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Ashley Bunnell Ritchie

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Leni Riefenstahl, an aspiring German actress turned director/producer is best known for her remarkable skills in directing documentary films for Adolph Hitler before World War II. After the war, her success as a director faltered as the public and the film community shunned her for her involvement with the Nazi regime. Many of those attending or watching the 2003 Academy Awards, where Riefenstahl was honored as one of the greatest filmmakers of her time, failed to understand how the Academy could honor a woman who had been so heavily involved with Hitler. The anger some expressed raises the issue of how people need to remember Leni Riefenstahl. There was little doubt about her genius as a filmmaker, but the controversy focused on whether or not she deserved to be recognized by the Academy given her notorious past. Some interpreted her recognition as an insult to public opinion since, in their view, her artistic demise after World War II was a punishment administered by a public outraged at her Nazi sympathy. Yet, the enigma of her career before and after the War remains.

Who was the *real* Leni Riefenstahl? Was she a Nazi collaborator or an unassuming victim? Was she a naive film genius who did not foresee the consequences of her actions or an ambitious woman who did not mind sweeping her morals under the carpet for success? Was she really a cinematic genius? Would she have continued to create masterpieces

had she not been shunned?

To arrive at a fair assessment of the woman and her talents is not easy. In the literature surrounding this enigmatic presence in film history, several Leni Riefenstahls appear. To judge from current scholarship about her, it is evident that she meant different things to different people. However, few question her ability. Though commentators almost universally attribute the demise of her artistic career to her notorious reputation, this may not have been the case. Perhaps the failures of her post-World War II films are better explained by her inability to adapt to the evolving pace of films. Perhaps the "punishment" that was inflicted on her had no role in the downward spiral of her career. Leni Riefenstahl, "the limited talent," is one possible depiction of this controversial woman very few individuals have constructed, but it will be a serious consideration in the latter part of this paper.

How Riefenstahl came to be known as a 'cinematic genius'

In order to better understand the public's perception of Riefenstahl, it is crucial to examine how she earned her reputation as a cinematic genius. Riefenstahl was fascinated with the entertainment industry at an early age. Relentless in her pursuit of getting what she wanted, Riefenstahl was convinced she could do anything and everything.[1] Thus, she pursued dancing as a child, even when though it horrified her father. When she suffered a knee in-

[1]Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl: The seduction of genius*. (London: Continuum, 2002), 11.

jury, Riefenstahl made the decision to transition into acting, a dream she would carry for the rest of her life. She often described her move into cinema as "a classical moment of revelation,"[2] and after gaining notoriety for her work in smaller budget films, she got the chance to work for a director whom she had long admired: Arnold Fanck. She used her time with Fanck to familiarize herself with every aspect of film production and then made the decision to move behind the camera to explore directing.

When Riefenstahl became a self-proclaimed director, she quickly established herself as a household name. Her two documentaries, "Triumph of the Will" and "Olympia," brought the standards of documentary films to a level never seen before and surpassed any of the artistic works she had created or ever would create in the future. "Triumph of the Will," Riefenstahl's best known film, gained its reputation for its original and brilliant techniques. However, today it is judged for its effectiveness in promoting the Nazi regime.

Riefenstahl got her chance to direct "Triumph of the Will" after Hitler saw her film, "The Blue Light," and was impressed with her original style. He asked her first to film a small Nazi party meeting. The results, "Sieg des Glaubens," pleased Hitler. Thus, when the Nuremberg rally was in the works, Hitler knew just whom to call on. Although she lacked experience with documentary films, Leni Riefenstahl displayed artistic techniques Hitler had not seen in other directors. As with everything he did, Hitler was unremitting in his pursuit of her as a director. In

[2] *Ibid.*, 22.

fact, when initially petitioned to direct the movie, Riefenstahl refused and referred the Chancellor to someone she thought could do a better job. This was unacceptable to Hitler. Eventually, through power of persuasion and might, Riefenstahl hesitantly accepted the daunting task.[3] Despite her initial reluctance to work with Hitler on the film, Riefenstahl knew that she would open up doors she never thought possible by working in such close proximity to the Third Reich. Directing the film gave Riefenstahl her first opportunity to direct as if she were making a "big studio production."[4]

The brilliance of Riefenstahl's film of the Nuremberg rally liess in the authenticity of her cinematic techniques and their tremendous effect upon the audience. According to author Rainer Rother, Riefenstahl's "stylistic ideal" was remarkable in two ways. "On the one hand, she employed cuts modeled on narrative films in an attempt to place the audience in the position of the 'ideal spectator'." On the other hand, Riefenstahl made certain to "heroize" the main subject of her film. In "Triumph of the Will," this "subject" was none other than Adolph Hitler. Riefenstahl perfected the idea of placing the viewer in the location of an "ideal spectator" at the beginning of the rally. She positioned the camera in such a way that it appeared to be inside Hitler's head as if he descended from the clouds onto the Nuremberg rally. The audience saw through Hitler's eyes as he descended closer to the people and witnessed "the

[3]Glenn Infield, *Leni Riefenstahl: The fallen film goddess.* (New York: Crowell, 1976), 62.

[4]Rother, 66.

sheer subjugation of will as untold thousands relinquish[ed] minds and individuality to a single, mesmerizing fanatic."[5] This technique became known as seeing through the "eye of the Fuhrer: the same buildings, the same misty atmosphere of a new dawn."[6] Seeing the rally through the eyes of their hero allowed the audience to feel a closer connection and more intimate relationship with Hitler.

The film's journey from the airport to the hotel also includes "genuine narrative forms" in which Riefenstahl displayed truly remarkable originality. This specific sequence "ends with an emphatic fade, and includes approximately ninety shots within about five minutes."[7] Thus, the shots are only about three seconds each. Riefenstahl also used a variety of camera angles when shooting the eye contact between Hitler and members of the cheering crowd to construct the idea of their bonding. However, "the hierarchy of the eye contact" remained uniform throughout the film. "The 'people' are always shown in high-angle shots; Hitler from a low or eye-level angle…Their function is one of orientation, clarifying the distance already covered."[8]

Riefenstahl wanted to portray Hitler as the savior of the people and did so by constructing the framing of her shots carefully and closely considering who was in them. One example of this placement is seen in the abundance of women and children in "Triumph of the Will." Rother notes the prevalence of

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[5]Audrey Salkeld, *A portrait of Leni Riefenstahl*. (London: Jonathon Cape, 1996), 140.

[6]Rother, 58.

[7]*Ibid.*, 66.

[8]*Ibid.*, 67.

women and children cheering in the crowd. Only occasionally did the film show any other kind of onlooker. Such emphatic moments in the film would help promote its object "as the champion of women and children," an untapped resource for many politicians.[9] Noteworthy also is the fact that the film never showed Hitler's reaction to the loyalty of his followers; instead it "reflects the devotion evident in the reactions of other onlookers."[10]

The political repercussions from "Triumph of Will" were profound. To put it concisely, "Triumph of the Will" was an "effective way of sponsoring enthusiasm for military service."[11] The documentary, more often called a Nazi propaganda film, had a tremendous impact on the German people. Through the film, many came to see Hitler as their God, their savior. Debate over whether or not Riefenstahl intended to create such a powerful piece of propaganda loomed over the filmmaker until her death. Audrey Salkeld found it hard to believe that Riefenstahl did not see the ramifications of her highly successful film. In her portrait of the filmmaker, she wrote that Riefenstahl's initial intention may not have been to glorify Hitler, but her feelings for him at the time were so full of adoration that she could portray him in no other light. "For Riefenstahl, in 1934, as for millions of her countrymen and women, the Fuhrer represented the savior who would restore Germany to some (imagined) former

[9] *Ibid.*, 68.
[10] *Ibid.*, 68.
[11] *Ibid.*, 77.

glory. This is what she filmed."[12]

Riefenstahl got another chance to flex her documentary muscles when the Olympics came to Berlin in 1936. Because of the incredible success of "Triumph of the Will," Hitler called on Riefenstahl once again to profile the athletes throughout the competition. From the beginning, she designated certain events for special treatment. In "Olympia," she chose the marathon and the decathalon for their epic qualities and the men's high diving competition for its visual potential. But more importantly, she looked for individual human effort. "Physical strain depicted through pulsing temples, bow-tight muscles" became a favorite visual theme for Riefenstahl.[13] Her focus was more on people performing greatly, rather than how great their performances may have been. Hence, she produced a film appreciated by fans of sports and cinema enthusiasts alike.

Although "Olympia" had obvious artistic qualities, its intrinsic political influence for the Third Reich was perhaps the film's strongest accomplishment. Masked behind the glistening bodies of Olympic athletes was a recipe for German nationalism. "Olympia" celebrated a community spirit in which no subordination seemed apparent, the spirit of happy harmony which the German people might perceive between itself and the Fuhrer.[14] Where "Triumph of the Will" emphasized the necessity of creating a new Germany, "Olympia" presented Hitler, the party, and the people in a way that celebrated the 'new Ger-

[12]Salkeld, 153.
[13]*Ibid.*, 174.
[14]Rother, 77.

many' that had been created.

Because of her highly successful documentaries, Riefenstahl was known as a pioneer in her field. No longer did men dominate the making of documentary films. If film professionals wanted to seek guidance on how to create a profoundly moving documentary film, they consulted the works of Leni Riefenstahl. What set her apart from other filmmakers were her unique style and her techniques. She approached the camera in ways no one else had, and she knew how to manipulate it in order to create whatever feeling she wanted on the screen. Riefenstahl also had an eye for images. She knew how to pick and choose useful shots for her work. Many of the shots in her films resemble photographs. In the long run, this filming style would work against her. But, for the time being, it made her a cinematic genius.

The manifestation of a self-proclaimed genius

The image of Leni Riefenstahl as a genius was not one that she refuted. On the contrary, Riefenstahl embraced the idea quite whole-heartedly. From childhood, Riefenstahl had been confident of herself and her abilities. On countless occasions she remarked on her ability to do anything that she put her mind to, as if to explain her ventures into dancing, acting, and other forms of entertainment.[15]

When repercussions from "Triumph of the Will" set in, Riefenstahl found herself in an unfortunate position. Suddenly, people were attacking her for being involved with Hitler and for helping advance

[15]Lisa H. Williams, *The Amazon Queen: A dramatic portrait of Leni Riefenstahl.* (Dissertation: Chapel Hill, 1977), 2.

and legitimize the Third Reich. She was ostracized by cinematic professionals and none of her post-War works achieved either popularity or real success. In response, Riefenstahl assumed the role of the artistic genius whose career suffered from the effects of political hatreds. According to Riefenstahl, nothing she ever did was fairly judged after 1945. Because of the attacks, she was doomed to a career with little artistic recognition. In her memoirs she used a number of examples to explain the negative effect her social exile had on her filmmaking efforts. After the War she no longer had available the most advanced film equipment the Third Reich had provided for her, which hindered her ability to create superior films.[16] Even worse, the professional and social isolation she faced reached across continents. When she traveled to America to promote her films, she met resistance at every turn. Hollywood producers and studios told her that neither she nor her films were welcome. It quickly became apparent that her only supporters resided within the borders of her homeland.[17] Defending herself in her autobiography, Riefenstahl even went so far as to claim that her film, "Tiefland," released in 1954, would have been a huge success had the press not publicized the allegation that gypsies from Auschwitz had been used in the film. She stated that response to the film was overwhelmingly positive at its screening, but then the "adversaries struck" and made hateful attacks in newspapers that

[16]Rother, 114.

[17]Leni Riefenstahl, *The sieve of time: The memoirs of Leni Riefenstahl*. (Great Britain: Quartet Books, 1992), 236.

destroyed any chance the film had had for success.[18]

Riefenstahl wrote her autobiography in 1992 to set the record straight. Almost sixty years after completing "Triumph of the Will," she made the decision to publicly address the issues that had been "punishing" her since the War. At the end of her lengthy life story she claimed her motive for writing was to dispel "preconceived ideas and to clear up misunderstandings" about her art and her life. She admitted that it had not been an easy task since the life she had recounted "did not turn out to be a happy one."[19] Throughout these memoirs she maintained she had been cheated by society and in so claiming she reinforced the idea that the public had something to cheat her of, namely recognition of her cinematic brilliance.

The many different Leni Riefenstahls

Leni Riefenstahl is a popular subject for biographers. Her controversial and fascinating life entices authors hoping to write an interesting story, but, one biographer's interpretation does not make a complete Leni Riefenstahl. Instead, similar to the New Biography, where writers represent their subjects in different contexts, biographers of Riefenstahl use various aspects of her life and depict her according to their individual interpretations. To some, she is a vixen, while to others she is a naïve victim. It is almost as if authors are creating a character for a day time soap opera, and in a way, they have. Many of the biographers who have chosen to write about

[18] *Ibid.*, 397.
[19] *Ibid.*, 656.

her life have done so by writing screenplays for their dissertations. Most, who are working to get their Master's degree in Theater Arts, find Riefenstahl to be an intriguing figure that provides an excellent framework for a juicy play. In real life there is not one accepted version of Riefenstahl. Therefore, the plethora of screenplays and books on Riefenstahl lay out a number of portrayals, each one contradicting the other. Indeed, the many selves attributed to this woman create a history worth investigating on its own.

The sexualized Leni Riefenstahl

One version of Leni Riefenstahl turns her into a seductress who relied on sexual appeal to find professional opportunities. Lisa Williams' dissertation, "The Amazon Queen: A dramatic portrait of Leni Riefenstahl," fosters this notion of Riefenstahl. In one scene where two men discuss the up and coming Riefenstahl, one protagonist compares her to sponge. "She soaks somebody dry," he complains, "then dumps them, and moves on to soak somebody else." His comrade replies by recalling having heard she was a "nymphomaniac."[20] In Williams' script, Riefenstahl never met a man who did not have something to give her and she was willing to use any means necessary to get it, even if it meant enticing men with her body.[21] Williams also calls attention to Riefenstahl's relationships with Hans, her married boyfriend and her cameraman. Although Hans and Riefenstahl often had differing views on the way a

[20]Williams, 75.
[21]*Ibid.*, 9.

scene should be shot, Riefenstahl knew that by sexually tempting her boyfriend, she could get her way in the end.

"The Amazon Queen" makes numerous references to an alleged romantic relationship with Hitler. Williams is not alone in her opinion. Many authors have implied there was such a relationship. However, Williams is more explicit. In one scene of her play Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda and public information, has a conversation with Hitler's mistress, Eva Braun, about the close relationship between Hitler and Riefenstahl. He tells Braun that Riefenstahl "circumnavigated" him and went directly to Hitler. He added that each had discovered something in the other they could use.[22] Just what that something might be became apparent in another scene where Riefenstahl and Hans are making love and instead of looking into the eyes of her boyfriend as he kisses her, Riefenstahl's eyes lock onto the portrait of Hitler hanging next to her bed.[23]

The naive Leni Riefenstahl

Riefenstahl, as a naïve woman who really had no idea of what she was getting into, provides another possible scenario for her biographers. In this version of the woman, she appears an innocent and unknowing accomplice to an evil she fails to grasp. In the screenplay that became her dissertation, Laura Conover Wardle creates this Riefenstahl. In the play Riefenstahl defends herself from the charges of her

[22] *Ibid.*, 71.
[23] *Ibid.*, 79.

enemies by arguing that in 1934 no one knew what lay ahead. She could never have predicted the outcome of Hitler's Germany.[24] Conover has Riefenstahl refute allegations with the claim that preoccupation with her work absorbed all of her time and made her lose contact with the outside world. She did not realize until it was too late that during the 18 months (from 1935-1936) that she was in the editing room the world's opinion of Germany changed.[25] Since she remained a strong supporter of Hitler long after world opinion had shifted, however, this excuse fails to convince anyone in the play and, most of all, the playwright who created her.

In the opening scene of Wardle's screenplay, Riefenstahl stands in front of the International Military Tribunal to testify at the Trial of Nazi War Criminals. In her monologue she pleads her innocence and reflects on her life after the war and on the treatment she received from the public. In a direct quote from the transcript Riefenstahl tells the tribunal that she had been stripped of everything. "They have taken all of my things, my equipment, my cameras, my films, my house, everything. My friends have turned against me and they have murdered me."[26] Ultimately, she claims responsibility for allowing her connections with the Nazi regime to get out of hand and makes herself responsible for her isolation and ignorance.[27] In this version, Riefenstahl

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[24]Laura Conover Wardle, *Leni Riefenstahl: Art and propaganda in the Third Reich.* (Brigham Young University: Dissertation, 1985), 5.

[25]*Ibid.*, 16.

[26]*Ibid.*, 5.

[27]*Ibid.*, 17.

acquires a certain amount of poignancy in the role of an artist completely overtaken by the situation in which she had unwittingly found herself.

The "fictitiously naive" Leni Riefenstahl

Audrey Salkeld's biography presents a fictitiously naïve Leni Riefenstahl who knew how and when to play dumb as a means of getting others to help advance her career. Although not quite a collaborator or outright supporter of the Nazi party, this Riefenstahl indirectly contributed to the regime for personal gain**.** Unconcerned with the politics of the Third Reich, she looked on the regime as an opportunity to achieve her professional goals. Hence, Salkeld's Riefenstahl is more self-serving than vindictive. Salkeld repeatedly alludes to Riefenstahl's tendency to play the "Hitler card" in order to maintain her artistic freedom.[28] By merely alluding to her close association with Hitler, Riefenstahl could count on special privileges and have access to areas to which others were denied. This Riefenstahl thoroughly enjoyed the privileges that Hitler's favor brought her.

Another screenplay, by Dana Gillespie, adopts a similar interpretation of Riefenstahl. Gillespie's Riefenstahl chooses to ignore atrocities occurring right in front of her in order to further her career. In this script Hans warns Riefenstahl about what the Nazis are up to. He tells her to educate herself, but she replies that she does not intend to stick her nose

[28]Salkeld, 7.

in things she knows nothing about.[29] Hans tells Riefenstahl to stop looking only through a lens and to remember that another world exists that does not quite fit into the frame.[30] Salkeld underscores this willful naiveté when she reports that when asked to do another movie for Hitler, Riefenstahl was initially reluctant and claimed not even to know the difference between SA and SS or anything about politics.[31]

The vindictive Leni Riefenstahl

Perhaps the most common interpretation of this woman, and the one shared by many of those outraged over the Academy's recognition of her, is a vindictive Leni Riefenstahl. This Riefenstahl was an inherently evil woman who knew exactly what was going on the entire time and compromised whatever moral values she had for fame. Authors who take this interpretive slant tend also to gravitate toward the idea of a romance between Riefenstahl and Hitler.

Gillespie, who toyed with the idea of Riefenstahl as fictitiously naive, also suggests the possibility of Riefenstahl's inherent wickedness. She draws attention to her need to be in constant control and her perpetual efforts to deepen her relationship with Hitler.[32] Gillespie also makes Riefenstahl's attitude toward the Jews pertinent to the character she creates. According to Gillespie's interpretation, the more favors Riefenstahl's received from Hitler, the

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[29]Dana Gillespie, *Leni: A screenplay based on the career of Leni Riefenstahl*. (Dissertation: 1988), 42.

[30]*Ibid*., 109.

[31]Salkeld, 273.

[32]Gillespie, 31.

more indifferent she became to what was going on. She would not allow the boycott of the Jews or threats of violence against them to interrupt her own career. Other artists, such as Fritz Lang could see what was going on and when asked by Hitler to create films for the party, he refused to do so.[33] She was perfectly aware of Hitler's determination to strip the Jews of their social power and wealth and deny them the opportunity to earn a living, and she still sent in her request to be a member of the Reich Film Association.[34] Gillespie claims the "lure of artistic freedom and unlimited resources Hitler dangled in front of her were great enough to make her ignore the moral consequence of supporting him and his regime."[35]

Embedded in this interpretation is the idea that Riefenstahl placed art above anything else. Whatever the moral repercussions, if something benefited art in any way it was justified. According to Gillespie, "The threat of war, the Jewish problem, the brutal policies of Hitler- all were ignored. Art, not moral responsibility, was her goal."[36] When the accusation surfaced that Riefenstahl used gypsies bound for Auschwitz in her film "Tiefland," she denied in her autobiography that the extras had been executed. While some accounts support her claim, others do not. In Gillespie's account, during the filming the inmates of the concentration camp received clean clothing and were forced to pose in front of a huge banquet table full of food they were not allowed to

[33] *Ibid.*, 57.
[34] *Ibid.*, 60.
[35] *Ibid.*, 75.
[36] *Ibid.*, 128.

eat. After the film came out rumors circulated that the prisoners were sent to Auschwitz and executed.[37] Once the gypsies' actual fate was learned, Gillespie's Riefenstahl maintained she did not know at the time and did not want to know about it now. "They had served her purpose."[38] Of course, in her autobiography she denies ever using as extras gypsies who were later executed.

The fabrication of a genius

Leni Riefenstahl became an accredited director after the release of "Triumph of the Will" and "Olympia." There is no questioning her unique and gifted style in both documentaries, and it is easy to understand how her reputation as a cinematic genius developed. However, there is not much critical discussion about Riefenstahl's work either before or after the two documentaries. Riefenstahl insisted that her work was not given a chance after the War, which explains her later failure. But, this assertion might be disputed. Perhaps Riefenstahl was not a genius after all. Apart from her famous documentaries, her films attracted little interest and a good amount of artistic criticism.

Riefenstahl's first real chance at directing came in 1932 with the film "The Blue Light." Released before the War, it did receive enthusiastic reviews at the time of its release, but it also met harsh criticism. Riefenstahl's biographer, Rother, finds the film naive, the meager "realization of a girlish dream."[39]

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[37] *Ibid.*, 196.
[38] *Ibid.*, 152.
[39] Rother, 37.

He calls attention to the striking parallel between the life of Riefenstahl and that of the main character, Junta, who is ostracized by her village for climbing a mountain none of the local boys could conquer. According to Gillespie, Riefenstahl blamed the film's unfavorable criticism on the Jews. For her, says Gillespie, Jews were foreigners who did not understand her art and sought to wreck her career. Rother implies that Riefenstahl's reaction to her film's failures was a likely response to Hitler's anti-semitic laws. Riefenstahl forecasts that when Hitler came to power, he would not allow Jews to slander her work and determine the fate of her career.[40]

A decade and a half after the war began in 1954, Riefenstahl finally released "Tiefland," a film that she had been working on for 20 years. Measured against "Triumph of the Will" and "Olympia," "Tiefland" was met with much disappointment. Critics panned it at the time and it goes largely unmentioned today in discussions of Riefenstahl's work. In Rother's opinion, and in this he was not alone, the "stylistic agenda overwhelms the material" creating a "discordant impression."[41] He characterizes the plot of the film as "over-stylized". In the face of criticism, Riefenstahl blamed all the film's shortcomings on her limited resources when compared with what she had had at her disposal working under Hitler.[42] Riefenstahl's problems, however, went beyond the loss of her earlier resources and her professional ostracism. There were limitations to her brilliance.

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[40]Gillespie, 229.
[41]Rother, 110.
[42]*Ibid.*, 114.

One of her major problems seemed to be her story-telling ability. Riefenstahl was accused of being an "unoriginal storyteller" and of having "creative uncertainty."[43] Of Riefenstahl, Rother says she did not have the "artistic temperament capable of conjuring up successful films from variations of her ideas."[44] Put blatantly, she did not have the creative capabilities to tell a compelling story. Rother argues that after the War, Riefenstahl lost her touch and "lacked convincing ideas for a film."[45] Documentaries remained her favorite and only successful genre of film. In documentaries she did not have to write scripts or tell stories, and was left to focus on her true passion: photography. But, one critic finds unoriginality even in one of her most famous documentaries: "Olympia." According to Willy Zielke, the cameraman who shot and actually created the prologue for the documentary on his own, the prologue was the most artistic part of the film, and Riefenstahl never even admitted that he authored it.[46]

No matter how "brilliant" her prior documentaries were, if Riefenstahl could not advance with contemporary film techniques she could not remain a favorite in the public eye, regardless of her involvement with the Nazis. Photography played a central role in Riefenstahl's life. In fact, the genius displayed in her two famous documentaries lay in her photographic ability, but this passion for photography could not

[43] *Ibid.*, 40.
[44] *Ibid.*, 40.
[45] *Ibid.*, 40.
[46] Infield, 237.

sustain her cinematic career. As time progressed, Riefenstahl could not adapt with the pacing of mainstream cinema. To view "Triumph of the Will" is to see essentially a series of pictures. The pacing was appropriate for the film's purpose and for someone who had this kind of ability. Each still image in her films tended to linger on the screen too long. In "Triumph of the Will," which was a very successful attempt at Nazi propaganda, the lingering shots were effective for captivating the minds of viewers. "The anticipation of the youthful audience is conveyed by images of boys climbing up on barriers and each other, straining, on tip-toe, to get a good vantage point."[47] Richard Corliss notes that the film's pulse, "accelerating from stately to feverish," is in Riefenstahl's master editing. She needed no narration to tell you what to think or feel; her images and editing were persuasive enough."[48] However, in a film such as "The Blue Light," where a story line *was* needed, Riefenstahl's images could not overcome the bland plot. In an age where popular cinema involved fast-paced entertainment, audiences could not relate to Riefenstahl's style, which was more like flipping through a picture book. In fact, "Last of the Nuba," a collection of pictures Riefenstahl took of an African tribe, was intended to be a film before producers decided it would be better off as a collection of pictures.

Another problem Riefenstahl encountered was

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[47]Linda Deutschmann, *"Triumph of the Will."* (New Hampshire: Longwood Academic, 1991), 67.

[48]Richard Corliss, "Riefenstahl's Last Triumph," *Time,* October 18, 1993. V142, 91.

that she was unable to "limit" her artistic ambitions to her real talent. She still had a deep passion for acting and dancing and refused to put that all behind her when she transitioned into a career behind the camera. It was not uncommon to see Riefenstahl starring in one of her films. Because Riefenstahl could not disassociate herself as an actress, her films suffered. After watching "Tiefland," she calls herself "obviously miscast." She saw that her sick and pale figure on the screen did nothing to enhance the film.[49] In her documentaries Riefenstahl did not have to worry about acting and directing, she just took pictures with her camera. Thus, the documentaries displayed her tremendous ability in taking pictures. Her other films were compromised by her attempt to be more than she was.

Despite the public's outrage at the Academy's recognition of Riefenstahl, some people remain devoted to the idea of her brilliance. Several members of the feminist movement are committed to keeping the spirit of Riefenstahl alive because she was a powerful woman in history who, according to them, paved the way for women in cinema. Infield narrates that Riefenstahl's popularity continues to grow even after her death because she is praised by this feminist movement. In his view, Riefenstahl was the "only important woman director in the history of cinema, and as such, regardless of her ethics or morals, is cherished by some leaders of the feminist movement."[50]

By recognizing Riefenstahl as one of the greatest

[49]Riefenstahl, 317.
[50]Infield, 230.

filmmakers of her time at the 2003 Academy Awards, Hollywood divided art from politics saying the two can coexist independently. But, can the two really coexist peacefully? Infield doesn't think so. He says Riefenstahl cannot be recognized without drawing attention to her involvement with the regime. Infield makes artists particularly responsible for the message they send out with their art. In his words, "an artist's skill, imagination, and the creativity give him or her the ability to touch the minds of others much more easily than the less talented person."[51] No artist can ignore their need for an "ethical compass." He says, an aesthetic of mass murder is not possible. William Cook holds a different viewpoint and finds that it is art that determines whether or not something is immoral. According to Cook, "Triumph of the Will" and to a lesser extent "Olympia" prove that art is amoral. "Its morality depends purely on its context. In a moral context, it is moral. In an immoral context, it is immoral."[52]

Of course even if art should not be judged by its political ramifications, Riefenstahl was still not necessarily deserving of the honor the Academy bestowed upon her, as only her documentaries played a prominent role in cinematic history. And, many even question the prominence of that role. Susan Sontang writes, "Triumph" and "Olympia," are undoubtedly superb films, but they are not really important in the history of cinema as an art form. No-

[51] *Ibid.*, 235.

[52] William Cook, "Shooting Hitler: William Cook on the contentious career of the woman who made Nazis beautiful," *New Statesman*, February 11, 2002, v131, 40.

body making films today alludes to Riefenstahl."[53] Marcus Ophuls agrees with Sontang and says he does not think she is one of the greatest filmmakers in the world, Nazi or not.[54]

In reality, Leni Riefenstahl was little more than a gifted documentarian. She had an eye for camera angles and a good sense of how to tell a story with a camera. But, when it came to producing a film that called for prose, she was an amateur. There is no question of her ostracism from the cinematic community after the War, but had she been allowed to continue filming without the scornful eyes of the disenchanted public upon her, it is probable she would be remembered today as a woman who once directed two spectacular documentaries and lived off the notoriety of these films for the remainder of her years.

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[53]Infield, 237.
[54]*Ibid.*, 237.