

Trump's inner thoughts (if there are any), it is well established that he prefers the aesthetics of Vince McMahon over those of Riefenstahl.

Veiel sees his work as a commentary on the present and a warning for the future (an even greater upsurge of rightwing extremism). A commendable goal, perhaps, but he should beware of aesthetic blowback - his documentary might have the unintended consequence of inducing people to explore Riefenstahl's films for themselves, thus potentially accelerating the pace and scope of a Riefenstahl renaissance.



Veiel seems to be an earnest fellow, full of good intentions, confident that he maintained objectivity while striving "... *eine eigene Filmsprache zu finden...*". Ms Maischberger is a journalist and talk show host, full of intentions as well. He was born in the late fifties, she in the mid sixties, so both arrived on the scene after the faith and practice of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* had taken root.

Since they, like their generational confreres, have the luck of a late birth, they came of age properly catechized, imbued with the sacred duty to *manage* the past. If asked, that generation of folks (mostly dead now) who didn't

have the luck of a late birth would probably suggest *studying* the past instead.

Regrettably, a distillation of Veiel's *Riefenstahl* yields only garden variety *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The overall impression is redolent of the Gotcha Journalism pioneered by 60 Minutes and eagerly adapted by a host of journalistic epigones since then. At least 60 Minutes tended to ambush people who were still alive.

Since it is the better part of wisdom to tread lightly around documentaries claiming to speak truth to power, can we find a reliable method or an ultimate key for summing up an individual's essence? Camus emphasized the requisite conjunction with the individual of freedom and responsibility. Paul Tillich referred to the individual's ultimate concern. Bo Diddley boiled it down *mo' better*: "...*who do you love?...*".

Bo would be happy to learn that there is indeed a discernable *Ordo Amoris* herein: Riefenstahl fell in love with herself at an early age and was never unfaithful despite having art as a mistress and loving much else, such as beautiful bodies and mountains and waterfalls and attention and winning and hobnobbing with influencers of whatever stripe. In the midst of all this loving, was she willing to hang out with Nazis, including The Big Guy? Sure. Things go better with Coke.

But there is precious little convincing evidence that she actually loved Nazi Ideology per se, or that the glorification of this worldview was the animating principle of her work. If she loved anything about the Nazis, it was the power they wielded, which, given her privileged status, created a protective cocoon, a safe space, as it were, where she could continue linking beautiful images together. Living and working thusly necessitates scads of time, and to paraphrase Oscar Wilde "The trouble with any *ism* is that it takes up too many evenings."

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Riefenstahl (2024)
German with English Subtitles

January 16 | 6.30pm
Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania
611 Spring Garden St.
Philadelphia, PA 19123

Riefenstahl (2024)

Director: Andres Veiel

Script: Andres Veiel

Cinematographer: Toby Cornish

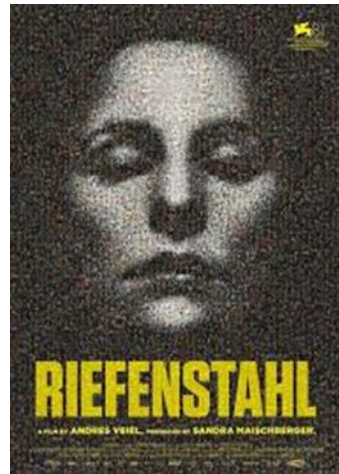
Producer: Sandra Maischberger

Narrator: Ulrich Noethen

Running time: 115 minutes

Release Date: August 2024

Commentary: A. Krumm



Who do you love (Bo Diddley)

"It's a feeling for links between images..." So said Leni Riefenstahl about how she did what she did. Some artists claim they do not know how they do what they do. Some say they are the recipient of a divine spark, some will profess themselves merely to be the conduit of a great tradition. Leni Riefenstahl indulged in no such equivocation.

Perhaps there was something antecedent to that feeling, an *Urquelle* of sorts. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson advised "*You ain't nothin' if you ain't a hooper*" and before she was anything else, Leni Riefenstahl was a dancer. Perhaps the rhythm of a dancer gave birth to this feeling which engendered the remarkable images in her films.

What she did with that feeling was transformative. Whether of strutting Nazis or naked Nubians or latter-day agonists of an Olympiad, whether of the under-sea world that fascinated her toward the end of her life, Leni Riefenstahl's images are utterly captivating. In accord with Ezra Pound's alleged dictum: "*make it new, make it sing*", Riefenstahl minted fresh images and linked them in sequences that sing with movement and rhythm and irruptive intimacy. Perhaps it should not be burdened with the overused descriptor 'genius' but Riefenstahl's *feeling* is manifest throughout her oeuvre.

And yet much of her compelling visual aesthetic was achieved through an obsessive, well-nigh fanatical editing process. In that process she habitually juxtaposed the lonely intensity of the individual with the synergistic emotional power of the crowd, thus choreographing a Gestalt of the one and the many ensconced within a very particular time and place that was nonetheless timeless.

work, watch *Riefenstahl*, produced by Sandra Maischberger and directed by Andres Veiel. They, along with their team, plowed through the rather immense archive of Riefenstahl's *Nachlass*. Starting from the operating premise that Riefenstahl was an insidious person in need of retroactive doxing, in the true spirit of virtuous cognoscenti, they proceeded to do so.

Rummaging through these unflattering *Lebensartifakte* (bursting with personal, political and psychological detritus, warts and all), they uncovered plenty of unlovely fodder. Who among us would care to have his or her worst attitudes, utterances, and behavior archived, indexed and available for the world and posterity to inspect (and judge) ad nauseum, ad infinitum.

Ms Maischberger and Herr Veiel indicated that they wanted to create an artistic narrative rather than just a run of the mill documentary. Unfortunately, Riefenstahl is not around anymore, as their film might have benefited greatly from her editing skills. The look and feel of the tale they tell is not new and it does not sing. Ironically, there is a distinct dearth of *Schauwert*, except for the segments interweaving Riefenstahl's actual work. Clearly one is expected to digest this work by swallowing whole the overweening *Grundsatz* that Riefenstahl was (and is) one dangerously conniving *Nazihelferin*.

The narrative logic of the film (sprinkled with weirdly spooky soundtrack cues) seems frequently off-kilter. Veiel intersperses film sequences, TV interviews, home movies, textual material, photos, telephone calls, and (to his credit) more than a few probing close ups of Leni Riefenstahl's face as she struggles to gain control of her thoughts and emotions. Many sequences are introduced with shots of the physical *Rohstoff* itself: audio cassettes, video cassettes, film reels, analog photos, written material, etc., as if to say "look at all this *Rohstoff*, we went through it so pay attention. Just look ... here is a photo of her holding *Des Führers Hand!*"

Indeed, there is a lot of *Rohstoff*, and a healthy percentage of this comprises footage of those television interviews she did through the years, segments (some of it unreleased footage) from *Die Macht der Bilder*, or sequences from *Das Blaue Licht*, *Triumph des Willens* and *Olympia*. Subtract the foregoing material, and the pedestrian tone of the film becomes apparent.

One is left with home movie clips, readings from Riefenstahl's assorted texts (memoirs, letters, etc.), admonitory narration while supposedly inculpatory photo montages scroll past and recorded telephone calls that apparently are meant to suggest *thought-crime* or infer guilty intentions. Again, to his credit, Veiel includes (from *Die Macht der Bilder*) a few marvelously revelatory takes of Riefenstahl's glowing countenance as she reviews her famous films, magic moments where that vaunted *feeling* of hers surfaces.

Veiel declared that he had to make this film. For him Riefenstahl is a prototypical fascist whose allure and influence is alive and kicking. He sees a renaissance of her aesthetic ranging as far as Moscow and Peking. Naturally Trump is doing his part to proliferate a fascist mentality along with this fascist aesthetic. Without presuming to be privy to

stahl's take on herself, you could do worse than watching Ray Mueller's documentary *Die Macht der Bilder*. In particular, listen to her closing soliloquy, a feisty riposte to her detractors, wherein she poses a final question:

"... *wo liegt meine Schuld ...?*" An interesting question.

Confronted with the horrific aftermath of totalitarian ravages, of whatever provenance, it is a good bet that most individuals who lived through such a time would echo Riefenstahl's sentiments and say "... so where does my guilt lie..." Like her, they would say "Well I didn't know about all that", or if they did admit to knowing, they might say "... well I had no control over that. I didn't support it but what could I do...". This was essentially Riefenstahl's stance, not necessarily inspiring, but nonetheless one shared by many.



It is compulsory common knowledge that the Third Reich is the *ne plus ultra* of wicked regimes and by extension, anyone who lived through that time in that place as a citizen is *ipso facto* complicit in evil, unless they died fighting for the resistance (Riefenstahl wryly noted that there were not all that many resistance fighters). Yet contrary to the carefully curated narratives of official history, the past is littered with brutal regimes and leaders, many of them of quite recent provenance.

When the subject of the Third Reich comes up, a reflexive discourse control invariably kicks in. To mention any competition, to contextualize, to draw any comparison is to commit the ultimate moral lapse. Why this is so should probably be the subject of another documentary (perhaps one that Herr Veiel could undertake), since as Robert Conquest observed in *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, Nazism and Bolshevism were more like twins than opposites.

If it is a good thing to learn from history, it would be a good thing to dispense with discourse control à la "...*All genocides are equal, but some genocides are more equal than others...*"

How many documentaries are there that excoriate Sergei Eisenstein for working under Stalin. Mao possibly killed more people than Hitler and Stalin put together, but there seems to be very few extant studies concerning the propagandistic elements of Wang Ping's film *The East Is Red*, which assures us in the opening overture that Mao Zedong is the Saviour. It is not certain if Pol Pot, Suharto, Talaat Pasha, Leopold II, Idi Amin or Robert Mugabe had *Lieblingsregisseure*, but further study might be warranted.

If you wish to consume the most recent orthodox examination of her life and

Riefenstahl's documentary films transcend mere chronology and the prosaic 'one damn thing after another' tendency of most documentaries. As many critics and film aficionados have noted, her works do not transmit information so much as they convey mood and an emotionally laden *vorfilmisch* quality that translates seamlessly into visually enchanting drama, leavened by injections of beautifully stylized spontaneity.

Her *feeling* was just as evident in her feature film *Das Blaue Licht*. A mystical aura pervades everything. Riefenstahl creates a haunting *Märchen* where form and content synergize, inviting us to revel in the beauty with which she envelopes us. Apropos this work, she said: "...*And with this feeling, that form and content should coincide, came the idea that I must write a ballad or a legend for such a film.*"

Riefenstahl's *feeling* was her very own and that feeling enabled her to capture beauty on film as few have done before or since. But as is so often the case with that mythical species known as a *Solitary Genius*, she benefited greatly from both circumstance and key people. She served an invaluable apprenticeship under the famed mountain film director Arnold Fanck. Riefenstahl aptly describes this tutelage: "*I soaked up Fanck's and his cameramen's experience until it became second nature....Camera work became as interesting as using a paintbrush.*"

She also knew how to surround herself with outstanding co-workers. She leveraged the collaboration and contributions of superb professionals such as Hans Schneeberger, Sepp Allgeier, Walter Frenz and Herbert Windt, among others. One cannot minimize the fact that for her most famous projects (*Triumph des Willens* and *Olympia*), her biggest fan, *Der Führer*, was all in when it came to granting her unlimited funding and creative control.

Nonetheless, it is not an exaggeration to say that she changed the course of filmmaking, both technically and artistically. Her *Nachwirkung* (or perhaps better said her *Fortwirkung*) is immense. Advertisers, film makers and sundry visual content mongers have been imitating, copying and cheerfully stealing her techniques ever since. Where would wide world of sports be without her. Absent Riefenstahl, music videos might have been still born. Calvin Kline likely sold a lot more underwear due to her.

Although in later years he curbed his enthusiasm one of her biggest fans was Walt Disney. In terms of impact on her art form, some say she ranks up there with Orson Welles and Hitchcock. George Lucas would probably agree, as would a host of other devotees, including Andy Warhol, Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, Mick Jagger and Jodie Foster, among many others.



A good way to grasp Riefenstahl's original impact is to absorb the reaction to *Olympia* when that film was released worldwide in 1938. As biographer Jurgen Trimborn noted, the international press called it among other things "a masterpiece", "a work of art of the highest order", and "the most beautiful love song that film has ever offered to sports." Although before and during the war her work was essentially suppressed in the United States and England, this enthusiasm continued unabated throughout the rest of the world. Privately, in both America and England, connoisseurs and casual fans alike praised, however sotto voce, the artistic value of her work and recognized its immediate impact and the enduring impact it would undoubtedly exert in the future.

Unintended praise sometimes reared its impish head even in the midst of negative assessments. The American critic Amos Vogel, while referring to *Triumph des Willens* as a "deeply dangerous", said that Riefenstahl was "without doubt one of the greatest directors." Frank Capra, hired to create propaganda films for the US Office of War Information, confessed to being shaken when first viewing *Triumph des Willens*.

You have to give Capra credit. Although in his autobiography he indulged in a good bit of hyperbolic antipathetic ranting in describing *Triumph des Willens*, he recognized a masterpiece when he saw it, also calling it "...the powerhouse propaganda film of our times..." and declaring in his most oft quoted passage "Triumph of the Will fired no gun, dropped no bombs. But as a psychological weapon aimed at destroying the will to resist, it was just as lethal." Once over his initial panic attack upon viewing *Triumph des Willens*, Capra proceeded to freely leverage many of Riefenstahl's techniques (as well as footage from her film) in creating righteous propaganda for his own series, *Why We Fight*.

Obviously Riefenstahl is deservedly remembered for her unique cinematic achievements, but she is also problematically remembered because she lived and worked and flourished during the tenure of the Third Reich and hence she is, it is averred, inextricably bound up with the ideology and worldview of that movement. It seems the chief concern of those who see Riefenstahl as an exponent of a Nazi world view is to make sure no one ever forgets the second reason for remembering Leni Riefenstahl, perhaps serving, in Elisabeth Bronfen's apt phrase, as a "collective scapegoat". From this perspective Riefenstahl, all the more dangerous because she is so attractive, is seen as the ultimate Nazi Chick: a *Sieg Heil* seductress with a *Hakenkreuz* bulls-eye justifiably etched on her forehead.

Was Riefenstahl an egomaniac? It would certainly seem so (gifted artists often are). Was she the ultimate opportunistic careerist? Absolutely. A ruthless one at that. Feminists take note, she enraged a lot of male Nazi powerbrokers because she was better at *climbing the greasy pole* than they were. She was willing and able to jettison anyone (whether the connection was person-

al, political, professional or otherwise) if that relationship might hinder her climb to the top or threaten her artistic *amour propre*.

Her connections to Harry Sokal and Bela Balazs, both Jewish, testify to her ruthlessness and as well as to her apparently non-ideological temperament. Harry Sokal was Riefenstahl's business patron for ten years (and also supposedly an unrequited lover). He provided funding and business guidance and opened doors. Balazs was a key contributor in developing the dramaturgy and crafting the script for *Das Blaue Licht*. It is implausible if Riefenstahl were a visceral antisemite or a nascent Nazi in search of a *Führer*, that she would have worked so closely with either of them. It does make sense for an ambitious careerist to do so. Both of them were talented in different spheres, both were useful to her.

In the 1990s everyone wanted to be cholesterol-free. In 1933, everyone wanted to be *Judenfrei* and Leni Riefenstahl never had a problem going with the flow. Both of her collaborators were suddenly *ex post facto persona non grata*. When Balazs (having fled to Moscow) requested payment for his work on *Das Blaue Licht*, Riefenstahl refused and actually sicced her new buddy Julius Streicher on him to encourage Balazs to cease and desist.

Perhaps there was some confusion about the payment. Harry Sokal had fled Germany as well, due to not being on the *Things Nazis Like* list either. Incidentally, he had taken the negatives of the film with him, and was marketing the film abroad without remunerating either Riefenstahl or Balazs. But nonetheless, to sic Streicher on a person seems a tad beyond the pale.

In the decades after the war, Riefenstahl frequently obfuscated and lied in frenetic attempts to put herself in the best light possible regarding her relationship to the Nazis. Ultimately, this tactic only provided more ammunition for her detractors, but given Riefenstahl's solipsistic personality, it is not surprising she did so. Perhaps, over time, she actually convinced herself that her claims about being simply a naive unsuspecting artist were true.

Yet dissimulating about what she knew and who she knew does not make her complicit in the actions of the Nazis. By all accounts, she never killed anyone, never endorsed killing or persecution, never indulged in *Volksverhetzung*, never even joined the party. On rare occasions, though she never mentioned it, she helped people who had run afoul of the regime, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Nevertheless, the standard accusation (and generally accepted perception) is that Riefenstahl was the ultimate fellow traveler, even a Nazi by conviction, and therefore her oeuvre in the end can only have a negative meaning. It is as if there is a direct correlation between the remarkable *Anziehungskraft* of her films and the degree of guilt imputed to her.

Trotz alledem, is it legitimate to contextualize Riefenstahl? Is it legitimate to contextualize any German who lived through that era? The prevailing *Good-think Zeitgeist* since 1945 says No! Nonetheless, if you wish to hear Riefen-