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From the Mountains to the Lowlands:
Depictions of Gender Roles in the
Films of Leni Riefenstahl

Sean R. Robinson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

From the Mountains to the Lowlands: Depictions of Gender Roles in the Films of Leni Riefenstahl

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Critics have analyzed Leni Riefenstahl's four feature length films from 1932 to 1954 largely for their depictions of fascist ideals while often neglecting how they represent gender. Viewing Riefenstahl's films using the theoretical gender models of Judith Butler and R.W. Connell provides a greater understanding of gender roles in Germany during both the Weimar and Nazi eras. Beginning with *Das Blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*, 1932), and continuing to *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935), *Olympia* (1938), and concluding with *Tiefland* (*The Lowlands*, 1954), there is a clear evolution of how Riefenstahl understood and represented gender. Riefenstahl's earliest film *Das Blaue Licht* depicts a strong and independent female protagonist in Junta, but with the rise of fascism in Germany this type of character disappears and evolve into the weak and helpless figures like Martha in *Tiefland*. This study will look at these films within the cultural context of early-twentieth century Germany and National Socialism to consider how Riefenstahl's films participate in the understanding, articulation, and performance of gender at a crucial turning point in the history of Western Culture.

Keywords: Leni Riefenstahl, gender roles, film theory, gender theory

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people I would like to thank for their assistance while this thesis was produced. Firstly, I am supremely indebted to my chair, Dr. Christopher Oscarson for the hours he poured into this paper with me, and his commitment to guiding me through the rigors of academic achievement. Likewise, Dr. Rob McFarland and Dr. Martha Peacock have each gone beyond any expectations while I have been working on this paper. I am also grateful for the support and love of my family over the course of the last two years, and giving me the motivation to be the best version of myself possible. Finally, I would like to thank my fellow graduate students who have accompanied me every step of the way.

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INTRODUCTION

Climbing a seemingly vertical rock face against an eerie, moon filled night, Junta ascends the ostensibly terrible Mount Cristallo. As she does, a man from the village below secretly follows her, seeking the same destination—the strange blue light emanating from the mountain's peak. The climb becomes more and more dangerous with both Junta and the villager straining to hold onto the sheer rock face. Finally, without the necessary skill to complete the climb, the man from the village falls to his death never discovering the secret of the blue light. Junta, on the other hand, continues the climb, using her hands and bare feet to cling to the mountain finally reaching the apex to view the source of the light, a cave filled with crystals which, when hit directly by the light of the full moon, create the glow that attracts both Junta and men from the village to discover its source. While Junta is always successful in her ascension, the men, without fail, fall to their deaths (*Das Blaue Licht*, 57:30). In Leni Riefenstahl's (1902-2003) *Das Blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*) 1932, Riefenstahl herself plays the character of Junta, a woman who lives outside of society, able to excel in areas of physicality with which the masculine population can't compete.

Often viewed as a herald of fascism as one of the most prominent early filmmakers in German history, Riefenstahl's critics claim that several aspects of her films signaled the atrocities of the Third Reich. Even *Das Blaue Licht*, created a year before Hitler became Chancellor, is viewed as a proto-fascist film, with little analysis given to the depiction of gender roles. This thesis will examine this often overlooked dimension. Beginning with *Das Blaue Licht*, I will explore the evolving depictions of female gender in the films of Leni Riefenstahl. From the empowered woman, Junta, representations of female characters metamorphose with the rise of fascism in Germany. By the time Riefenstahl makes *Tiefland* (1956, *The Lowlands*) the central

character is only able to function through the volition of the masculine. In her films, Riefenstahl reflects and shapes society's understanding of gender which fluctuates greatly from the Weimar Republic to the Nazi era. Looking at gender roles rather than race or propaganda will allow us to view her films in a new way, which can in turn, help us to better understand the society in which Riefenstahl was working. Racial ideology under the Nazi regime created some of the most terrible atrocities in human history, and this reduction in the value of human life is also clear in the conceptualization of gender in the Third Reich. By looking at gender in the films of Leni Riefenstahl, we will get a better understanding of the impact these gendered ideologies had on Germany at the times in which they were created.

One of the most debatable female film directors of all time, Leni Riefenstahl was also an actress and dancer. Riefenstahl is best known today for her directorial career of four full-length films, *Das Blaue Licht*, *Triumph des Willens* (1935, *Triumph of the Will*), *Olympia* (1938), and *Tiefland*. Her films evolve from *Das Blaue Licht* the fairy tale-like genre known as *Bergfilme* (Mountain film) that dramatically uses the mountainous landscape of the Alps to create a melodramatic and imposing atmosphere, to some of the most effective propaganda films ever created with *Triumph des Willens* and *Olympia*, ending with her racially charged final film *Tiefland*, which utilized gypsies from concentration camps as extras, and shows masculinity as being the dominating gendered attribute. Rather than just her best-known propaganda films created under the direction of the Third Reich, all of Riefenstahl's films, including *Das Blaue Licht* and *Tiefland* offer a fascinating portrayal of gender roles echoing the periods of time.

Riefenstahl depicts German populace's view of masculine and feminine norms in her films by showing the dominate ideologies of the social climate of the Weimar Republic which was experimental and permissible in exploring gender fluidity and later that of Nazi Germany

which retrograded the advances of the 1920's. Junta, her first directed protagonist, is a wildly independent woman, skilled physically with a passion for her secret cave of crystals. Her final female protagonist in *Tiefland* stands in blatant contrast—weak and unable to function in society without the overbearing pressure put on her by men. A deeper understanding of gender issues in the world in which women like Riefenstahl were living is fundamental to understanding the Third Reich and sheds light on the rise of National Socialism and ideologies used to justify racism and genocide. The evolution of Riefenstahl's treatment of gender shows, in many ways, her own experiences with the tumultuous events occurring in Germany between 1918 and 1945. The vast majority of scholarship Riefenstahl views her films as both powerful and dangerous tools of propaganda. These are valuable points of view, as they flesh out an understanding of Nazi ideologies, regarding race, nationalism, and individuality, however, they often omit the important analytical aspect of gender.

Scholarship on Riefenstahl focuses largely on her disputed involvement with the Nazi party, and particularly her second film *Triumph des Willens*. In her book on cinema during the era of the Weimar Republic *The Haunted Screen*, German film critic Lotte H. Eisner mentions Riefenstahl five times, with *Das Blaue Licht* and *Tiefland* being mentioned once with no analysis, while *Triumph des Willens* and *Olympia* are mentioned twice, with a short analysis being given to them each. In contrast to others, Eisner doesn't dwell strictly on fascist elements, giving insightful visual critiques, saying "in [Riefenstahl's] *Olympiade* [sic] (1938), another idealized documentary, this time celebrating the Berlin Olympic Games, Leni Riefenstahl lingers at length over night views of torchlight slashing darkness and flags becoming transparent next to the flames – a high point of chiaroscuro" (Eisner 336). Eisner's brief visual analysis emphasizes Riefenstahl's talented eye for aesthetically pleasing shots, a quality that is often used as evidence

in other critiques of her fascination with fascism. However, the bulk of Eisner's short analysis is focused on the fascist aesthetic rather than the visual aesthetic, discussing the uses of the masses, the gigantic proportions shown in every aspect (crowds, architecture, etc.), and the depiction of Hitler as a pseudo-deity.

Laura Heins also focuses heavily on the propagandistic aspects of Riefenstahl's films. In her book *Nazi Film Melodrama*, she strangely neglects to mention *Das Blaue Licht*, *Tiefland*, and *Olympia*, the first two of which might actually be considered melodramas. While she does mention *Triumph des Willens*, it is again a brief statement to analyze the fascist aesthetic, describing the mass ornament she portrayed in depicting the Nuremberg Rally. Heins otherwise discusses portrayals of romance in films from Nazi Germany, looking at how they either reinforce or subvert the policies being enacted, and how those depictions related to films of Hollywood from the same time.

In her groundbreaking essay, "Fascinating Fascism", Susan Sontag looks at the career of Riefenstahl and the fascist aesthetic. Sontag begins by talking about Riefenstahl's photography book *The Last of the Nuba* (1973) and the misleading suggestion in the book that claims resents Riefenstahl stood up against the Nazi party. Sontag then goes on to criticize Riefenstahl's use of the fascist aesthetic throughout her career, something Sontag deals with in general terms rather than specific examples. Riefenstahl, Sontag says, focuses on "the contrast between the clean and the impure, the incorruptible and the defiled, the physical and the mental, the joyful and the critical. A principal accusation against the Jews within Nazi Germany was that they were urban, intellectual, bearers of a destructive corrupting 'critical spirit'"(Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism"). Sontag's assessments of Riefenstahl all builds up to a critique of her sadomasochistic ideals, shown in her depictions of domination, slavery, and mastery— "a form of gratification that is

both violent and indirect, very mental" (Ibid.). Sontag clearly considers Riefenstahl guilty of collusion with the Nazi hierarchy and therefore culpable for war atrocities.

In contrast to the critical appraisal of Riefenstahl by Susan Sontag, David B. Hinton's book *The Films of Leni Riefenstahl* looks more broadly at all of Riefenstahl's films, which he says are "of greatest significance" when examining her life (Hinton vii). Hinton is comparatively sympathetic towards Riefenstahl, stating that the observations of Kracauer which imply collaboration with the Nazi hierarchy are "questionable" (40). He finds Sontag too fixated on the figure of Hitler in Riefenstahl's two documentaries (60). While Hinton might be too apologetic for Riefenstahl's Nazi collaboration, his work has the advantage of drawing attention to the character of Riefenstahl as a struggling artist working in a system that often discouraged her and attempted to stifle her creative instincts. He tries to cast Riefenstahl in a positive light, focusing on her technical innovations in the art of filmmaking, focusing on her as an artist rather than a pseudo-political figure.

Finally, in his work on films during the years surrounding the Weimar Republic, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, Thomas Elsaesser dedicates approximately four pages to Leni Riefenstahl, underrepresenting her in a book spanning 472 pages. Elsaesser describes Riefenstahl as one of the two filmmakers in Germany that pulled cinema into a modern age, applying the revolutionary montage of Eisenstein to her films. Riefenstahl "boldly, sometimes vulgarly, popularized the achievements of Vertov and Pudovkin, fitting their techniques of contrasting and alternating shot sequences into the sound film, often in strikingly innovative ways" (Elsaesser 393). Elsaesser goes on to focus on Riefenstahl's amateur status as filmmaker and describe the "'experimental' dimension" (Elsaesser 395) of her films. Elsaesser

dismisses Riefenstahl, briefly describing the technical aspects of *Triumph des Willens* and to a lesser extent *Olympia*, with little insight or analysis, especially in regards to gender.

It is strange how often Riefenstahl is described as a pioneer in film then dismissed as an oddity. In most scholarship on Riefenstahl, *Triumph des Willens* is examined in depth but mainly as a critique of fascism and an attempt to establish complicity with the National Socialist ideological project. If all that is asked is whether Riefenstahl was a true believer in the Nazi cause, the ideas of complicity and the individual are lost for lack of definitive sources, seemingly in a dead-end debate. Riefenstahl's thoughts about some of the specific atrocities committed by the Nazis through the end of the war are not plainly evident in her films, but they can be analyzed for how they engage with important questions such as, how is the individual related to the mass, and how power is manifested. Especially if we look beyond her most obviously propagandistic film, a complex and evolving conception of gender emerges that provides insights into how society and Riefenstahl see the interrelations of masculine and feminine characters. Riefenstahl's representation of gender roles is best understood by stepping away from conceptions of gender that are overly binary. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues for a conception of gender that is fluid by criticizing binary constructions of gender that reduce the depth of humanity and life to just two categories. Butler argues that this dualistic conception of gender has been forced upon us since birth (Butler 3) questioning if the very concept of gender is itself a fallacy. She says that historically gender is a "cultural interpretation of sex, or that gender is culturally constructed," but she questions the basis for that construction (7) echoing Simone de Beauvoir who stated "one is not born a woman, but, rather becomes one" (8). "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that

the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (7). Butler believes this makes gender performative rather than natural, with a “closed phallogocentric signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether” (9) by dictating what is both masculine and feminine and therefore what is gender-normative.

The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*. (141)

An honest expression of the self is lost when individuals conform to a set standard of enacting gender roles. By rejecting many of the common conventions of this standard, the new gender roles created by the disproportionate gender demographic after World War I in the Weimar Republic fashioned non-conformative women who had the opportunity to openly express themselves. In the Weimar Republic, women began exploring new forms of dress, sexuality, and placement in society. They demanded a voice to break the gendered norm that had historically relegated them to delimited areas of female “performance.” Riefenstahl broke away from these performative roles both as an actress and a director. Her character of Junta in *Das Blaue Licht* shows that women can succeed when they choose embrace a lifestyle that emphasizes the sense of true identity. Changing the nature of performance permeated much of society in the Weimar Republic but also created a sense of chaos with new, frightening possibilities. When the Nazi party took power, they re-established an essentialist concept of gender, believing that gender is unchangeable despite societal upheavals, and this view is apparent in Riefenstahl’s character Martha in *Tiefland*, who embodies an essentialized depiction of traditional femininity.

In the Weimar Republic, the concept of the feminine underwent rapid changes in society that attempted to create equal footing for both sexes. Women left their designated “performance” areas to enter new venues that were customarily held by men. Women cut their hair in the boyish "Bubikopf," a short, shoulder-length haircut. (Sutton 27). They also incorporated traditionally male clothes into their fashion with tuxedos (35) and monocles (47) becoming common clothes for women, as well as signifiers of homosexuality. Women wanted to rapidly modernize, solidifying their place as equals with men through these changes of fashion and open sexuality.

Building on Butler’s ideas of performative gender, R.W. Connell claims that sex in Weimar Germany was acted out like a role on stage, but the Nazis insisted on far less fluid notions of gender emanating from ideas about the male body (46). Gender, for the Nazis, was "virtually equated with the exercise of power in its most naked forms" (42). The Nazis embraced this historical view of masculinity, with "fascism [being] a naked reassertion of male supremacy in societies that had been moving towards equality for women... To accomplish this, fascism promoted new images of hegemonic masculinity, glorifying irrationality, and the unrestrained violence of the frontline soldier" (193). The gender role experimentation of the Weimar Republic was dismissed in favor of a nation that had the ability to engage in perpetual warfare, and to do this, the Nazi party recognized the need for strong and healthy men. This drive largely relegated women to the role of mothers, with Nazi leadership saying the most important thing for a woman was to "be a mother first, foremost, and always, preferably a married mother of several children" (Stephenson 16).

Nazi privileging of the male body and masculinity was largely a reaction to anxieties created by the Great Depression, the threat of Bolshevism, and Weimar shifting of gender norms.

The progressive conceptions of gender roles that de-centered a single sex and created more equality in the Weimar era were rejected, with masculinity restored to its central location in the social, political, and cultural modes of German life. With the rise of the Nazis, one can say, as Connell does, that masculinity decisively won the gender war of the Weimar Republic, relegating women to full-time domestic work (Connell 193).

By looking at *Das Blaue Licht*, *Olympia*, and *Tiefland*, I will demonstrate that Riefenstahl's depiction of societies' gender norms at the time evolve from depictions of physically strong and independent women, to women who are secondary in society under the hegemonic masculinity, and ultimately to submissive women less valued than men. This evolution, in many ways, reflects Riefenstahl's own life. As a physically skilled rock climber and dancer she took commissions from the misogynistic Nazi party and ultimately lost her independence due to her legacy of complicity with a genocidal regime. Ultimately, the evolution of gender will also reflect the ideology regarding race.

DAS BLAUE LICHT AND WOMEN IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Das Blaue Licht depicts a moralistic tale of Junta, a young woman living on the outskirts of an Alpine village in the mid 1800's. The small village is famous for the nearby mountain, which on the night of the full moon mysteriously glows with an otherworldly blue light. All those who try to climb the mountain fall to their deaths except Junta, and consequently the village scorns her as a witch. Junta lives alone until the arrival of the urban Viennese Vigo, a charismatic man who gains the rural Junta's trust after saving her from the villagers. In her confidence, Junta brings Vigo up the secret route to the top of the mountain, revealing a large cavern filled with crystals that glow when the light hits it once a month. The next day, Vigo chooses to reveal the secret ascent to the top of the mountain to the villagers in the hope that they can mine the cave and

become prosperous. Junta suspects that something is wrong, and climbs the mountain to find the cave bare. The blue light having disappeared forever, she throws herself to her death. After her death, the villagers begin to romanticize her memory and revere Junta as a type of local saint or martyr.

Perhaps the least known of Leni Riefenstahl's films, *Das Blaue Licht* is a tale that occupies both the present (beginning in the 1930s) and the past (the bulk of the film takes place in the mid-1800s) in which Junta, the wild, almost feral woman who lives on the outskirts of society is content to live a life surrounded by her crystals. Junta is a powerful and independent woman and a product of her time, reflecting contemporary liberal gender ideologies.

Working as an actress and dancer shortly after the end of the First World War, Leni Riefenstahl worked in a new Germany. This Germany found itself in a new and disorienting political situation as it incorporated a democratic system for the first time in the fledgling nation's history. She began her career as a dancer, but became enraptured with the aesthetic of film when she saw the movies of Arnold Fanck. Fanck was a leader in *Bergfilme* leaving the film studio to show the danger and majesty of the German Alps. According to Sontag and Kracauer, *Bergfilme* prefigured National Socialism with "a visually irresistible metaphor for unlimited aspiration toward the high mystic goal, both beautiful and terrifying, which was later to become concrete in Führer-worship" (Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism"). This assessment seems to be too broad, and was likely said to fit their arguments, as *Bergfilme's* were being produced in countries that did not embrace fascist tendencies, and in Germany were being made over a decade before fascism took hold. Riefenstahl became determined to act in *Bergfilme*, and after presenting herself to Fanck in person was cast in *Der Heilige Berg* (1926 *The Holy Mountain*), a tale about misunderstood affections that lead two men, both in love with Riefenstahl's character, to die

during a climbing accident all set against scenic mountainous settings. As the star of these films, Riefenstahl not only gained a reputation for excelling at rock climbing—a skill highlighted by the characters she played—but she also distinguished herself for her extreme attention to detail and daring in her performance of dangerous scenes.

While many scholars view *Das Blaue Licht* as an important film in the *Bergfilme* genre, it is often overlooked by Riefenstahl's critics in favor of her documentaries. This film is nonetheless important as the beginning of a trajectory into the center light of Nazi propaganda and gender norms of the late 1920's and early 1930's. These changing norms split society, the liberals believing in progression and the conservatives lashing out at them. These societal ruptures are seen in the film, which questions the new type of women, casting the female lead in an important light. The film also seems to create a microcosm for the path Riefenstahl's own life would later take.

As the old world of monarchies and empires crumbled after the First World War, the first great experiment in German democracy emerged (McCormick 3) under the burden of guilt imposed by the victorious Triple Entente. No longer content with antiquated political structures, particularly after the disastrous war that had cost the lives of millions across the world during World War I (Sutton 3), Germans hoped to usher their country into a new, modern age now known as the Weimar Republic, the newly established German republic named for the site of its constitutional convention. Germany had only been a unified country for less than half a century since the uniting policies of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) and had never before been a democracy. Beginning in 1919, the country suffered a significant economic depression that would last throughout the inter-war period. "People suffered from hunger, disorder, unemployment and the first signs of inflation. Street fighting became an everyday event"

(Kracauer, *Caligari* 43). Because of the war reparations, the German economy was forced into a state of hyper-inflation (McCormick 3). This lack of financial stability and tumultuous change in government manifested itself in society as a cultural crisis, events that Kracauer called “a breakdown of those in command, resulting from a hopeless military situation” (Kracauer, *Caligari* 43.) With the end of World War I came a rise in new moral constructs and probing of what could be achieved by casting off the restraints of provincial public morality that had been a hallmark of Wilhelmian Germany (Petersen 16). “A key element in this identity crisis was gender” (McCormick 3) as women were searching for their place in this new democracy often in progressive, diverse ways.

In the evolving gender-based society of the Weimar Republic, there emerged three distinct female archetypes. The first was called the "Gretchen," a traditional German Fraulein, with long virginal hair braids and customary Alpine clothing. The second was the "Americanized Girl," seen as athletic with shoulder length hair, full of energy—the embodiment of a modern, Westernized woman. The final and most shocking type of woman to emerge was the "Garçon" who, at least outwardly, embraced masculinity in fashion and in an attempts to attain the same social roles held by men and was often associated with lesbianism (Sutton 6). A split between the Gretchen and the Garçon came to represent the differences of the conservative and liberal branches of the culture (7). The masculine sections of society felt threatened, and, over the course of the late 1920's and early 1930's, these elements would push for the normalization of the Gretchen.

In *Das Blaue Licht*, Junta's refusal to conform to traditional gender roles runs counter to the order established by the right-wing conservatives in the Weimar Republic as she occupies the non-binary space described by Butler. In a 1925 article in the Weimar publication *Das Magazin*,

actress Lily Dagover stated "what good does it do a woman to cut off her hair and run around dressed like a man! In spite of all efforts she will only ever manage to be a weak and poor copy" (Malten 78). It was these types of criticisms that Riefenstahl was opposing, both personally and artistically. Riefenstahl shows an acceptance, and even a pursuit, of roles that are not traditionally feminine with her character Junta. In her climbing, she seeks the masculine in herself. This is also seen in her appearance, which rejects traditional beauty in favor of utility. Her scarcity of speech indicates a ready acceptance of her position on the fringes of society. The difference in character Junta has from the villagers cause a rift with the villagers casting Junta out of their presence.

Butler's writing help to explain one reason Junta is so hated for her gender-non-conformity when she says that "the effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms" (Butler 13). The villagers see Junta as this singular enemy as they attempt to dominate and oppress her. The children knocking her basket from her hands while mocking her while the men of the village call her "the Devil's witch" suggesting a distrust and unwillingness to associate with her. Early in the film, Junta enters the village in a scene where the men are sitting at a table above a small street. As Junta enters the area from the street, the men quite literally look down their noses at her. The camera films from a low angle as the men stare imperiously at Junta and pans to the right to reveal her looking up at them with a look of worry on her face. This worry is justified, as a group of obese men look at her, one of whom grabs her basket where she is concealing a crystal, which the man tries to forcefully take. She makes no real defense for herself and simply flees eventually escaping with the help of Vigo. After the death of Junta near the end of the film, society appropriated the idea of the woman who lived away from any societal

association, the woman they called “witch,” and turned her into a saint who they both venerated and commodified by placing images of her likeness on brooches that were sold to tourists.

The death of Junta shows a willingness to sacrifice her life rather than surrender to the life that society begins to force upon her. In *figure 1*, we see the evolution of the scene of Junta’s death unfolding, with Junta's shocked face discovering the cave, and her distraught exiting of the cave. She puts her hands on the rock and begins to climb, but slowly releases her grip on the mountainside and falls back with a look of peace on her face. The final shot of the scene is of Mount Cristallo covered in mists, as if the mountain itself is mourning the death of the one individual who understood the uniqueness of the crystals. To Junta, independence is more important than conforming to the lifestyle the villagers force upon her by taking the crystals from the cave. Her suicide is her final act of rebellion at being forced into a role. It is not a defeat; conformity within society is rejected as Junta rather chooses death. Junta's death was a conscious choice to maintain her independence to the last.

Of all the films by Riefenstahl, *Das Blaue Licht* seems to be least accessible to scholars. Riefenstahl is largely looked at through the lens of seeing her as a Nazi propaganda filmmaker, and many have stated that this film is a precursor to the fascist aesthetic. Richard W. McCormick claimed that the film was “readily amenable to right wing tendencies” (McCormick 56), while Martina Thiele briefly touches on the gender aspects of the film, saying that the film is “replete with sexual connotations,” such as the character of Junta being presented for the male gaze. Her assessments too are overshadowed by her interest in the “spellbound” Hitler and Goebbels, who became aficionados of Riefenstahl in part because of *Das Blaue Licht*’s grandiose depiction of the Alps and representations of self-sacrifice (Pages 238-39). However, these critics don’t elaborate on their arguments, giving the rest of the film little thought. Susan Sontag, says that

“the fascist ideal is to transform sexual energy into a ‘spiritual’ force, for the benefit of the community” (Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism"). This, Eric Rentschler believes connects the film with National Socialism, as the sexual character of Junta, through her death and spiritual energy, benefits the small village which comes to see her as a patron of their prosperity (Rentschler 39-40). It is an oversimplification to state that Riefenstahl was always a Nazi in spirit even before the Nazi party was in power. Rather, it is more logical to consider the depiction of gender in *Das Blaue Licht* in the context of other Weimar films, especially those that Riefenstahl had starred in prior to her directing career as well as the society in which she was working.

Stylistically, Junta is neither a Gretchen nor a Garcon, showcasing a fluid sexuality that is not part of a binary system for either appearance or attitude towards life. Butler states that many “butch” lesbians style themselves in such a way as to embrace the masculine fully, consciously trying to capture the essence of masculinity (Butler xii). While Junta is not shown as either “butch” or a lesbian, she is shown embracing the masculine. She is unkempt in appearance, with hair longer than shoulder length, but with a boyish appearance. She is a far cry from what one might think of as the Alpine *Heidi* with tattered clothes and bare feet. The utility of these is, of course, for rock climbing with her feet able to cling to the rock face as she does in the scenes of her nighttime ascent.

Junta's sexuality is likewise not on display for observation. She is modest in dress and her disheveled appearance suggests she has no interest in making herself the object of desire. While she does invite Vigo into her home for the course of many nights, they are shown to sleep in separate sleeping spaces. Here, there has clearly been no sexual interaction. The night of Vigo's secret ascent up the mountain begins with Junta, lying asleep in a bed of hay. Non-diegetic orchestra music plays as she tosses and turns, as if in pain. This shot cuts to a scene of the full

moon traveling across the sky, shot from behind a tree, with ominous mists filling the air. The music becomes haunting, as Vigo approaches Junta from the side, the camera viewing her from above the waist. Vigo lingers over the sleeping Junta, as if about to kiss her, but hesitating each time he approaches, as she rocks her head back and forth. He comes to his senses, and rather than forcing himself on her, he moves back and rests his head against a pillar of the hut. While he didn't literally rape her body in this scene, it foreshadows that he will rape her passion in the form of the cave. Clearly, the love that Junta feels for Vigo after his rescue is platonic.

Junta's unconventional gender depiction resonates with shifts in gender roles that can be found in texts and films from the Weimar Republic. Estimates ranging from 85,000 to 400,000 women wanted to maintain a hold on the more masculine roles both at work and in the home after World War One. Emerging within this larger group of women were Berlin's "Third Sex" (Ulrich 14), often lesbians or gay men who openly embraced the changes occurring in society driving the changes themselves in order to change public opinion by removing negative stigma towards the liberal lifestyle. These members of the "Third Sex" were adherents to the idea's of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), the director of the Institute of Sexual Knowledge (Willy 17). Hirschfeld was "tireless, getting out the 'good word' in every city in Germany" (Willy 18), establishing a scientific basis for the acceptance of individuals who felt that they were neither male nor female and therefore a member of a new, third sex. The conservative criticism against the progressive mindset of the "Third Sex" created a largely heteronormative binary sexual system in Germany while those who sought to reject this system were penalized and later even sent to concentration camps. Women like Junta were seen as a danger to the status quo, which in the early 1930's was rapidly changing.

For the first time in German history, women participating in sports became part of mainstream society during the Weimar era allowing women like Riefenstahl to explore and depict new dimensions of masculinity and femininity. While women in sports were not new throughout the world, with Italian Paula Wiesinger creating a reputation as a mountaineer in the early 1930's, and American Amelia Earhart working as a world famous pilot, German women publicly participating in sports was largely in its infancy (Sutton, 20). Riefenstahl became famous for her acting, dancing, and directing, and Hanni Kohler, a prominent sporting figure of the 1920's, became a well known motorcyclist (Sutton 75). These women were almost always seen as interlopers in sports. In a well-publicized photo spread, Hanni Kohler was shown in two separate images, the first showing her in dirty motorcycle leathers as if having just finished a race. The second showed Kohler clean in an elegant night dress with the caption "in civilian wear" indicating that she was in her natural form as an aesthetically pleasing woman dressed for the pleasure of men. When she was participating in sports, she was in her battle dress (Sutton 75). These women caused fear among the conservatives who saw them in sports as a physical threat to men's positions of power with sports being the "last and most important bastion of masculine superiority" (Sutton 70). For Junta, there is no "civilian wear," she does not feel the need to wear a night dress when she invites Vigo into her home, nor does she style her hair. She simply presents herself as she is, not an object for men, but as a modern woman in the sense of personal independence. This truth to herself is arguably what sets her apart sexually as well. Despite her attitude towards Vigo, her sexuality can arguably be called into question as well. While she shows no homosexual attributes explicitly, her actions are far from typically feminine, and her actions in taking in Vigo could be those of a concerned human being who is simply

looking for friendship. These actions largely mirror popular Weimar sentiments of a modern woman.

In her films, Riefenstahl is shown in a similar fashion as Kohler, elegant at times, dirty and hard at other times. This aesthetic continued through her *Bergfilme*, with depictions of her as a kind of super woman often capable of doing more than the men who accompany her, as in the case of her directorial debut, *Das Blaue Licht*. Movements arose in the late 1920's to combat these new women that broke the gender mold and attempted to reestablish traditional norms. Eventually, the Garçon largely went out of fashion and outspoken conservative's reaction against the rise of the new and dangerous women, and the Gretchen became the dominant style for women in Germany (Sutton 57). The dominance of the Gretchen, while not indicative of party policy at the time, was indicative of the backlash orchestrated by both the male population and more conservative Germans male and female, both of which largely backed the Nazi party in 1933 after Hitler was made Chancellor.

From a gender standpoint, this story of Junta can be viewed as a rejection of the patriarchy and an embrace of individuality. The residents of the village are all shown to be essentially the same. The men and women dress and act in similar manners without any of them being unique, the men being either obese and mustached, or tall, lean and clean shaven, generally with bulging, angry eyes when they see Junta. The women are almost always older, with dark shawls covering them. They take on their traditional roles, with the men telling the women what to do, and the women dutifully complying. Junta on the other hand does not dress or act like anyone else in the village, which sets her apart from everyone, making her unique but alone. She does not comply with what men tell her to do, and when one man from the village grabs her arm in anger, she actively resists. The male-driven patriarchy is shown to control almost every aspect

of the village, but Junta lives outside this system. This gives her power to live a life that is free from constraint. It is only after Junta is no longer a singular, special individual that she loses her power and will to survive. The individual is important to the story, but is only revered as a heroine because of her death for the village, not for her individuality. The villagers view her death as a sacrifice for them, as Sontag says, a death to sustain the whole. They are unable to see Junta's death as the ultimate expression of free will and not a willing sacrifice at all.

Choosing to live as an outsider both literally, in her small alpine cottage, and figuratively with her unconventional appearance and physical abilities, Junta represents the new and dynamic order of woman of the 1920's. Riefenstahl embraces this new woman, as many of the women in the Weimar Republic embraced the possibilities of changing their gender roles. Junta is happy as an outsider, because as an outcast from society she is free to experience the joys of her secret crystalline cave, which excludes the participation of the community. When society forces itself into her life, she chooses death rather than acceptance. For Junta, "the cruel fate [she] suffers at the hands of a brutal order would become Riefenstahl's own drama" (Rentschler 48).

TRIUMPH DES WILLEN AND OLYMPIA: THE MAIN EVENT

In his biography on Riefenstahl, Stephen Bach describes the events of her first encounter with Hitler at a rally where he spoke in February 1932. Bach recounts that Riefenstahl was so impacted by Hitler's oratory skills and rhetoric that it was like being struck by lightning; after this first encounter, she was so astounded that she was "unable to hail a cab" (Bach 89-90).

Later, during their first meeting, Hitler told Riefenstahl "once we come to power, you must make my films" (91), a task she proved to be more than equal. Like Junta falling under the spell of the charismatic Vigo, Riefenstahl came under the power of a similarly captivating man—in

Riefenstahl's case, Hitler. This would also prove to be disastrous, with Riefenstahl unable to escape her association with the Nazi party for the rest of her life.

Riefenstahl's films reflect a belief in the establishment surrounding her, despite never officially joining the party. Rather than focus on the slippery question of her true commitment to Nazi ideology, we will focus on these propagandistic films to consider how they represent gender and the individual with regard to the "mass ornament," the spectacle created by large groups of people formed into a single whole (Kracauer 75). To illustrate this, it is valuable to examine how events led to her propaganda films, and how the gender constructs in *Olympia* formed in this new order. The individual seen in *Das Blaue Licht* is, in many ways, subverted in favor of the genderless mass.

In German society after 1933, it was seen as honorable for men to join the army, perhaps the greatest "mass ornament" created in Germany at this time, with their impressive numbers and lock-stepping drills seen in wartime footage and film such as *Triumph des Willen*. Women were conscripted into their own "mass ornament" in society, being encouraged to join the publicized multitudes of women who were sacrificing their bodies and energies to bear children for the mass of Germany itself. In this regard, each "mass" is a microcosm in itself, all forming the "mass" of the Nazi regime, working independently but in the hopes of cooperation to create a stronger Germany in regards to art, government, military, and race. In *Olympia*, these gendered microcosms are seen in regards to both the participants and the crowds.

Olympia and *Triumph des Willen* both use an aesthetic that propagates the regime, showing Germans as a strong, unified entity— from the unified lock-stepping SA, to the crowds in the Olympic stadium all raising their arms to Hitler in salute. The human bodies are glorified to an extreme extent, showing a fetishization of the fascist aesthetic with the always victorious,

self-sacrificing, and beautiful athletes (Mackenzie 306). Both *Olympia* and *Triumph des Willens* show interest in rising ideologies rather than just document events.

The beliefs held by the free-willed Junta are nowhere to be found in *Triumph des Willens* nor *Olympia*, which focus rather on the militaristic efficiency of the new German order and their perceived rightful place as the leaders of the world. The individual that was so focal to *Das Blaue Licht* is often assimilated into the faceless masses, or turned into an emotionless machine in *Olympia*. However, there are also instances that the individual takes precedence over the mass. In *Triumph des Willens*, brief close-up shots show individuals along the road as they wait for Hitler to drive by. In *Olympia*, we get similar shots of individuals in the crowd during the Parade of Nations looking excited at the events, or athletes who perform superbly, like Jesse Owens, who Hinton describes as the "true hero of the film" (Hinton 60), are the focus of segments of the film. Elsaesser believes that these brief departures from the fascist aesthetic are due to the compromises between the Nazi state and the International Olympic Committee (Elsaesser 396). Regardless of the reasoning, the individual that is present is quickly lost in the mass. The film emphasizes participants of racial backgrounds the Nazis would have found distasteful coupled with undertones of misogyny suggesting that Riefenstahl created a film that was not fully fascist in its message, but also taking steps away from the depiction of the free-thinking and independent woman.

1935's *Triumph des Willens* and 1938's *Olympia* were both commissioned by Hitler to show the strength of Germany (Bach 123-124). *Triumph des Willens* was seen as a huge success, and along with *Olympia* has been called one of the "two greatest documentaries ever made" (Bach 270). *Triumph des Willens* depicts the Nuremberg Rallies, with opening shots from inside Hitler's plane as it descends into the city as if he is a god among the people. It shows the

mechanical efficiency of the SA, building the existing ideas that the German people were a superior race to all others (Sennett 47). Erwin Leiser's book *Nazi Cinema* describes the film as a type of documentary opera, with Hitler standing in as Siegfried, or a prophet to a new and powerful Germany. Much of Leiser's argument about the film describes it as a forerunner to the war with the SA showing an obvious call to arms (Leiser 25-29). Because of the abundance of documentation on *Triumph des Willens*, precedence in this study will be given to *Olympia*.

After the release of *Triumph des Willens*, Riefenstahl was again commissioned to create a party film based on the 1936 Olympics, the result being the epic six-hour film *Olympia* edited from 1,300,000 feet of exposed film (Mackenzie). Hinton describes how *Olympia* has been viewed over the years, "on the positive side—a poem, a hymn, an ode to beauty; on the negative side—a paean to Naziism" (Hinton 47). Hinton analyzes the different events, breaking down the composition of the scenes and the attempts to "stylize reality" (57) choosing to disregard almost all reference to Hitler and the Nazis. Hinton claims that the argument of sports are a facet of fascism is a "risky critical assumption" (61) and not applicable to *Olympia*. He cites the fact that Goebbels did not allow Riefenstahl to film the 1939 Winter Olympics as evidence that the Propaganda Ministry didn't believe that Riefenstahl's depiction of sports supported the Nazi party. This argument for a purely aesthetic *Olympia* without a political message stands in contrast to other critics, who choose to see it as a fascist propoganda film.

While Nazi leadership was uninterested in supporting the idea of the "new woman" Riefenstahl embodied in her early films, they were aware of how hard it would be to go back to pre-war society. Subsequently, they chose rather to integrate some aspects of Weimar gender practice. Utilizing fashions such as the woman's tuxedo and changing it to a woman's dress suit for officials, Nazis were able to, in this regard, negotiate a kind of compromise between past and

present. This also shows a deeper understanding of the emerging modernity in society with a shift in conservative values. The women's dress suits were both conservative and progressive, maintaining modesty in the skirts that went with the buttoned top, but at the same time reappropriating designs that had become among conservatives synonymous with homosexuality less than a decade before. This perpetuated the Nazi agenda of appeasing both liberals and progressives and was used to support their own power rather than to show concern for morality in Germany. But despite their willingness to integrate certain conventions, Nazi leadership was unwilling to give women the safe freedoms and roles they had enjoyed just years earlier. The Nazis said both men and women had valuable characteristics and were of equal worth—"equivalent but different" (Stephenson, 19)—each fulfilling their potential in different spheres in the community. As Butler says, "the institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term" (Butler 23). The Nazi's saw it as imperative to create distinctions in gender, stating that men and women were "equivalent but different" (Stephenson 19).

Olympia, released in 1938 to document and commemorate the 1936 summer Olympics held in Berlin, displays throughout a strong current of masculine energy as figures heroically compete in the feats of strength and endurance like Greek champions. Mandell says "the beautification of mindless, masculine physical power is, in fact, highly supportive and perhaps a part of totalitarian ideology" (Mackenzie 305). In no other film directed by Riefenstahl is this pure masculine power more apparent. The film opens to images of statuary from antiquity which are classically composed, clearly harkening back to the golden age of Greece. The vast majority of these images focus on the male anatomy with only a small percentage being women. With a track shot of Myron's *Discobolus*, the image is superimposed over a nude man throwing a discus

(*Olympia*, 7:00) followed by images of men performing traditional Olympic sports such as throwing, running, and jumping. This transition is very effective, creating a connection to antiquity and a reverence for the skills being demonstrated. This also legitimizes Germany asserting that as Greece led the world in philosophy, art, and technology in antiquity, Germany was the new leader picking up the mantle after the chaos of the first World War to lead humanity into a new, enlightened age.

The men are shown in close-ups, with their arms and torsos tense as they throw shot-puts and javelins in slow motion. There are female athletes as well, but much fewer though shown just as graceful and as characterless as the men. The acts are performed for roughly three minutes with close-up shots emphasizing the male body and importance placed on the "grace, poise, and strength of the athletes" (Mackenzie 304) over the actual feat being performed. Often, there is an omission of scenes showing the objects landing, creating a sense of the results being inconsequential when compared with the physicality of the action itself. Again, there is a unity between the calm control of Greek athletes and the calm of the German athletes. The camera frequently begins at ground level and tilts up to show the oiled athletes performing in slow-motion, making them seem larger than life. Following the images of the men, we are introduced to nude women, who rather than participating in any kind of sport, perform coordinated dance, undulating in a kind of sexual rhythm. The juxtaposition of the genders is in clear contrast. The men are seen in a hyper-masculinized homoerotic manner because of the emphasis on aspects such as the musculature and buttocks. The camera often slowly pans over the male rear which is coupled with nudity, creating a strong homoerotic effect for the viewer. These contrast with the nude, undulating figures of the women who are shown to be of a sexualized nature due to their gyrations, both showing idealized forms and hearkening to statuary from the Classical world.

The remainder of the film focuses on the actual events of the games. The dancing women would have appealed to Riefenstahl herself famous for her dancing, but when these women are placed in the movie directly after seeing the men performing, it becomes clear that the women are meant to be gazed at for the pleasure of men while the men in the opening were shown as a kind of example for the perfected male.

One of the only times that women are shown in slow motion is in the first minutes of the scenes of diving. Like the dancers at the beginning of the film, the divers are seen in a somewhat sexualized manner, but here they are also given the most humanity. Divers are shown in three primary positions; the first showing their faces as they prepare to dive. Here they have the most character, looking nervous, or often determined. Secondly, there is the jump and the dive itself, which shows the grace of the movement. The third views of the women are the most sexualized, showing them underwater as they sway to the surface, or even playfully swimming towards the camera. Interestingly, the shots of viewers are all of women, indicating that this is skewed towards the feminine. The portion of the film dedicated to men's diving is much shorter in length than the women's. This is due to the nature of the sport being seen as skewed towards the feminine, as evidenced by the fact that it takes place during the portion of film titled *Festival of Beauty*. Rather than focus on the strain of other sports, the diving is shown in a conceptualized manner. When one woman dives at the 1:13:45 mark of the second half of the film, the shot is taken from high above the diver, with emphasis given to her buttocks and legs in the air. To further emphasize the feminine nature of diving, Riefenstahl infuses the scenes with a very different kind of music. While much of the sports involving masculine physicality has orchestrated music that is heavy on the percussion instruments, the diving portion uses soft harp music. Rather than add to the drama of the scene the harp music creates a sense of calmness,

implying that the results don't matter here, as this is not a form of the brute, masculine sporting seen in the other events. The diving is rather shown as a purely aesthetic sport, an event similar to dance in its nature.

The gender dynamic of the opening of *Olympia* is again seen in the actual competitions. The film is focused on the men, showing them in slow motion as they perform their physical feats. In particular, the German men are emphasized. The masculinity, as Connell discusses, comes directly from the male body. Connell also describes how “the embodiment of masculinity in sport involves a whole pattern of body development and use, not just one organ” (Connell 54). As the camera pans over the male athletes in slow motion, we clearly see the taught muscles moving in unison, and the effect is, as likely intended, highly masculine. These elements work together to create a sense of hegemonic masculinity. The men are given much more precedence than the women, and with this priority we as the audience are shown the classically perfected athletes.

The film speed used by Riefenstahl is also indicative of where the focus of the film is. Seen in slow motion, the camera zooms in on the men as they stretch, panning over their twisting body. When the women are shown in competition, the angles are seen from far away, partially obstructed by people in the foreground or cropped to be unable to see much of the action. Rather than show the women competitors in slow motion, they are often shown in real-time, or even at a sped up rate (with few notable exceptions, such as the diving discussed above), as shown in *figure 2*, and the high jump event featuring Ibolya Csák (*Olympia*, 47:30). While the men are shown to be majestic and powerful, the women are shown in an almost comical manner.

Despite being made and released in the early years of the Nazi regime, *Olympia* is indicative of Nazi gender policy for both the 1930's and what would come in the later war years.

The most obvious of these indicators is the depiction of women in film. The emphasis is often removed from them and placed on the men. For example, forty-five minutes into the film is the women's competition for the high jump. Here, the women are actually shown in slow motion, but after each jump the camera cuts to scenes of men in the stands who are cheering and laughing, pointing at the competitors while often omitting the reactions of female attendees. This makes the scene feel odd, almost as if it's done for the pleasure of the men. The women are eroticized for the male spectators who leer at them. This microcosm of Germany as a whole is present with men participating in the mock-war of sports while women are shown as pretenders who are "put up with" due to necessity and the men appearing to view them with a judging eye for their sex appeal. This, too, is seen by the cuts to the jeering and pointing of the spectators during and after the women compete. While the male competitions are presented as the main events, the female events are more of an oddity, a curiosity for the men, who collectively show a sense of disdain. There are also images, however understated, of the individual. While there is the clear aspect of the mass in *Triumph des Willens* and *Olympia* with the crowds and soldiers there is still a tie to single individuals as seen in *Das Blaue Licht*. The athletes are shown apart from the mass despite their lack of character. While these documentaries show gender strictly as a binary construct, Riefenstahl still shows concepts she included in her first film. There is a departure from the mass and fascists aesthetic in *Tiefland*, Riefenstahl's final film, which took four years to film from 1940 to 1944, and after a decade of editing was finally released in 1954, while a sense of male superiority and aesthetic women continue.

GENDER AND RACE IN *TIEFLAND*

Leni Riefenstahl's final film, *Tiefland*, is overshadowed much like *Das Blaue Licht*, *Triumph des Willens*, and *Olympia* by her ties to Naziism, but this film is nonetheless an important film in

understanding Riefenstahl's representation of gender. If *Das Blaue Licht* and *Olympia* reflected society, then *Tiefland* shows in many ways a lack of society or the helpless feelings of being unable to maintain control of one's life. The female lead in *Tiefland*—played by Riefenstahl—has no will of her own. As with *Olympia*, gender lacks fluidity in *Tiefland* and Martha stands in stark contrast to Junta, neither independent nor an outsider bending to the will of the masculine power. She is, however, physically skilled in dance, excelling as Junta did in rock climbing. Sadly, the character does not have depth and is far more like the characterless of the figures in the opening of *Olympia* than Junta in *Das Blaue Licht*.

Like gender, race in Nazi Germany was something that much of German society felt needed to be controlled with an outlook that propagated a racial binary system that mirrored the gender binary. This system viewed the Aryan race supreme, and any other race as inferior. This racial point of view is seen in *Tiefland* specifically in regards to the inhumane use of gypsies from concentration camps as extras. Unable to film *Tiefland* in Spain as Riefenstahl had planned due to the war, Riefenstahl used gypsies from concentration camps to fill the roles of the Spanish villagers rather than real Spaniards. Riefenstahl claimed almost until her death that the extras were compensated for their time, fed, and sheltered on the sets. She also claimed that after filming she met with almost every single extra at a book fair in the early 2000's and that they had survived the war and gone on to live full lives. She went so far as to refer to the extras as her "darlings" (Tegel 6). However recent research has proven that almost every single Gypsy was killed in the camps after filming, the money they received for the filming being given to the various concentration camps rather than the individuals (Ibid.). Those few who did survive claimed that Riefenstahl screamed and sometimes beat them on set when she became frustrated with a lack of perfection and stated that she knew that after filming they were sent to their

deaths. Before her death, Riefenstahl admitted that she was unaware of the fates of the extras, with only vague details being provided (7).

Ultimately, the film is both a rejection of Hitler as well as an apolitical film (Dassonowsky 110). While the rejection of Hitler is easy to read, the fact that she intended it to be apolitical is more of an impracticality as well as a contradiction to the allusions to the Nazi party. Filmed during the fiercest time of the Second World War under the eye of the totalitarian regime who enforced depictions of ideology through censorship boards, Riefenstahl presented a film that on the surface was a melodrama showing a stark contrast between good and evil. In the film, the innocent and naïve Pedro resides in the mountains above a Spanish village living out a simple and idyllic life in the dramatic landscape. The village below is in turmoil with the villainous Marquis rerouting water away from the farmers to create grazing land for his prized bulls. Visiting the city is a troupe of entertainers led by the dancer Martha. Martha is seen dancing by both the Marquis and Pedro, and both men fall in love with her. The Marquis forcefully takes her to his villa where she rapidly submits herself to him. However, in order to maintain financial footing the Marquis must marry a wealthy baroness. He concocts a plan to marry Martha to the simple Pedro and retain her as a mistress while keeping both Martha and Pedro in the dark as to his machinations. The film culminates in a climactic fight between Pedro and the Marquis, neither willing to relinquish their claim on Martha. Pedro is victorious, the film concluding with he and Martha residing in his cottage in the mountains.

In the film, the main character of Martha is a feeble, sexualized object rather than an actual person with depth and character. Bach describes Riefenstahl's early collaboration with her one-time director Arnold Fanck, who upon reading the script for *Tiefland* stated “*this is supposed to be a gypsy?*” and suggested that Martha's name should be changed to “Touch-me-not” due to

her unsullied and pure dancing. She seems to have decided to change this earlier, chaste iteration, as Riefenstahl's dance for the Spaniards in the film is sexually suggestive, and is the reason both Pedro and the Marquis lust after her. She undulates for the men, all of whom look at her in a lustful manner (Bach 200). She is "the hapless object of erotic desire and repeated rape. Here, too, the director commingled voyeurism and exhibitionism, capturing the licentious gazes of male spectators in Riefenstahl's onscreen presence and echoing their lecherous gaze with a camera that feasts on her own body's movements" (Pages 166).

Like *Das Blaue Licht*, both Martha and Junta lose their independence when they submit their respective wills to men, but they have dramatically different outcomes. Junta is clearly independent, occupying a place in society that is threatening to the status quo, as she is the reason that the men of the village fall to their deaths while following her to the blue light. When Junta invites a man into her life, despite how innocent that action is, she gives up her independence and must live the remainder of her life with the consequences forced upon her. Martha is, by all indications, equally independent as she too lives life away from society with her traveling group of dancers, living for her passion. Unlike Junta, however, she does not rebel against a loss of independence as she is forced to submit to the men. This results in a much less romantic ending, for as Junta dies without independence, Martha learns to live without it. She accepts the authority of the masculine in her life, something that mirrors Riefenstahl herself, who was bowing to the will of Hitler and Goebbels.

Martha's scenes often reflect this forced submission of a woman in a male-driven society, as she almost exclusively appears in dark interior scenes. In the scene where she is dancing for the men in the tavern, it is dark, smoky, and crowded, with an almost claustrophobic feel. When she is eating with the Marquis, the room is well lit but Martha is cast in shadow despite the

candles burning around her. Finally, at the end of the film, as Martha argues with Pedro in his mill, shadows cover her face that other characters are missing, with her black dress adding to her oppressed appearance. The men on the other hand have well-lit faces, often standing against majestic mountainous landscapes with bright clothing contrasting Martha's dark wardrobe.

This mirrors both aspects of the lives of women in Germany in the late 1930's and 40's, living life without a sense of independence, relegated to the role of motherhood, as well as the professional life of Riefenstahl herself. The fluidity of gender from the Weimar Republic and the independent woman living outside of the normal parameters of society are, effectively, dismissed in *Tiefland*. This is a large thematic departure for Riefenstahl who as an auteur filmmaker seemed to progressively reflect society in her films. Riefenstahl would never shake the negative reputation she had due to her association with the Nazi party, and like Martha, she had to learn to live with that stigma. Like Junta and Martha, Riefenstahl lost her independence when she bowed to the will of the patriarchy in the form of the Nazi party.

For a woman who portrayed a strong protagonist in *Das Blaue Licht*, Riefenstahl's character in *Tiefland* is much more deflated in her independence and personal strength. The strong woman who cares more for her personal passion that was present in *Das Blaue Licht* is absent only to be replaced by a woman that is morally weak. Here, she is not betrayed as Junta was by Vigo, but after a very small struggle willingly accompanies the strange Marquis. This weakness continues through the film when the Marquis must make Martha his mistress in order to marry the Baroness for money and gives Martha to the simple Pedro. Again, as Martha is forced into being passed from one man to another, she is shown as unable to fully rebel against her situation. She does however deny Pedro's advances, but this is in favor of the promised sexual liaison given by the Marquis. Her self-respect is abandoned along with her prior life when

she is abducted. In the end, the fickle Martha chooses the simple but heroic Pedro as her lover after he strangles the Marquis. Both films show an interest in “the imperfections of man and society” (Hinton 75), but they also show a contrast between a woman who lives happily outside of society in pursuit of her passions, and a woman who embraces the darker aspects of society and meekly allows it to affect her regardless of her moral understandings.

Ever-present in *Tiefland* is the underlying power of masculinity. While Pedro strangles the wolf after a brutal bare handed fight at the beginning of the movie, we see close-up shots of Pedro's strained face with transitional-cuts to the wolf's face with Pedro's hands around its neck. This is mirrored in the final fight scene of the film between Pedro and the Marquis, who physically fight each other for Martha's love. Connell states, "true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies" (Connell 45). In *Tiefland*, the masculinity comes from the men's hands, as seen in *figure 3*. The two fighters begin their battle with knives, but the outcome is ultimately decided by their hands, with Pedro strangling the Marquis to death, with the villagers witnessing the events with approval. Physicality resolves the conflict, and Martha blindly goes with the victor of the fight, a man who she has known only briefly. She submits her will to the man who is physically superior in a show of "glorifying irrationality" (193). This too juxtaposes the physicality of Junta, whose power also came from her hands and ability to climb. Here, Riefenstahl instead chooses to embody the physicality in the men who use their strength for more than aesthetic reasons.

There is a natural comparison with the first and last films created by Riefenstahl. The juxtapositions between *Das Blaue Licht* and *Tiefland* create a startling contrast, as both show a woman who excels in her craft, but one is willing to die for it, while the other is not as she is forced to become an object of lust for men. Even the heroic Pedro sees her as an object of lust

after seeing her dance, knowing nothing else about her other than her skills. These two films create bookends on the life of Riefenstahl, with her love of creating and dedication to her craft being lost due her submission to men, particularly Hitler and his goals of having her create for him which ultimately became her downfall. There is a lack of surety that accompanies *Tiefland* and what its meaning truly is, as the extended editing process caused the film to become an enigma. This is in part due to the seizure of the film at the end of the war by the French, who subsequently lost a significant amount of the film prior to its return, some of which Riefenstahl claimed to be the most important parts of the story (Hinton 72). While intention is not, strictly speaking, of importance, it does create a mystery as to what a final project would have been had the film been released in 1944 rather than 1956. Elements of the film suggest that it is a type of apology for her participation in the Third Reich.

This apology in the film for her association with the Nazi party, can be seen when considering that it underwent a decade of editing. Released long after the atrocities of the Third Reich had been presented on the world stage, there was plenty of time to spin the tale in a different way. She also seems to believe that a veiled criticism of the upper Nazi leadership was necessary as she didn't agree with the violent war-centric policies (Marcus 85). The evil Marquis can easily be seen as a Hitler figure suppressing the innocent people of the village for his own good while providing grazing lands for his bulls, a traditional symbol of war. Despite this reading, there are several evidences that suggest that like her propaganda films *Tiefland* was a vehicle to show the masses the ideologies of a totalitarian regime such as the representation of submissive women and the potential benefits of rising in society through any means necessary.

Riefenstahl's representations of sexuality damage her claim that *Tiefland* is meant to be an apolitical criticism of Hitler. Unlike the female lead in *Das Blaue Licht*, *Tiefland* shows a

weak, helpless lead female lead who is incapable of any form of independent action or thought depending on the strong men around her. Despite over a decade of editing, the binary depiction of gender which thrived under Nazi rule is clearly evident. Judith Butler's assertions that modern gender is performative is evocative in considering *Tiefland*. Riefenstahl, a strong woman in her own right who was willing to change traditional narrative to show a modern woman as seen in *Das Blaue Licht* was unwilling to do the same after living in Nazi Germany for twelve years. Neither was she willing to release a film which criticized the government. While *Das Blaue Licht* shows a new, modern woman of the Weimar Republic and *Olympia* shows a more binary gender system, it is *Tiefland* that shows the most extreme contrast between gender relations. Martha is the most helpless figure in any of Riefenstahl's films, and while it can be seen as a tragedy in her violent and forced relationships, the real tragedy is that she was unwilling to be an active force in her own life.

CONCLUSION

The ideologies of the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany are, by modern ethics, hard to grasp. Exactly how a totalitarian regime could establish itself and so effectively supplant earlier, progressive beliefs on gender with radically retroactive ones is difficult to comprehend. Leni Riefenstahl, the most prominent female director working in Germany during these eras and often given complete creative control over her creations, engaged these gendered ideas completely. Much of the scholarship surrounding her deals with her associations with the Nazi party and the fascist aesthetic in her films. However, she also offers interesting insight into the gendered culture of the Weimar Republic and the changes it underwent under the Nazi regime. Her 1932 film *Das Blaue Licht* depicted much of the same forward thinking of the Weimar Republic with the powerful heroine Junta. Living outside of society in her appearance and manner, Junta

represented the unique individual as someone who could be admired. Disregarding commonly held cultural trends, Junta is highly skilled at rock climbing more so even than her male counterparts. This embrace of both the individual and the powerful feminine largely mirrors societal trends of the Weimar Republic.

However, with the rise of Hitler, Riefenstahl chose to challenge her earlier depictions of gender roles and the individual in favor of the mass and the masculine. *Triumph des Willens* shows the power of a unified whole while *Olympia* depicts images of perfected physique. The imagery of the strong individual Junta, in her tattered clothes and wild hair, were replaced by idealized men and sexualized women that were characterless, only functioning as part of the whole. Individual achievements were only glorified through victory; the film shows the victors of the events as superior to the losers, the domination discussed by Sontag being showcased throughout the film.

Lastly, in her final film *Tiefland*, Riefenstahl fully embraces the depictions of a gender binary. Martha is incapable of acting independently depending on the men surrounding her to direct her actions. Power in the film comes from the masculine body with Pedro killing both the wolf and the Marquis with his hands, and because of this he wins the love of Martha. The fluid gender roles of *Das Blaue Licht* and the Weimar Republic become static in *Tiefland*, showing, as Sigfried Kracauer said, how "films are the mirror of the prevailing society" (Kracauer, *Mass Ornament* 291). Whether Riefenstahl was a true believer in the ideologies of the Nazi party or whether she was an unfortunate victim of circumstance is debatable, but what is clear is her depictions of gender roles largely did mirror the culture in which she was producing her works at that same time that they also participate in the construction of gender.

Riefenstahl's embrace of conservative ideology in her films also offers interesting insight into both the era of her filmmaking and her motivation. The argument that Riefenstahl felt constrained to create the works for the Third Reich is simple, but fails to explain the ideological fervor she shows in her films after 1933. Likewise, to say that she was simply opportunistic does not clarify her acceptance of gender binaries in *Olympia* and *Tiefland*, or the often opposing racial depictions of the two films. Riefenstahl was rather, first and foremost, concerned with beauty in her films, showing women in *Olympia* as an instrument to convey this, as well as Jesse Owens. In *Tiefland*, she continued this pursuit with a ruthless intensity, using the gypsies to create an audience on screen to view the beauty of her dancing. She was of course constrained and opportunistic, but these were a means to an end for Riefenstahl, whose passion focused on showing beauty to the world at any cost.

Gender itself under the Third Reich has been largely overlooked in favor of larger issues, such as the Holocaust. While this paper does not aim to detract from this in any way, I do aim to look at others who suffered under the Third Reich, either socially, emotionally, or physically. Stephenson says that woman as a whole were not victims under the Nazi party, with some actually benefitting from the change of government. However, they did suffer at a disproportionately higher rate than the male population (Stephenson 125). In a totalitarian regime, a sense emerges that favors a specific type of person, believing them to be superior to others. In Nazi Germany, this idea of others being less than the ideal was given to many people—individuals outside of the Aryan race, homosexuals, communists. In addition to this, women were less than men under the Nazis, but are often a neglected discourse when discussing the events of the Second World War. As a group that suffered under a dictatorship, women need

to be considered along with all those who suffered under the oppressive German government from 1933 to 1945.

IMAGES



Figure 1: Sequential film stills from Das Blaue Licht, 1932(1:15:45 – 1:16:50).

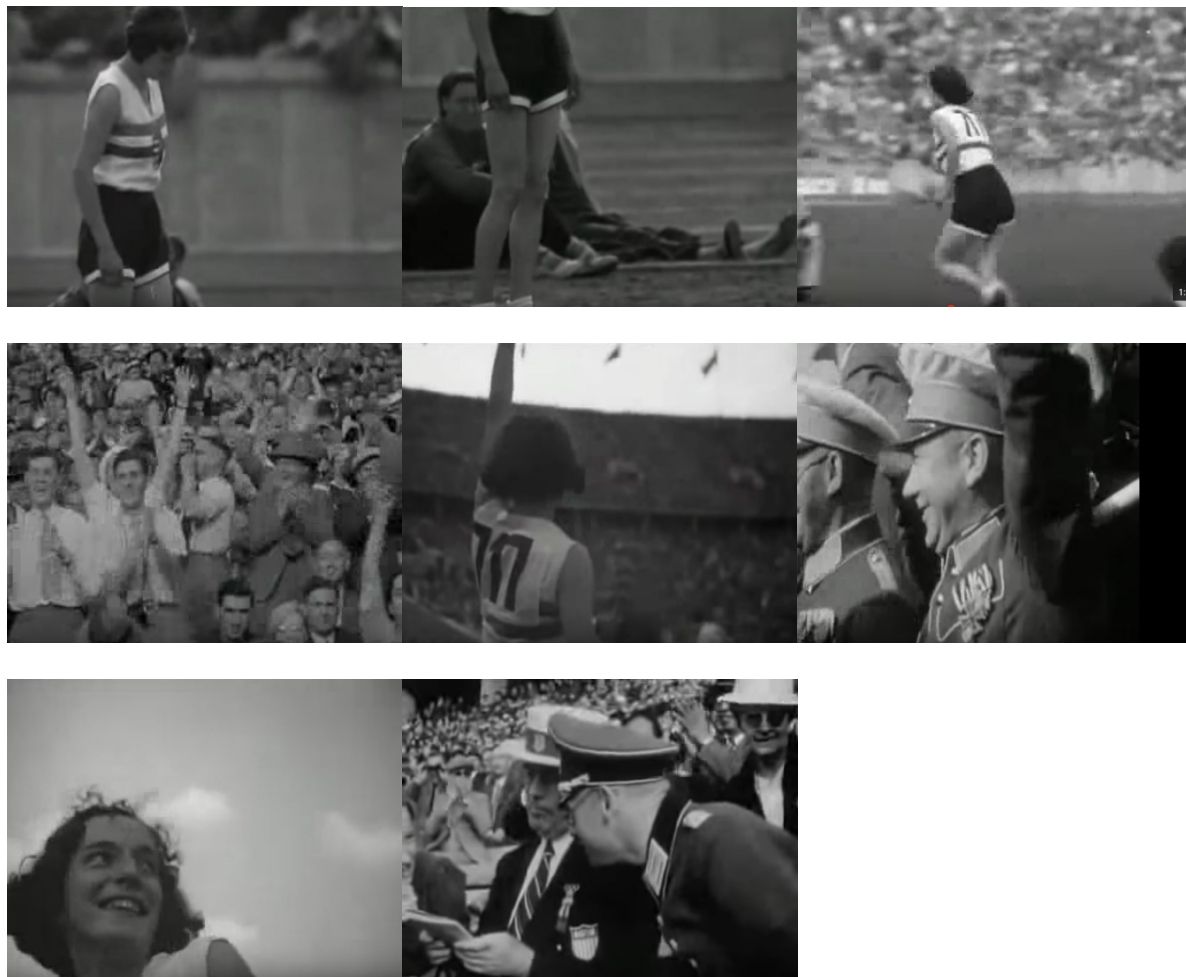


Figure 2: Sequential film stills from Olympia, 1938 (47:30 – 48:12)



Figure 3: Sequential film stills from *Tiefland*, 1954 (1:31:30 – 1:33:00)

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