

Reappraising Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*

• Alan Marcus

Leni Riefenstahl, who died on 8 September 2003, aged 101, was one of filmmaking's most contentious directors. The power of two of her epic documentaries, *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938), the two-part film on the 1936 Berlin Olympics, have cemented her place in film history. More criticism has been written about Riefenstahl than any other director, except perhaps Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles. She remained an intensely enigmatic figure, one who managed to pursue the five professions of dancer, actress, director, photographer and diver, chronicled in a handsomely illustrated book marking her centenary.¹ Publicity surrounding the publication of the book reawakened debates about Riefenstahl's career in film and her involvement with the Third Reich.

Over the years, a range of studies have appeared following *Film Culture's* tribute in 1973, by Barsam, Infield, Berg-Pan, Cooper, Loiperdinger, Deutschmann, Salkeld, Chauvelot, Hinton, Leeftang, Rother and Trimborn, as well as Riefenstahl's own lengthy autobiography in 1992.² As Riefenstahl approached her 99th birthday, she agreed to be interviewed by the author on 13 June 2001.³ Previously unpublished excerpts from this interview allow us to reconsider her role as a filmmaker, and to compare her statements with views she has expressed elsewhere, and with the literature on her contributions to cinema.

Riefenstahl starred in six 'mountain films', starting with *The Holy Mountain (Der Heilige Berg)* in 1926, before directing her first contribution to this genre, *The Blue Light (Das Blaue Licht)*, released in 1932. The genre drew its inspiration from the German Romantic movement, the purity and beauty of nature and the challenge of man's engagement with the

mountains. It has been argued that this filmic genre was imbued with a fascistic subtext,⁴ although others dismiss this reading, suggesting instead that the genre represents a rejection of nationalism.⁵ Whether it was the wholesome charisma or athleticism Riefenstahl exhibited in these films, her performances found favour with Adolph Hitler. Hitler was an eager filmgoer, and in 1932 he and Riefenstahl met for the first time. She was receiving international awards and recognition for *The Blue Light*, and he was on the verge of taking political control of Germany. Their highly visible association, profiled on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine in 1934, featuring a head shot of Riefenstahl with the caption 'Hitler's Friend'; while the cover of *Time* magazine in 1936, with a photo of Leni partially clad climbing a mountain on skis, subtitled 'Hitler's Leni Riefenstahl', underscored the controversy surrounding their relationship. It was precisely because of this special relationship between a dictator and a filmmaker, that some of the most discussed and influential films in cinema history came to fruition.

In this article, I focus on one of the key films which emerged from that relationship, *Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens)*, which I discussed at length in my interview with Riefenstahl. In addition to her advanced age, she had suffered broken ribs and lung injuries in a helicopter crash the previous year while in the Sudan revisiting the Nuba people, whom she had photographed and filmed between 1962 and 1977. Despite concerns about how her health might affect the interview, her recollections were sharp and her demeanour was forthright and spirited. I was intrigued by some of her answers, not for what new insight they offered, but for how they reaffirmed how she wished others to

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interpret her films and motivations. In particular, I was interested in the way she considered *Triumph of the Will* to be a realistic portrayal of the Nazis' 1934 Nuremberg Rally and the events surrounding it, and her role as a filmmaker in shaping that representation.

When speaking about *Triumph of the Will*, it is important to do so in the context of two other related films which straddle its production: *Victory of Faith* (*Sieg des Glaubens*, 1933) and *Day of Freedom – Our Armed Forces!* (*Tag Der Freiheit – Unsere Wehrmacht!*, 1935).⁶ What has been referred to as 'the Nuremberg Trilogy' contains a closely interrelated symbiosis. Riefenstahl was commissioned by Hitler to make a film about the 1933 rally, whose theme was 'Victory of the Faith', designed to celebrate the Nazis coming to power when Hitler was appointed Chancellor on 30 January 1933, and later assumed dictatorial powers under the Enabling Acts. She recounts verbatim in her autobiography a discussion with Hitler when she told him that she had no experience in making documentaries and did not wish to embark on this project: 'I talked to Hitler almost beseechingly, and slowly he relaxed and calmed down'.⁷

This was the fifth annual Nuremberg Party Rally, with hundreds of thousands of members of the military and civilians taking part during the event, which lasted from 30 August to 3 September 1933. It has been suggested that because of a feud between Joseph Goebbels and Riefenstahl she was not informed by his Propaganda Ministry of Hitler's request, and only found out about it shortly before the rally.⁸ In her interview with Hitchens she claimed that she only had two days to prepare.⁹ This explanation is restated in her autobiography, intended, in part, to explain the quality of the filming of *Victory of Faith*, as compared with the more sophisticated production of its sequel, *Triumph of the Will*.¹⁰ Loiperdinger and Culbert have uncovered documents which show that in fact Riefenstahl had a number of advance production meetings with Hitler and Goebbels to discuss preparations for making a film about the Führer in the months leading up to the Rally.¹¹

For many years it was thought that all copies of *Victory of Faith* had been destroyed or lost during the war and its aftermath, as Barsam wrote in 1975 and Hinton confirmed in 1991.¹² Barsam therefore only accords the film a passing reference in his classic text. However, Loiperdinger and Culbert revealed in 1988 that a good 35mm print of the film is held in the Filmmuseum at the Stadtmuseum in Munich. Their article examined in detail for the first time the production history and narrative structure of the film, and its usefulness as preparation for *Triumph of the Will*. What we discover is that *Victory of Faith* provides many parallels with the later film, and illuminates the degree to which Riefenstahl was able to hone her methodological and stylistic techniques in making the sequel. *Victory of Faith* was her first documentary, and as such proved to be a valuable learning ground. One cannot help but sense that the mystique surrounding the film's disappearance was akin to the accidental match which destroyed Robert Flaherty's first documentary film about the Inuit, which prompted his second effort, *Nanook of the North* (1922). In fact, Riefenstahl met Flaherty, 'the father of the documentary', when she was in England in 1934. Both artists' films champion the individual human spirit, though Flaherty did it from a humanistic perspective, while Riefenstahl favoured heroic ideals.

Riefenstahl was fortunate in securing as chief cameraman Sepp Allgeier, who had shot a number of the feature films she appeared in, including *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (*Die Weisse Hölle vom Piz Palü*, 1929) and *Storm Over Mont Blanc* (*Stürme über dem Montblanc*, 1930), and who would go on to shoot *Triumph of the Will* the next year. Cameramen Franz Weihmayr and Walter Frenz, sound engineer Siegfried Schulze, and composer Herbert Windt also worked on both films. This allowed Windt the unique opportunity to refine his compositions, infusing them with marching music and nationalistic songs, so that they performed an integrated role in linking the sequences and heightening their emotional impact. So satisfied was Riefenstahl with his work, that she asked him to compose the music for her later films, *Olympia* and

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Tiefland (1954). In the technical and creative team Riefenstahl assembled, one sees a development and progression of style, technique and maturation of themes in the execution of the two films.

The structure of *Victory of Faith* bears some strong similarities to *Triumph of the Will*. The film starts with early morning shots of Nuremberg and then proceeds to show Hitler arriving by plane and driving through the town to the acclaim of the crowds. Allgeier was able to film from the back seat of Hitler's open limousine, a shot which records Hitler's POV and plays an integral function of welding the viewers' identification with the leader. This shot in the triumphal motorcade is repeated with even greater impact in the second film. Flag ceremonies, marches and speeches by Hitler and other party leaders and Hitler Youth activities are featured in both films. There are, though, key differences. In *Victory of Faith*, Hitler shares the limelight with Ernst Roehm, leader of the SA, who is featured prominently and often seen by Hitler's side. Behind the scenes, there was a struggle for power between the SA and the SS, and within ten months, Roehm would be murdered along with other leaders of the SA in a purge on 'the Night of the Long Knives', 30 June 1934. Despite the fact that the film had been well-received by the party when it was premiered at the UFA Palast am Zoo in Berlin on 1 December 1933, a replacement would soon be needed, without some of the personalities visible in the first film, and reaffirming Hitler's exclusive power as Führer. With his full cabinet in attendance for the premiere, Hitler gave Riefenstahl a bouquet of flowers, in recognition of the success of her first documentary film – the same film she later downplayed.

As Winston has asserted, the new film would also demonstrate the unity of the party, which Hitler had to ensure as he spoke before 97,000 SA men, two months after murdering more than 200 of their leaders.¹³ Unlike the uniform he wore in the first film, for the 1934 Rally, Hitler is often seen in the distinctive brownshirt SA uniform, in a conscious effort to placate and symbolically consume the leadership role of

Roehm and consolidate his power over the SA. Whereas in *Victory of Faith* Riefenstahl's team had shot 50,000 feet of film, though she asserts it was only 4,000 feet, in the significantly bigger production of *Triumph of the Will*, they shot an estimated 350,000 feet.¹⁴ With more resources and using a much bigger crew, Leni Riefenstahl, still only 32 years of age and able to profit from her earlier experience, was now in charge of a cinematic force of 172 people, including 36 cameramen and assistants under the supervision of Allgeier. According to Barsam, Riefenstahl depended heavily on Allgeier, estimating that 50 per cent of the finished film was shot by him personally.¹⁵ Having shot the first film in the same locations would have provided a useful precursor to determining in advance which shots would be most effective the second time round. The team repeated those shots and elements that worked in the 1933 film, while Riefenstahl constructed a more varied and sustained dramatic structure. Gone were any potentially embarrassing *actualité* moments which had crept into the first film, such as when an official accidentally knocks Hitler's hat off a railing, or when some dignitaries appear not to take an avid interest in the Führer's speech.¹⁶

In covering the Sixth National Socialist Party Rally, held 4 – 10 September 1934, the director still uses shots of the medieval city in her opening, but prefaces them with an ethereal sequence of flying through clouds. As the spires of the city emerge out of the mist, the columns of marchers appear ant-like on the boulevards below. This section performs a vital function in establishing Hitler's systemic role as hero, coming down from the heavens as a saviour figure, who is immediately recognized as such by his grateful populace. By architectural association, the scene also seeks to affirm that Hitler will restore Germany with its proud, ancient traditions and cultural heritage to its rightful place of heroism and grandeur.¹⁷ This deification of Hitler has been commented on by Berg-Pan, and provides the film's subtext for the legitimisation of his rule.¹⁸ We do not see his figure in the plane itself, instead the director creates a structured sequence of rising tension, building our sense of



• Hitler 'smiling demurely' in *Triumph des Willens* (1935)

anticipation until she finally reveals the Führer as he steps out of the plane. The style of the shots signify a movie star idol, a celebrity, smiling demurely as Riefenstahl juxtaposes shots of women, straining to wave and catch a glimpse of the leader. A brief sexually charismatic exchange is suggested by this montage. An 18-year old participant at the rally recalled that women were fascinated to see if Hitler really did have blue eyes, as was reputed.¹⁹ During the motorcade sequence which follows, the director specifically includes shots of people of different age groups, and close-ups of beautiful children's faces, intent on viewing and saluting the Führer. In our interview, I asked Frau Riefenstahl about the carefully constructed nature of this opening section:

AM: In the beginning of Triumph of the Will, the film is edited as if Hitler is emerging like a god from the heavens, descending to his people. Was it your intention to portray him as a kind of deity?

LR: No, he's not a god. He's sitting in a plane, he's flying to Nuremberg in a perfectly normal airplane. He's not a god, who says that he's a god? The journalists say that, not the film. Does the film say that? In the film we just see an airplane, we don't even see Hitler, we just imagine that he flew to Nuremberg in a plane.

AM: How did you view Hitler at the time you made the film – as a leader who would save Germany from its suffering after the First World War?

LR: He isn't presented as anything. If you travel to Nuremberg, you go on a plane. And anyway, he doesn't have any wings, does he? Is Hitler presented as a God? He's not. It's a joke!

AM: There is a shot in Triumph of the Will near the beginning, when Hitler is driving through the crowds and there is a shot of a child, a

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- A 'coincidence' of the child's face with swastika?

beautiful child's face next to a swastika. Today when we interpret that shot it presents a terrible irony.

LR: No, because you have to understand the streets were full of swastikas during the party rally, and whether one photographed a child or a woman or a man, there were very often flags with swastikas hanging from the walls in the background. It was a coincidence that there is a swastika in the shot.

AM: *The film can be seen to present a metaphorical river, which gains in strength and intensity, the frame barely able to contain it. When making the film, did you attempt to create an organic metaphor of a natural force, which achieves its inevitable strength?*

LR: My response to that is that it's just a question of quality. If something makes a

strong impression, then that's because the image and the movement associated with it have been very well captured by the camera. The better the quality, the greater the appeal. But there's no thought behind the images, there's only the object or person that is being photographed.

Riefenstahl's disagreement with the representational view that the film offers a constructed version of reality, rather than reality itself, seems surprisingly defensive. While there were undoubtedly numerous swastikas along the parade route, it is by no means a coincidence that one is prominently featured in the shot with the child. The cameraman framed that shot, and from the thousands of feet of film exposed, she carefully selected it to include in the edited film. It is as if to say, that she did not use her skill as a director, and more importantly as an editor, in designing the rhythm and architecture of the

film's twelve sequences, to enhance the way Hitler is perceived by the viewer. Yet, she has cited Hitler himself telling her

I don't want a boring Party rally film; I don't want newsreel shots. I want an artistic visual document The Party people don't understand this. Your Blue Light proved that you can do it.²⁰

The first film took four months for Riefenstahl to edit, but she had a much bigger undertaking to cut *Triumph of the Will* in five months. The task involved selecting 10,000 feet of film from almost 400,000 feet. She claims that she 'had no model for creating this film, nothing to go by, so I had to experiment'.²¹ She is curiously disavowing of the experience of having worked for months on shaping similar footage the year before. The process of deciding what to use and what to leave out is fundamental to the art of editing. In *Triumph of the Will*, her ability to assemble a compelling narrative about the pageant was an area I wished to ask her about.

AM: In considering *Triumph of the Will*, to what extent were your ideas about montage influenced by Eisenstein's approach to editing *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), or the work of other filmmakers you admired?

LR: I wasn't influenced by *Battleship Potemkin*, I hadn't seen it at the time. I wasn't influenced by other films, it was my personal way of shooting a film. I didn't borrow from other filmmakers, that's my style, the so-called Riefenstahl style! (laughs)

This response differs from the one she gave Sarris²² and Barsam²³ when she discussed having been impressed by *Potemkin*. This perception echoes another statement she made, indicating that 'the completed film was a realization of her own vision'.²⁴ It does not take into account, though, the substantial debt she owed Dr. Arnold Fanck, who directed her in six of the mountain films she starred in, and in their last film together, *S.O.S. Iceberg* (1933), the US/German co-production with Universal filmed on location in Greenland. Elsewhere she recounts how Fanck

was a generous teacher to her,²⁵ who 'became my professor, and who taught me the fundamentals of my technique of mise en scene'²⁶

I soaked up Fanck's and his cameramen's experience until it became second nature. I needed no finder to know exactly which scene would require which focal length. I learned about over and underexposure effects and processing compensation.²⁷

In our interview she went on to explain her methodology in devising a plan, a precise construction, to which she then added 'the melody' of shots, as she has described it, to create dramatic crescendos: 'There are valleys, there are peaks. Some things have to be sunk down, some have to soar'.²⁸ I was therefore interested to ask her about the relationship between documenting an event and later imposing a dramatic narrative framework, and how that might differ between the two filmic forms she had worked in, documentaries and feature films:

AM: Would you say that the process of editing the film is one of organic creation, and that you used the editing technique to reinforce this impression?

LR: The way a film is cut to a great degree determines how big an impression it makes. That's true of every film, and especially in a documentary. The editing of the film plays an important role because it helps to bring the events to life for the viewer and convey them more directly. And it's true, I have a special gift when it comes to working at the cutting table. I'm a good editor.

AM: How do you distinguish between documentaries and feature films?

LR: There's a big difference, yes. The feature has a plot, you see, which is pre-determined. When the editor cuts a feature film, the script says exactly how he's meant to cut: A man opens the door, walks over, goes into the room, and says his line. In a documentary there is no plot. One has to form a plot out of

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the material, out of the images. The editor has to produce the plot, or the action out of the images. It's up to him whether he emphasizes a particular aspect more or less. To that extent he's creative, he's an artist, which he's not in a feature – there he's just someone who follows a pattern. The editor of a feature film just does what he's been told to do, while the editor of a documentary creates something. He must shape a plot out of the material himself. That's a big difference.

In the process of editing *Triumph of the Will*, one of the elements she managed to cut out was the German army, the Wehrmacht. The 1934 Party Rally was the first time that the Wehrmacht took part, demonstrating its loyalty to the new regime, after the struggles of the previous year. General von Reichenau was aghast when he learned that Riefenstahl had decided not to include any footage of the Wehrmacht's exercises at Nuremberg.²⁹ He confronted her directly on the issue: 'You can't possibly exclude the Wehrmacht from the film – just who do you think you are!' According to Riefenstahl, the generals complained to Hitler, who then raised the matter with her personally. He reaffirmed the complete artistic freedom he was alleged to have agreed to at the outset of filming. The compromise they reached was that she would produce a short film the following year, solely on the Wehrmacht, which resulted in *Day of Freedom!*, the final film in Riefenstahl's Nuremberg trilogy. This 28 minute film documents the army's drills with Hitler in attendance during the Seventh National Socialist Party Rally, 10 – 16 September 1935. In the process of sequentially filming the 1933, 1934 and 1935 Nuremberg Rallies, Riefenstahl 'discovered that I had a definite talent for documentaries. I experienced the pleasure of a film-maker who gives cinematic shape to actual events without falsifying them'.³⁰ The issue of presenting a cinematic truth of the events, while stressing specific dramatic moments, goes to the heart of adopting a narrative form in the crafting of a documentary. After all, this was neither designed to be a newsreel nor an ethnographic rendering.

AM: *Triumph des Willens, the Olympia films and your Nuba photographs herald the heroic and the strong. Your exquisite underwater photographs present sheer beauty. Can you describe how your interests to document and dramatize evolved?*

LR: For me it's simply that my camera people and I photograph what we see, without adding any particular agenda, just what the camera sees, what we can see through the viewfinder: a record of reality. Everything else are the ideas of journalists who read things into it, but we simply try to make the best possible pictures of what we see, and the most filmically dynamic.

AM: *What are your ideals and how were they realized in filming Triumph of the Will?*

LR: I had no ideals, I only did my duty. A commission, which I carried out. It was an exercise in duty. I didn't embellish things in any way. I wanted to make the shots as good as possible, which means for a film shooting the images in a filmically dynamic way – but without a particular agenda, just what I saw. It doesn't really matter what kind of ideas you want to convey in the films. It is a question of presenting what is in front of the camera rather than trying to translate ideas.

AM: *In an interview with Andrew Sarris in 1967, you said of Triumph of the Will that it is 'purely historical. It is a film-verité. It reflects the truth that was then in 1934.' Will you please elaborate on how the film embodies the truth?*

LR: The shots we made were not staged, they were shots of a party rally. That is, of parades and spectators and the Führer, which weren't staged – and we had been commissioned to film it. Without wanting to add our own personal political viewpoint, we just wanted to shoot good images, and it was historical, it wasn't staged. What the film shows is true, that's what happened in reality. Nothing is staged.



• Riefenstahl's concession to the army: *Tag Der Freiheit- Unsere Wehrmacht!* (1935)

AM: *Frau Riefenstahl, would you say that this film is objective?*

LR: What do you mean by that?

AM: *When you speak of having captured the truth does that mean that the truth that you have captured on film is an objective truth? That truth is objective?*

LR: The word 'objective' can be understood in many different ways, I wouldn't use the word 'objective.'

This perception was similar to the one she explained to Sarris in an earlier interview, yet she had assured him that, 'whatever is purely realistic, slice-of-life, what is average, quotidian, doesn't interest me'.³¹ On the one hand, she finds her explanation of realism to be a useful cover, while on the other, dismissing 'the real' if it fails to captivate. Given the special relationship

she had with Hitler and his having directed her to make the three Nuremberg films, the question arises of how she approached this aspect of their agreement when deciding what to shoot and how to construct the finished film:

AM: *Did you feel that you had a responsibility to Hitler and the subjects of the film, and if so what was it?*

LR: My answer to this is no, it never occurred to me that I had a particular responsibility, there was nothing to be responsible for. There were shots of spectators and of the men marching in the parade. There was no political idea behind it, it was actually just a party rally of the kind that all countries and nations hold once a year. So, it wasn't something special. It wasn't a story, wasn't anything in particular, it contained just simple, realistic shots of spectators and a parade that actually happened, and that was filmed, as it

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happened. That's to say, nothing was changed or altered, rather it occurred in reality just as we see it in the film. And it's not propaganda, since for propaganda I would have had to have made a comment, which I didn't. The pictures are all without comment.

AM: At the beginning of the film it states that it was commissioned by the Führer, and I wonder if you felt that you had a special responsibility to him to capture events in a particular way?

LR: The event was organized by the party leadership. The film was commissioned by Hitler. Hitler commissioned Frau Riefenstahl to make a film of the party rally.

It is hard to appreciate how she can suggest that the 'pictures are without comment', when that is an inherent feature of any edited sequence, particularly when it is infused with the potent visual symbolism she employs. The goal of juxtaposing one shot with another is to suggest a relationship between the two images, which in turn generates a commentary about both of them and their collective meaning. *Triumph of the Will* has been described as the prototype for a political film used for propaganda purposes,³² it retains the paradox of being able to 'repel and attract us at the same time'.³³ Corliss has referred to the film as 'a sympathetic documentary of a propaganda event',³⁴ while Barsam calls it a hybrid of the documentary and propaganda traditions.³⁵ Riefenstahl always went to great lengths to attest that this was not her objective,³⁶ despite the fact that Hitler had stated that he wished to 'exploit the film as an instrument of propaganda in such a way that the audience will be clearly aware that . . . they are going to see a political film'.³⁷ Riefenstahl's view found greater sympathy with her nemesis, Joseph Goebbels, who stated: 'our opponents frequently reproach us for striving to achieve propaganda art. We have never been aware of doing this. We do not want to make propaganda with our films; we want to create art with them'.³⁸ Recognized as a work of art, the film won a string of awards,

including the Grand Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1935 and the International Grand Prix at the 1937 Paris World Exhibition. Although *Triumph of the Will* trumpets Hitler's popularity and seeks to promote him and the virtues of National Socialism, with the exception of a remark by Julius Streicher in an excerpt from a speech he gives, it does not contain overt references to the Nazis' racist doctrine. The film's great value for its intended audiences is its demonstration of the constructive and robust power of the collective – enthusiastically asserting how a collective spirit can embolden and make productive a people, for the common good of a Germany united behind one leader and one ideology. I sought to press her further on the issue of moral complicity and the way the film acts as a cinematic expression of the Nazi mystique.

AM: How do you feel that the Nazi Party used the film for propaganda purposes?

LR: It could only be propaganda if I commented on what it showed, if I had expressed an opinion, but I didn't express an opinion, I just showed what happened. What can I do if other people use it as propaganda? I can't influence that.

AM: You have an expressed love of beauty, which is clear in your Olympia films. How does Triumph of the Will reflect your ideas about beauty and harmony?

LR: Yes, it's true, I generally see the positive things in life more than the negative. I'm what one might call a positive person. Beauty catches my attention more so than things that are ugly. As a result, I devote myself more to beautiful things than to ugly things, which means that beauty is particularly visible in my films.

AM: In retrospect, how does the concept of vergangenheitsbewältigungsfilm allow us to understand that historical period through Triumph of the Will?

LR: In the film, we can see the relationship between Hitler and the German people, it's there as a document, that's how it was at the time. People might not like that, or might wish it wasn't the case, but that's how it was.

AM: *Your films and photographs celebrate life and achievement. While Triumph of the Will also celebrates achievement, do you feel that it is ironic that the leader and movement it places on a pedestal should have brought about so much death, inhumane brutality and destruction – in other words, the opposite of what your work strives for?*

LR: I'm not a clairvoyant. I couldn't, in 1934, know what would happen during the war, couldn't know that there would be so many deaths. It's nonsense to be supposed to know in 1934 that people would die four years later.

AM: *Which film or books on your life and work have you found most accurately represents your vision?*

LR: The book that just came out, published by Taschen, *Five Lives*.

AM: *Taking the body of your extensive film, photographic and written work, how would you wish to be remembered, and what is left undone?*

LR: What would I like people to think about me? That I didn't want to do anything except to show the truth, to show what I'd seen as genuinely and as positively as possible, so that people enjoy their lives more, and take courage, and don't think so negatively and aren't depressed, but rather take more pleasure in beauty than in ugliness, that's what I want.

Her apparent political naiveté is something she has discussed before: 'it was impossible for the young girl that I was to foresee what was going to come about'.³⁹ Her former cameraman, Henry Jaworsky, who worked on *The Blue Light*

and *Olympia* explains that Riefenstahl believed in Hitler, but thought he was badly advised.⁴⁰ He also suggests that she extended the shooting of *Tiefland* over a seven-year period during the war, in order that she might remove herself from what was going on in Germany and further associations with the Party. Like her earlier films, *Tiefland* retains the thematic motif of a belief in 'the heroic, the good and the strong'.⁴¹ The controversies surrounding her relationships with the Nazi leadership and the impact made by *Triumph of the Will*, hampered her efforts to clear her name and to continue making films.

Riefenstahl was never a member of the Nazi Party, yet she was tried by two denazification courts, and classified as a 'follower' (*Mitläuferin*) in 1948. The American occupation authorities interrogated and released her, and then the French took her into custody and she spent several years in detention camps. In 1952, the French courts deemed that her activities for the Nazis did not justify punishment, and the Berlin senate declared that she was 'not charged' with Nazi crimes. However, public absolution of her moral responsibilities as an artist was never forthcoming. 'I was finally forced to realize that I will never get rid of the shadows of the past. Nevertheless, I have found the strength to come to terms with this fate without bitterness'.⁴² Finding it difficult to raise funding for her subsequent film projects, she turned her talents to photography, producing a striking series of books on the Nuba and of underwater sealife.⁴³ She was portrayed in the media as an icon of vitality and 'the last great surviving image-maker of the Nazis'.⁴⁴ Out of desire and necessity, Leni Riefenstahl continually transformed herself in an effort to seek out and create powerful expressions of her vision of life around her. While the *Olympia* films serve as exemplary filmic treatments of that creative impulse, *Triumph of the Will* is a testament to the same aspirational vision, and its attempt to ennoble what proved to be an inhuman regime. Leni Riefenstahl was tenacious in life, and her legacy will continue to be much debated years after her death.

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Notes

- 1 Angelika Taschen, ed., *Leni Riefenstahl Five Lives*, Taschen, 2000.
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- 3 The interview was conducted in German with the assistance of Silke Mentchen, Lektor for German at Cambridge University.
- 4 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological Study of the German Film*, Princeton, 1947: 112.
- 5 David Hinton, *The Films of Leni Riefenstahl*, Filmmakers series, no. 74, Scarecrow Press, 2000: 21
- 6 The latter film is included with *Triumph of the Will* in its re-release version on DVD.
- 7 Riefenstahl, *Memoir*: 144
- 8 Hinton: 26.
- 9 Hitchens: 114.
- 10 Riefenstahl, *Memoir*: 143.
- 11 Martin Loiperdinger and David Culbert, 'Leni Riefenstahl, the SA, and the Nazi Party rally films, Nuremberg 1933–34: 'Sieg des Glaubens' and 'Triumph des Willens', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1988: 4
- 12 Richard Barsam, *Triumph of the Will*, Indiana, 1975: 13.
- 13 Brian Winston, 'Triumph of the Will', in David Ellwood, ed., *The Movies as History*, Stroud, 2000: 68.
- 14 Loiperdinger and Culbert, 1988: 5; Riefenstahl, 1992: 148.
- 15 Barsam, 1975: 24.
- 16 Loiperdinger and Culbert, 1988: 17
- 17 Barsam, 1973: 36
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- 25 Deutschmann, 1991: 201.
- 26 Sarris, 1967: 388.
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- 30 Ibid: 160.
- 31 Sarris, 1967:392, 394.
- 32 Berson, 1965: 17; Kelman, 1973: 162; Barsam, 1978: 122; Deutschmann, 1991: 1.
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