In the Land of Gods and Monsters

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I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful.
—Leni Riefensthl (qtd. in Sontag “Fascinating Fascism”)

How do you talk about Leni Riefenstahl without discussing Hitler?

It actually is quite simple. You start at the beginning. You start with the image of a young woman.

As the fog clears, her figure appears sitting barefoot on a rock on the top of a ragged mountain peak. Snow that looks like glitter begins to fall from the heavens as she bends down and picks up a glowing blue crystal. Behind her, an enormous waterfall plunges into the depths below. Mist wets her tattered clothes.

The first time we are shown Junta in Leni Riefenstahl’s 1932 film, The Blue Light, we see her as a goddess. She is literally radiant; light flows from her body. Making her way down the mountain, she finds other crystals and places them in her small straw basket, collecting them the way a child might collect flowers for her mother. She is sweet and powerful, humble and strong, framed by Riefenstahl in such a way that the audience is expected to fall in love with her. We expect the townspeople at the base of the mountain to praise her as we do. When they don’t, when they see her as a witch and blame her when several young boys climb the mountain and fall to their deaths, we still take Junta’s side because she has already captured our hearts.

But in the end, it is Junta’s very beauty that leads to her downfall. An attractive scholar travels to the mountain town, falls in love with her, and, thinking that the villagers will accept Junta if they understand that she is the source of light, leads them to the crystals. But the townspeople are greedy and take all the gems for themselves, leaving none for Junta. Her mountain path grows dark, and she falls, plunging from the peak into a flowerbed on the mountainside.
A beautiful woman killed by others’ greed. A beautiful woman killed by love. A beautiful woman killed by nature. A beautiful woman slips and falls.

When she is twenty-two years old, Riefenstahl sees an image that drastically changes her life. She stands on the subway platform, favoring the foot she hurt dancing, waiting for a train to take her to a doctor who is going to treat her injury.

A poster catches her eye, an advertisement for a film. A man is climbing over a towering mountain chimney. Minutes later, Riefenstahl is in the theater watching *Mountain of Destiny*. Clouds, rocks, alpine slopes, and mountains flash before her eyes. She is captivated by their force and power. Sitting in the darkness, she commits those vivid black-and-white images to memory. “I had made up my mind to get to know those mountains,” she writes in her memoir (42). She decides to become an actress.

Riefenstahl spends the next eight years visiting various mountains all over Germany: acting, skiing, climbing, laughing, crying. She learns to climb, to push her body to its limits, to sit in the snow for hours. She comes to the Brenta Dolomites, the mountain range that she uses for her first film, *The Blue Light*. She searches for the best way to amplify nature’s natural beauty. She is both Romantic and romantic; she knows the terror of these peaks, their sense of the sublime, but she also feels a kind of nostalgic sentimentality. The forests, the lakes, the animals all remind her of the fairy tales of her childhood, so she tugs on her memories for the images that will haunt her and us. As a child she sleepwalked when there was a full moon, so she uses the moon as the leading part in *The Blue Light*. She also invents a special filter that creates a moonlit effect by shooting on infrared film negative. It is organic, pure, striking. Like Junta, whom she plays in her own film, she is bringing light to the world, harvesting crystals of natural desire.

Enter the attractive scholar—or at least, the failed art student. Hitler. He sees *The Blue Light* and approaches Riefenstahl. He wants her. It is debatable whether this desire is sexual, or professional, or both. He has the ability to change everything about her situation, and her reaction upon meeting him is powerful: “I had an almost apocalyptic vision that I was never able to forget. It seemed as if the earth’s surface were spreading out in front of me, like a hemisphere that suddenly splits apart in the middle, spewing out an enormous jet of water, so powerful that it touched the sky and shook the earth. I felt quite paralysed” (Riefenstahl 101). It is worth noting the violent naturalism of her vision. Water does the impossible—cracks the earth, rises up, overcomes gravity. Riefenstahl believes she is doing the opposite of falling.
It is the fact that Hitler intimates Riefenstahl that draws her to him. Riefenstahl decides to join Hitler and his retinue, becoming a lone female in an all-male pack of wolves. She travels in an exclusive circle, positioning herself always in relation to the alpha male, the Führer. She decides to prove the ones who distrust her wrong. She will make a film worthy of his greatness, as good as any demagogue could desire. Employing a crew of one hundred and seventy men, she films the 1934 Reich Party Congress in Nuremberg. The film of this event, *Triumph of the Will*, becomes her magnum opus. She invents new techniques, builds cranes and tracking rails. Thirty cameras are used to capture a rally that will change history forever.

If you have ever seen a documentary about Germany, or any from the 1930s, it is almost certain that you have seen a few moments from *Triumph of the Will*. Young boys, all between the ages of ten and twenty, pound fiery cadences on drums. They are preparing for a daytime rally in the vast Nuremberg Youth Stadium. Their fresh, well-scrubbed faces match their neat attire. They are Hitler Youth. They know nothing of the gas, fires, or purges that will come. They look innocent. Trumpets and flutes join the drums for a fanfare. The boys crane their necks, sit on each other’s shoulders, jump as high as they can, desperate to get a peek of their Führer. Hands turn almost simultaneously across the stadium as Hitler makes his way through the excited throng. He is handed flowers plucked from fields all over the Reich. At the podium, he stands with his hands interlaced, eyeing the massive crowd. He seems pleased with himself. He has persuaded these people of something that is never quite said. Perhaps he has persuaded them to accept her. Close-ups of smiling boys’ faces appear on the center of the screen. They clap, drum, and stomp in unison. Hitler steps into his car, driving through their salutes. The camera pulls back from the crowd. There are miles and miles of Hitler Youth; the mass is never-ending. *Triumph of the Will* dramatically elevates Reifenstahl’s status. She wins multiple cinematic awards, and personal accolades from Hitler. She has given him an image to reflect and consolidate his ambition. She has given him his light.

A beautiful woman slips and falls.

In 1933, Joseph Goebbels is appointed Propaganda Minister for the Third Reich. His preference for propaganda tends towards the subtle and artsy. Hitler, on the other hand, wants a more direct approach: blunt, explicit expressions of desire. What makes him “sick,” he reportedly says, is “political propaganda hiding under the guise of art. Let it be either art or politics” (qtd. in Welch 37). Goebbels takes issue with this rejection of artfulness. He thinks
that “the moment a person is conscious of propaganda, propaganda becomes ineffective” (qtd. in Welch 38).

In his book, *Propaganda and the German Cinema: 1933-1945*, David Welch characterizes these different approaches as “lie direct” and “lie indirect” (37, 38). We are perhaps used to thinking of *Triumph of the Will* as a clear instance of “lie direct,” as an expression of the National Socialist point of view. In the film itself, Goebbels says, “May the bright flame of our enthusiasm never be extinguished. It alone gives light and warmth to the creative art of modern political propaganda.” For a man interested in subtlety, it’s a pretty direct sentiment.

In 1965, Riefenstahl is interviewed by Charles Wasserman for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, who asks if she knew of Hitler’s plans. She stiffens, her eyes widen, and she jolts in her chair. Her voice peaks like her faithful mountains, then drops below the surface. She protests. She says she was unaware. Then she is suddenly calm and ladylike again. When she talks craft, she is a new woman, recalling exactly how each shot was achieved, the color of the filter, the brand name of the camera, and how many rolls of footage were used. She is wholly different from the defensive, self-justifying woman who first argued that *Triumph of the Will* was a documentary, and then said “Reality doesn’t interest me.” Wasserman asks her if she believes *Triumph of the Will* is a propaganda film. She stiffens again and responds in choppy English: “If I would see this film today, after we know everything that happened, I would say yes. In this time, ’34, natural no, because a propaganda film must have a commentator . . . I only made what I have seen, and I have spoken nothing, only the natural things” (CBC).

If Riefenstahl can’t classify *Triumph of the Will*, how can we be expected to? It is a shocking comment in a number of ways. What was Goebbels in her film if not a commentator? What is a director—if not an arranging, composing, commenting hand? Yet what seems even more shocking is the afterthought of her answer, that almost offhand characterization—“only the natural things.” The rally, then, was natural. She says it so coolly, as if she had stepped outside to film a mountain. And how does one film only the natural but not care for the political reality?

In *Triumph of the Will*, it is the filming itself that transforms reality into fantasy. Her craft makes it so. The way the crowd falls at Hitler’s knees, the way he is flown from the clouds on a plane, the salutes, the chants, the drumming, the coordination of the marching—it is all a form of beauty. In the world of Riefenstahl’s film, everything becomes rhythmic and harmonious, takes on the easy symmetry of a natural world. She cannot admit that
this rhythm, and that the film’s transformation of the “natural,” comes from her technical skill.

To admit that *Triumph of the Will* is beautiful is a difficult thing to do now. We can’t look at Riefenstahl’s film without the hindsight history provides, without the knowledge of all the horror and pain these young boys would go on to inflict on others. Yet is it fair—to her, to our understanding of art—to see so much beauty in *The Blue Light*, and ignore it in her next film? It’s true that on the surface of it, *The Blue Light* and *Triumph of the Will* seem like very different films. One is set in nature, the other in a city. One captures solitude, the other seeks the collective. One follows a woman, the other a crowd of young men. One is about being undone. The other is about being overcome, transfigured, made whole. We could say that Hitler ruined Riefenstahl with her second film, set her off on a course from which she never recovered. She slipped, thinking all the while that she was rising upward. But *The Blue Light* and *Triumph of the Will* are twins, in a way, even if they are fraternal, not identical. In each, the light is a source of obsession. In each, Riefenstahl focuses on the purity of desire. Men lust after something greater, something that is exciting, captivating, and deadly for all parties involved. They see the crystals and Hitler as heavenly gifts, given to them in a time of need. Perhaps we overlook the similarities between the films because her love of nature, which is so present in *The Blue Light*, veils a number of problematic “truths,” including the notion that man can be so easily persuaded to destroy the thing he loves. We could say that *The Blue Light* is Lie Indirect, and *The Triumph of the Will* is Lie Direct. But to make this kind of distinction seems spurious. We—or rather, I—don’t want to. I want to assume instead that there is a clear distinction between the beauty in one film and the beauty in the other. Junta seems so far away from Nuremberg. How can this goddess be the same as the boys in the stadium? I do not want to believe that both are natural in the same way.

We might think Riefenstahl has solved the problem herself with her next film, *Olympia*, a four-hour black and white movie comprised of two parts, *Fest der Völker* (Festival of the People) and *Fest der Schönheit* (Festival of Beauty), which documents the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. The Prologue sets the scene of the games’ origin, the camera tracking through temple ruins and classical statues: we are in ancient Greece. The camera settles on a statue of a discus thrower. In slow dissolve, the statue comes to life in the form of a German decathlon champion. The camera moves to show other classical sports, each dissolving from marble and stillness into flesh and movement. The shot-put thrower tosses the ball in a rhythmic, dance-like motion. His hands dissolve
and are replaced by the feminine hands of a dancer. Nude women circle around each other, throwing their hands in the air (though the camera angle hides her face, Riefenstahl is one of these women). They line up; only their hands extend out. From the ground, a flame rises. It encloses the women, yet they are untouched. The flame becomes the Olympic torch. These are women come down from the mountaintop, transfigured, immortal. History comes alive through the lens of Riefenstahl’s camera and with one, simple technique. It takes one cut in an editing room to bleed the past into the present, to connect the Greek gods with the German athletes of 1936. The statues themselves are also lies—“direct” or “indirect,” it doesn’t matter. Riefenstahl is able to reach backwards in time and reconstitute, reread history, cinematically exemplifying the long-standing superiority of the Aryan body. The Olympic Games provided the perfect opportunity for the Nazis to display their supposed dominance over all races, and they won more medals than any other country that year. We see Hitler in the crowd, watching the events, his presence somehow overshadowing the athletes. Even when he is not there, he is. She barely lingers on his face, but one shot is enough. In the film, the athletes’ natural beauty is accentuated, almost sharpened, by the dominant political atmosphere. The body is, indisputably, a “natural thing,” but the sources of its power, here, are dangerously unclear.

Riefenstahl spends eighteen months in the cutting room, stitching together thousands of black and white negatives to make *Olympia*. She forgoes meals and sleep. She is so focused that she says she misses the political change that is occurring outside her office (Riefenstahl 213).

World War II begins. Riefenstahl attempts to make another film as the battles rage on. Her brother dies fighting. It takes her years to make another film, and when it is finally completed, the French confiscate it. She is labeled a Nazi sympathizer and held for four years by the Americans and French for de-Nazification. She protests, says she is innocent, but no one believes her.

Six thousand miles away in the United States, another artist, Ansel Adams, spends these years looking over his own photographs in his lab. He is also interested in capturing the natural. His Sierra Mountains are Riefenstahl’s Dolomites. He is another technical obsessive. In the 1930s, Adams masters the manipulation of darkness and sunlight, using it to elevate the natural wildness through seasons and spaces. Using a large depth of field, his black-and-white photographs capture oak trees in snowstorms, branches above clouds, lakes and trees in front of endless mountains. And like
Riefenstahl, Adams had a similar epochal awakening, a realization akin to the one she had standing on that subway platform in 1924.

It is interesting to note that both Riefenstahl and Adams had other life plans. Riefenstahl wanted to pursue dancing further, and Adams wanted to be a pianist. But Riefenstahl injured her foot, and Adams’ family could not pay for the expensive lessons. The tiniest twist of fate intervened: Riefenstahl saw a poster and Adams was given a book about Yosemite. “From that day,” Adams writes in 1916, “my life has been colored and modulated by the great earth gesture of the Sierra (qtd. in Turnage “Adams”). Both Adams and Riefenstahl found a new source of beauty and never looked back, and if you look closely, you begin to see patterns between Adams’s photographs and Riefenstahl’s films; they are attracted to the sublime sense of power in nature. Waterfalls, clouds, and mountains take on a greater meaning, become driving forces in their work.

If Adams and Riefenstahl are comparable, then there is recognizable evidence that Riefenstahl is not the only person to create a world where politics lurks beneath the natural world. Adams’s majestic pictures now represent the cause of wilderness protection in the popular imagination. The Sierra Club uses his photographs to advertise. But Adams would only be considered a propagandist by the most churlish. If he is known as one thing other than an artist, it is simply an environmentalist. It makes sense that the Nazis were environmentalists. They advocated vegetarianism, organic agriculture, and forest preservation. During their rule, the Nazis maintained the idea of “Blood and Soil”: a nationalist ideology, popularized by race theorist Richard Walther Darré, that advocated rural living and valued the German Aryan peasantry above urban dwellers and immigrants. The Nazis were desperate to regain the sacred land that their predecessors had held. They saw the forest in relation to themselves: strong, healthy, and far-reaching. Yet if Riefenstahl is known as one thing other than as a female artist, it is as a Nazi. Had she chosen to continue with the fantasy stories of her childhood, her life, her legacy would have ended with her art. The irony is that her lack of awareness destroyed her career—but now, she will never be forgotten. For Riefenstahl, her art has been “saved” because it is the “lie direct.” The Blue Light is only watched because of Triumph of the Will.

Riefenstahl is only in the news again these days because of the supposed directness of that lie. When Kathryn Bigelow released Zero Dark Thirty in 2012, the noted feminist polemicist Naomi Woolf accused Bigelow of being the American Riefenstahl of her time because of her supportive—or at least neutral—portrayal of torture and the CIA’s tactics in the hunt for Osama Bin
Laden. Wolf argued that Bigelow made “heroes and heroines out of people who committed violent crimes against other people based on their race.” And, perhaps because there are so few well-known female film directors, Wolf found it easy to draw a distinct line from Bigelow to Riefenstahl. In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, Bigelow addressed Wolf’s criticism: “Those of us who work in the arts know that depiction is not endorsement. If it was, no artist would be able to paint inhumane practices, no author could write about them, and no filmmaker could delve into the thorny subjects of our time.” By her logic, Bigelow needed to show the interrogator—capable of stringing a man up for days—striding through very ordinary corridors in Washington, casually sitting with departmental heads in the CIA. She needed to make this man’s passage between our world and another shadow world so natural that we would in turn reject it as unbelievable—and reflect, in turn, on our own shock (in a way, this sense of moral “dissolve” is very similar to *Olympia*). It’s the last part of Bigelow’s justification that seems debatable—can she really rely so faithfully on an audience’s capacity for self-reflection? She seems to want to think that *Zero Dark Thirty* will influence our thinking without its making a direct statement or endorsement, that we will be fascinated enough with her craft to offer our own interpretation.

What the comparison between Bigelow and Riefenstahl does reveal is that these women will be remembered, not because they are women, but because as women they are able to take on such grandiose subjects and master their art so well that it tugs at our heartstrings. These heartstrings are not the lovely, gushy ones that are manipulated by many female directors like Nancy Meyers and Nora Ephron, but the deeper emotions of pain, horror, regret, and those that are tied up in much bigger events that we carry with us, that are released in the darkness of the cinema. These women might say that they filmed whatever their talent found available, but it appears their talent is (their) tragedy. They bring out the upper case in us—the defensive desire to think of Lies and Women and Propaganda. Even if they don’t want to, they make us aware that what we are watching might be dangerous, might be insidious, might be a lie that brings out an even more uncomfortable truth.

In 1962, at age sixty, Riefenstahl travels to the Sudan in search of new beauty, this time in the form of a Sudanese tribe, the Nuba. She makes short films and takes thousands of photographs of these natural, dark, nearly naked humans. The Nuba are physically flawless. The oil on their large muscular bodies glistens in the sunlight. The way they dance is slow, rhythmic. They bring Riefenstahl some renewed prominence. Critics say she is exploiting the
Nuba, using their beauty to absolve her previous transgressions. Yet Riefenstahl never saw her earlier work as a transgression; she was invited to film an event and used the talent she had. It seems, rather, that it was mutually beneficial. She used Hitler for his status, and he used her for her sheer talent. They both benefited and they both suffered.

Adams has been criticized for the lack of human presence in his pictures, but this absence has also ultimately saved him. We think the human form—however natural—has not “corrupted” his art. We are, supposedly, not able to see ourselves in his pictures. But humans are in the forefront of Riefenstahl’s films and photos. We can see, in Riefenstahl’s decision to photograph the Nuba, her desire to become Junta again. Critics and historians label her as immoral, as failing to adhere to accepted moral standards. But it is only after studying this woman, watching her films, listening to interviews that I realize something so minute that it is easily overlooked. She is not immoral, but amoral. Or rather, she thinks herself amoral. Riefenstahl saw her subjects only through her camera lens. Beauty blinded her judgment. She never took a moment to step back, to step aside. She was not aware another eye would ever evaluate her because she controlled every part of the process so intently. She saw the human body as natural, but then she went and filmed thousands of bodies doing very unnatural things. Maybe this is why we punished her. We can’t face the fact that the Hitler Youth believed that what they would go on to do was, in their minds, natural. We see them as barbaric, as creatures who are not humans. We, “the good ones,” could never do that. And yet Riefenstahl provides clear proof that humans can. It is a haunting thought. Riefenstahl does not show any of the cruelty. How could she? At the time, she didn’t know what was to come. But her art will be forever wrapped up in a historical event that cannot be forgotten. She was on the wrong side of history, and for that her art will both perish and be saved.

It is almost funny to think that all of this might never have happened. To think that so much was set in motion by a twist of an ankle is haunting. In many ways it’s easy to believe that this was her twist of fate, that she was destined to play a part in history. But what does that say about the nature of creativity? That art will always be overshadowed by history? Should creativity be sequestered from history? Yet art is self-expression, and so separation between artists, history, and their art is really impossible. When it comes time to critique such connections, one also comes up against the complexity of the individual; Riefenstahl, in particular, contained so many lives. We need to know who she was before Triumph of the Will, because it is only then that we can sense her multiple transformations. Beyond the murky ethics that
overtake our discussions of her work, Riefenstahl’s art reveals more about the
world than we want to know. It is almost too unbearable to admit that both
the Nuba and the Nazis can exist simultaneously in the same filmmaker’s
world.

At age seventy-two, Riefenstahl takes up underwater photography and
learns to scuba dive in Africa. In the Indian Ocean, she finds a different
world. The creatures below only see her as a human. They can’t understand
her past. They don’t know who she is. She is alone. Again, she has returned
to water. The power of this image brings me back to the image she created
when she first saw Hitler: a hemisphere that suddenly splits apart in the middle,
spewing out an enormous jet of water. Now there is no violence, no spewing
forth, not even the crashing of the waterfall that first began her career. This
new picture is silent, calm, a fluid movement. She has survived the dive,
almost in spite of herself. She spends the rest of her life paddling, trying only
to support herself so she can get enough air to breathe.

In her debut as an actress, in The Holy Mountain in 1926, Riefenstahl
plays Diotima, a dancer, who begins an affair with a skier. Before venturing
on a ski trip that will ultimately end in his death, Karl is warned: “You seek
Gods – but it’s people you must find.” It seems, knowing what choices she
was to make, that these words were better suited for Riefenstahl, who sought
out the Gods, who believed she had found one in Hitler. I don’t think she
even realized how symbolic her life was, how that line of dialogue and how
her first film had mapped out her history. She saw a poster for the Mountain
of Destiny. She stood no chance against kismet.

I think if she had waited, if she had taken a step back, if she hadn’t been
so “spontaneous,” so blinded by beauty, she would never have stepped inside
that theater. But I don’t think she would have had it any other way.

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