

Who was Leni Riefenstahl?⁹

Leni Riefenstahl was a German actress and film director. Her film, *The Blue Light*, impressed Adolf Hitler, who requested to meet with Riefenstahl and offered her the opportunity to direct an hour-long propaganda film, *The Victory of Faith*. A year later, Riefenstahl was asked by Hitler to make the infamous film, *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary of a Nuremberg Nazi rally.



Riefenstahl stands near Heinrich Himmler while instructing her camera crew at Nuremberg, 1934.

Riefenstahl went on to make the film *Olympia*, documenting the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics. Riefenstahl said the film had been commissioned by the International Olympic Committee, but it was funded by the Third Reich. *Olympia* was a huge success and widely acclaimed for its technical and aesthetic achievements. Riefenstahl was one of the first filmmakers to use tracking shots in a documentary, placing a camera on rails to follow the athletes' movement. The film is also impressive for its slow motion shots. Riefenstahl used slow motion in underwater diving shots, used extremely high and low shooting angles, panoramic aerial shots and tracking system shots to capture quick movements.

⁹ Scheinberg, Robert (4 September 1997). "Award to German filmmaker spurs debate on her role as propagandist". *JTA News*. Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Retrieved 27 February 2017.

Many of these shots were relatively unheard of at the time, and set new standards in cinematography that are still in use today.

Riefenstahl's films were powerful because of their artistry. In a sequence of *Olympia*, divers leap in the air and soar like birds before effortlessly hitting the water. There is no narrator in these films, leaving the viewer to freely contemplate the Director's meaning and message. The films are so well done, they appear to be unbiased and neutral documents of history. But beneath the carefully manicured surface, the reality is that every sound and sequence of images gives an emotional cue to the audience. It is what is not shown that is as important as what is shown.

The international debut of *Olympia* led Riefenstahl to embark on an American publicity tour in an attempt to secure commercial release. She was received by Henry Ford in Detroit and *Olympia* was shown at the Chicago Engineers Club two days later. Avery Brundage, President of the International Olympic Committee, praised the film and held Riefenstahl in the highest regard. Walt Disney brought Riefenstahl on a three-hour tour showing her the ongoing production of *Fantasia*.



Riefenstahl in conversation with Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels, in 1937.

Riefenstahl was friends with Joseph Goebbels and his wife, Magda. She went to the opera with them and attended their parties. Goebbels thought highly of Riefenstahl's filmmaking, but was angered by her overspending on the Nazi-provided filmmaking budgets.

Riefenstahl later denied any deliberate attempt to create Nazi propaganda and said she was disgusted that *Triumph of the Will* was used in such a way. In the post-war years, she was declared a Nazi sympathizer, but never prosecuted. Riefenstahl insisted that she was not an *official member* of the Nazi party but others have noted that this was a tactic of the party itself, to feign unbiased representation.

"The point is no artist, no journalist, no filmmaker, no opinion maker of any kind was a member of the party. Goebbels was really smart. Goebbels was Hitler's propaganda chief. He was really smart, and he knew that party *sympathizers* were far more useful. [...] Riefenstahl was close to the party leadership for years. [...] So it's a question of being highly selective with the truth, which after all, is exactly what the Nazi regime was all about in the first place [...] The fact of the matter was she was the closest person to the party in the German film industry at the time, and she was perfectly able to commandeer the sorts of resources, with the help of Hitler, that allowed her to film the rally [*Triumph of the Will*]. The fact – the notion that she was ordered to make the film, I think, is really neither here nor there. In one sense, everybody was ordered by Hitler to do anything, right? But in another sense, she was perfectly placed to receive that order. It was no accident."¹⁰

So, who was Leni Riefenstahl? An artist of unparalleled gifts, a woman in an industry dominated by men, one of the great formalists of the cinema and a Nazi propagandist. "Without the Riefenstahls of the world in the 1930s", said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, "the Holocaust might not have happened. I would consider her an unindicted co-conspirator."

¹⁰ Brian Winston, the head of the School of Communication and Creative Industries at the University of Westminster, interviewed by Jonathan Man, CNN.