

A black and white photograph of Leni Riefenstahl. She is wearing a light-colored, ribbed sweater and has her hands raised near her face, looking upwards with a thoughtful expression. The background is filled with technical equipment, including a large camera lens on the left and various mechanical parts, suggesting a film set or a technical workshop.

# Leni Riefenstahl

*The Seduction of Genius*

**RAINER ROTHER**

continuum

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# *Leni Riefenstahl*

The Seduction of Genius

RAINER ROTHER

Translated by Martin H. Bott

 **continuum**  
LONDON • NEW YORK

**Continuum**

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## *Translator's Preface*

Some of Leni Riefenstahl's films were released in English-language versions which differed from the original in certain respects. To avoid confusion, the original German titles are used here, although a 'courtesy translation' is provided on the first mention of each film (and in the Filmography). Reference is also made to English-language versions where relevant. Translations of the dialogue or captions are my own.

Similarly, for the sake of authenticity, I have translated all other German quotations myself, even where published English translations of the text in question are available. The German sources are therefore listed in the Bibliography (which also specifies the archival sources used). Where English translations of important material exist – Riefenstahl's memoirs are the most notable example – this is made clear on the first mention in the text or notes. Readers should note, however, that *Sieve of Time*, the translation of Riefenstahl's memoirs published in the United Kingdom by Quartet Books, omits some sections of the original text.

Courtesy translations for the titles of German articles and books cited in the text or notes are supplied wherever their meaning is relevant.

Quotations from texts written in English are, of course, from the original and cited accordingly.

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Martin H. Bott  
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Most of all, it was Catherine who repeatedly encouraged me and demonstrated unflagging patience. Without her, this book would never have been completed.

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Introduction: The Problem with Leni Riefenstahl*

When the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* magazine asked Leni Riefenstahl to specify her main character trait, she chose strength of will.<sup>1</sup> Nobody could argue with the ninety-one-year-old's self-assessment: her career provides ample evidence of her determination. Yet this was a characteristic she was forced to conceal for much of her career. If she thought that bursting into tears was the only way forward in a particular situation, she would do just that. Sometimes there really was no alternative: strength of will was regarded as unfeminine in the period during which she was defying the odds by making her way in the male domain of filmmaking. The way she overcame all obstacles, battling against almost exclusively male colleagues and rivals, is certainly a conspicuous aspect of her career. It was an impressive demonstration of strength; her refusal to allow herself to be distracted from her own aims was remarkable, as was her capacity to endure all kinds of strain.

The second aspect of her career concerns the ambitions which Riefenstahl went to such lengths to pursue. According to her memoirs, she never actually wanted to become an actress and she directed her first film without any particular desire to be a director. She claims that Hitler compelled her to make the Party Rally films, that she agreed reluctantly to direct *Olympia* and only made *Tiefeland* (The Lowlands) because her *Penthesilea* project seemed inappropriate during the war. Can she really have fought so hard, so tenaciously and so long for projects she would have preferred to

avoid altogether? Strong-willed though she was, she represents herself as remarkably indecisive.

Riefenstahl's work and her success at getting her own way are evidence of her capabilities. It is evidence that remains provocative even today. The large exhibition dedicated to twentieth-century art in Germany ('Das XX. Jahrhundert. 100 Jahre Kunst in Deutschland') at Berlin's Altes Museum was a striking example of how Riefenstahl's work has been viewed in recent times. One room was dedicated to Nazi art. Only a few examples of the plastic arts were included, such as *Prometheus* (1937) by Arno Breker, *Menschenpaar* (1936) by Georg Kolbe and Adolf Ziegler's *Vier Elemente* (1936). In the middle of the room stood a 'KdF Wagen' ('Strength through Joy' car – Hitler's term for the original Beetle), a symbol of the populist variety of National Socialist modernism. Large reproductions from the advertising brochure that accompanied the 'Deutschland-Ausstellung' (the Germany Exhibition in Berlin, 1936), designed by Bauhaus disciple Herbert Bayer, and four video projections completed the display. Leni Riefenstahl, and above all her *Olympia* film, dominated the videos. There were scenes taken from the prologue, the various sporting events including the famous high-diving collage, and finally the 'Cathedral of Light'. She was also represented indirectly: the intercut documentaries about Breker and Thorak, by Arnold Fanck and Hans Cürdis, were made by Riefenstahl's production company.<sup>2</sup> The other two examples – a film about the Nazis' ritualistic service of remembrance on 9 November 1937 and a compilation of wartime weekly newsreels – also conspicuously reflected the influence of Riefenstahl's work.

Hanging opposite the *Olympia* projection were four screen-prints by Andy Warhol (versions of *Reflected* and *Stadium*, both 1982) which take up the motif of the 'Cathedral of Light' designed by Albert Speer for the Nazis' show-piece, mass-participation events. It was *Olympia* which imprinted that image on people's collective memory. It is unlikely that any other artist active under the Nazi regime could be shown to have such continuing relevance. Significantly, the exhibition in Berlin traced responses to her work from the 1930s to the 1980s, from 'Nazi art' to Pop Art. It treated Riefenstahl's work as something very special. It might be described, somewhat controversially, as the only form of Nazi art without a parasitic indebtedness either to avant-garde models such

as Bauhaus or modern sculpture or, by contrast, to supposedly antique or classical models (like the work of Breker and Ziegler). Rather, it possessed its own, integral strength, enabling it to become a model itself – or at least a source of inspiration – to modern artistic movements such as Pop Art. Clearly, such a claim is more than a little problematic in terms of cultural discourse, for it implies that all Nazi art was bad and kitschy unless it was by Riefenstahl. Nevertheless, that view of her work remains widespread, albeit largely unspoken. In the 1990s, for example, it inspired several artists to turn their attention to Riefenstahl as a person. At the same time, her films and photographs acquired a resonance as legitimate aesthetic quotations.

Posthumous artistic fame rarely happens because of the discovery of a hitherto unrecognized genius. Usually it is the confirmation of a talent that even contemporaries considered significant. The talent therefore received recognition – but was also subject to envy and resentment. According to Walter Benjamin, there is a criterion for distinguishing moderate talents from the real geniuses. This is in fact a delicate distinction, given that both were celebrated alike by their contemporaries. Benjamin claims that there is a ‘real structure of “greatness” among the great authors, who are “great” because their influence is historic but who did not, conversely, have historic influence on account of their power as authors’.<sup>3</sup> This conclusion obviously hovers on the brink of tautology, as it does not define historic ‘greatness’ on the basis of a specific quality in the works. There is something intellectually unsatisfying about the claim that Shakespeare was a great writer because his works remain so influential even today. It would be more satisfying to suggest that he was a great writer because he was ‘the first’ to develop something, or developed it ‘more rigorously’ than anyone else, or better still because he was the ‘only one’ to develop it. That, indeed, is the argument favoured by aesthetes. For Benjamin, however, such an argument is simply a way of evading the paradox. True geniuses, after all, can remain unsung indefinitely, perhaps because their works have actually disappeared or perhaps because, despite being tremendously innovative, they were also tremendously obscure and fail to attract attention even today because of the lack of a continuous trail leading back to them. Unsung ‘greatness’, however, is impossible.

That which we consider 'great' is always that which is familiar and established: the repertoire. 'In theoretical terms, however, the main axiom of this new mysticism should be: "A work is not celebrated because it is great; rather, it is great because it is celebrated."' <sup>4</sup>

Benjamin's outline of a theory for posthumous fame is materialistic in a very literal, almost primitive sense. If 'greatness' is considered to mean historic influence, then the enduring talents really are significant. That does not mean, however, that everything 'significant' also endures. Yet Benjamin's unexpectedly robust materialism does offer some consolation absent from the idiosyncratic claims of spiritual hierarchies. He does not define 'greatness' as a mystery, but as a relatively stable currency.

It is in this sense that Leni Riefenstahl's 'greatness' emerges. Riefenstahl was, for example, considered worthy of a television documentary lasting more than three hours (and broadcast at peak viewing time). A modern choreographer generally described as 'provocative' saw Riefenstahl as her kind of subject. A band more or less synonymous with 'Deutsch-rock' used footage Riefenstahl had produced (back in 1936/38!) in a music video.<sup>5</sup> Exhibitions honoured her artistic work in Tokyo, Milan, Rome and Potsdam. She was invited as a special guest at *Time* magazine's 100th anniversary. This is evidence enough to prove that Riefenstahl is, in the terms of popular culture, a cult artist if ever there was one. Her burgeoning influence is clear to see – not just in sports films or even in the way the image of sport in general has been sexualized, not just in quotations such as those in *Star Wars* or even in an animated film such as *The Lion King*,<sup>6</sup> and not just in the aesthetics of advertising. The truth is that her considerable influence is no longer founded only on her undeniably ingenious inventions as an artist: her own biography is now also a factor. For decades she has persistently advanced her own explanation of herself, and in the public perception that explanation has become as significant as the works themselves. Both Johann Kresnik's work of dance theatre (in the central figure's monologue) and Thea Dorn's radio play<sup>7</sup> draw on Riefenstahl's memoirs. Leni Riefenstahl's apologia for her own life turned her into a 'figure of art' worthy of as much attention as her works of art. In recent years, there have been several announcements of plans to make a film of her life, and Jodie Foster now appears to be going ahead with this project.<sup>8</sup>

The mere idea of making a film about Riefenstahl's life is evidence of a change in her public image. Formerly a non-person, she has grown in popularity because of, not despite, the cliché of the 'Nazi filmmaker'. This transformation has been achieved by a particular version of the public construction called Leni Riefenstahl, a version founded on the persona rather than the person, on a vague conception of her work rather than close analysis of it. Such a construction is born of a discourse that is closely bound to powerful stories and forceful individuals. Both as a person and as a legend, Leni Riefenstahl certainly fits the bill. It would be hard to conceive of a 'more powerful' story.

Recently, therefore, a new myth of Leni Riefenstahl has arisen. Its public appeal – involving a moderate form of outrage – is beyond doubt. Towards the end of the 1990s this 'persona' acquired a unique kind of aura. Even within her lifetime, she began to enter the phase of posthumous fame.

The aesthetic provocation in Riefenstahl's work is now perceived more generally and more clearly. This, allied to the way her life story has been used to create new fictions, has created an additional stratum of significance above that of the moral and political provocation arising from her life and work, which dominated people's view of her for so long. Riefenstahl has, however, not yet become a completely uncontroversial symbol, as the political protests against the exhibition of her photographs in a Hamburg gallery in 1997 showed.<sup>9</sup> She remains the representative figure she always was, but other aspects of that 'persona' have emerged. It is hardly surprising that this should be regarded as (at least) problematic in political terms.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the link between the symbolic, demonized image of Riefenstahl and her career remains to be reconstructed.

The symbolic figure of the 'Nazi filmmaker' was evidently grist to the mill of those seeking to shift blame and make recriminations. There is certainly a 'Riefenstahl problem', but even today there is also a problem *with* Leni Riefenstahl. Moral judgements are an essential ingredient in the debate surrounding the work (which is exemplary and exceptional in equal measure) and its director. That is an inescapable consequence of the extent to which both the work and the person profited from, and contributed to, National Socialism. The problem *with* Leni Riefenstahl only emerged after



1945 and cannot be understood in purely moral categories – partly because it involves the reasons for the fact that no other person whose career blossomed under Nazi rule has attracted the kind of persistent criticism endured by Leni Riefenstahl. Of course, the director is not an innocent victim of boycotts and character assassination: her behaviour until the end of the war generated all the ammunition needed by her later critics. Her justifications, moreover, were precisely what made some of the criticism possible and necessary. Yet the intensity with which her critics clung and continue to cling to the demonic image of her cannot be explained only by Riefenstahl's strategy of keeping quiet about awkward events and insisting that she bore no personal responsibility. She can, after all, claim never to have been a member of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers – or Nazi – Party), never to have committed a crime and not to have vilified minorities in her films. She acquired her share of the blame through tacit connivance, suppression and not wanting to know – like so many other Germans.

It was probably inevitable that one of the consequences of the way West Germany went about legitimizing itself – the Federal Republic's famous 'fundamental consensus', which was at once antimilitarist, antifascist and anticommunist – should be the construction of symbolic demons to promote stabilization. In political practice, West Germany had no choice but to rely on the cooperation of many officials and functionaries in the economy, the press and the world of culture. Their cooperation largely reflected the fact that the democratic sovereign was identical with the people that had failed to rise up against dictatorship and mass murder. Even at the time, there must have been a suspicion that if, in retrospect, all Germans except a few war criminals were to be treated as somehow equal, there must necessarily be some exceptions within that group: individuals who were implicated in ways that were difficult to determine and who had not been declared guilty in law. Other people must surely have known all about the things which 'we could not have known' – people with more power, influence or fame; people like Leni Riefenstahl.

The public debate in post-war Germany thus started to use her as a 'case' and to cite the conflicting aspects of that case whenever it seemed appropriate. The alternative approaches to Leni Riefenstahl

are well established: she was a great genius or a mere talent; an obsessive artist or a barefaced propagandist; the supreme ingénue or a calculating profiteer. There is no foreseeable end to this circle of interpretations, and it is certain that Leni Riefenstahl herself will never say anything that might suggest a new possibility. For a long time now, she has done no more than repeat her own statements, which form a unified version of events – tightly sealed even against verifiable facts. For a long time, therefore, society continued to find the ‘case’ of the public ‘persona’, Leni Riefenstahl, provocative. It was as if she possessed some particularly emotive quality. Two equally entrenched, bitterly hostile points of view shared only their mutual insistence that they were opposed in every respect. The only place they ever met was in a court of law.

There is no analogy for the way Riefenstahl’s work has been received. To term it problematic is perhaps an understatement. West Germany’s evaluation even of Veit Harlan, director of the virulently anti-Semitic film *Jud Süß*, was rather discerning (and certainly not apologetic) compared with its appraisal of Leni Riefenstahl. That is true to an even greater extent of other Nazi propagandists, who did not confine themselves to work on film. The tendency to declare Riefenstahl either a total genius or a mere propagandist for National Socialism seems almost a reflex reaction, and it has been very slow to develop and change. Indeed, perhaps that very process might enable us to understand more precisely the construction of Leni Riefenstahl’s public persona.

That is the goal of this book, which deals with Riefenstahl’s work and the way it is bound up with Nazi propaganda and the subsequent public debate. Although this approach involves tracing the course of Riefenstahl’s life and analysing many statements made in her memoirs and interviews (for these contributed to the construction of her image), the book is not intended to be a biography. After 1945, Leni Riefenstahl always defended her ‘whole life’. In her justification she forged a consistent view of her work and her public role. Everything had to interrelate without contradictions, and ultimately it was vital that everything could be represented as entirely private. Similarly, her critics were and are intent on reconciling the life with the work and with the person. They, however, have drawn negative conclusions about the person on the basis of the work. This book attempts to avoid such alternatives.

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Part One

THE TALENT

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## CHAPTER TWO

### *Beginnings*

Leni Riefenstahl considered herself capable of anything and everything. One section of her memoirs, when she quotes from a letter to a girlhood friend, seems almost charmingly naïve now. In the letter she mentions articles she has written but not submitted, plans for novellas, work on material for a film ('but I am keeping it to myself, since I want to play the main role in it myself one day') and the development of 'something to do with aeroplanes, because of the impending dawn of civil aviation'.<sup>1</sup>

Other people took a different view of her abilities. Her father thought her incapable of dancing. Arnold Fanck thought her incapable of acting. The film industry thought her incapable of playing demanding roles, not to mention directing films herself. Stalwart Nazi Party members thought her incapable of making the Party Rally film. Such scepticism explains why her desire to prove herself was such a feature of her career. Hitler and – to begin with, at least – Goebbels were patrons who recognized her abilities instead of doubting them. Perhaps it is no wonder that she was unable to resist them.

#### **Overcompensation**

Leni Riefenstahl's career was marked by an excess of motivation. She always felt a compulsion to make grand entrances and tackle the toughest problems first. When she took to the stage, it was never in a supporting role. Right from the start, she was there at the centre of the action. She always demanded one hundred per cent,

be it as a dancer, an actress, a director or a photographer. Her ambition rebelled against the narrow bounds which the women of her time were expected to respect. She was characterized by tremendous confidence in her own abilities, an unusual self-assurance which left her undaunted by immense and unexpected challenges. Yet the cautionary memories from her childhood were also important:

I never wanted to depend on anyone in my life. When I saw the treatment my mother sometimes received from my father – he could stamp his feet like an elephant if he was unable to undo a button because of the starched collar of his shirt – I swore to myself that in later life I would never let anyone else take the wheel. I would always make my own decisions.<sup>2</sup>

Leni Riefenstahl knew exactly what she wanted, and she also knew exactly what kind of life she did not want to lead. Her career therefore could not begin otherwise than as an eruption, as a struggle against her father's will. She had to aim as high as possible from the very start.

This urge was to remain a decisive influence in later years. Her achievement is not the result of a long, cumulative process of development, still less of being properly taught her various professions. Her debuts were outbursts, heroic demonstrations of her abilities or even mere stopgaps; but she always felt the need to begin with an all-out effort in order to justify her career decisions. It is probably fair to say that the only chance she had was to overtrump everyone with proof of what she could do. This lent her career its exceptional character. Looking back, she was never able to identify an interlude during which she had been able gradually to test her skills. She made up for her lack of experience and education with demonstrative self-confidence and the desire to be a star from the very start.

In Riefenstahl's definition, a career does not denote a process, a slow struggle for recognition. Rather, it involves a series of stages linked by a paradoxical logic: a brilliant beginning, an acclaimed continuation and a hard-fought finale. Leni Riefenstahl's performances were the results of unexpected chances and sudden moments of insight. Her motto was 'learning by doing'. Her ability to grasp things quickly and her physical agility lent her so much

assurance that she soon felt she had mastered each new subject. She then, of course, felt an almost overpowering urge to go on and demonstrate her own skills.

According to her memoirs, this was the case even at the start of her brief career as a dancer. She writes that her first public performance was when she stood in for the 'already very well-known' Anita Berber, who had been taken ill at short notice.<sup>3</sup> Despite all the quarrels with her father, she managed to get her way and shortly afterwards she embarked on the first of her careers. She remembers it as a thoroughly successful beginning. Having just turned twenty-one, she danced her own programme for the first time. Within a few months – between October 1923 and approximately May 1924 – she undertook a tour which allegedly included seventy performances, mainly in Germany but also in Austria, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia. Soon afterwards, whilst unable to dance for a considerable period due to a knee injury, she decided she wanted to play a part in a Fanck film. Her wish was fulfilled: Leni Riefenstahl began her film career with a leading role in *Der heilige Berg* (The Holy Mountain, 1925). She imposed her stylistic will even on the first film she made as a director, in *Das blaue Licht* (The Blue Light, 1932), demonstrating that she felt no hesitation or insecurity about the medium. In 1933 her first documentary, *Sieg des Glaubens* (Victory of Faith), defined a new kind of film which soon came to be regarded as the prototype of National Socialist cinematic art. Similarly, as a photographer – in her photo-reportages, the books of photographs about the Nuba and the later underwater pictures – she presented herself as the finished article even in her first publications. In retrospect, this gives the impression of an astonishing series of incomparable 'debuts'.

There is a popular belief that winners can be recognized right from the start, and it is undeniable that Leni Riefenstahl made a superlative start to each new stage in her extraordinary career. Her total of five brilliant beginnings must surely constitute a record.<sup>4</sup>

## The First Performance

Leni Riefenstahl took to the stage for her first solo dance recital on 23 October 1923 as a performer of her own making. Though



significantly influenced by teachers and other great dancers, Riefenstahl was fundamentally an original. She danced her programme to music by, among others, Chopin, Grieg, Gluck, Brahms and Schubert. The twenty-one-year-old debutant was responsible for all the choreographies, which had titles such as *Die drei Tänze des Eros* (The Three Dances of Eros), *Tanzmärchen* (Dance Fairy-Tale), *Lyrische Tänze* (Lyric Dances), *Sommer* (Summer) and *Traumblüte* (Dream Blossom). Within the still relatively recent tradition of expressive dance, she freed herself from classical models and sought her individual style of dance. The fact that this style was occasionally reminiscent of the great dancers of the age, above all Mary Wigman and Niddy Impekoven, was hardly surprising. Critics noted the similarities and sometimes quibbled about them.

The young artist did not just impose her personal style on the dances: she also designed the costumes. She was fond of fluid robes or tight leotards for her solo numbers. They were mostly of a single colour in order to set her off more clearly from the similarly plain stage set. It was quite clear from the dancer's stage presence that she had developed her own language within the art form. Her dancing had nothing to do with codified step sequences.

The way her first career developed is typical in many ways of her progress thereafter. In later years too, she repeatedly shunned the established paths when setting off on a new project and preferred to rely on personal contacts and friendships rather than on the production plans of anonymous studios. As she prepared her first performances, the young dancer doubtless received support from her then admirer, Harry Sokal, and her mother. It is unclear whether she also used an agent to represent her during the six-month tour. She did, however, succeed in creating an extraordinary stir in Munich and Berlin even with her first entirely independent programmes. The press reviews were not just very positive, but also very numerous for a debutant. In fact there were so many that, even at this early stage, reviewers at the performances alluded to the fuss the press made of her. Dealing with the media was always to be one of her particular talents. She was quick to recognize, and henceforth to exploit, the value of a good public relations campaign.

In the context of Riefenstahl's work as a whole, her engagements

up to May 1924 amount to no more than a brief prelude, seemingly insignificant compared to her subsequent achievements. Yet those few months were in fact of central importance to her. The public acknowledgement of her creativity as an artist was her refutation of her father's doubts. In asserting herself against his will and proving herself a genuine talent, she created herself as an artist. Not only did she quickly master the workings of a business that she, an outsider, had resolved to conquer; she also defined her own 'image' for the first time. The latter is probably best illustrated by the photograph used both for her publicity brochure of 1924 and her advertisement for 'Amor Skin' cream of 1928. The picture shows her in a long, white robe, with her big, earnest eyes directed at the camera and her short hair flat against her scalp. This Leni Riefenstahl – the serious young woman filled with a sense of mission – became her first public persona.

In retrospect her career as a dancer also proved important for another reason. None of her subsequent careers quite succeeded without the help of others. Later, there would always be a story to build on. As a dancer, Leni Riefenstahl had no story whatsoever. That perhaps explains why she later told the tale in simplified terms, purged of opposition and criticism. The narrative construction was intended to portray a talent which was fully formed from the start and which earned immediate, unqualified acclaim.

The first dance recital in Munich therefore acquires a certain significance in the construction of Riefenstahl's biography. It made a moderate impact, with two Munich newspapers registering the debut. Apparently, it was intended as a dress rehearsal for the impending performance in Berlin and was organized by Harry Sokal, who hired the Tonhalle concert hall for just one dollar.<sup>5</sup> It was the era of galloping inflation: the *Münchener Zeitung* newspaper containing the report of Riefenstahl's performance cost 300 million marks, and by the next day the price had gone up to 500 million marks. On 26 October 1923 the reviewer wrote:

Leni Riefenstahl brings with her to the stage many of the important prerequisites for success, such as beautiful looks and an evidently unorthodox temperament. This enables her to hold the attention of her audience to the end. But [she] spoils her own prospects of achieving truly great art by

remaining in the region of sentimentality. She sprawls, for example, when she should be majestically expressing herself and purifying her sensuality into the highest artistic *form*. For the same reason, her movements sometimes let her down; the risk of . . . sensationalism is a consequence of her temperament. If, however, she were to use her passion as the starting point rather than the final statement of her art (without belittling it in the least) and worked on her technical skills, she might yet become something special. Let us hope that success does not get in her way.<sup>6</sup>

The *Münchener Neuesten Nachrichten* had also sent a reviewer to the debutante's performance. He took a similar point of view in his report:

Leni Riefenstahl, a pupil of Jutta Klamt, is a young dancer whom nature has blessed with beauty and stature. Her first dance recital at the Tonhalle indicated what she is capable of. It took the form of a musical, graceful display of athleticism, without any particular audacity but with some original touches. By choosing Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, the young artist had set herself a task to which, within herself, she was not yet completely equal. The dramatic element remained a mere suggestion, whilst the lyrical element always seemed much more creative. Even the 'Dances of Eros', for all the beauty of the contours in certain passages, never quite lived up to their very ambitious title. They were pretty arabesques around a set motif. However, the dancing of this beautiful, supple figure contained nothing to undermine the positive overall impression: no importunate sham, no cheap showiness. On the contrary, the artist's whole manner, like her sound choice of costumes, demonstrated a sure, cultivated taste.<sup>7</sup>

The two Munich critics did not see the performance as a perfect first attempt, and they noted moments which were flawed or betrayed uncertainty. Ultimately, however, they did suggest that the young dancer possessed remarkable talent. Like later critics, they were unable to resist allusions to her beautiful face and figure, but they also identified some of the debutante's other qualities:

naturalness, a gift for lyricism, a refusal to resort to showy effects, a sure sense of style. On the other hand, they agreed that she was guilty of a certain over-eagerness: her technique and experience as a dancer were not yet completely equal to her ambition. The reviews of her performance in Munich were benevolent, moderately critical descriptions of a *talent* at the moment of its debut. They constituted, by any standards, a positive response to a nascent career.

The way Riefenstahl later described the 'first performance' – this first opportunity for her artistic vocation to prove itself – differs markedly from the published opinions of her contemporaries. The legend she created was of an inspired genius and a perfect debut.

She offers a convincing and colourful description of her own feelings concerning the audience:

The hall was barely one third full. I was unknown. The few people who did attend had probably received free tickets from the concert organizers. I was not bothered by the emptiness of the hall. I was happy to be able to dance in front of an audience. I did not suffer any stage fright. On the contrary: I could hardly wait to get on stage. Even my first dance, 'Studie nach einer Gavotte' was greeted by considerable applause; by my third dance I was forced to give an encore, and then the applause grew and grew until, during the last dances, the members of my audience came forward and demanded encores. I carried on dancing until my exhaustion forced me to stop.<sup>8</sup>

More problematic is her attempt to draw on contemporary reviews to prove what an overwhelming success her performance was. Immediately after her euphoric recollections of the evening, there follows a passage from the *Münchener Neuesten Nachrichten* – clearly intended as evidence of the enthusiastic response from audience and critics alike. To give the impression of unqualified praise, however, she has to resort to some creative quoting. Not only did the newspaper article she used actually relate to her second performance (in December 1923), she also misrepresented the tone of the piece.<sup>9</sup> The critic did indeed remark on the 'large and grateful audience' and praised the young artist because this time she subordinated 'her eagerness to her ability'. Nevertheless,

he regarded Leni Riefenstahl as 'nothing less than problematic':

*She takes after Wiesenthal. Her domain is that of normality and naturalness. Everything else comes across as unspontaneous, calculated or formulaic, even if the innate beauty of the moving form sometimes makes it easy to overlook this. The proud, bold opening march of the Caucasian suite is a typical product of the Mary Wigman school. Unfortunately, its bellicose power is watered down by femininity: a dainty Amazon! Even the Oriental fantasy dance – despite exhibiting the sprung power of a body under complete control – is not really the forte of a dancer blessed with natural talent, whose truest successes will always arise from forceful, authentic dancing such as in the 'Valse caprice' and in the summery concluding dance, when she becomes a surging, circling delight, as natural as a swaying poppy or a nodding cornflower. The Munich audience, with its long-standing tradition of discernment in dance, instinctively understood this. It demanded encores of precisely those dances.*

The young dancer doubtless sent the publicity brochure (containing press reactions up to 29 April 1924) to theatres and journalists when she was preparing a comeback after her injury.<sup>10</sup> Understandably, it omitted negative opinions and even nuances. It is striking, however, that the memoirs should, so many years later, employ the same strategy.

### **An Intimation of New Grandeur in Dance**

Riefenstahl's description of the rest of her career as a dancer also reflects her insistence on the legend of consummate success, of unwavering applause from audience and critics alike. That is the only possible explanation for the way she misrepresented the thrust of Fred Hildebrandt's review in the *Berliner Tageblatt*. Once again, the publicity brochure and the memoirs quote the same excerpts, and once again the editing is manipulative. Both the brochure and the memoirs used only the passages marked here in italics. The rest of the text was suppressed.

*This very beautiful girl, who received a tumultuous response from the daily press when she began her career in the Blüthnersall, in the Kammerspielen, in the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, in Munich, Cologne, Innsbruck and Prague, is doubtless fighting fervently for a place beside the three who enjoy serious reputations: Impekoven, Wigman and Gert. And when one sees this tall, perfectly developed creature standing amid the music, one has an intimation that dance might achieve a grandeur which none of the three was able to carry and uphold – not in Mary's heroic stroke of the gong, not in Niddy's sweet fiddling, not in Valeska's terrible drum-beat: the grandeur of the dancer who reappears every thousand years, the perfect, powerful grace, the unparalleled beauty, the divine image. But then this young woman begins to unfold her body; the idea wilts, the brilliance fades, the tone flattens; a wonderful sham now occupies the stage – expansive, certainly, and with a thirst for rhythm and a nostalgia for music. Unfortunately, her expansiveness fails to enliven the space, the rhythm withers in the face of her thirst, and her nostalgia sits on the music like a straitjacket. It is the élan, the thirst and the yearning of a foolish, moonstruck maiden. . . . Nevertheless: this is no careless beauty tripping her way up the intricate paths towards art. In this dancing there is an insane will to escape such chains of the enchanted body; a humble individual is groping around in the darkness; a human being is wrestling with the angel. Thus, a spectacle which might easily provoke anger in fact leaves one feeling sad – regretful that such superficial perfection is not blessed with the inner gift, the grandeur of genius, the daemonic flame.<sup>11</sup>*

Riefenstahl's selectivity turns a review that is mainly about a great but disappointed hope into a hymn of praise. The tactic says a great deal about Riefenstahl's need for recognition.<sup>12</sup> Modern assessments of Riefenstahl's dancing, which have to rely entirely on the contemporary commentaries and the scenes in *Der heilige Berg*, are necessarily tentative – but there is no doubt that at the time the young talent was thought almost unanimously to possess remarkable potential. It is all the more surprising that the memoirs should seek to exaggerate such a consensus.

There were relatively few thoroughly negative reviews. Most

were basically favourable, whilst some were uncritically enthusiastic. The *Vorwärts* critic, John Schikowski, underwent an instructive change of attitude. At the first dance recital in Berlin he was particularly severe on the second part of the programme: 'All in all: a very strong artistic temperament achieving perfection within her field. That field, however, is extremely limited. For higher things, the most important ingredient is missing: the soul.' On hearing from Munich that this very section had been greeted there with enthusiasm, he decided to attend Riefenstahl's second performance and review his opinion. He experienced 'a revelation. Virgin territory!' and summed up:

Here bubbled the longed-for spring, here flowed the Fountain of Youth. It may not yet be powerful enough to brim over and carry all before it, but it is set on its course, clear and confident. If (despite the dazzling popular successes and disconcerting press furore) her serious sense of artistic purpose remains vigilant and effective, I am convinced that this young Berliner is capable of fulfilling our hopes for the future of dance: of delivering a new spirit and stylistic grandeur.<sup>13</sup>

Schikowski's point of view seemed entirely reasonable, and his relatively objective evaluation appeared superior to the more effusive, less distanced reviews.<sup>14</sup> The obvious reasons for the extraordinary reception Riefenstahl's dance recitals received were her youth and beauty. The critics tended to concentrate on her physical attractiveness, largely irrespective of any aesthetic appraisal of her performance. It would appear that her beauty, 'which is doubly delightful in view of how scarce it has become among dancers',<sup>15</sup> distracted some critics from weaknesses in the performance. Even those who considered her a mere 'variety show attraction' rather than the stuff of two-hour matinees at least found her 'young' and 'pretty';<sup>16</sup> those who felt that the shape of her dancing was overly influenced by the music never neglected to mention 'the slim, youthful, beautiful dancer'.<sup>17</sup> The reviewers admired her beautiful, flexible build<sup>18</sup> and thought her body seemed 'chiselled from marble, perfectly proportioned, beautifully groomed and evenly honed',<sup>19</sup> or 'perfectly formed in every respect'.<sup>20</sup> In short, although the dancer – who was indeed very