

Critique

Gursimran Datla

***Riefenstahl* (2024): The Seduction of Form**



(Official Poster “Riefenstahl” from *IMDB*)

Last year, I wrote 2 articles about the rise of propaganda in the mainstream film industries (India and beyond) in the context of the works of German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. When I was browsing through YouTube and other archives, to my luck, I got to know that a new documentary is released on her life and controversial body of work—particularly her propagandist style of filmmaking in Hitler's Germany. I had intended to watch it since then.

‘*Riefenstahl*’ is a newly made documentary directed by Andres Veiel. The film sketches her life, her deeply troubling alliances with Hitler and other Nazi party members, and her lifelong struggle to convince people and journalists that she was only ‘there’ for her art and had no idea about the atrocities of the Nazis.

‘*Riefenstahl*’ would have been anything, a redemption documentary or a critical documentary, declaring Leni Riefenstahl as the ‘culprit,’ but this

documentary maintains an objective gaze and remarkable creative precision. It keeps a distance from going too close, respecting the space and ambiguity. At the same time, it is not just a document of Leni Riefenstahl's life and work; it also examines how she used tracking shots (cameras on rails), moving cranes, and low, gliding camera angles that were mobilized to intensify propaganda (in her own words). In an era obsessed with simple and convenient answers, Riefenstahl's complex life exposes something far more unsettling about human nature itself.

Veiel's documentary draws on never-before-seen material from Riefenstahl's personal estate. Camera, in this doc, not only lingers but also registers her private films, photographs, recordings, and letters—to interrogate her legacy and its resonance in the present moment. Despite being a revolutionary in form, Leni's filmmaking and artistic practice undeniably stood alongside the fascist regime, actively aiding the dissemination of propaganda, inhuman acts, and racial segregation.

Veiel's film does not permit the comfortable lie that genius and complicity occupy separate spheres. What emerges is a portrait of an artist whose formal innovations were inseparable from the ideological violence they served. The camera angles that made Hitler appear to descend from the clouds at Nuremberg—those low, reverential tracking shots—were not neutral tools wielded by an innocent aesthete. They were the very grammar of fascist mythmaking. Riefenstahl understood this. The archive material Veiel excavates demonstrates that she was not merely a talented filmmaker caught in unfortunate circumstances; she was

an active collaborator who grasped the propaganda value of her work and pursued it with cold calculation.

The documentary opens up the recordings of Riefenstahl in her later years, still insisting she was "just an artist," still performing wounded innocence when confronted with the Romani extras from *Tiefland* who were dragged from concentration camps for her shoot. Veiel does not editorialize overtly, but the juxtaposition speaks plainly. Her denials sound hollow against footage of the rallies, the athletes' bodies rendered into Aryan iconography in *Olympia*, the choreography of power she orchestrated with such precision. This was not accidental beauty; it was engineered seduction.



What makes Veiel's approach for this documentary significant is its refusal to collapse into either hagiography or simple denunciation. The film acknowledges Riefenstahl's technical mastery, her pioneering use of multiple cameras, and her mobilization of cranes and rails to achieve fluid, symphonic motion, while simultaneously demonstrating how these innovations functioned as propaganda technologies. Riefenstahl adored masculine beauty; she liked the masculinity of the athletes. That's what inspired her to shoot the Olympics, but at the same time, her obsession

with masculine beauty is reflected in Hitler and the Nazi regime, as they not only simply “disliked” people they considered unattractive; they built a political ideology that ranked human beings by supposed biological value and targeted many of those who did not fit their ideal for exclusion, sterilization, and murder. Riefenstahl positioned cameras to see through the Führer's eyes, to make audiences inhabit the perspective of power. The technique became inseparable from its purpose.

In my last year's articles, I examined how contemporary filmmakers—from Aditya Dhar's *Article 370* to Tommy Gulliksen's *Facing War*—deploy similar strategies: the heroization of leaders through selective framing, the erasure of dissenting voices, and the substitution of spectacle for scrutiny. Veiel's documentary arrives as a stark reminder that brilliance and moral bankruptcy can coexist. The question *Riefenstahl* forces us to confront is not whether art and politics can be separated but whether we are willing to see the ideological work that aesthetic choices perform.

The film also excavates Riefenstahl's post-war career, her attempts to reinvent herself as an ethnographic photographer in Africa. Even here, the documentary suggests, the problematic gaze persists, a fascination with "primitive" bodies, an aestheticization that flattens human subjects into objects of Western visual consumption. Veiel does not hammer this point, but the implication hangs in the air: once you have trained your eye to

serve power, can you ever truly see otherwise?

There is a moment late in the film where Riefenstahl, ancient and defiant, insists that *Triumph of the Will* was not propaganda because it merely documented reality. Veiel lets the claim sit there, uncontested by voiceover but thoroughly dismantled by the film's own evidence. Susan Sontag's formulation echoes here: "In *Triumph of the Will*, the document is more than just a record of reality; 'reality' has been created to serve the image." This is the essential insight that Riefenstahl did not passively record Hitler's rallies but actively staged them as cinematic events.

Riefenstahl stands as one of the most important documentaries of recent years precisely because it does not offer the reassuring fiction that great artists are necessarily good people or that technical innovation redeems moral failure. Instead, it insists that we reckon with the full complexity of a filmmaker who gave fascism its most seductive visual language—and who spent the rest of her long life denying what she had done.

We will have many Riefenstahls in the form of modern filmmakers—supported and funded by establishments, collectives, organizations, systems, foundations, banks, and religious bodies. The question is whether we as an audience will retain enough awareness to recognize that what they are offering is not art but propaganda.

Gursimran Datla is a film critic, film programmer, and award-winning filmmaker.