

The Puzzle of Leni Riefenstahl

by Steven Bach

Leni Riefenstahl — “Hitler’s filmmaker” — must have hoped that her 100th birthday this past August would bring that final rehabilitation of reputation for which she has worked with awe-inspiring tenacity since the Thousand-Year Reich collapsed and took her career with it. But the birthday changed nothing: Riefenstahl remains the most important female film director in history, and the most controversial. In Germany, she’s a reminder of the unrepentant bad old days — not those of the Reich, for which a simple mea culpa might earn her some measure of the rehabilitation she craves, but of the postwar period, in which confronting issues of guilt and complicity, however imperfectly or painfully, became for Germans a process that was genuinely searching rather than merely defensive.

Riefenstahl’s admirers and detractors alike offer as evidence for their views the two works on which her reputation largely rests: *Triumph of the Will* (1935), her film of the 1934 Nazi Party Congress, and *Olympia* (1938), her two-part film of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Even American writer Susan Sontag, one of Riefenstahl’s harshest critics, allows that the films “may be the two greatest documentaries ever made.” But they are branded with the stigma of Riefenstahl’s sponsor, Adolf Hitler. To her admirers, *Olympia* and *Triumph of the Will* are works of auteurist power, innovation, and beauty; to her critics, they are propaganda for a murderous regime. That they might be both seems self-evident, but no such summary evaluation of them has ever taken hold because Riefenstahl has so successfully shifted the focus of the debate to herself — as a seeker of beauty and a political naif.

Anxious that Riefenstahl might not make it alive to August, opinion makers in the German press began scorning or saluting her in January. They need not have worried. Her energy and lucidity remain phenomenal, and she has now added “oldest active film director ever” to her credits. A week before her birthday, the French-German television channel Arte broadcast the world premiere of her latest film, *Underwater Impressions*, a 45-minute documentary about deep-sea creatures. German critics dismissed it as “a home movie” or “an exquisite slideshow,” but at least it was apolitical.

Riefenstahl is frail but loquacious, and as ready as any starlet to pose for the local TV news team or German *Vogue*, which ran a 23-page spread on her in August. She changes focus as nimbly as any cameraman and defines herself as a woman with five lives. (*Five Lives* just happens to be the title of a recent (2000) coffee-table book in which Riefenstahl celebrates herself as dancer, film star, film director, photographer, and deep-sea diver.) The newsweekly *Die Zeit*

lamented the “broken record” of Riefenstahl’s claims to political naiveté and postwar victimization, even as it contributed to the inches of space her claims receive in print. Broken record it may be, but it helps her sell books, calendars, postcards, and videos, including *Triumph of the Will* (though not in Germany, where the film is legally forbidden). To celebrate her centennial, she’s selling deluxe editions of photographs from her work, personally autographed, for \$20,000 each. Some of the images are, in fact, not hers; the Olympic photographs, long available in book form and exhibited and sold in galleries under her name, are actually the work of her camera crew on *Olympia*. Some are stills from the film, and some are photos they took separately.

Riefenstahl vehemently maintains that *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* are not propaganda, as any good propagandist would. She assiduously cultivates her image as an artist on the high road to beauty, and she fields even hostile questions with ease, her manner ranging from faux-naive to diva-imperious. On her side she has age — no one wants to be rude to an old lady — and the law. She has brought, and mostly won, some 50 libel suits since postwar courts officially labeled her a mere “Mitläuferin” (sympathizer). She was so labeled despite her Nazi films (*Triumph of the Will* is one of three she made for the party) and her proximity to the center of Third Reich power, most notably to the Führer himself.

Riefenstahl deals shrewdly with this aspect of her résumé. She denies that she was Hitler’s mistress or, as one old canard has it, that she ever danced nude for him at Berchtesgaden. In fact, no one but Riefenstahl raises those concerns anymore, as if she’s aware that, without her ties to the Führer, she might be just another forgotten filmmaker. To younger Germans, who have never seen the mostly silent films about mountain climbing in which she appeared as an actress, and for whom *Triumph of the Will* is still officially prohibited, she’s a relic from an era that still leaves them feeling bewildered or defensive. For them, her connection to Hitler is the only thing that gives her currency and — the young are not alone in this — a measure of glamour.

Die Welt, one of Germany’s soberest papers, initiated her centenary year in January by offering a sympathetic forum for the all-too-familiar claims and complaints that inspired *Die Zeit*’s “broken record” headline months later. As August approached, the tabloid press lured readers with racy headlines such as “In Love I Had Bad Luck” and “Her Time with Hitler,” while the militantly feminist magazine *Emma* renewed its charges that she was the victim of “a witch-hunt.” German-speaking television checked in almost nightly from mid-July on. The questions were soft, the challenges perfunctory. Riefenstahl predictably observed that her early enthusiasm for Hitler was shared by millions of her compatriots, and then dismissed the topic so as “not to spoil my birthday.”

The closest any television pundit got to a hard-hitting question was during an hour chat following the broadcast of the new underwater film. Sandra Maischberger, whose usual subjects are politicians and

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*Leni Riefenstahl, shown here on the set of *Triumph of the Will*, resists charges that she was “Hitler’s filmmaker.” She released a new film to mark her 100th birthday in August.*

policymakers, wondered aloud about the claims of political unawareness. If Riefenstahl were really that unaware, she asked, might it not be that she was so egocentric that she didn’t know or care about *anything* outside herself? Riefenstahl eagerly agreed: The trait validated her as the obsessed artist searching for beauty. She then announced her intention to make a film about Vincent van Gogh, whose self-mutilation, she suggested, was part of the same search.

Print journalists, safe from her alert and contentious presence, had an easier time focusing on the Third Reich and themes of ambition, opportunism, and narcissism. Berlin’s liberal *Tageszeitung* declared her “obsessed with herself.” The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* referred to “the autism in which [she] lives.” *Die Zeit* suggested that questions about Hitler annoy her “not because they hint at associations with Nazi fanaticism, but because they interrupt the flow of her limitless narcissism.”

Germany

The most serious damper on the celebration came in mid-August, a week before Riefenstahl's birthday, when an organization representing European Gypsies charged at a press conference in Cologne that she was guilty of Holocaust denial. The charge is a grave one in Germany and mandates court proceedings. The suit accused Riefenstahl of having lied about the fate of Gypsies she had used as slave-labor extras on *Tiefland* (Lowlands), one of two features she made during the war. (She was writer, producer, and director of *Tiefland*, and she played a Spanish dancer in the film. Production was halted in 1944, and the film, completed in 1953, had its German premiere in 1954.) Riefenstahl had publicly claimed to have seen "all the Gypsies who worked on *Tiefland* after the war. Nothing happened to a single one of them." But the truth is that, of 48 Gypsies who can be documented, 20 died in Nazi extermination camps, most of them in Auschwitz—to which they were transported almost directly from the film set. A spokesman announced that Riefenstahl "regretted that Gypsies had to suffer under National Socialism."

It wasn't much of an apology, and it was accompanied by claims of faulty memory from a woman with seemingly total recall about every lens and film stock she used in every film she ever made. The tepid expression of regret, which distanced Riefenstahl from events, was no surprise, but it got attention and it raised the issue that most of the news media were skirting without ever confronting: Why do Germans still care about Riefenstahl? What is it about her that unsettles them at this late date and arouses such intense partisanship?

The newsweekly *Der Spiegel* sought an answer in art: "The German resistance and anger toward Riefenstahl are explicable, perhaps, in that she discovered and conquered a new and popular art form, perfecting and perverting it at the same time. . . . Through Riefenstahl we have seen how a monument can be made from a body . . . how from a madman with a moustache you can make a charismatic hero. . . . Thanks to her [work] we mistrust ourselves."

A simpler answer, I think, is that Riefenstahl disturbs because she remains the adamant, fierce, glib voice of the "how could we have known?" defense, an argument fewer and fewer Germans, and almost none of the current generation, still feel comfortable making. Perhaps the most intriguing, if bitter, note in the centenary press was *Die Zeit's* suggestion that Riefenstahl might be, in and of herself, the "best conceivable Holocaust memorial. Not some smooth stone you turn to when you feel like it, but this decaying, ungainly monument, forever spewing out the same old reminiscences in unending variations—the monument we really deserve."

At 100, Riefenstahl is indeed her own monument, the diva who won't go away, eternally ready for her close-up. She preceded her underwater film with a "dear viewer" speech on camera, in which she announced that she was a member of Greenpeace and made a plea in behalf of all those fish that, as captives for distant aquariums, die in transport. Her eyes were moist with sincerity, and it was impossible not to wonder, the Gypsies' lawsuit having been announced the same day, whether she ever thought about other transports and other captives.

She didn't say. □