

Leni Riefenstahl interviewed by George Hickenlooper  
w/ Greg D'Elia, Jordan Mechner  
Pöcking, 5/25/91

Notes by JM  
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(p1)

I am very controversial -- some people love my work & my person, others hate me

made over 1400 dives for underwater photog book

didn't know about play -- was amazed when George showed her article w/photo of actress who played her. "This is not Leni."

"The Blue Light" (1931) -- first film as dir/prod/writer

"Since then I am my own boss -- in good times and bad times -- always independent."

Paramount planned feature film on life of Leni -- Larry Ferguson to write, Meryl Streep to star -- but change of leadership at Par, project dropped

Lost brother during last year of war on Russian front.

Started career as dancer.

"Heilige Berg" -- first film -- main role was a dancer.

I am not only interested in bodies, but in everything that is beautiful. E.g., underwater, Nuba.

Not so interested in negative things. I like positive things.

Re *Olympia* -- Naturally Olympic athletes are healthy and have a healthy body.

Unfamiliar with Bosch.

As dancer was the most happy time in my life -- I loved dance, but couldn't continue because of operation. Very hard. Dance was my life.

Mountain films: I was fascinated by mountains & nature because I was from Berlin. So the papers wrote "Leni is a mountain girl."

Re "The Blue Light": Opportunity for women in Germany in '30's?

Everyone said No to a 20-page treatment. People doubted it would succeed because it was not a *Krimi* or other genre film. I had no money to engage a director, so I must do it myself. "Notlösung." Had only 6 people. Gave up my apartment to make the film.

Then my *Schicksal* (destiny) changed.

2 years after "Blue Light," Hitler came. He wanted me to make the rally film.

It was a documentary, won international prizes --> They say "Leni is a Nazi." But I only did the same as Eisenstein has done, and others. In '34, the whole world was sending diplomats to Hitler. No one knew what would happen later.

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Von Sternberg was a friend for many years. Last meeting was in Venice '59, joint retrospective.

Sternberg wanted me to come with him to U.S. in '29. But I had a love story and didn't want to leave Germany. It was a strong romance between my cameraman and me, which lasted 5 years. I didn't want to lose him, so I couldn't leave Germany.

Olympia took 3 years. 1 year preprod, 1 1/2 years to cut.

Autumn '38: I wanted to go to America after *Olympia*. Then the tragedy happened, when I was on a boat from Germany to NY. Kristallnacht. Journalists in NY asked for my opinion. I couldn't believe it was true, I couldn't believe this had really happened. Then when I got to LA they boycotted Leni. They said I was Hitler's girlfriend. I was never a girlfriend as they thought. I received no orders from Hitler or Goebbels. The desire to make *Olympia* came from the Int'l Olympic Committee.

**Q: Portrayal of Hitler in *Olympia*?**

Initially Hitler intended to make only a brief appearance at games. But after the first German victory, the German athletes told Hitler "Because you were there, we won." So after that Hitler came every day.

**Q: Hitler's rebuff of Jesse Owens?**

After the first winner, Hitler congratulated the athletes in his loge. But the international committee ruled that illegal. So after that, Hitler couldn't meet with any athletes. No more Germans or Americans or negroes. Nothing personal against Owens.

"Victory of Faith" (Sieg des Glaubens): Party was jealous that she got to make it.

**Q: Who was jealous?**

Goebbels, but also his team. They had been members of party for 20 years -- they were film people, they were older, and they were men -- jealous of Leni because she was young, female, liked by Hitler.

Triumph of the Will.

First time ('34), Army was in Nuremberg -- but the weather was bad, the footage came out ugly, she didn't use it. Afterwards, Hitler asked her to use generals in the film; she refused; he was disappointed.

**Q: Why did you refuse?**

Because of the gray sky, the rain. It was bad photography. I didn't want to destroy the art of my film.

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I had very few days' time (on Triumph); I couldn't really prepare. I was in Spain, I didn't even want to make the picture.

Es war nicht mein Verdienst -- it was the work of one cameraman. He did 50% of the picture.

Using a dolly was Leni's idea.

On Triumph I had 3 good cameramen. On Olympia, only students.

Olympia: Rehearsed 5 young students using cameras w/o film. Took them to football games, etc., & made them practice following action w/ camera.

Film is picture & movement. Sound is only behind this.

President of Olympic Committee (Swiss) saw Triumph & said "Leni is the only person in the world who can do this [Olympia]."

I wanted to be an actress. I was not a little bit interested in directing!

**Q:** What did Dr. Frank (?) teach you?

He taught me through our working together. He did not need to make a special effort to teach me. If you work with a man who is gifted, you learn.

**Q:** Sky in *Olympia*?

Some write "Leni makes heroes because she shoots against the sky." That is wrong. In Olympia there is no story. The drama is what the athletes feel. Therefore, you must show their faces. A background is distracting. The sky is calm. If I wanted to make a portrait of you, George, I wouldn't want those bookshelves in the picture. I would use a telephoto lens to throw the background out of focus.

Dr. Frank died 15 yrs ago.

Marlene left Germany in 1930 -- 3 years before Hitler came! Her departure had nothing to do with Hitler.

Fritz Lang left for political reasons. Elizabeth Bergner too. She was the most beautiful, best actress we had.

90% of German people were for Hitler before the war. After, nobody was for Hitler. I haven't changed -- I have always said I was not political.

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I was fascinated [by Hitler] in the beginning, because we were poor & depressed (Like East Germany today?) and Hitler came with the promise to change things.

**Q:** Is there a New German Cinema?

Not yet. Some things are quite nice, but the fall was too deep. The German people have lost; they are dead inside.

Outside Germany, no one believes us when we say we didn't know about the camps; they say we are lying. Young people don't understand their parents; they don't know how it was.

Fassbinder wanted Leni to work w/ him, sent cables, plane but she couldn't come.

**Q:** German reunification?

We are very happy, naturally, that we are together. It was not natural to be separated. But it is not so easy to form the people. After 40 years of a hard regime, they are different now. It needs a long time -- maybe 10 years.

Nationalism will be finished.

**Q:** USA?

America is a palette of many different things. The beautiful and the bad, all mixed together. Every good thing has a price. You have to pay for everything. In the U.S. you have freedom and democracy, but also you can be a criminal without getting caught.

I hope that every dictator is finished. We have to all be friends, or we will fall together.

Telluride was very beautiful, wonderful. I was very surprised, because there were no feelings of enemies.

**Q:** What about the demonstration against you?

All I saw were 6 young boys with "Leni Go Home" signs.

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The mayor was friendly. Gloria Swanson said: "I thought Hitler was dead."

**Q:** Difference between still photography and cinematography?

I am now working with video. (Underwater.) Must learn to edit video -- I am studying. In 6 months I will have video in my cutting rooms. I am very curious and excited. Until now, the technology of video was not good enough.

The advantage of video is that underwater, it is very dark.

I make photography as a resort, because I can't make films.

**Q:** Correspondence with Cocteau?

See my memoirs. He wanted me to direct *Voltaire & Frederic*. But he couldn't get a distributor to put up the money.

People were very jealous because I was one of the few who were independent during the Hitler time. They said I was a friend. But I had a strong will, and I was able to say no. I was gifted, so I had a big success.

I have a lot of friends. I have in my archives thousands of letters from America, from artists. Many people have wrong information about me. Susan Sontag wrote about

*Triumph* that the whole rally was staged. Not true! It was very difficult to shoot, we had to fight all the time with the organizers.

They said I took for my film *Gypsies* from a concentration camp, and that after the film is finished they will go to Auschwitz. [Which film?] Not true! First of all, it was assistants, not me, who did the casting. Second, it was not a concentration camp, but a real Gypsy camp that had existed for a long time. Finally, at that time Auschwitz did not even exist yet!

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Has lived in Pöcking 11 years. In Munich 40 years.

Gifts to Hoover Institute, Rochester (Negatives of *Olympia*), Eastman House

I have a special art for organization. Without this, I couldn't have made *Olympia*. *Olympia* had 1,200,000 meters of film.

Color coding system. 8-plate Steenbeck. Custom-built white formica cabinets. Red is best material; blue is reserve; green is Kurzungen (trims?)

Now (for Leni) the problem is not money but time.

Framed certificates on wall:

Paris 1937 -- Exposition internationale des arts & des techniques.

Grand Prix -- Triumph des Willens

Medaille d'Or -- Das Blaue Licht

On *Triumph's* Grand Prix: Do you think it would be possible to receive this 2 years before the war if this was a propaganda film? It was a document. It can be *used* for propaganda. If it were propaganda, there would be a voice-over. There is no voice-over, only images. Everything you see is true.

I was ordered to make this film. I tried to make it as good as possible. Even so, I received many criticisms from the Party.

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In '34 everyone would have done *Triumph*. Even a communist [name?] was interested in making it, would have been happy to get the job. 1/3 of the money came from UFA. Hitler said: Don't go to the party for the money to make the film.

*Blue Light* is my favorite film. It was my own idea. We were like a family; I did everything.

*Olympia* is good too.

**Q:** Advice to young filmmakers?

Do nothing what you don't like. Do only what you like. You must have one idea and you

must have a passion for it.

Cutting Olympia and Triumph, I had no private life. I must live with my work.

I make one film at a time. I need one year or six months in between to rest. To make a thing good, you must be dedicated.

If you make too many films, you can do nothing perfect.

I have no more desire to do a feature.

Underwater film: Soundtrack will be only natural water sounds, maybe subtle electronic music. No voice-over.

21 years working with Horst.

Claus Offerman (sp?) is a good friend. Helps to translate business things.

Has 2 secretaries.