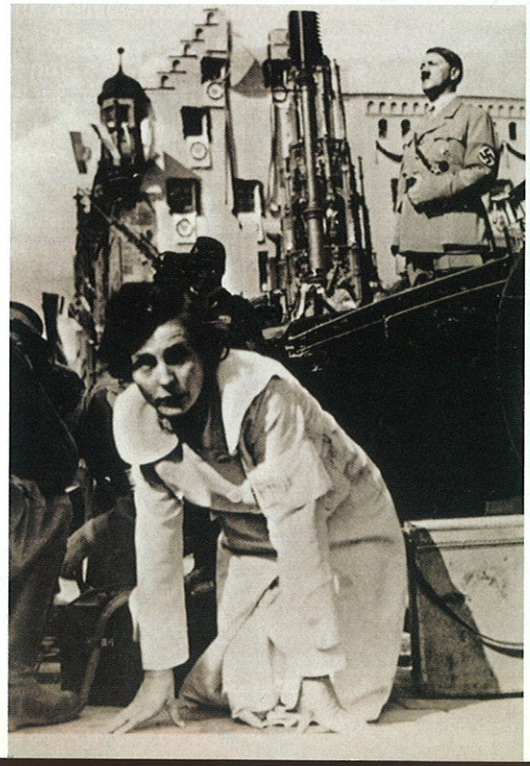
She placed her desire to create over everything else, and made a masterpiece of evil.

Leni Riefenstahl: Myth of Art

We all love stories about heroes who vanquish the dangerous union of great beauty and great evil. Ulysses tied himself to the mast to steer his boat past the seductive sirens, and no matter how small the bikini, James Bond never forgets to battle the criminal genius. But most of us just give in. A case in point: Leni Riefenstahl, maker of mythic films for Hitler. Riefenstahl remains an irresistible object of fascination, not the least because she has always been beautiful—in 2000, at age 98, she posed for Helmut Newton. She started out in the 1920s as a modern dancer, became a movie star and director in Germany, and after World War II enjoyed a productive career as photojournalist, most notably documenting primitive tribes in Africa. But her most important creations can be found in two films commissioned by Hitler in the 1930s—*Triumph of the Will,* a record of the Nazi party's 1934 Rally in Nuremberg, and *Olympia,* a film about the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

On both projects, Riefenstahl used modern technology with great imagination, and the Nazi government provided a generous budget. She built towers, dug trenches, launched cameras in planes, and directed dozens of cameramen to generate her footage, which she edited with great skill. Riefenstahl used film to create thrilling spectacles, what Susan Sontag has called "Nazi epics of achieved community in which everyday reality is transcended through ecstatic self-control and submission; they are about the triumph of power."

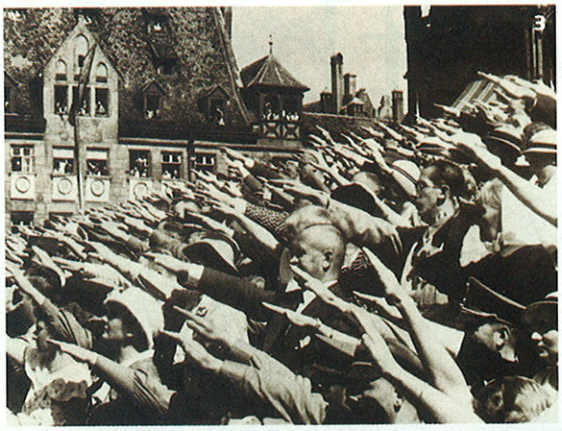
Riefenstahl herself insists she is and always has been an artist, that Hitler hired her to make art, and that propaganda was the furthest thing from her mind. She still claims to be a political innocent. Riefenstahl has defended the images of pageants, marches, ceremonies, and monumental portraits in *Triumph of the Will:* in one much quoted 1965 interview she insisted, "Everything in it is real.... It is history. A pure historical film.... It reflects the truth that was then in 1934. It is therefore a documentary." But abundant evidence, including her own memoir from the 1930s, shows that Riefenstahl, together with Nazi architect Albert Speer, choreographed the entire rally in order to film it. (She now says those memoirs were

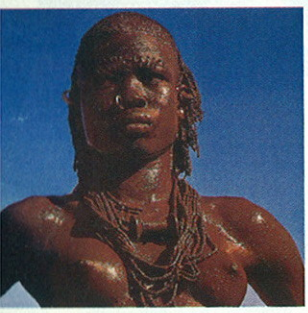


Opposite: Riefenstahl shooting, around 1940. Top: directing her film on the 1936 Olympics. Above: a poster for *Triumph of the Will*. Left: Riefenstahl directing the Nazi propaganda film in Nuremburg.

BY MARY PANZER

1 Jesse Owens from Riefenstahl's Olympic film. **2** U.S. diver Marshall Wayne. **3** Nazi rally from *Triumph of the Will*. **4** Riefenstahl as a dancer in 1923. **5** As an actress in 1929. **6** Shooting under water around 1973. **7** A Riefenstahl image of Nuba warriors. **8** Stars Marlene Dietrich, Anna May Wong, and Riefenstahl at a Berlin ball, 1928. **9** Riefenstahl's photo of a Nuba woman.





written for her.) German film historian Siegfried Kracauer calls the film "bastard reality ... an inextricable mixture of a show simulating German reality and of German reality maneuvered into show." Whatever the label, Riefenstahl clearly knew how to use film to convince viewers that the impossibly exciting world depicted in *Triumph of the Will* could and did exist, and as a result she continues to win admiration today.

The most recent contribution to the Riefenstahl story is a pictorial biography, *Leni Riefenstahl: Five Lives* (Taschen, $40). Assembled by Angelika Taschen, the chief editor for the German publisher, the book traces (with lavish reproduction) Riefenstahl's undeniably remarkable life. Much of the imagery presented is portraiture, underscoring Riefenstahl's unerring instinct for modern glamour and her growing taste for popular acclaim. Some of the most interesting pictures in this book are film stills from the movies Riefenstahl starred in during the late 1920s and early 1930s—such as *The Holy Mountain* and *S.O.S. Iceberg*—all directed by Dr. Arnold Fanck, whose distinctive adventure films were invariably set in the Alps, where heroes and heroines bond with nature and triumph over snow, avalanche, and corrupt modern civilization. Recent critics have tied German fascination with the purifying effect of the mountains to fascist aesthetics, and these pictures of Riefenstahl and her chiseled co-stars certainly satisfy every stereotype of the Aryan ideal. (The Nazis eventually put Fanck out of work because many of his backers had been Jewish.) Hitler's admiration for these films—and the first film Riefenstahl directed, *The Blue Light* (1932)—allegedly led him to ask the young woman to document the Nazi party rally of 1933, the first rally following the Nazi seizure of power. Dissatisfied with the final film (in the book, Riefenstahl says she was given little support by Hitler's jealous propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels), the Führer had her return to Nuremburg to film the 1934 rally, and the result was *Triumph of the Will*.

Evidence shows she staged the rally in order to film it.

The taint of her association with the Nazis would stay with her for the rest of her life. After the war she was jailed briefly by the American army moving through the Tyrol, then brought to the Dachau concentration camp, which was now holding leading Nazi prisoners. There, according to the new book, "she is confronted with photographs from the concentration camps *(continued on page 88)*

Leni Riefenstahl: Myth of Art

(continued from page 72) for the first time and is deeply affected." By 1947, it says, "she suffers from depression" and is placed by the French military government in a psychiatric clinic "and given electroshock treatment."

Yet by the mid-1950s she was able to reinvent herself as a documentary filmmaker working in Africa and as a celebrity photojournalist. The new book has photos of her covering the 1976 Munich Olympics and posing with Mick Jagger, as well as her images of Nuba tribesmen. Another section collects images from her most recent project, underwater photographs of turquoise rocks and glistening fish. There are also images made last year after Riefenstahl survived a helicopter crash in Africa. Anyone interested in the history of photography must come to understand that this was one of the most outlandishly intriguing—and, ultimately, unknowable—lives of the 20th century.

Riefenstahl explains her entire career as a relentless search for beauty. In an interview from the 1970s she said, "I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful.... Whatever is purely realistic, slice-of-life, what is average, quotidian, doesn't interest me. Only the unusual ... excites me. I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, by what is living." Throughout the new book, her energy is almost palpable, always coupled with a determination to remake the world according to her own desires. What doesn't exist, she creates with her camera. Perhaps no one has better understood the fictional possibilities of the photographic image—an image that most people accept as truth.

This documentary method inevitably results in lies, some more important than others. But who is left to challenge Riefenstahl? Her dramatization of the Third Reich has outlasted all its leaders, chilling testimony to her faith in art over everything else. Despite plentiful protest from those, including Sontag, who refuse to separate the woman from the Reich, Riefenstahl continues to attract attention. The book notes that at *Time* magazine's 75th anniversary party, held at Radio City Music Hall in 1998, the only two German guests of honor were Riefenstahl and model Claudia Schiffer. More recently, actress and producer Jodie Foster announced that she was interested in making a biopic about Riefenstahl. The myth of Leni Riefenstahl—that her art outweighed the ends it promoted—has become the filmmaker's last, and most sophisticated, creation. Is this siren's song any less dangerous when we know it is false? Or has danger always been an essential part of Riefenstahl's allure? ■

Western Exposure

(continued from page 40) timberland alone, he bequeathed to us almost 150 million acres—an area bigger than France, Belgium, and the Netherlands combined:

Hence, when we see pillars of rain supporting a pediment of cloud over the Grand Canyon, lit from within by flashes of lightning, we hear the long-ago thunder of his voice: *It is beautiful and terrible and unearthly... Leave it as it is... The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it.* When we look down that long wet road at Yellowstone, we picture him trudging off into the same black forest on April 12, 1903, the last president ever to enjoy the luxury of complete solitude in the wilderness. Those sleek buffalo in the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge owe an ancestral debt to him, as patron of the American Bison Society. Those waving Montana grasses—is it already more than a century since they cooled the flanks of his hot little pony, Manitou? Perhaps, in spirit, he still camps out on the misty ledges above Yosemite, listening spellbound (over John Muir's snores) to a "choir," as he put it, of Rocky Mountain hermit thrushes, believing himself to be in "a place of worship."

Such, at least, are the associations that a Roosevelt biographer unavoidably attaches to Macduff Everton's extraordinary landscapes. Other sensibilities will react differently, yet most likely with the same sharp sense that we belong in these sparsely populated spaces. Here is a photographer who identifies, to an almost aboriginal degree, with the American West. His camera feels out its contours, explores its mysteries, stares unblinking at its acts of savagery, and celebrates its beauties with a constant sense of joyous rediscovery, quite different from the alienation, even terror, we can feel in the works of pioneer photographers.

"There are two ways," Schiller wrote, "that Nature without living creatures can become a symbol of the human: either as representation of feelings or the representation of ideas." Everton has no didactic purpose, no ecological or political message to convey. He simply allows our Western horizons to unfold before us, in images so wide that they extend common perception. As a result, the phenomenon of landscape as memory begins to work. *This is my own, my native land,* one feels oneself saying, as image succeeds image and familiarity combines with strangeness.

To learn how Macduff Everton shoots his panoramic landscapes, see On Location, page 80.