Hitler, she was able to make some of the most influential films of all time. That is to say, by dealing with the devil, Riefenstahl reached the height of her success. In Rolf Giesen's book, *Nazi Propaganda Films: A History and Filmography*, he writes:

“Leni Riefenstahl would have worked for practically any political regime. If she had lived in Soviet Russia she would have found a way to the Kremlin and into Stalin’s inner sanctum; in Italy she would have embraced boastful Duce Benito Mussolini; in Britain she would have joked with cigar-smoking Winston Churchill... So Leni Riefenstahl seems to have been only interested in three things: in power— in money— in her own career.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Riefenstahl’s involvement with the Nazis brought her great fame and fortune. Leni Riefenstahl traveled throughout Europe to promote *Olympia*, meeting great acclaim in Vienna, Paris, Graz, Brussels, Copenhagen, Oslo, Venice, Rome, and Bucharest. In November, 1939, Riefenstahl traveled to New York in hopes to find a distributor for *Olympia*. There she learned of the *Reichskristallnacht* (“Crystal Night”), during which thousands of Jewish homes, shops, and synagogues were destroyed. Following this, “[T]he anti-Nazi League and many German émigrés, including Fritz Lang, turn[ed] against performances of the *Olympia* films in America.”<sup>8</sup> But even after the fresh perspective America provided her, Leni Riefenstahl *still* supported the Fuhrer. This is untenable. After 1939— after the *Reichskristallnacht*, and after the invasion of Poland— there could be no doubt whatsoever that Hitler was a bad guy, and that National Socialism would have to be defeated. And yet Riefenstahl still, somehow, found a way to believe in her Fuehrer.

All the evidence to this point suggests Riefenstahl may indeed have sympathized with the Nazi movement throughout the 1930’s. But what of her feelings for the Nazis after the war broke out in 1939 and carried on well into the 1940’s? Hitler no longer had the resources available to fund films as elaborate

---

<sup>7</sup> Giesen, 22-23

<sup>8</sup> Taschen, 313-314

as *Olympia*, and Frau Riefenstahl made no further films for the party. Additionally, her correspondence with Hitler and other party members cooled down due to the immense pressures of war. There is, however, one document worth noting. Riefenstahl composed a telegram for Hitler in honor of his capturing Paris:

Mein Fuehrer,

It is with indescribable joy, deep emotion, and warm gratitude that we share your greatest and Germany's greatest victory, the entry of German troops into Paris. Your deeds exceed the power of human imagination; they are without equal in the history of mankind. How can we ever thank you? Simply to acknowledge my congratulations is an inadequate expression of the feelings that are stirred in me.

Leni Riefenstahl<sup>9</sup>

This document is *most* incriminating and would seemingly prove that Riefenstahl was, in fact, a Nazi sympathizer were it not for her clever excuses. Were she allowed a rebuttal, Riefenstahl would insist this telegram not be ripped out of context; it was written, she claims, because she was overjoyed in thinking the war had ended. Yet, even if we hold this statement to be true, there is still ample room for criticism. By the time this telegram was composed, Hitler's Nazi war machine had already ripped through half of Europe! Hitler had given no indication that Paris, France was his ultimate goal, and even if he had, the Nazis still occupied the land illegally. It is most distasteful that anyone, under any circumstances, should praise a conquering army who forcefully occupies the land

---

<sup>9</sup> English translation used in *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*

of a resistant population when that population has done nothing to warrant its invasion.

But this did not stop the German people from raising their voices (along with Leni Riefenstahl) in praise of Hitler's conquest. It was a time of great rejoicing in Germany not only because many people deluded themselves into thinking the war would end, but also because their newspapers, radio programs, and films had become propagandized. In the German media, there were no dissenting voices to question or oppose the leadership. This of course begs the question: Was Leni Riefenstahl a propagandist?

## **Part II: Propagandist**

Those who wish to defend her legacy purport that Riefenstahl's films for the Nazis were merely "jobs" which she performed to perfection. They are quick to point out the utter lack of racist and discriminatory content in her films, commending her for insisting Jesse Owens' scenes remain in the final cut of *Olympia* in spite of Propaganda Minister Goebbels' wishes.<sup>10</sup> Before making any final judgments, however, it may be helpful to define propaganda in more definite terms. The dictionary defines propaganda as, "the systematic propagation of a doctrine or cause or of information reflecting the views and interests of those advocating such a doctrine or cause." Riefenstahl's films (of the Nazi period) certainly fall into this category. Her films portray the Nazi regime as though it were some sort of religious body. In *Victory of Faith*, *Triumph of the Will*, and *Olympia* alike, huge masses of people are seen moving in orderly fashion,

---

<sup>10</sup> Taschen, 313 (Here Angelika Taschen also states that Riefenstahl refused to remove shots of Hitler for the French release of *Olympia*.)

subverting their will in ritualized ceremonies. They sing songs, light torches, carry flags and banners, and listen to “sermons” delivered by Hitler and others. The Germanic/Aryan supermen are filmed as though they were Greek gods descended from Mt. Olympus to mingle with the lesser peoples. Hitler is also given a god-like status by Riefenstahl’s camera, whether descending from the clouds (by airplane) above Nuremberg in *Triumph of the Will* or cheering on the German athletes in *Olympia*.

It is also important to note that these films have a markedly different tone from her prior work. In films like *The Blue Light* (1932), Riefenstahl’s character is a strong, individualized woman, participating in “men’s activities,” often ostracized from society. Had her film career developed without Hitler’s intervention, one may assume Riefenstahl would’ve continued making films of this sort. (In fact, Riefenstahl returned to classic form in her first post-Nazi period feature, which was also her final motion picture: 1954’s *Tiefland*.) How, then, is this change of style to be explained? Riefenstahl’s change in style is no doubt the result of a change in genre— from fictional narrative to documentary propaganda.

In establishing Riefenstahl’s role as propagandist, carefully examining the films she did for the Nazis will be of doubtless utility. By looking at precisely *how* Riefenstahl constructed these films— through directing and editing and so forth— her overall filmic intentions will become immediately apparent. In the photography of *Olympia*, for example, an obsession with the perfection of Aryan physicality is readily apparent. But the most ample evidence of Riefenstahl’s



propagandistic intentions is contained in her most well-known work: *Triumph of the Will*.

Leni Riefenstahl's documentary masterpiece *Triumph of the Will* details the Nazi Party's 1934 rally in the city of Nuremberg. Throughout the film, Riefenstahl manipulates cinematography, editing, sound, and narrative structure in order to create a fascist aesthetic in which individual identity is lost to that of the state in adoration of Adolf Hitler. The film repeatedly subjects the individual to the collective, and the collective to Adolf Hitler. In this way, Riefenstahl— who shaped the film as editor and director— succeeds brilliantly in the creation of a fascist aesthetic, an aesthetic in which spectacles are made of domination and submission, and authority is worshiped with obsessive fanaticism.

Riefenstahl achieved this goal, and met Hitler's lofty expectations of her film, by planning *Triumph of the Will* in conjunction with the Nuremberg rally. Riefenstahl commanded a huge crew with vast production resources including fire trucks and ladders, camera platforms, specially dug pits from which to film the rally, and even a blimp. During Hitler's arrival in Nuremberg, the grandiose opening sequence of the film, Riefenstahl's unlimited creative control is especially evident as her camera flies through the air, rides along in Hitler's motorcade, films from rooftops, and wanders freely through the crowds. (In what follows, I offer a detailed analysis of *Triumph of the Will's* opening sequence. I begin by looking, first, at the set of captions which Riefenstahl uses to set the proper tone, and second, by exploring the sequence in which Hitler arrives in Nuremberg. Although a shot-by-shot analysis of the entire film would be

especially enlightening, the scenes I have chosen are typical of Riefenstahl's work, and will be particularly revealing of her propagandist intent.)

Before Hitler's arrival by airplane, Riefenstahl sets the film's tone with a short series of captions in which Riefenstahl reminds the (German) viewers of how far they've come, thanks to Hitler:

"On September 5, 1934,  
20 years after the outbreak of world war,  
16 years after Germany's woe and travail began,  
19 months after the start of Germany's rebirth,  
Adolf Hitler flew once more to Nürnberg to muster his  
Faithful followers..."<sup>11</sup>

These captions are specifically designed to glorify Hitler and his National Socialist movement while at the same time demonizing the nations responsible for Germany's defeat in World War I. The beginning of Germany's "woe and travail," you will note, coincides with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The "start of Germany's rebirth," similarly, coincides with Hitler's rise to power. Hitler, according to *Triumph of the Will*, is the savior of the German people, the sole man responsible for the restoration of their dignity and economic well-being.

The next series of shots develops Riefenstahl's visual presentation of Hitler as a god descending to Earth. The clouds part over the city of Nuremberg and the viewer is confronted with symbols of power, government, history, and religion. Massive towers topped with flags and the aging walls of a banner-draped cathedral are looked down upon from the perspective of Hitler's airplane. One such flag-topped tower looms over an enclosed square of citizens below, visually subjecting them to the power structure. In his book, *From Caligari to*

---

<sup>11</sup> Giesen, 24

Hitler, Siegfried Kracauer describes the scene as “a reincarnation of All-Father Odin, whom the ancient Aryans heard raging with his hosts over the virgin forests.”<sup>12</sup>

Suddenly, Hitler’s plane appears on the screen, flying high above the land and people of Nuremberg. Soaring seemingly unaided through the clouds implies power above that of mere mortals, a god-like power which only the Fuehrer exercises in *Triumph of the Will*. In the film’s first long-take, the looming shadow of Hitler’s plane on the landscape (no doubt representing his power and influence) is seen passing over buildings and marching troops in the street below. This is followed by a brief series of shots in which Riefenstahl thematically links the marching troops to Hitler. The marching troops are presented by Riefenstahl as subjects, and Hitler as their ruler. The camera looks down on them from far overhead, reducing them to a colony of ants, while Hitler’s plane is filmed from the side to give it an identity. As the plane approaches, the troops appear larger and larger, suggesting one’s identity is somehow magnified when serving the Fuehrer, a theme Riefenstahl will return to.

The landing of the airplane is inter-cut with Nazi salutes from the enthusiastic crowd. In many shots, the crowd’s saluting appears as little more than a sea of disembodied hands, completely separate from any individual body or face. Hitler is the only one with *identity* in this scene. But even in shots in which Hitler does not appear, the crowd is visually subjected to the power of the Fuehrer. They wear swastika armbands, decorate the city with Nazi flags and banners, and fanatically salute the passing cars. The crowd is also segregated

---

<sup>12</sup> Kracauer, illustrations 59-60.

according to Nazi doctrine. There are no Jews, gypsies, or other minorities in attendance, but only the pure-blooded Germans which constitute the “master race.”

The motorcade itself seems to derive its identity from Hitler, the center of attention. It is important to note Hitler is *standing* as he is chauffeured through the city streets, towering above the onlookers like an idol placed on a pedestal for worship. There is no doubt Hitler is the center of attention; in many shots the camera seems virtually glued over his shoulder. He is frequently seen from the back or in profile as a disembodied torso whizzing past the large crowds, giving the Nazi salute. The citizens of Nuremberg become faceless admirers in these over-the-shoulder shots and their group identity is inseparably tied to Hitler’s saluting hand and arm.

This first scene in *Triumph of the Will* is one of the most famous in the film, and has been analyzed by countless film historians. Riefenstahl’s striking portrayal of Hitler’s arrival by airplane and subsequent motorcade ride merits this distinction because it sets the tone of *Triumph of the Will* in propagandistic fashion, a tone for which Riefenstahl is responsible, and a tone which she maintains for the duration of the film. Riefenstahl’s contention that her film is merely a historical documentary, and that she was simply a passive artist-on-the-sidelines performing a “job” for the Nazis, is thus without foundation.

“There is little doubt... that no director or producer could have made a film such as *Triumph of the Will* without having an avid interest in the subject: Hitler and the Nazi Party. Moreover, *Triumph of the Will* could not have been turned into the outstanding

film that it is, if the director had not also been an artist. Riefenstahl's skill as a filmmaker is evident in the production..."<sup>13</sup>

Upon final analysis, Leni Riefenstahl may not have been a Nazi party member, but she most certainly was a Nazi sympathizer both before and during World War II, and may rightfully be regarded as a propagandist as well. Yet the purpose of this inquiry is not to attack Riefenstahl's character, but simply to explore and answer the hotly debated aspects of her life and work in order that such debates may be laid to rest with her. Although Riefenstahl may have erred in her judgments during the 1930's and early 1940's, her place in history is assured. The sheer quality and utter perfection of filmic form achieved in her films *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* allows these films to transcend the usual limitations of propaganda and become works of art in their own right. Now that Frau Riefenstahl is dead and we are nearly sixty years removed from the horrors of World War II, perhaps her life's work will finally get the credit it deserves. Yet this can only happen when we become capable of separating art from the sins of the artist. Rest in peace, Leni Riefenstahl.

---

<sup>13</sup> Giesen, 23

## ***Bibliography***

1. Deutschman, Linda. *Triumph of the Will: the Image of the Third Reich*. Wakefield, NH: Longwood Academic, 1991.
2. Downing, Taylor. *Olympia*. Worcester, UK: TheTrinity Press, 1992.
3. Felder, Deborah G. *The 100 Most Influential Women of All Time: A Ranking Past and Present*. New York, NY: Carol Publishing Group, 1996.
4. Giesen, Rolf. *Nazi Propaganda Films: A History and Filmography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003.
5. Koch, Peter-Ferdinand. *Die Tagebücher des Doktor Joseph Goebbels*. Hamburg: Facta Oblita, 1988.
6. Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Calagari to Hitler*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947.
7. *Olympia*. Dir. Leni Riefenstahl. Germany, 1938. Videocassette. Home Vision Entertainment, 1997.
8. Riefenstahl, Leni. *A Memoir*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1993.
9. Taschen, Angelika, ed. *Leni Riefenstahl: Five Lives*. Köln, Germany: Taschen GmbH., 2000.
10. *Triumph of the Will*. Dir. Leni Riefenstahl. Germany, 1934. Videocassette. Video Yesteryear, 1983.
11. *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*. Dir. Ray Müller. Germany, 1993. DVD. Image Entertainment, 2003.