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“Leni Riefenstahl Simply Will Not Go Away:”
An Analysis of the Media Discourses about Hitler’s Filmmaker

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Leni Riefenstahl will forever be connected to the political ideology of fascism and the images of Adolf Hitler and male strength and beauty she brought to the screen in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938), the contested masterpieces of her filmmaking career under the Third Reich. Now 100 years old and releasing her first film in almost half a century, she has remained a ubiquitous media presence for most of her life. In the 1970s, an article in *Newsweek* began: “Leni Riefenstahl simply will not go away” and her media presence has only increased since that time (“Leni’s triumph of the will” 11/29/76). More recently, in the past decade, *Vanity Fair* featured an interview with Riefenstahl and published Helmut Newton’s photographs of her; lengthy reviews of her memoirs appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *Times of London*; Ray Muller’s documentary, *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* appeared at film festivals in New York and Washington, D.C.; and Jodie Foster’s decision to make a film based on Riefenstahl’s life was announced on CNN. This media attention prompted Eric Rentschler to describe Riefenstahl as “the Third Reich’s most visible living celebrity and a constant object of lurid speculation, be it as ‘Hitler’s girlfriend,’ a ‘Nazi pin-up girl,’ or a ‘fallen goddess.’ The spectacle of Riefenstahl has always made for good press” (1996: 27-8). This paper examines the media’s enduring fascination with Riefenstahl by analyzing articles devoted to the filmmaker’s life and work that have appeared in Western newspapers, popular journals and on the Internet over the course of the past three decades.

Leni Riefenstahl was born in Berlin on August 22, 1902, the daughter of middle-class parents, Alfred and Bertha. As a teenager, she developed an interest in dance and, against the wishes of her father, began to study ballet. By the mid-1920s, she had become a successful dancer, the star in shows throughout Germany. In 1926, however, a knee injury ended her dancing career, and her acting career began. Riefenstahl first appeared in a single scene in Wilhelm Prager's *Ways to Strength and Beauty* (*Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*, 1925), although her biographers generally neglect to mention this minor part, describing instead her starring role in Dr. Arnold Fanck's *The Holy Mountain* (*Der Heilige Berg*, 1926) as her first screen appearance (Kreimeier 1996: 176). From 1927 to 1933, Riefenstahl starred in six more mountain films, five of which were directed by Fanck, "the uncontested father" of the genre (Kracauer 1947: 257). Extremely popular in Germany, mountain films "captured the most grandiose aspects of nature at a time when the German screen in general offered nothing but studio-made scenery," and Riefenstahl was the much-adored heroine of the genre, representing the "quintessential German Rhinemaiden, apple-cheeked, strong-legged and absolutely aglow with health" (Kracauer 1947: 257; Goddard 4/8/94). The mountain films made Riefenstahl a national celebrity and also provided her with the opportunity to learn filmmaking techniques. As she described in a 1974 interview:

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 focal length. I learned about over- and underexposure effects and processing compensation. I got to know which lenses gave pinpoint sharp images and which affected sharp artistic results. Camera work became as interesting as using a paintbrush. (Hinton 2000: 10)

In 1932, Riefenstahl put this knowledge of filmmaking to use by making and starring in her directorial debut, *The Blue Light* (*Das Blaue Licht*). The film, which tells the story of

Junta, a mystical girl persecuted as a witch by villagers who are mesmerized by the blue glowing crystals in her mountain cave dwelling, won the silver medal at the Biennale in Venice. It also drew the attention of Hitler, who at that time was actively campaigning for the presidency of Germany as the leader of the National Socialist party. Although he lost the 1932 presidential election, Hitler would become the leader of the German government, obtaining the chancellorship “by behind-the-scenes maneuvering” less than a year later on January 30, 1933 (Infield 1976: 43). Consequently, many prominent figures on the German cultural scene, appalled and threatened by the book burnings, virulent anti-Semitism, and decrees restricting personal freedom issued by Hitler’s government, fled the country. Riefenstahl remained, insisting later that her extensive film work outside of Germany and her lack of interest in politics rendered her ignorant of the Nazi party’s policies. In *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, she also argues that she stayed in the country in order to aid her Jewish friends, a claim that is countered by both her professed naivety and close association with one of the most outspoken anti-Semites in the Nazi hierarchy, Julius Streicher.

Riefenstahl first met Hitler at some point in 1932, although the exact date and circumstances of their meeting are unknown. The nature of Riefenstahl’s relationship with the leader of the Nazi party and the extent to which Riefenstahl was involved in the bureaucracy of the Nazi party’s film executive are the subjects of debate. Glenn Infield, the author of a 1976 biography of Riefenstahl, is among those who suggest that Riefenstahl became Hitler’s mistress before becoming his filmmaker, and he describes Riefenstahl as holding the title, “at least unofficially, of ‘Film Expert of the National Socialist Party’” (1976: 54). Conversely, other accounts of the filmmaker insist that

Riefenstahl's relationship with Hitler was purely professional and that she was never a member of the Nazi film executive, simply a director commissioned to make films [Schulte-Sasse (1992), Kreimeier (1996), Hinton (2000)]. What is not debated is that, in 1933, Riefenstahl agreed to make a film depicting the annual Nazi party rally in Nuremberg. Entitled *Victory of Faith* (*Sieg des Glaubens*, 1933), the short film shows the Nazi party shortly after it had come to power but before it had acquired the organization that would characterize its later years, and contains footage of Ernst Rohm, the leader of the S.A., before he was killed with other high-ranking Brown Shirts in Hitler's blood purge of June, 1934.

The 1934 Party rally proved to be a momentous event for both the Nazi party and Riefenstahl. In the months leading up to the rally, Hitler secured his position of supreme authority in Germany by aligning his party with the German military, and, after the death of Otto von Hindenburgh, the head of state, consolidating the offices of president and chancellor. Riefenstahl accepted Hitler's commission to film the rally, and the resulting film, *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1935), won the German National Film prize and became a world famous depiction of the Nazi regime. Unlike *Victory of Faith*, for which Riefenstahl had little preparation time and minimal aid from the rally organizers, *Triumph* was made with the full cooperation of the Nazi party: "The Party provided the setting and every facility possible for unimpeded film-recording of the event" (Hull 1969: 75). The next year, Riefenstahl released *Day of Freedom: Our Army* (*Tag der Freiheit: Unser Wehrmacht*, 1935), a short film compiled from footage of the German military at the 1935 party rally. *Victory of Faith* and *Day of Freedom* were lost for years after their release, probably because "Hitler did not want the public to be

reminded of those [Nazi party members] who had ‘disappeared’,” and, as short, hastily made films, they reveal little of the director’s aesthetic style (Berg-Pan 1980: 34).

Triumph of the Will, hailed by the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, as “a filmed grand vision of our Fuhrer,” is thus the Nuremberg rally film to which journalists and academics refer when critiquing Riefenstahl’s aesthetics and their political meaning (ibid: 40). The other film of this era that exemplifies Riefenstahl’s aesthetic style is *Olympia*.

In 1936, Riefenstahl was commissioned to film the Berlin Olympic summer games, a filmmaking project negotiated between the Nazi regime and the International Olympic Committee. The Nazis designed the Berlin Olympics as a propaganda event aimed at an international audience:

the Olympic Games of 1936 offered the German government the opportunity to achieve three propaganda aims: first of all, to “impress the world with the size and the efficiency of the Games...Second, the Nazis would impress the world with the accomplishments of German athletes”...Third, “the Nazis could demonstrate that they were full of good will towards the whole world and wanted only to be friends.” (McFee and Tomlinson 1999: 88)

Riefenstahl’s film of the event has been praised as a technically innovative masterpiece and criticized as an expression of fascist ideology. In particular, Riefenstahl’s famous interpretation of the Olympic diving competition has been criticized for depicting athletes as “raw material...abstract shapes” (Rentschler 1996: 22). This sequence is shot and edited so that the divers are silhouetted against the sky and the dives occur in rapid succession. The result is that the features of the athletes are obscured and each dive looks like a surrender to the oblivion. The film was released on Hitler’s birthday in 1938 in two parts, the titles of which are associated with the fascist ideal of community, *Festival of*

the People (Fest der Volker), and the fascist cult of the body, *Festival of Beauty (Fest der Schonheit)*. Like *Triumph of the Will*, *Olympia* has been called one of “the greatest documentaries ever made,” but remains one of the darkest stains on Riefenstahl’s reputation because its controversial aesthetics are widely considered to be examples of fascist propaganda (Sontag 2/6/75: 319).

After releasing *Olympia* in Germany, Riefenstahl visited the United States, where she was exposed to hostility because of her involvement with the Nazi regime. Shortly after her arrival, anti-Semitic riots swept throughout Germany. When Riefenstahl was informed of the attacks, now known as Kristallnacht, she dismissed the news as anti-German propaganda. She similarly dismissed advertisements placed in the Hollywood trade papers by the American anti-Nazi league that declared: “There is no room in Hollywood for Leni Riefenstahl” (Churchill 12/11/38). Riefenstahl returned to Germany and, after the outbreak of war, worked briefly as a war correspondent, traveling to Poland to film newsreels at the battlefield. She abandoned this work after witnessing German soldiers massacring prisoners in the Polish village of Konesky. For the rest of the war, Riefenstahl attempted to obtain financing for several unrealized films, and returned to her roots in the mountain film genre with *The Lowlands (Tiefland)*, 1954). Serving as both director and star, Riefenstahl filmed *The Lowlands* in Spain and Bavaria before the end of the war, but did not complete the film until 1954.

In 1945, after the fall of Germany, the American military deemed Riefenstahl a Nazi sympathizer rather than a party member. Despite this denazification, her home was seized; she was imprisoned and interned by the Allies for three years, and sent to an insane asylum in the French occupied zone of Austria. Throughout the 1950s,

Riefenstahl attempted to make at least five films but was unable to find the financial support for her projects. She blamed the negative media attention she received in newspapers throughout Europe for her inability to find support for her postwar filmmaking career. Although Riefenstahl won court battles against several libelous European newspapers, including one that published the forged Eva Braun diaries in which Riefenstahl was portrayed as the mistress of high-ranking Nazi officials, this did little to improve her public image. Riefenstahl became a postwar pariah, rejected by the film industry and reviled by critics for her Nazi past.

In the 1960s, Riefenstahl traveled to Africa with the intention of making a film about the slave trade. The film was never made, but she produced collections of still photographs of two groups of southern Sudanese people called the Nuba, whom she visited in the provinces of Kordofan and Kau throughout the 1970s. Riefenstahl's photographs of the near-naked, muscular Nuba re-awakened protests against her. Most notably, in a *New York Review of Books* article entitled "Fascinating Fascism," Susan Sontag described the photographs as celebrations of the fascist ideals of youth, strength and beauty, and thus analogous to Riefenstahl's Nazi films. Despite the continued criticism of her work, Riefenstahl emerged as a pop icon in this decade. She learned to scuba dive and published a book of underwater photographs, took portraits of Mick and Bianca Jagger for *The Sunday Times*, photographed the 1972 Munich Olympics, visited Andy Warhol's factory, and attended the first Telluride film festival as the recipient of an award for "exemplary contributions to the art of film" (Andrews 9/15/74).

In the 1980s, Riefenstahl generated controversy with the publication of her autobiography, which was criticized as an "overlong self-defense," a whitewash of her

past, that could only be read with skepticism (Almond 10/15/92). In addition, Riefenstahl lost a libel case she brought against a director whose documentary asserted that she had used Gypsies from an Austrian concentration camp as extras in her film, *The Lowlands*, and then allowed them to be killed at Auschwitz. A second volume of underwater photographs and the documentary, *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, kept the filmmaker in the public eye in the 1990s. Finally, this year, the prosecutor's office in Frankfurt, Germany, opened an investigation (since dropped with no charges laid) into claims that Riefenstahl had denied the Holocaust by continuing to insist that none of the Gypsies she used in *The Lowlands* went on to die at Auschwitz. On the same date, Riefenstahl celebrated her 100th birthday by releasing her first film in almost 50 years, a compilation of underwater diving footage entitled *Underwater Impressions* (*Impressionen unter Wasser*, 2002). The media marked the occasion with print and Internet articles outlining Riefenstahl's life, her numerous careers, and the controversy that has surrounded her since her involvement with the Nazi party. Over twenty-five years ago, Sontag criticized what she viewed as the media's willingness to forget Riefenstahl's fascist ties: "It is not that Riefenstahl's Nazi past has suddenly become acceptable. It is simply that, with the turn of the cultural wheel, it no longer matters" (2/6/75: 312). The articles that appeared on Riefenstahl's 100th birthday serve as assurances that her Nazi past has not faded into the background; it has, instead, remained the reference point for all assessments of her work.

Central to the media's analysis of Riefenstahl's work is the idea of fascist aesthetics, a concept that developed out of the writings of Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. Kracauer and Benjamin were the first theorists to study the emerging mass

culture of modern, industrialized Germany and draw parallels between the country's political / economic conditions and the aesthetic rituals of the masses. Asserting that "spatial images are the...basis of social reality" in his 1927 essay, "The Mass Ornament," Kracauer's rumination on the popularity of the "Tiller Girls," a group of female performers who danced in rigid geometric patterns (a style also popularized in contemporaneous American Busby Berkeley films), led him to conceive of the idea of the mass ornament: "The regularity of [the 'Tiller Girls'] patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier" (1995: 75). Kracauer described mass ornaments as groups of people reduced to "mere building blocks and nothing more," and believed that the phenomenon had emerged in modern Germany (and other industrialized countries) as an extension of capitalism (ibid). He argued that being a member of the mass ornament was analogous to being an automaton on the production line, or a cog in the proverbial wheel. In the closing years of the Weimar Republic, Kracauer envisaged the emergence of a political movement that would exploit this objectification of the masses. He thus anticipated the rise of National Socialism, a political movement that promoted a variety of "irrational and ultraromantic notions with such key terms as beauty, strength, discipline, nobility, pride, [and] sovereignty," ostensibly offering the German citizenry an alternative to the isolation and inhumanity of modern capitalism, while, in reality, continuing to view German citizens as mass ornaments "to be shaped and used...by their leaders" (Strauss 1992: 68; Kracauer 1947: 302). The fascist concept of *Volkerformung* [the formation of the people] exemplifies the Nazi regime's perception of the people as building blocks. Describing *Volkerformung*, Goebbels wrote in his 1929 political novel, *Michael*: "The statesman is...an artist. For

him, the people represent nothing different than what the stone represents for the sculptor” (Rentschler 1999e). The leaders of the Nazi party, several of whom were failed painters and poets, considered themselves to be artists, utilizing fascist ideology to shape the masses.

A decade after Kracauer, Benjamin analyzed Germany’s mass culture in the early years of the National Socialist regime, coining the term fascist aesthetics in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin argued that the uniqueness or originality of a work of art, which he termed the “aura,” had declined in the modern era as a result of the rise of photographic and cinematic means of mechanical reproduction. He believed that reproduction brought an end to the traditional function of the work of art and a beginning to its service as a political tool: “We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (1968: 223-4). Benjamin argued that the Nazi regime aestheticized politics in an attempt to ritualize fascist ideology, promoting the cult status of certain political values by expressing them artistically: “The violation of the masses, whom fascism, with its Fuhrer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values” (ibid: 241). Benjamin considered film to be the Nazi regime’s “most powerful agent” of propaganda because it offered the illusion of reality and provided the masses with “a simultaneous collective experience” (1968: 221). One such powerful agent was Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, which is generally considered to be fascist propaganda. Riefenstahl’s critics describe the film as “a profoundly subversive work,” and her

apologists concede that, even if the filmmaker was politically naïve and only concerned with producing a work of art, the film constitutes “a sympathetic documentary of a propaganda event” (Vogel 5/13/76; Hinton 2000: 42). Although the fascistic spirit of Riefenstahl’s other work remains the subject of scholarly debate, *Triumph of the Will* is widely cited as the definitive example of fascist film aesthetics.

In an essay in *Fascism, Culture and Aesthetics*, Walter Strauss provides a list of three criteria that he considers to be the core of fascist aesthetic ideology:

- A belief (better: a mystique) centered on the destiny of the nation or the race. In Germany, the trademark of this creed always involves the romantic notion of the *Volk* and may easily become extended to the Nordic race, or the white race, or the Aryans.
- Closely allied with this is the cult of leadership and the discipline and submission demanded of and for the *Volk* to bring about an ideal or utopian community of superior spiritual and physical beings.
- This whole cultic irrationality glorifies sacrifice and heroism; underneath it there throbs an eroticism or ecstasy that is darkly connected with death and the will-to-death, even though officially and publicly the rhetoric and techniques of eugenics and of future vitality are always exalted. (1992: 68)

I will expand on and provide examples of each of these ideas by describing scenes in *Triumph of the Will*.

Firstly, the concept of the *Volk* was an extension of the Nazi obsession with purity and the “blood and soil” mentality of premodern life. Borrowing 19th-century ideas of Social Darwinism that advocated a survival-of-the-fittest worldview and a variety of racial theories, the Nazis believed that race mixing had contributed to the degeneration of Germany, and advocated eugenics and the killing of mental and physical “defectives,” “anti-social” persons, and Jews as the means to re-vitalize the Aryan nation. The *Volk* are represented in *Triumph of the Will* in a scene that depicts a parade of men, women, and children in traditional costumes, accompanied by extra-diegetic Bavarian music on

the soundtrack. In a sequence in which Nuremberg is shown at dawn, the tolling of a bell, the reflection of ancient stone houses in the water, and the prominence of National Socialist flags expresses the connection of the Nazi German *Volk* to classical, premodern life.

Secondly, the Nazi cult of leadership is considered by some to be an example of the Romantic leader myth, which developed out of Napoleon's conquest of Germany in the 19th Century:

The predisposition to seek security in a charismatic form of leadership has been traced by some writers back to the German experience of Napoleon, a "social nobody" who came as a conquering hero, a little man who could dominate the world...Through Napoleon, Germans adjusted to the idea of "injustice ennobled by genius, of crime justified by greatness, of history elevated above morality." (Deutschmann 1991: 101)

Triumph of the Will's opening sequence, in which Hitler is depicted descending in his plane through the clouds, is cited as an expression of the cult of leadership. Kracauer argued that the descent of Hitler through the clouds was intended to represent the Fuhrer as an Aryan God coming down from the heavens. Similarly, Sontag described Riefenstahl's technique of alternating panoramic shots of the masses with low-angle, close-up shots of the solitary figure of Hitler silhouetted against the sky as an endorsement of the fascist aesthetics of "egomania and servitude" (2/6/75: 316). The discipline and submission of the masses is depicted in *Triumph of the Will*'s Labor Corps rally sequence in which Hitler is shown reviewing ranks of Labor Corpsmen who stand rigidly at attention and chant fascist rhetoric in perfect unison. With their automatic, emotionless and disciplined chanting, the Corpsmen exemplify Kracauer's concept of the mass ornament.

Thirdly, fascism was a militaristic political doctrine, and thus, inspired by Nietzschean philosophy and the myths of battlefield bravery that sprang from World War I, it glorified sacrifice and death: “[Nietzsche’s] philosophical primitivism was reinforced by an experience of war in the early twentieth century that brought from a whole generation of European and other writers ecstatic praise of ‘naked brutality and the flow of blood’” (Mangan 1999: xi-xii). The myth of Verdun, based on a bloody World War I battle that exacted a high toll on the German military, provided one of the sources for the Nazi regime’s concept of the Aryan Superman: “The myth of Verdun symbolized the birth of a new man who developed a second nature, enabling him to move in a free and uninhibited way in an environment where death was a constant threat” (Huppauf, 1990: 72). The Verdun-inspired Aryan Superman, immortalized by Arno Breker in statues that flanked buildings across Nazi-era Berlin, was a hardened man of steel ever ready to fight to the death for his country. References to World War I appear throughout *Triumph of the Will*, most notably in the wreath ceremony sequence in which Hitler, S.A. Chief Lutze, and S.S. Chief Himmler, flanked by thousands of S.A. men, proceed towards a World War I memorial. More than simply paying respects to the dead, the Nazi leaders acknowledged World War I in a calculated propaganda move designed to portray the regime as an extension of the fighting spirit, bravery and bloodlust myths like Verdun associated with the battlefield.

By attempting to grasp the significance of Riefenstahl’s role in history, and the meaning of her work, the media’s assessments of Riefenstahl vary. Scholarly research suggests that general assessments of Riefenstahl constitute a binary opposition between critics who condemn her for her Nazi connections and “fascist gaze,” and apologists who

champion Riefenstahl and her work as apolitical [Deutschmann (1991), Schulte-Sasse (1992), Rentschler (1996)]. As Linda Deutschmann notes, the problem with these oppositional views is that they are often reductive, separating the political and aesthetic aspects of Riefenstahl's career into isolated spheres, and concentrating solely on one or the other: "[Discussion of Riefenstahl's work] has often degenerated into a futile battle between those who would like to bury the Nazi experience – including Riefenstahl and her work – in scathing adjectives, and those who, by recognizing the talent and artistry behind the Nazi aesthetic, seem to support or encourage it" (1991: 221). There are, however, more than two alternative viewpoints regarding Riefenstahl and her work. My analysis of approximately 80 newspaper, popular journal, and Internet articles supports Rentschler's assertion that there are actually four dominant discourses about Riefenstahl: redemptive, denunciatory, liberal and postmodern (1999d).

Redemptive

The redemptive discourse focuses on the aesthetics rather than the politics of Riefenstahl's work. Sontag was a major proponent of this discourse in the 1960s before becoming one of Riefenstahl's most outspoken critics. A decade prior to producing "Fascinating Fascism," Sontag praised Riefenstahl's work in a number of essays that argued for a rejection of hermeneutics in favor of "an erotics of art," an appreciation of "the sensuous surface of art" (Kramer 2/9/75). Her 1964 essay, "On Style," argues that Riefenstahl's aesthetics are worthy of celebration despite the political content of her films:

In art "content" is, as it were, the pretext, the goal, the lure which engages consciousness in essentially *formal* processes of transformation. This is how we can, in good conscience, cherish works of art which, considered in terms of "content," are morally objectionable to us...to call Leni

Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will* and *The Olympiad* masterpieces is not to gloss over Nazi propaganda with aesthetic lenience. The Nazi propaganda is there. But something else is there, too, which we reject at our loss. Because they project the complex movements of intelligence and grace and sensuousness, these two films of Riefenstahl (unique among works of Nazi artists) transcend the categories of propaganda or even reportage...Through Riefenstahl's genius as a film maker, the "content" has – let us even assume, against her intentions – come to play a purely formal role. A work of art, so far as it is a work of art, cannot – whatever the artist's personal intentions – advocate anything at all. The greatest artists attain a sublime neutrality. (ibid)

Contemporaneous with the publication of Sontag's essays, Andy Warhol was creating works of art that could be appreciated solely for their surface appearance, thereby toying with the concepts of "high" and "low" or "popular" culture. Like Warhol's pop art, Sontag's calls to transcend artistic categorization and appreciate immediate and accessible aesthetics were expressions of postmodern cultural theory.

Another example of the redemptive discourse about Riefenstahl is the argument that her works are expressions of her own aesthetic vision rather than fascist ideology. In other words, this discourse argues that Riefenstahl did not adopt fascist aesthetics; the Nazis adopted her aesthetics: "Riefenstahl's ideals, her love of natural beauty, her love of purity, and idealism which rejected conventional civilization in favour of the rugged mountains and their inhabitants, were absorbed and approved by the National Socialist regime" (Berg-Pan 1980: 28). The film historian David Hinton articulates this argument in his analysis of Riefenstahl's films: "an artist's true intentions can never be fully understood, not at the time, and not many years later. But a work can and should be examined against the maker's previous works in an attempt to ascertain whether certain features are established traits of the artist" (2000: 43). Hinton points to the generic devices of mountain films, the genre that provided Riefenstahl with her filmmaking

education, as major influences on her work. For example, in *Triumph of the Will*, the low-angle, close-up shots of Hitler, widely viewed as expressions of the fascist cult of leadership, evoke the standard stylistic devices of Dr. Arnold Fanck's mountain films. As Fanck wrote in his memoirs: "With black and white film, when everything was coated in gray tones, it was always difficult to distinguish the climbers from the rock face. Consequently, I almost always had to work in silhouettes, with the climbers framed against the sky" (ibid: 9). Hinton also describes the work of Riefenstahl's contemporaries as influential to her aesthetic style. Most notably, Hinton considers the editing style of "city symphony" movies, including Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin – Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin – Symphonie einer Grosstadt*, 1924), to have been the source of Riefenstahl's depiction of Nuremberg awakening in *Triumph of the Will*, and the "unchained or subjective" roaming camera technique of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1919)'s director, Carl Mayer, as the influence on Riefenstahl's depiction of *Triumph of the Will*'s parade sequence. With their varied assessments of Riefenstahl's films, Sontag and Hinton express the belief that: "it is...necessary to assess [Riefenstahl] as an artist, accountable only to another kind of history, and it seems possible that on this level, film history will preserve the honors which have been given her" (Hull 1969: 140). This sentiment lies at the heart of the redemptive print and Internet articles about Riefenstahl.

The redemptive articles that echo Hinton's contention that Riefenstahl was faithful to her own aesthetics rather than those of the Nazi regime, argue that Riefenstahl's concerns were solely artistic. Supporters of this argument cite aesthetics in Riefenstahl's work that they believe express an opposition to fascist ideology. Examples

of this redemptive discourse can be found in the newspaper and popular journal articles that appeared around the occasion of the 1972 Munich Olympics, the first Olympic games to be held in Germany since the 1936 Berlin games. The 1972 games re-awakened interest in Riefentahl's *Olympia*, which, in turn, revived debate about the function and meaning of the film. The redemptive articles cite the filmmaker's treatment of the athlete Jesse Owens as proof that the film is not an example of fascist propaganda but rather an expression of Riefentahl's own obsession with the human body:

The impression persists that her *Olympia*...was neither newsreel nor art but propaganda attesting to the superiority and destiny of Hitler's Reich... Viewed in the more dispassionate light of today, *Olympia* reveals little that can be regarded as fascistic in spirit. The shots of Hitler and his entourage are...few and far between...Hitler's private feelings about Jesse Owens, the great black sprinter, are hardly printable, but, in *Olympia* Owens is given his full due. (Alpert 3/25/72: 65-6)

Other redemptive articles point to Riefentahl's books, *The Last of the Nuba* and *The People of Kau*, as additional examples of her opposition to Nazi racial theories, citing her photographs of the Nuba as proof that her cult of beauty was not restricted to Aryan bodies: "True, Riefentahl photographed beautiful young men and beautiful young women (the old, she says, stayed indoors, in huts, unphotographable). But, were you not to know who the photographer was, you would merely think the pictures were very good *National Geographic* shots" (Jenkins 10/15/00: 20). By arguing that Riefentahl was only ever concerned with expressing her own aesthetic vision, the redemptive articles support Riefentahl's own argument that she was and still is an apolitical artist. This argument has its basis in German Romanticism, a movement that theorized art as a praxis separate from the other realms of society, a space of free expression isolated from monetary and political concerns.

Romantic sentiment runs throughout Riefenstahl's work. McFee and Tomlinson distinguish it as "a romanticism based on a sense of dislike of the state of society, and blended in emergent German nationalist consciousness with a Pietist variant of religious mysticism: 'piety came to mean chiefly the personal emotional experience of divine bliss'" (1999: 102). As an actress, filmmaker, and photographer, Riefenstahl revealed her dislike of modern society by consistently representing places of idyllic isolation and premodern existence: the mountains in *The Blue Light* and *The Lowlands*, reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's mystical paintings; the Nuba villages in Africa where she was able to commune with her version of John Jacques Rousseau's "noble savages, a "native people as yet untouched by the destructive hand of civilization"; and the underwater world of the Indian Ocean (Wakeman 1987: 956). In the 1920s and '30s, Riefenstahl was influenced by Germany's Expressionist cinema, a genre that combined Romantic sentiment with avant-garde film techniques: "[it] fulfilled the dominant Romantic dreams of glorifying nature and man's place in it; of discovering union with elemental forces; of creating past worlds and future utopias" (Robinson 9/24/94). Riefenstahl has always maintained a belief in the Romantic concept of the artist as a figure who transcends politics, stating in *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*: "If an artist dedicates himself totally to his work, he cannot think politically. That's true of practically every artist in the past who produced great works, be it Michelangelo, Rodin, Rubens, or the other Impressionists. None of these people had any time or feeling for politics" (Muller 1993). Riefenstahl insists that, as such an apolitical artist, she has always been driven by a "deep-seated urge to pursue the...beautiful," and that her films are consequently celebrations of beauty devoid of hidden moral and political meanings

(Tanabe 10/8/76). The fallacy of this argument is asserted by the denunciatory discourse about Riefenstahl.

Denunciatory

The denunciatory discourse about Riefenstahl argues that her works are rife with fascist aesthetics. Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism" is the most vocal articulation of this discourse and the first article to argue that Riefenstahl's entire oeuvre (at that time), from her mountain films to her photographs of the Nuba, is consistent with a fascist gaze. This reading of Riefenstahl's oeuvre has been highly influential to all of the media discourses about her. Of the print and Internet articles analyzed for this paper, thirty percent of the approximately 60 articles that have been printed since the appearance of "Fascinating Fascism" have made reference to Sontag's argument that fascist aesthetics run throughout Riefenstahl's work. Prior to the appearance of Sontag's essay, the major assertion of the denunciatory articles was that Riefenstahl had been a willing Nazi propagandist. For example, in "Can We Now Forget the Evil that She Did?" Amos Vogel states:

Precisely because of its appeal [to emotions] and its perfect orchestration of filmic and psychological components, *Triumph of the Will* must be classified as a profoundly subversive work and its creator as Nazism's most effective propagandist. Leni Riefenstahl was officially commissioned to make this film by Hitler himself. She now must bear its burden. That she is retroactively attempting to falsify its nature and her relation to it may be understandable; that there exist people willing to assist her is not. (5/13/73)

After Sontag's essay was published, the focus of the denunciatory discourse shifted towards the examination and condemnation of Riefenstahl's works as showcases of fascist aesthetics. In "Fascinating Fascism," Sontag drew heavily from Kracauer's late-1940's-era analysis of the German film industry, *From Caligari to Hitler*, which argues

that the roots of fascism were evident in the films produced in the Weimar era. Kracauer drew a direct line from the fiction of Weimar films to the reality of National Socialism:

Since Germany thus carried out what had been anticipated by her cinema from its very beginning, conspicuous screen characters now came true in life itself...many motifs known from the screen turned into actual events. In Nuremberg, the ornamental pattern of *Nibelungen* appeared on a gigantic scale: an ocean of flags and people artistically arranged. (1947: 272)

Sontag borrowed Kracauer's analysis of mountain films and Nazi propaganda to construct her argument that Riefenstahl's work constitutes a "trptych of fascist visuals" (2/6/75: 314). The first panel in the triptych is the mountain films. Sontag describes the mountain film narratives about the heroic and deadly exploits of mountaineers as representations of the fascist celebration of death and veneration of nature. The second panel in the triptych consists of Riefenstahl's works for the Nazi party, *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*, which are described as expressions of the fascist cult of leadership and the asexual adulation of perfect, athletic bodies: "In *Olympia*, the richest visually of all her films...one straining, scantily clad figure after another seeks the ecstasy of victory, cheered on by ranks of compatriots in the stands, all under the still gaze of the benign Super-Spectator, Hitler" (ibid: 314). Riefenstahl's Nuba photographs constitute the third panel in the triptych. Sontag accuses Riefenstahl of glorifying an ideal of premodern existence by concentrating on the imminent demise of the Nuba in the face of modernization, and exalting physicality by featuring the wrestling matches of the barely clothed tribesmen: "In celebrating a society where the exhibition of physical skill and courage and the victory of the stronger man over the weak are, as she sees it, the unifying symbols of the communal culture – where success in fighting is the 'main aspiration of a man's life' – Riefenstahl seems hardly to have modified the ideas of her Nazi films"

(ibid: 315). “Fascinating Fascism” constitutes a reversal of Sontag’s position on Riefenstahl’s work in her earlier “erotics of art” essays. Prompting this change of opinion was the publication and popularity of Riefenstahl’s *The Last of the Nuba*. Sontag considered Riefenstahl’s Nuba photographs to be dangerous because they were being referenced as proof that Riefenstahl’s sole interest as an artist had always been to capture beauty:

Riefenstahl’s current de-Nazification and vindication as indomitable priestess of the beautiful – as a filmmaker and, now, as a photographer – do not augur well for the keenness of current abilities to detect the fascist longings in our midst...Somewhere, of course, everyone knows that more than beauty is at stake in art like Riefenstahl’s. And so people hedge their bets – admiring this kind of art for its undoubted beauty, and patronizing it for its sanctimonious promotion of the beautiful. (ibid: 320)

Sontag detected fascist ideology in this celebration of beauty.

The denunciatory discourse about Riefenstahl contests the idea, promoted by Riefenstahl and her supporters, that the concept of beauty and the ideology of Romanticism are apolitical. Of the arguments that Riefenstahl has utilized to defend herself against accusations that her works contain fascist aesthetics, her most frequent assertion is that she has only ever been concerned with representing beauty:

I can simply say that I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful. Yes: beauty, harmony...Whatever is purely realistic, slice-of-life, which is average, quotidian, doesn’t interest me...I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living. I seek harmony. When harmony is produced I am happy. (Berg-Pan 1980: 20)

The fallacy of this defense is the belief that beauty exists “outside of time and beyond any political or religious persuasions” (Rentschler 1996: 49). In actuality, beauty can be used as a potent political concept, as Riefenstahl’s former employers, the Nazi regime, proved. The Nazis promoted an ideal of beauty as strength, physical perfection, and racial purity.

Riefenstahl implies this ideal in the above passage by stating that she rejects the “average [and] quotidian.” As John McGowan has stated:

The urge to purity in the social world, linked with a high Romantic vision of a unified national community, finds echoes in the various forms of totalitarianism and ethnic intolerance that arise in the aftermath of World War I, and manifests itself most completely and most terribly in Hitler’s racial theories (and murders). (1991: 12)

Riefenstahl and her supporters further undermine her argument that beauty is apolitical by describing her work as analogous to other works of art, most notably Renaissance paintings and sculptures, that are, in fact, political. For example, Richard Grenier notes: “The thesis has been put forth that with her emphasis on male strength and beauty, [Riefenstahl] represents something that has been called the ‘fascist aesthetic.’ On the face of it, this would make fascists of Michelangelo and the ancient Greeks, to whose art Riefenstahl has always been devoted” (1994: 50). In reality, Michelangelo’s works were not apolitical celebrations of corporeal beauty. In Renaissance Italy, Michelangelo’s statue, *David*, “hugely admired for its proportional beauty,...was a patriotic icon...the attributes lodged in the figurative body of David symbolized the fictitious body of the state. It appropriated the figure of the powerful hero as a symbol of its own power” (Mangan 1999: 16). Rather than being apolitical, Michelangelo’s *David* provided inspiration to the Nazi regime, which borrowed from Renaissance Italy the idea to use statues as representations of political power.

The denunciatory discourse condemns as fascist the Romantic ideology Riefenstahl has espoused throughout her life. For example, in *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer argued that the Expressionist cinema (the avant-garde techniques of which influenced Riefenstahl’s directing style) and the mountain film genre express the fascist

tendencies of Weimar-era Germany, thus anticipating the rise of National Socialism. Expressionist cinema was based on the Romantic concept of the subjective nature of existence, and projected a distorted vision of reality onto the screen with eccentric, sharp-angled, abstract sets and chiaroscuro lighting – a vision of reality that was purely constructed out of the imaginary. As Goebbels noted, the Nazis considered themselves to be expressionist artists, molding German society according to their inner vision: “We people of today are expressionists. People who want to shape the outside world from within themselves” (Rentschler 1999a). Of the mountain film genre, Kracauer wrote: “The surge of pro-Nazi tendencies during the pre-Hitler period could not better be confirmed than by the increase and specific evolution of the mountain films,” which he believed expressed a characteristically fascist worship of nature (1947: 257). Thus, attempts to redeem Riefenstahl by arguing that her directorial style was influenced by the Romantic traditions of Expressionism or the mountain films, rather than fascism, are countered by Kracauer’s assertion that these genres are replete with fascist aesthetics. Kracauer’s thesis is echoed by Greenfeld, who argued a link between Romanticism and the totalitarianism of fascism: “the Romantics mystically evoked ‘their image of an ideal *natural* community, which would put an end to isolation and exclusion, leave no one and nothing out, but gather all within its iron embrace. In short, they envisioned a totalitarian society” (McFee and Tomlinson 1999: 102).

Liberal

The Liberal discourse focuses on Riefenstahl as a case study in the debate about the relationship between art and morality. This discourse avoids the tendency towards reductionism that some examples of the redemptive and denunciatory discourses about

Riefenstahl exhibit. For example, a reductive denunciatory discourse about Riefenstahl can be found in the *Globe and Mail* article, “Riefenstahl still in deep water at 100,” which describes *Triumph of the Will* as “unbearably horrible, unconscionable, and unforgivably evil,” and draws an oblique comparison between Riefenstahl and the sadistic Nazi doctor, Joseph Mengele (Crosbie 8/22/02). Taking into account the nature of the medium, that a single newspaper article cannot provide an in-depth or lengthy analysis of Riefenstahl or the nature of her work, this description reveals nothing about Riefenstahl’s work other than its ability to evoke intense condemnation. By contrast, the liberal discourse argues that Riefenstahl should not be reduced to either an evil propagandist or an apolitical artist. This discourse draws attention to the difficulty of assessing works of art based on the biography of the artist, echoing Russel Berman’s assertion that, “the political substance of a serious work of art is likely to be ambiguous and multivalent” (Golsan 1992: 58). For example, one liberal article states:

As even a quick scan of the reference books will reveal, once you start judging works of art by the biographies of the artists who made them, you’re asking for trouble. What about Don Carlo Gesualdo, that extraordinary 16th-century composer whose innovations prefigure the harmonies of Stravinsky? Wife murderer. What about Roman Rolland, whose massive novel “Jean-Christophe,” first published in 1908, has awakened a yearning romanticism and a sense of individual conscience in generations of young readers? Stalinist toady. (Page 11/19/95)

To this group of artists could be added Riefenstahl, who is still considered morally guilty because of her Nazi past and her unwillingness to apologize for it. Ray Muller addresses this in the conclusion of *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, stating: “I feel that people are expecting an admission of guilt...” to which Riefenstahl replies:

What do you mean by that? What am I guilty of? I can and do regret making the film of the 1934 Party Congress, *Triumph of the Will*. I regret -- no, I can’t regret that I was alive in that period. But no words of anti-

Semitism passed by my lips. Nor did I write any. I was never anti-Semitic. I never joined the Nazi party. So what am I guilty of? Tell me that. I didn't drop any atom bombs. I didn't denounce anyone. So where does my guilt lie? (1993)

Riefenstahl remains unrepentant about the admiration she felt for Hitler in the 1930s, lamenting in an interview: "Nobody was honest after the war. They never were for Hitler. That was *au contraire*: 90 percent were for Hitler. But I was honest. I have paid 50 years of my life that I couldn't work. Because if I had said that I was never impressed with Hitler, I can work, I can do everything" (Jenkins 10/15/00: 18). Riefenstahl thus remains a morally ambiguous artist. The liberal articles address this by comparing Riefenstahl to other artists who exhibited questionable morals or worked for despots but produced great works of art:

[Riefenstahl] is not the first film director to serve a dictator. Roberto Rossellini and Luchino Visconti served Mussolini; Sergei Eisenstein worked for Stalin...Some epic directors have got their politics epically wrong – D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was so racist that it has become virtually unshowable in the United States. (Boyes 5/13/00)

Riefenstahl's works also remain ambiguous. Although *Triumph of the Will* is generally considered to be unequivocally propagandistic, the political meaning of the rest of Riefenstahl's oeuvre remains the subject of debate. The liberal articles examine this debate, the moral quandary that Riefenstahl represents, and the problematic relationship between art, morality and politics, without prescribing a solution to the debate or passing judgment on Riefenstahl's life and creative output.

Postmodern

There are many possible reasons for the media's sustained interest in Riefenstahl. She generates controversy, elicits divisive opinions about art and morality, and represents a journalistic challenge because of her complex, defensive and contrary character. In

addition, I believe that the media's fascination with Riefenstahl is related to the interest in fascism and fascist art that theorists have identified as a characteristic of postmodern society. As Rentschler notes, postmodern culture is rife with Nazi iconography, especially the images popularized by Riefenstahl in her films:

SS uniforms and party regalia provide props for both alternative fads and mainstream trends in fashion. Nazi phantasms have engendered television series, movies of the week, and Hollywood features, from *Hogan's Heroes*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Holocaust* to *Swing Kids*, *Shining Through*, and *Schindler's List*. As celebrities go, Hitler's posthumous renown rivals that of Elvis Presley...Set designers for *Batman Returns* drew generously on the work of Albert Speer and Arno Breker. George Lucas restaged the closing scene from *Triumph of the Will* in the finale of *Star Wars*; a recent rock video by Michael Jackson likewise unabashedly recycles Riefenstahl's images of soldier males paying deference to their master. American artists pilfer the Nazi legacy with relish. The beautiful divers, dancers, and discus-throwers of *Olympia* serve as prototypes for television commercials, magazine ads, and photo spreads. (1996: 6)

The postmodern discourse about Riefenstahl describes the aspects of her work that comply with a pop sensibility, including the accessibility of her aesthetics. One postmodern article describes Riefenstahl's editing style in *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* as a precursor to the rapid imagery of music videos, a medium that John Fiske has called "the first postmodern television:" "No MuchMusic video-editing genius could teach her anything about rhythm and composition" (Fiske 1987: 254; Goddard 4/8/94). The same article notes that Riefenstahl's shots of Hitler in *Triumph of the Will* provide "the first images to which the word 'superstar' applies" (ibid). This description echoes Rentschler's contention that Hitler's "renown was – and is – that of the media star...In that sense, he is very much a man of our times" (1999f). Other postmodern articles note the prevalence of Riefenstahl's aesthetics in contemporary culture. One describes the controversy surrounding a 1996 Budweiser commercial that featured footage from

Riefenstahl's *Olympia*. Another dubs a 2000 pop culture phase as "fascist chic," noting the fascist fashions on the runways of Prada, Tom Ford and Helmut Lang shows, the body cult evident in Herb Ritts's photographs of muscular physiques, and the Riefenstahl-inspired design of Ridley Scott's film, *Gladiator* (2000): "*Triumph of the Will*...colored the vision of Arthur Max, production designer of *Gladiator*. In an interview, Mr. Max acknowledged borrowing heavily from Ms. Riefenstahl's images of Nazi banners and standards" (La Ferla 11/12/00). By focusing on the presence of fascist aesthetics in the media, these articles about Riefenstahl are comparable to Umberto Eco's concept of postmodern "neo-TV:" "Eco argues that TV is so absorbed in itself that it has now virtually turned its back on the external world...[and that] TV itself is fascinated with, and is forever congratulating itself on, its own productions, its own operation, and its own ability to make history" (Ward 1997: 58). The postmodern articles about Riefenstahl display the self-referential nature exemplified by Eco's neo-TV. One article, however, does address the external world by asking what the current interest in fascism indicates about postmodern society, a question that is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate.

Sontag has suggested that the postmodern fascination with fascism is the result of morbid curiosity and titillation seeking. In "Fascinating Fascism," Sontag states:

Nazism fascinates in a way other iconography staked out by the Pop sensibility (from Mao Tse-tung to Marilyn Monroe) does not. No doubt, some part of the general rise of interest in fascism can be set down as a product of curiosity. For those born after the early 1940s, bludgeoned by a lifetime's palaver, pro and con, about communism, it is fascism – the great conversation piece of their parents' generation – which represents the exotic, the unknown. Then there is a general fascination among the young with horror, with the irrational. Courses dealing with the history of fascism are, along with those on the occult (including vampirism), among the best attended these days on college campuses. And beyond this the

definitely sexual lure of fascism...seems impervious to deflation by irony or overfamiliarity. (2/6/75: 323)

Sontag's sentiments were echoed by De Lillo a decade later with his novel, *White Noise*, which comments on the American obsession with Nazi lore and iconography. The novel's main character is a college professor who has created an entire field of study devoted to Hitler, who is revered as a pop icon. Like Sontag, De Lillo believed the postmodern obsession with Nazism results from a gloomy fascination with inhumanity, although his explanation owes more to Jung's idea of the collective unconscious: "There is some element in the soul that creates in us a need to know the worst about ourselves. If we are a species called Thinking Creature, then let's think to the limit, let's imagine the worst, let's set out to find the purest representative of the species that can imagine the worst" (De Lillo 1998: 345). Other theorists have argued that the postmodern fascination with fascism is an indication of fascist longings in contemporary society. The film theorist Robin Wood pointed to fascism as the cause behind a cinematic trend in the 1980s. He argued that the *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars* trilogies represented a cinematic reaction to the "resurgence of an increasingly militant, vociferous, and powerful right" in American political culture, a right that was feared to "carry within itself the potential to become fascist" (1996: 211). Wood believed that, like the American establishment in the 1980s, Spielberg and Lucas's trilogies celebrate fascist aesthetics and aspects of fascist ideology, while expressing a fear of embracing fascist culture in its entirety. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*'s fascist elements are listed as its preoccupation with weapons of mass destruction; its blatant racism directed at almost all of the non-American characters; and its glorification of the leader figure, Indiana Jones. Wood concluded that the *Indiana*

Jones movies were not fascist films, but that they were a form of entertainment that would not be out of place in a fascist popular culture.

A number of theorists argue that the fascist longings in contemporary society are indications that fascist ideology is even more prevalent in postmodern culture and politics than we realize or are willing to admit. These theorists point out aspects of the Third Reich that have survived to the present-day. For example, Rentschler considers the media saturation of postmodern culture to be an extension of the media practices originated by the Nazi regime: "A direct line leads from the Nazis' vanguard deployment of pyrotechnic histrionics and audiovisual excesses to the profuse present-day investment in constant simulations and hyperreal events" (1996: 6-7). Linda Schulte-Sasse argues that the aestheticization of politics that characterized the Nazi regime has become common practice in contemporary Western society, describing the staging of political events for broadcast and the use of media to promote a sense of national solidarity, "euphoria and well-being" as structural similarities between National Socialist and contemporary culture (1992: 162). Finally, basing his argument on the revelation that Heidegger, the father of poststructuralist thought, was also a fascist when living in Germany under the Nazi regime, Reed Way Dassenbrock asserts that fascism is implicated in the core ideas of postmodern theory: "it is fascism as well as poststructuralism that tells us that there is no truth, but rather that truth has to be relativized to the occasion and to the speaker. It is fascism as well as poststructuralism that celebrates the dissolution of the human individual into his or her collectivity" (1998: 255). Dassenbrock argues that fascism is also present in contemporary political discourse, describing some political themes that have particular relevance today:

the themes of political discourse are moving steadily in a fascist direction. Let me cite just a few examples: the obsession with immigrants and racial others who are supposedly the cause of our problems;...the idealization of the family as an antidote to both the evil without represented by immigrants and the evil within represented by homosexuality; [and]...the faith in a leader with a nonpolitical background who can somehow save us from our own decayed democratic procedures. (ibid: 256)

Dasenbrock concludes that, because of the continued influence of fascism, it would be more appropriate to call our current society “post-fascist” rather than postmodern.

Conclusions

Leni Riefenstahl is still widely regarded as “the film goddess of the Third Reich” (Infield 1976). On the occasion of her 100th birthday this year, it would not have been surprising to find sympathetic reappraisals of her life, considering that her post-World War II work has often been received favorably by members of the press. Instead, the articles provided by major Western media sources focused primarily on Riefenstahl’s Nazi past and the negative press that she has generated over the years. Other artists who either tolerated or supported fascism in Europe in the 1930s and ‘40s continued to work and gain fame after World War II, including Roberto Rossellini, Salvador Dali, and Richard Strauss. Even artists who worked for the Nazi party were later absolved and went on to have successful careers in their fields, including the directors of the most vicious and anti-Semitic propaganda films made under the Third Reich. Veit Harlan, the maker of *Jew Suss* (*Jud Suss*, 1940), which encouraged German audiences to “keep our race pure,” resurrected his filmmaking career in the 1950s (Schulte-Sasse 1992: 161). Fritz Hippler, creator of *The Eternal Jew* (*Der Ewige Jud*, 1940), went on to work for the US Army as a translator. Why hasn’t Riefenstahl been able to transcend her past like these other artists? One suggestion provided by film professor and historian Robert von

Dassanowsky is that Riefenstahl is being punished because she is a woman. Von Dassanowsky can find no other explanation than sexism for the failure of the postwar careers of such “popular German-language icons” as Zarah Leander, Lilian Harvey, and Marika Rokk, while the careers of their male counterparts continued to flourish in Germany and Europe (1995: 14). He also sees sexism in the media’s need for Riefenstahl to apologize for her Nazi past:

[Riefenstahl’s] refusal to give the media what it would like from her, a repentant figure who damns her art and blames a femme fatale hubris, has helped solidify the image of her as Budd Schulberg’s ‘Nazi pin-up girl’ and Hitler’s symbolic mistress, but repentance would hardly have reestablished her cinematic career... Given the ease with which male artists associated with fascism or Stalinism have reinvented themselves, such apologia would play into the patriarchal understanding that Riefenstahl is nothing but a dangerous aberration, that women have no place in artistic creation, and worse, that evil fosters female ambition to beget more evil. (ibid: 14-15)

However, more than sexism lies behind the need for an apology. Riefenstahl elicits scorn not simply for refusing to repent, but for refusing to acknowledge that she was even cognizant of the events that were unfolding around her in Germany in the 1930s and ‘40s, an awareness of Nazi atrocities to which other artists have admitted. Another suggestion for the failure of Riefenstahl’s postwar film career is that her aesthetic style enjoyed a brief moment of popularity in the 1920s and ‘30s, but was never really in fashion and fell out of favor after World War II: “her visual style – heroic, sensuous, attuned to the mists and myths of nature – was never in critical fashion” (Corliss 10/18/76: 76). This view is particularly contentious because it reduces Riefenstahl’s visual style to that exemplified in her mountain films and *Triumph of the Will*. The images of strong, perfectly formed, barely clothed bodies she brought to the screen with *Olympia* (and, later, *The Last of the Nuba*) are still very fashionable in popular culture, “a potent source of inspiration for

post-modernist artists today” (Mangan 1998: 8). A final suggestion for the sustained stain on Riefenstahl’s reputation is that *Triumph of the Will* is such a well-made film that many believe it had to have been made by a fascist of fanatical devotion: “*Triumph* was just too good a movie, too potent and mesmerizing” (Corliss 10/18/93: 76). This view neglects the argument that Riefenstahl’s aesthetics continued to exhibit fascism throughout her career as a filmmaker and photographer. Ultimately, none of these suggestions is satisfactory, and Riefenstahl remains tied to her Nazi past.

By breaking down the media’s treatment of Riefenstahl into four discourses, redemptive, denunciatory, liberal, and postmodern, I have attempted to expand my examination of Riefenstahl’s treatment beyond the traditional apologetic and condemnatory viewpoints. The inclusion of the liberal and postmodern discourses yields valuable information about culture and politics beyond the specifics of Riefenstahl’s life and career, which remain the primary focus of the redemptive and denunciatory discourses. The liberal discourse uses Riefenstahl as an example of artists whose work poses moral problems, thus touching on the relationship between art and morality, and the role of the artist in society, including the power and responsibility that come with producing popular works of art. The postmodern discourse examines what Riefenstahl means to contemporary society, thereby offering insights into postmodern culture and politics. Together, the four discourses provide a more complete, albeit no less controversial, picture of Leni Riefenstahl.

LENI RIEFENSTAHL'S OEUVRE

FILMS

Appearances

1925 *Ways to Strength and Beauty (Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit)*
Director: Wilhelm Prager

1926 *The Holy Mountain (Der Heilige Berg)*
Director: Dr. Arnold Fanck

1927 *The Great Leap (Der Grosse Sprung)*
Director: Dr. Arnold Fanck

1929 *The Destiny of the House of Hapsburg (Das Schicksal Derer von Hapsburg)*
Director: Rudolf Raffé

The White Hell of Piz Palu (Die Weisse Holle von Piz Palu)
Director: Dr. Arnold Fanck

1930 *Storm over Mont Blanc (Sturme über dem Montblanc)*
Director: Dr. Arnold Fanck

1931 *The White Frenzy (Der Weisse Rausch)*
Director: Dr. Arnold Fanck

1933 *S.O.S. Iceberg (S.O.S. Eisberg)*
Director: Dr. Arnold Fanck (German version), Tay Garnett (American version)

Director and star

1932 *The Blue Light (Das Blaue Licht)*

1954 *The Lowlands (Tiefeland)*

Director

1933 *Victory of Faith (Sieg des Glaubens)*

1935 *Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens)*

Day of Freedom: Our Army (Tag der Freiheit: Unsere Wehrmacht)

1938 *Olympia: Festival of the People (Fest der Völker), Festival of Beauty (Fest der Schönheit)*

2002 *Underwater Impressions (Impressionen unter Wasser)*

AUTHOR

1933 *Struggle in Snow and Ice. (Kampf in Schnee und Eis)* Leipzig: Hesse & Becker

1937 *Beauty in Olympic Struggle. (Schönheit im Olympischen Kampf)* Berlin: Deutschen Verlag

1973 *The Last of the Nuba. (Die Nuba)* New York: Harper and Row

1976 *The People of Kau. (Die Nuba von Kau)* New York: Harper and Row

1978 *Coral Gardens*. New York: Harper and Row

1987 *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir*. Munich: Albrecht Knaus Verlag

1993 *Wonders under Water*. London: Quartet Books

**Behind the Scenes of the Reich Party Rally Film (Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitagfilms*. Munich: Franz Eher Verlag, 1935) is a long brochure about the making of *Triumph of the Will* that was credited to Riefenstahl for years, although in interviews she denied writing it. Kracauer drew from this work to support his reading of *Triumph of the Will*, and Sontag also referenced it, making it an important text in interpretations of Riefenstahl's work. However, the actual author of the book was Ernst Jager, an editor of film magazines who was hired by Riefenstahl's production firm to produce the work for the publicity department of the German film company, Ufa (Hinton 2000: 41). The work is still erroneously attributed to Riefenstahl in some newspaper and journal articles

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