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Olympia Film: the Olympic Narrative,

(He)Leni's Myth and the Ancient Greek Beauty Ideal

Katerina Zisimopoulou

Doctorate Candidate, Architecture School, National Technical University of Athens
(Metsovion)

49, Lazaraki Street, 16674, Glyfada, Greece

Email: kzisimopoulou@gmail.com

Introduction

My research interest in the theme “The Challenge of Ancient 'Feminism'” focuses on a particular modern Woman inspired by – or even, one could argue, obsessed by – Untraditional Greek Drama heroines: namely, the famous and ambiguous Leni Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl, the German film director of the Nazi regime and a personal friend of Hitler himself, was perceived as a mythical woman who built her whole personality and film-work on the ancient Greek Beauty Ideal of body and movement. In this respect, the objective of the 1936 Olympic Games to manipulate the narrative of the Games and the body beautiful in order to spread the interwar period Nazi

propaganda, identified perfectly with Riefenstahl's personality. Thus she evolved into the untraditional female heroine of the Third Reich, the '(He)Leni beautiful' of Nazi Germany, or 'Penthesilea', the 'perfect German woman' in Hitler's exact words. The involvement of Nazi politics and the a(n)esthetization of the public realm seems inevitable and full of surprises.

Nazi Germany & Ancient Greece, the Body Beautiful

According to Hitler's chief architect Albert Speer, who was one of the highest-ranking Nazi officials¹, "Hitler believed that the culture of the Greeks had reached the peak of perfection in every field. Their view of life, he said, as expressed in their architecture, had been 'fresh and healthy.'"² Speer argues to have witnessed Hitler exclaiming his admiration of the splendid bodies of young people approaching Hellenistic ideals through sports when viewing the photograph of a beautiful female swimmer. It is highly probable that though Hitler himself was not a keen sportsman – he was reported to be averse to any kind of sport that either colored or Jewish athletes might have excelled in – he nevertheless foresaw the dynamic potential for disseminating propaganda through sports and the representation of athletes' bodies. Even if the sports culture of the interwar period leaves little athletic events for him to enjoy, he envisions future events for the Nazi party to organize and abuse for its own agenda.

When referring to the Greeks and the Hellenistic ideals, Hitler actually means the Dorians and the Dorian³ ideal. Naturally his view was affected by the theory fostered by the pseudo-scientist Rosenberg (a Nazi race theorist and official), that the Dorian tribe who migrated into Greece from the north was of Germanic origin and therefore its culture did not belong to the Mediterranean but to the Nordic 'Aryan' world.

Despite Hitler's Nazi Lacono- and Dorian-philia, in his memoir "Inside the Third

Reich” Speer remarks that although Rosenberg had sold hundreds of thousands of copies of the “Myth of the Twentieth Century” and the public regarded the book as the standard text for party ideology, Hitler called it “stuff nobody can understand.”⁴

Fascinating Riefenstahl

Even though nearly forty years have passed since Sontag’s essay “Fascinating Fascism”, and almost a decade since Riefenstahl’s death, it seems that the fascinating Riefenstahl discourse has not spoken its last words. Regardless of the intentions of the parties involved the discussion about her is to this day “fresh and healthy” and exciting. According to Susan Sontag, “part of the impetus behind Riefenstahl’s recent promotion to the status of a cultural monument surely is owing to the fact that she is a woman. (...) But a stronger reason for the change in attitude toward Riefenstahl lies in a shift in taste which simply makes it impossible to reject art if it is beautiful.”⁵

There are numerous political and ethical reasons to reject Riefenstahl’s work as racist propaganda of the German national-socialist party during the interwar period, but the moving and still images of impeccable beauty created by a mythical female director makes it impossible for her work to fall into oblivion. Therefore, by analyzing the influence of the ancient Greek female heroines on her work, the exposure of their archetypal beauty reveals the power of representational images and unveils the propaganda message they produce, diminishing their political effect.

(He)Leni Beautiful of Nazi Germany

Though Riefenstahl has indeed in Müller’s words “created her own truths about certain things in her life,”⁶ there is little doubt that she was a beautiful woman, whose beauty and charm had a considerable effect on men. The personality she

communicates through her memoirs pays tribute to her famous name. Born Helene Bertha Amalie, "Leni" Riefenstahl was definitely Heleni Beautiful of Nazi Germany for several decades. Numerous and famous are the men mentioned in her memoirs⁷ as bewitched by her elegance and eloquence: Froitzheim, Fanck, Sokal, Sternberg, Prager, Schneeberger, Ertl, Zielke, the athlete Morris, Goebbels, Hitler, Jacob, Kettner and many others (whether or not her lovers) are described by her as men deeply affected by her beauty and athletic figure and will.

Riefenstahl might have confessed in the Spartan queen's words from Euripides' ancient Greek Drama "Heleni": "my own fatherland, Sparta, is not without fame (...)
My name is Helen; I will tell the evils I have suffered. For the sake of beauty..."⁸
Riefenstahl herself believed that her life was full of sorrows and struggle: "My entire life consisted of opposition. My own rule for myself was never to give up. How else could I have survived this life?"⁹

The mythical Heleni claims through Euripides that "when someone looks to one event only, and is ill-treated by the gods, it is hard, but all the same it can be borne. But I am involved in countless troubles. First, although I never acted wrongly, my good name is gone. And this trouble is stronger than the reality, if someone incurs blame for wrongs that are not his own."¹⁰ In Ray Müller's documentary about her life, Riefenstahl cries out: "What do I have to regret, where does my guilt lie?"¹¹ Her biographer Trimborn attributes to her "a proclivity for melodrama and myth"¹²; she herself definitely believes that there is a tragic dimension in her life-story. Speaking to Cahier du Cinema in 1965, she argues that her life "has been a tissue of rumors and accusations through which she had to beat a path"¹³.

Riefenstahl's revival owes much to the 1970s feminist film festivals in the US and later in the 1980s Germany¹⁴ where she was celebrated as a model for women in the film industry. Euripides gives these words to king Menelaos: "the task is yours; it is suitable for women to deal with women."¹⁵ The way Riefenstahl presented and re-invented herself after the 2nd World War and the Holocaust for a period of over six decades provides an example in support of the classic feminist theory that women see themselves as image, produced by the image others have for them.¹⁶

Penthesilea, the Perfect German Woman

Though her name is Heleni and she has proved herself as not only the beautiful but also the unique Heleni of Nazi Germany, there is a definite fascination on her part with the Amazon queen Penthesilea¹⁷, after having first read Kleist's tragedy in 1926. Both her biographers, Leis and Trimborn, and she herself in her memoirs, agree that a film on Penthesilea was the dream film project of her life, not to be realized due to its cost and the war preparations. "Riefenstahl presented Hitler with a deluxe edition of Kleist's drama, in 1937, affirming to Hitler that for years it had been her passionate wish to film the work and to play Penthesilea."¹⁸

Professor Ruby Rich argues in the context of feminist studies that "Riefenstahl herself was a sort of Amazon among the Nazis, the token exceptional woman who was granted permission by the patriarchy to be privileged to its power in exchange for adopting its values. (...) equal to the best of men. (...) Penthesilea in the vernacular becomes Leni in drag."¹⁹ Therefore Riefenstahl has become a living myth for modern feminist studies, as both the beautiful Heleni who erotically dominates a world of men, and also as the athletic Penthesilea, who antagonizes men as their equal. This combination makes it impossible for feminist theory to ignore Riefenstahl, even

though her political and professional ethos has proved to be, at the very least, questionable and even catastrophically immoral, in many cases.

The Film Olympia - behind the Narrative of the 1936 Olympic Games

Riefenstahl's fascinations with the beautiful (Heleni) and the athletic (Penthesilea) merge in the film *Olympia*, part I and II, directed at the alleged request of the International Olympic Committee as the official film of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Susan Sontag argues that "Olympia was commissioned and entirely financed by the Nazi government (a dummy company was set up in Riefenstahl's name because it was thought unwise for the government to appear as the producer) and facilitated by Goebbels's ministry at every stage of the shooting."²⁰ In the 18 months during which the material gathered in reels was being processed, Riefenstahl claims to have gathered 400.000 meters of film as raw material for the final cut.

Riefenstahl was not the only person to direct the film. Willy Zielke had signed a contract with Riefenstahl, which specified that "he would be solely responsible not only for shooting the prologue to Olympia but also for the film's montage sequences."²¹ Zielke himself argues that Riefenstahl engaged him primarily because she found it maybe too risky for her reputation to have her name involved with the extremely liberal male nudity of the prologues of both parts of the film. The female nudes were most probably thought to be more acceptable to the public and the officials.

The two co-directors did not actually cooperate harmonically: their disagreements were both personal, as Zielke was said to be passionately and vainly in love with Riefenstahl – and professional, as she unofficially broke and ignored their contract

and went on to edit the prologue herself using his version as simply raw material. As a result Zielke suffered a serious nervous breakdown in 1937 and “spent seven years in various institutions, where, according to his own declarations he was forcibly sterilized.”²² Riefenstahl has denied any involvement in his institutionalization, but Zielke and his wife have repeatedly argued that she deliberately had him removed from the public spotlight and from the film’s closing credits in order to receive recognition as the film’s sole director.

Zielke’s mutiny against Riefenstahl interestingly enough resulted in his obnoxious punishment; he was not the only one: such seems to have been the case with her “cameraman Schünemann, who attempted to oppose her and she denounced him to the authorities.”²³ When it came to her career plans, Riefenstahl was ruthless and unscrupulous. As a woman in conflict with men, she was the one to win.

The story behind the reels of the Olympia film gives evidence for the myth of Riefenstahl as an untraditional female heroine of the 20th century: the female director plays a revolutionary and active role in transforming the ancient Greek Olympic narrative into the 1936 Olympic Games’ narrative of pliant bodies in order to defend Nazi values. She uses film and photography technology, her innovative thinking and a fair amount of Nazi money to transplant the ancient Greek beauty ideal from still statues and amphorae to moving images of perfect bodies.

Ancient Art in Motion, Olympia’s I Prologue

The narrative of the Olympic Games, ancient and modern alike, is connected to the Greek blood and soil, body and land; it could be characterized as a 20th century epic drama, as parts of Olympia introductions were shot in Greece while action was taking

place. The shooting of the ceremony of the lighting of the Olympic torch in Olympia, the ceremonial relaying of the flame and reenactment of fragments of the ceremony in Acropolis, Delphi and other areas of and outside Greece are of exquisite artistic and cinematic value. The ancient Greek ideal of the Body Beautiful prevails. The director herself, the modern beautiful (He)Leni is supposed to have participated in the film as a nude dancer. Willy Zielke, co-director of the film's introductions, was responsible for the shooting of these scenes before his tragic fate brought him into conflict with the beautiful (He)Leni or the ferocious Penthesilea.

According to Dr. Stephanie Grote "The Fest der Völker begins with shots of the peoples of ancient Greece, the 'birthplace' of the Olympic Games. Classical ruins, Doric columns, ancient temple sites, and images of the statues of Greek deities as silent witnesses of past times."²⁴ Through the prologue's sequences all the beauty of the ancient Greek art leads to Nazi Germany, as images fade and the flame marches to Berlin.

The transition from the myth of birth to the superhuman athletes of mankind is achieved by the resurrection of the famous statue of the discus-thrower by Myron. The statue is filmed from a fixed viewpoint then incarnated as a real athlete, the German Erwin Huber, in the same position, who comes to life and then gradually begins to move and throws the disc. The female body's beauty is exemplified by a complex of three dancers, one of which is allegedly Riefenstahl herself in shots that do not allow direct recognition, filmed along with male athletes of the torch relay. All the first athletes are either naked or half-naked.

Propagating Images: the Power of her Will

The Benaki museum photographic archives along with Greek photographer Nelly's biographic details support the argument that most probably Riefenstahl and Nelly were well acquainted since the early 1920s, when Nelly studied photography under Hugo Erfurth and Franz Fiedler in Dresden (1920-4) and Riefenstahl studied modern 'expressive' dance in Mary Wigman's world-famous school in Dresden-Hellerau (1923) for approximately nine months. Even if they had not been immediately acquainted at Wigman's school, Riefenstahl must have known Nelly's photographic work, as the latter had repeatedly photographed Wigman's leading dancers naked, in studio or in nature, and even gained distinctions for her work.

Based on the testimony of Nikos Paisios, Irene Boudouri, the curator of the Benaki Museum Photographic archives and editor of the book 'Antiquities', claims that "Riefenstahl and Nelly met in Athens, Greece in 1936 and Nelly even probably escorted Leni in Olympia for the shooting that took place there."²⁵ Zielke must have also been present as co-director of the prologue at the time. Nelly's photos taken from Olympia and the Opening Ceremony of the 1936 Olympics were published in the 1937 picture book 'Schönheit im Olympischen Kampf, 1936'. Zielke and Riefenstahl must have seen and studied Nelly's images of ancient statues and their juxtaposition with modern living figures and they must have known about Nelly's work in Delphi in the late 1920s where she took the famous images of the Delphic Festival organized by the Sikelianos couple.

Conclusion

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Riefenstahl may have re-staged and re-filmed²⁶ some parts of the footage after the events to achieve better frames and more impressive images. Nelly's influence on Riefenstahl and Zielke probably urged them

to re-stage the lighting of the Olympic torch in Delphi or the Acropolis instead of Olympia, to achieve the quality of the shots Nelly had taken of the Delphic chorus lines some years before.

Riefenstahl poses her own version of Reactionary Modernism²⁷ and the construction of a Nazi Mass Ornament²⁸ through the construction of filmic image representation against Kracauer's modernist ideals in the service of Nazi propaganda. As Olympia is not merely a cinematic image timeline for the athletic event itself, its importance is prominent in understanding the image of Nazi propaganda. Riefenstahl's expertise constructs the mass ornament's images in a motion film.

In her renowned Spiegel interview to Schreiber and Weingarten, Riefenstahl expresses her aversion towards reality and most probably truth and sincerity, as a consequence of her initial crucial perception. When asked, "If you photograph a Greek temple and a rubbish heap is next to it, would you leave out the rubbish?" Riefenstahl famously replies, "Absolutely. Reality does not interest me."²⁹ This is an extremely provocative statement that justifies the claims that only by coming to terms with Riefenstahl as a divergent personality can we understand her significance within the Nazi system of patriarchy and avoid repeating her mistakes in the context of our own culture and time.³⁰ Personally I fear that the present fiscal crisis in various parts of the world makes the claim to avoid the mistakes of propaganda in our present cultural conditions even more crucial than a few decades ago.

¹ Head of the Chief Office for Construction, Minister of Armaments and War Production & General Building Inspector for the Reich Capital.

² Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich, Memoirs by Albert Speer*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 96-97.

³ Homer in the *Odyssey* [R. 19, lines 172 – 177] makes one of the oldest references on the Dorians as one of the peoples living in Crete.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:tlg.0012.002:19:177&lang=original> [last visited November 2012].

⁴ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 96.

⁵ Susan Sontag, *Fascinating Fascism*, trans. Gerasimos Lykiardopoulos (Athens: Ypsilon Books, 2010), 21-22.

⁶ Ray Müller directed the German documentary film *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, 1993.

⁷ See also Leni Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl: Memoiren*, (München Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 1987).

⁸ Euripides, *Helen*, ed. Whitney J. Oates & Eugene O'Neill Jr., trans. E. P. Coleridge, (New York: Random House, 1938), lines 17-24.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Eur.+Hel.+1&redirect=true> [last visited November 2012]

⁹ Jürgen Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl, a Life*, trans. Ed. McCowen, (London - New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 231.

¹⁰ Euripides, *Helen*, lines 267-273.

¹¹ Eric Rentschler, “A Founding Myth and a Master Text: The Blue Light (1932)” in *Riefenstahl Screened: An Anthology of New Criticism*, ed. Neil Christian Pages, Mary Rhiel and Ingeborg Majer-O'Sickey (New York, London: Continuum, 2008), 153.

¹² Jürgen Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 231.

¹³ Eric Rentschler, *A Founding Myth*, 154.

¹⁴ Jürgen Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 275.

¹⁵ Euripides, *Helen*, line 830.

¹⁶ See also Ingeborg Majer-O'Sickey, "In the Rearview Mirror: Curating Riefenstahl, Filmmuseum Potsdam, 1999" in *Riefenstahl Screened*, 255 & 268, footnote 17.

¹⁷ See also Mario Leis, *Leni Riefenstahl, The Power of Will*, trans. Ioanna Avramidou, (Athens: Melani Publications, 2011), 13.

¹⁸ Trimborn, *op. cit.*, 155.

¹⁹ Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), 45-47.

²⁰ Susan Sontag, *Fascinating Fascism*, 16.

²¹ Trimborn, *op. cit.*, 138.

²² *Ibid.*, 138.

²³ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁴ Stefanie Grote, 'Objekt' Mensch. Körper als Ikon und Ideologem in den cineastischen Werken Leni Riefenstahls. Ästhetisierter Despotismus oder die Reziprozität von Auftragskunst und Politik im Dritten Reich (Eingereicht von Stefanie Grote an der Kulturwissenschaftlichen), (Fakultät der Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), 2004), 194 [only on the Internet].

²⁵ Irene Boudouri, *Nelly's: Photographic Approaches of Greek Art in Antiquities, Greece 1925-1939, NELLY'S* (Athens: Melissa & Benaki Museum, 2003), 27.

²⁶ Re-staging and re-filming the scene leads to the conclusion that there must have been a scenario for the filming of the performance aiming at specific goals and intentions. About re-staging by Riefenstahl see also Speer, *Inside*, 61-62.

²⁷ See also Herf J., *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, And Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, trans. Matalas P., ed. Chatziiosif Ch. (Heraklion: Cretan University Press, 1996).

²⁸ See also Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Levin T. (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75-86.

²⁹ Narraway Guinevere, “Control and Consumption: Photographs of Leni Riefenstahl” in *Riefenstahl Screened*, 228, note 73.

³⁰ Rich, *op. cit.*, 47.