

Riefenstahl: New documentary about Nazi propagandist warns of the danger of dictatorship and war

Bernd Reinhardt
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The new documentary film *Riefenstahl* by director Andres Veiel deals with the career of the Nazi propaganda filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003). Released at the end of October in Germany, Veiel’s work has attracted an exceptionally large number of viewers for a documentary.

The youth jury of the Leipzig Film Fair (FKM) declared it to be one of the most relevant of recent films—a warning of what could come. At the same time, the director has received a number of death threats from supporters of the far right.

Veiel is the first filmmaker to be able to draw on materials from Riefenstahl’s extensive estate, which contains documents, letters, conversations she recorded and telephone conversations, as well as masses of photos. Film material comes partly from Ray Müller’s 1993 documentary *Die Macht der Bilder: Leni Riefenstahl* (literally “The Power of Images,” but given the English-language title *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*), the first extensive film about Riefenstahl. Made largely under her control, Müller’s film refrains from an overtly critical stance.

Riefenstahl wanted to be remembered by posterity as an apolitical artist committed to the aesthetic ideal of beauty. Newly uncovered material, however, confirms that she was a staunch Nazi during WWII and remained so in its aftermath. In 1965, for example, a note in her calendar reminded the 62-year-old to vote for the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), a successor party to the Nazis, in the Bundestag [parliamentary] election.

Certain statements made by the NPD at the time, when the filmmaker was a sympathiser, clearly illustrate the continuity of Riefenstahl’s fascist views:

–“One must not forget the educational effect of the concentration camps, which turned many Red Front Fighters and Marxists into decent Germans.” (Deputy Regional Chairman of the NPD in Baden-Württemberg, Peter Stöckicht)

–“The worker must be deployed where he serves German interests. It is not acceptable that certain associations encourage workers to go on strike or change jobs. The worker must serve the Fatherland at his post.” (Chairman of the NPD Munich district association, Josef Truxa)

At the beginning of the film, we see Riefenstahl asserting that her aesthetic ideas are free of ideology. For her, art is the opposite of

politics, she insists. Her sense of beauty comes from her innermost self. In his film, Veiel shows that it is not possible to separate this “inner self” from broader social realities.

Riefenstahl’s ideal of the powerful, supposedly idealistic person, willing and able to make extraordinary sacrifices, was compatible with Nazi ideology or its pretensions. This was already noted by famed screenwriter Carl Mayer (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Sunrise* and others) in the 1920s, when he saw her as an actress in a so-called “mountain film.” She climbs rocks barefoot and is enveloped by avalanches, as Riefenstahl herself relates.

She cites the film *The Blue Light* (*Das blaue Licht*, 1932), which she co-directed with Hungarian critic and writer Béla Balázs and co-wrote with Mayer and Balázs (both of whom were Jewish), as holding the key to her life and work. She plays the lead role as a beautiful child of nature who draws strength to endure her difficult life from a fairytale blue light in the mountains. She dies when the light goes out one day. It embodied the loss of her own ideals in the face of Nazism, Riefenstahl claims.

At the time of the end of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi takeover in 1933, she was electrified by Hitler. The Nazi Party Congress in 1934, she emphasised, was all about “peace and work,” not antisemitism. The whole world was enthusiastic about Hitler, she claimed. Veiel contradicts her with excerpts from her own Nazi Party congress film *Triumph of the Will*, which make clear that in fact “Peace” means “victory” based on racism and nationalism.

Veiel also delves into Riefenstahl’s “innermost being.” What shaped her early on? Her argumentativeness is striking, sometimes quickly leading to outbursts. When she feels pressured by Müller during the shooting of his documentary, she shouts out, “I won’t let myself be raped.” Veiel depicts a life that was shaped early on by violence and humiliation. Her childhood was shaped by the social climate prevailing prior to the outbreak of the First World War. The young dancer fully then experienced the social misery of the 1920s.

A photo from this period shows her alone as a woman among film colleagues, all of them World War veterans who have come to the conclusion that only the strong survive. On the streets of Berlin, war invalids molder.

Former fighter pilot Ernst Udet describes his circle of friends as soldiers without a flag, which Hitler subsequently returned to them. Riefenstahl was part of this group and shared their sentiments. In a scene in *Triumph of the Will*, Hitler appeals to the willingness of German youth to endure hardship without breaking, all for the great goal of “national liberation.”

This requires strong, healthy bodies. In *Olympia*, fascinated by US athlete Jesse Owens, who moved like a “wildcat.” On film, she dramatised the marathon runners’ fight against exhaustion and stylised the high diving competition into a weightless flight of birds. What is fascist about that, she asks? During a television talk show in 1976, she frankly explained that she could not make a film about disabled people for aesthetic reasons.

Veiel’s film also deals with the fate of Willy Zielke, a man little known to the general public. The talented cinematographer was the creator of the prologue to Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, in which he brings the sculpture of an ancient warrior to life. Zielke suffered a nervous breakdown after the film was finished and was forcibly sterilised in a mental hospital, which diagnosed an alleged psychological illness according to Nazi law. Riefenstahl was regularly informed about his condition, but did nothing.

Veiel does not speculate about intent; instead, he shows how closely the filmmaker’s ideas of beauty and health correspond to Hitler’s in *Mein Kampf*. Riefenstahl regards *Olympia* as the pinnacle of her work. She writes enthusiastically to Hitler about the success of the international premiere tour, which lasted several weeks. He in turn sent her roses in Italy on the occasion of her birthday, when her film was being shown at the Venice Biennale and won an award.

At this point, Riefenstahl was clearly at the height of her success—also in terms of her standing with the Nazi leadership. After the war, Riefenstahl repeatedly emphasised her poor relations with Goebbels, but in an unpublished interview with Müller, she refers to the process as a series of “affairs.” Among her friends is Hitler’s chief architect and later armaments and war production minister Albert Speer. He is similar to her in artistic matters, Riefenstahl says: idealistic and uncompromising.

The war is a sharp caesura. It makes it more difficult for Riefenstahl, now a war correspondent, to find beautiful images. In 1939, she witnessed the shooting of Jews in Ko?skie, Poland. The photo showing her horrified face is well known. A revealing letter found among her papers was written by an eyewitness in 1952, who said that Riefenstahl was disturbed by the sight of Jews being guarded by soldiers as they dug a pit. She shouted at them to get out of the shot, but her words were understood as “Get rid of the Jews.” Her intervention led to panic, flight and shots.

Afterwards she complained to the military command. According to one witness, she primarily objected to the imposition of such chaotic working conditions. She was released from further film work in Poland. The advancing war also hinders her next film project, the feature film *Tiefland* based on motifs from the opera of the same name by Eugen d’Albert, one of Hitler’s favourite operas. The film only premiered in 1954 and was a failure.

After the war, Riefenstahl was repeatedly confronted with her role in the Third Reich, but was able to win dozens of libel suits. She denied having had any agreement with the Nazis, and the authorities found it difficult or failed to make a serious effort to prove her guilt for crimes committed by the Hitler regime.

Riefenstahl was classified merely as a fellow traveller. She was, however, forced to retract the lie that she met the Sinti and Roma forced labourers she used as extras for *Tiefland* in good health after the war. In fact, a large proportion of them, including several children, were murdered at a later date in Auschwitz.

German society in the 1960s was divided. One photograph shows Albert Speer leaving prison in 1966. He looks like a victor, is courted by the media and waves to his admirers. Three years earlier, the first

Riefenstahl trial had begun in Frankfurt amid great public interest.

Speer had been convicted as a Nazi war criminal in Nuremberg. In a telephone conversation recorded by Riefenstahl, she seeks his advice on future publishing contracts. She is writing her autobiography. Speer’s autobiography was an international bestseller and Riefenstahl is pleased to be one of his most intimate friends.

In the further course of the film, Riefenstahl denies the Holocaust in another telephone call and questions the existence of gas chambers. In the wake of the racist attacks on foreign workers in the city of Rostock in 1992, she responds that there were never such attacks on innocent women and children in the Third Reich. She expresses her general mistrust of all those persecuted by the Nazi regime.

As during the Nazi era, she unscrupulously uses every opportunity that arises to work in film and remain in the public eye. She accepts support from companies in return for advertising and provides them with the appropriate photos. She discusses exorbitant interview fees with Speer on the phone and sets conditions for television invitations: above all the Holocaust must not be mentioned.

The 1976 talk show *Je später der Abend* (The Later the Evening), mentioned above, is significant. On the show Riefenstahl complains about the supposed witch hunt against her, asserts her innocence and once again explains that the German population was fully behind Hitler.

Also taking part in the talk show was a former Hamburg factory worker, Elfriede Kretschmar, who refutes Riefenstahl’s claims. Everyone who lived in a big city, she says, knew what Hitler meant and what a concentration camp was. Kretschmar mentions that Hamburg workers knew about the camps early on because many had experienced their brutality as prisoners themselves.

The fact that the historical lie about universal German support for Nazism was part of the political canon of every postwar West German government facilitated Riefenstahl’s insolent public appearances.

Current developments confirm once again that fascism is resorted to by the ruling elites, above all, to suppress the working class. For example, extreme right Argentine President Javier Milei, recently warmly welcomed by Germany’s Social Democratic Party chancellor Olaf Scholz, is criminalising social protests and banning strikes. In Riefenstahl’s fascist propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, workers are no longer traitors to the nation who strike against the domestic economy. Instead they line up obediently in rows to serve German interests as a “national race,” in a manner befitting their “species.”

Veiel’s new film, which is well worth seeing, reveals the dangerous parallels between the present and the years before the outbreak of the Second World War, when Hitler’s dictatorship met with international ruling class sympathy.

In a public discussion in Berlin, following the showing of his film, Veiel emphasised the film’s topicality. Riefenstahl’s images have now shifted from popular culture to the political sphere. Once again, there are images abounding of “well-drilled soldiers.” In the US, Donald Trump’s agitation against immigrants, whom he claims are contaminating American blood, clearly mirrors the racist Nazi incitement featured in *Triumph of the Will*.



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