



# RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
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## **Women and Screen Cultures**

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**# 1**

### **Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives**

**Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli**

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# Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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Margaret Hennefeld

## The Politics of Hyper-Visibility in Leni Riefenstahl's *The Blue Light*

ABSTRACT: While the inadequate archival preservation of films by early women directors such as Alice Guy-Blaché, Lois Weber and Elvira Notari has led to their virtual erasure from dominant film history narratives, German film director Leni Riefenstahl's work and biography have suffered from inverse but revealingly parallel problems: a plenitude of memory and historicization. An excess of discussion regarding Riefenstahl's implication in National Socialism, and her personal relationship with Hitler continues to haunt analysis of Riefenstahl's oeuvre.

However, this conflation of Riefenstahl's personal politics with her filmmaking puts more at stake than the public memory of her as a film director. In auteurist compilations such as Andrew Sarris' "Interviews with Film Directors," Riefenstahl stands alone as the only woman filmmaker sandwiched between thirty-nine male directors. As Riefenstahl's interview with Sarris reveals, cinematic memory of Riefenstahl's earlier German mountain films (such as *The Blue Light*) has been largely overshadowed by the visibility of her later fascistic texts (*Olympia* and *The Triumph of the Will*).

In this paper, I suggest as an alternative or complementary effort to feminist excavations of invisible women's film histories, a more extensive probing of the female filmmaking histories that mainstream publics already recognize. Perhaps the hyper-visible spectacle made of Riefenstahl's canon contains its own forgotten histories that we can use to rethink the careers of early women directors.

This paper thinks about methods in feminist film historiography, and the questions they have raised about the gender politics of silent film's "visibility," by revisiting the early work of a notoriously historicized but in many ways under-theorized filmmaker: Leni Riefenstahl. Better remembered for her proto-fascist bodily athleticism both in front of the camera in Arnold Fanck's German mountain films, and behind it in her 1936 documentary about the Berlin Olympics and, of course, her triumphs in the "aestheticization of fascism" in *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1935), Leni Riefenstahl actually co-directed her first film, *The Blue Light* (*Das blaue Licht*, 1932), with the Jewish Hungarian film theorist Belá Balázs. An ambivalent allegory about the perils of being a female "übermensch" in remote Northern Italy, *The Blue Light* exhibits a dizzying pull between Riefenstahl's aesthetics of bodily athleticism and Balázs' obsession with close-ups of the face as "the lyrical essence" of dramatic form. I offer this interpretation of a most unusual and historiographically precarious "collaboration" in order to open up a new space for re-examining the archives of women's silent filmmaking that history has remembered all too well—in contrast with the reels upon reels of vanished and dilapidated archives by prolific women filmmakers from Alice Guy-Blaché, to Lois Weber, to Elvira Notari.

Whereas the inadequate archival preservation of films by many early women directors has led to their virtual erasure from dominant film history narratives (and vice versa), German film director Leni Riefenstahl's work and biography have suffered from inverse but revealingly parallel problems: a plenitude of memory and historicization. An excess of discussion about

Riefenstahl's implication in National Socialism, the extent of her knowledge about Nazi concentration camps, and her personal relationship with Hitler continue to haunt analysis of Riefenstahl's filmmaking oeuvre. I will argue that this conflation of Riefenstahl's politics with her cinematic innovations is relevant to larger questions in feminist film historiography. Indeed, these sensationalized accounts of Riefenstahl's filmmaking career put a great deal more at stake than her individual example as a film director. Riefenstahl's scandalously hyper-visible film career has worked to distract public attention from other histories of women filmmakers, while at the same time implicitly shading those invisible histories as fascist through synecdoche.

In contrast to many of the women filmmakers whose works have been resurrected by the Women Film Pioneers Project, Riefenstahl's cinema has been condemned by its excess of historicity, not by its invisibility. What I want to argue here is that Leni Riefenstahl's politically hyper-visible filmmaking career should merit equally rigorous efforts in theoretical excavation. From her perilous appearances in the 1920s traversing pristine white landscapes in what Siegfried Kracauer has called the proto-fascist German mountain film genre, through her Hitler-commissioned propaganda documentaries, to her later unfinished work filming athletic black bodies of the Nuba tribes in Sudan, Riefenstahl's legacy has suffered from a troubling confusion between history and memory. How intimate was her relationship with Hitler? Did she really not know that the Gypsy extras in *Lowlands* (*Tiefland*, 1954) were brought in from German concentration camps? What does she have to say about her own complicities in the wake of her public exposure to the Nazis' unthinkable atrocities? I enumerate these questions not to diminish their political significance, but to compare them with the types of biographical questions that present day feminist film theorists have inherited through their research on less contentious women filmmakers of the silent era.

For example, Amelie Hastie has made "memory suspicious of history," in a provocative inversion of Pierre Nora's assertion that "History is perpetually suspicious of memory," in her attempts to weave together coherent threads from the forgotten fragments of Alice Guy-Blaché's instrumental and vastly prolific early filmmaking career with Gaumont and Solax. Jennifer Bean has emphasized the entanglement between women's on-screen bodily indexicality and off-screen fodder for biographical publicity in her essay on "The Technologies of Early Stardom." "The fascination with a destructive force emanating from within technology's steely body certainly exceeded (and preceded) the frame of the star system, tapping into an 'imagination of disaster'" (422). Bean looks at the faces of star discourse as an attempt to humanize the disturbing but enthralling slippage between "serial queen" antics and the unruly apparatuses of modernity. To make somewhat of a leap from Pauline's de-politicized perils, we might even say that Riefenstahl "produces a body" for the unimaginable limits of modernity that erupted with the Second World War.

The slippage between Riefenstahl's iconic "aestheticization of politics" (to invoke Walter Benjamin) and the politics of silent film historiography bears closer examination. Riefenstahl

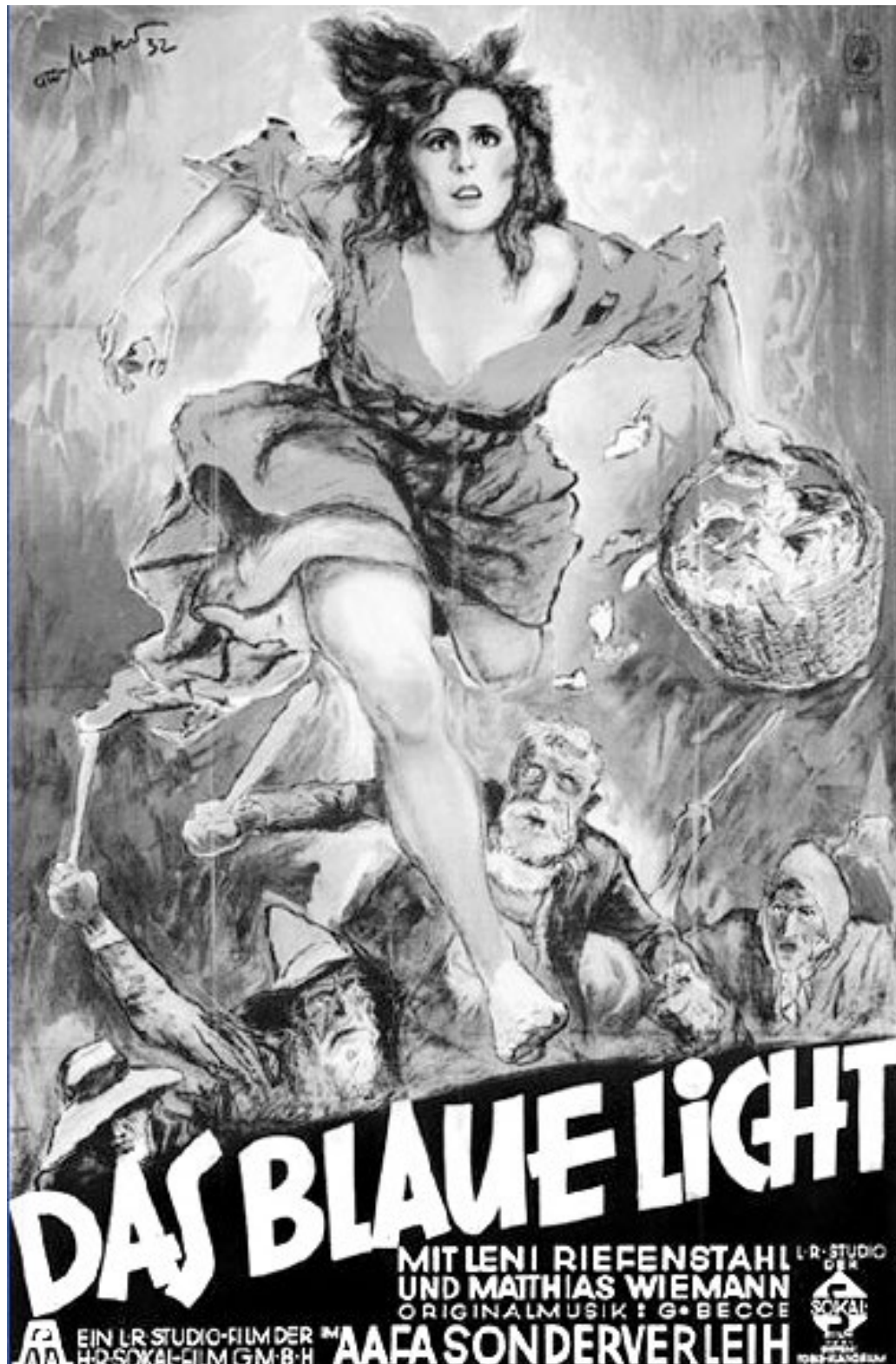


is often enlisted in popular film history narratives to compensate for an otherwise baffling absence of canonized women filmmakers. For example, in Andrew Sarris' widely read compilation of "Interviews with Film Directors," Riefenstahl stands alone as the only woman filmmaker sandwiched between thirty-nine male directors. This would suggest that only a limited amount of space has existed in film history narratives for the presence of female authors. Further, as Riefenstahl's interview with Sarris reveals, cinematic memory of Riefenstahl's early German mountain films, such as *The Blue Light*, has been largely overshadowed by the visibility of her subsequent fascistic texts, such as *Triumph of the Will*, *Olympia Part Two: Festival of Beauty* (*Olympia 2. Teil – Fest der Schönheit*, 1938), and *Lowlands*.

In her interview with Sarris, Riefenstahl attempts to establish a revisionist meta-narrative about her filmmaking career by hitching her own biography to the protagonist's plight in *The Blue Light*. Riefenstahl clearly identifies with this character Junta, a pariah and suspected witch in her conservative, Northern Italian village. The villagers, who call her "the damned devil's witch," suspect Junta due to her mystical bond with a mountain-top crystal grotto that glows with a blue light only during full moons. Junta's "blue light," a thinly veiled metaphor for her dangerous sexuality, fascinates the village men, the most virile of whom lose their lives attempting to ascend the steep Mount Crystal every full moon. When Junta reveals a secret passageway to the blue light to one of the men, an outsider and German painter named Vigo, he betrays her by revealing its mystery to the rest of the townfolk. The villagers opportunistically pillage Junta's grotto and commodify her mystical blue crystals. This drives Junta to heartbreak, madness, and suicide: she throws herself off a precipice.

As Riefenstahl reflects, Junta's "death brings happiness to the others, to all those who didn't understand her, the peasants and the painter as well as those who accused her of having cast a spell on the village, who pursued her in order to throw stones at her and who would willingly have burned her as a sorceress" (Sarris 455). Riefenstahl's identification with her ostracized heroine echoes *The Blue Light*'s own entanglement between different political and cinematic modes. Historically, thematically, and aesthetically, *The Blue Light* arguably provides a meta-discourse for reimagining Riefenstahl's relevance to broader conversations within feminist film historiography. The discourse about women's participation in silent cinema has primarily addressed the question of invisibility. In contrast, *The Blue Light* helps us think about women's marginal industry status as a problem of hyper-visibility.

Although an early sound film, *The Blue Light* bears many aesthetic similarities to silent cinema, a mode that Balázs made no bones about favoring over the corrupting and despiritualizing conventions of sound films. Indeed, the film unfolds as an art of the "magnified image," showcasing the interpenetration between emotive close-ups of Junta's face and auratically-lit depictions of the mountains. The film straddles both technological and political divides within the German film industry: its proto-fascist romanticization of German *volk* [folk] expresses a concomitant nostalgia for pre-sound era cinematic techniques. (Balázs' Jewish name, along with the Jewish producer Harry Sokal's, would later be suppressed from the film's



*The Blue Light (Das Blaue Licht, 1932) original poster.*

credits.) For Balázs, the sound film's use of dialogue to advance narration de-emphasizes the importance of the close-up, which has the power to reveal "the soul" and "hidden life of man." Balázs asserts: "Not even the greatest writer, the most consummate artist of the pen, could tell in words what Asta Nielsen tells with her face in close-up" (Balázs and Carter 66).

Balázs' signature appears with the first instance of Riefenstahl's face, in the form of a dissolving close-up of Junta's portrait that motivates the film's opening flashback from 1932 to 1866: a spectral transition from photographic close-up to snowy mountain landscape that graphically matches the graininess of Junta's dematerializing image. Riefenstahl's dissolving face here, which provides an aesthetic alibi for a mystical collapse of temporality, resonates with Balázs' broader theory of the close-up as a "spatialization of time" that brings history into focus: "The abstract picture of the big things of life arises mainly from our myopia" (Balázs and Carter 39). (It is indeed not coincidental that the treacherous Vigo is a landscape painter.) This use of Junta's face as a temporal and narrative framing device is consistent with the film's general strategy to humanize the conflict between myth and finitude, between timeless nature and physical embodiment. The narrative itself progresses towards the physical demise of its superhumanly robust female protagonist. Throughout the film, Junta's agile body is set apart from those of the vulnerable Italian village men, who all fall to their deaths attempting to scale the impossibly steep precipice. The film emphasizes this metaphysical duality between the body and nature with frequent cuts between sweeping natural panoramas and narrative scenes that foreground the limits of the human body—and that dramatize the escalation of rugged Junta's own vulnerability.

This dynamic between the physical and the spiritual reaches its narrative climax, and arguably also its aesthetic climax, during a suspenseful full moon, mountain climbing sequence in which Junta, her German love interest Vigo, and the Italian innkeeper's son, Tonio, all attempt to scale Mount Crystal in order to reach the blue light. The dramatic ascent is prefaced by a series of close-ups depicting the bewildered faces of the peasant villagers, which are intercut between images of the breaking full moon. I want to argue that this sequence attempts to make good on the film's effort to mediate between its two metaphysical poles: the embodied and the ethereal. It does so by psychologizing the conflict between human finitude and folkloric mysticism. Technologically, the film itself is torn between its silent cinema aesthetic—artistic use of close-ups, marginal function of dialogue, and histrionic physical gestures—and its cutting-edge experimentation with on-location sound recording equipment. Again, in his film theory, Balázs laments sound cinema's adoption of the trendy talkie, and praises silent cinema's ability to reveal familiar ideas in novel forms. This nostalgic fascination with cinema's potential kernels of meaning arguably governs Balázs's interest in *The Blue Light's* sound technology.

In his text *Theory of the Film*, Balázs explains how the close-up drives his method of cinematic writing:



Leni Riefenstahl as Junta in *The Blue Light*.



By means of the close-up the camera in the days of the silent film revealed the hidden mainsprings of a life which we had thought we already knew so well...We skim over the teeming substance of life...A multitude of close-ups can show us the very instant in which the general is transformed into the particular. The close-up has not only widened our vision of life, it has also deepened it. In the days of the silent film it not only revealed new things, but showed us the meaning of the old. (Balázs and Carter 55)

This climactic sequence, a feat of parallel editing, is absolutely haunted by the persistent appearance of the human face, which mediates the film's contradictory pulls between the embodied and the ethereal, between suspenseful narration and lyrical spectacle. The film interweaves objective aerial views with these subjectively positioned shots that narrate character psychology during the ascent. Cloud panoramas and vertical tracks towards the precipice punctuate the tense dynamic among Junta, Vigo, and Tonio, each of whom climbs separately. By intermingling the human with the *über*-human, the film thereby psychologizes its existential portrayal of nature. A close-up of Vigo's face, with reverse-shot of Junta's body, lithely slips into a disembodied study of riveting cloud formations in the sky. The film thereby positions Junta's athletic body as a third term to make legible the relationship between the human face and the natural landscapes: if, as Balázs argues, the face reveals the soul of humanity, the body here explains its relation to the movement of life.

With Vigo's arrival at the summit, the film's entire subjective frame of reference gets upturned from distance to nearness. Vigo's point-of-view shots during the climb foreground the hovering remoteness of Junta's faraway body. In abrupt contrast to this dominant spatial paradigm, Vigo's initial point-of-view shot at the top of the mountain presents the blue crystals in arrestingly close focus. From a close-up of Vigo's face, his eyes widened in disbelief, the film cuts to a close-up reverse-shot of the crystals, and thereby displaces what had been the spatial frame of reference up until this point. In this way, the film narrates its own literalization of what had been its unseen, mystical lure: the blue crystals, an implicit metaphor for Junta's dangerous sexuality, subjectively positioned through the eyes of a male character. (It is significant that these crystals are seen by Vigo, the outsider, German artist, and not by one of the Italian village men.) Somewhere between psychologized reverse-shots and antithetical cells of a montage, these close-ups of Vigo's face mediate between the film's mystical beyond-space and the space of the cinematic image itself. Through the close-up of the face, the film provides a concrete visual image for that which it also represents as ineffable: the mystical value of the crystals.

In the context of Leni Riefenstahl's own endeavors in feminist film historiography in her interview with Sarris, *The Blue Light's* meditative discourse on the face helps us reconsider how we historicize *The Blue Light's* relation to Riefenstahl's subsequent filmmaking projects. Film and cultural theorists from Siegfried Kracauer to Susan Sontag have categorized *The Blue Light* somewhat teleologically as a proto-fascist prelude to *Triumph of the Will*. Indeed, the aesthetic parallels between the mountain film as a genre and Riefenstahl's 1930s Nazi-commissioned

documentaries are striking. For example, Riefenstahl's documentary of the 1936 Berlin Olympics employs metaphysical comparisons between human bodies and transcendent natural panoramas that echo *The Blue Light's* mountain scenes. In *Olympia*, Riefenstahl deploys Balázsian close-ups to powerful effect in order to glorify and to naturalize the presence of different athletes' bodies within a German national landscapes.

However, I would argue that, unlike *The Blue Light*, *Olympia* wields its close-ups for purely propagandistic ends. Ironically, Riefenstahl does so by decapitating the German athletes whom she depicts. In its intense aesthetic study of the German athlete's body, *Olympia's* filmmaking dispenses with its vital Balázsian element: the face. As Balázs asserts, "Close-ups are the pictures expressing the poetic sensibility of the director. They show the faces of things and those expressions on them which are significant because they are reflected expressions of our own subconscious feeling. Herein lies the art of the true cameraman" (Balázs and Carter 56). During a gymnastics sequence in *Olympia Part 2: Festival of Beauty*,



The Pommel Horse event at the 1936 Berlin Olympics in  
*Olympia Part Two: Festival of Beauty* (*Olympia 2. Teil – Fest der Schöheit*, 1938).



Riefenstahl's meticulous control over the limits of the frame synchronizes itself with the gymnasts' undulating bodies, but at the expense of their faces, which repeatedly spill in and out of the edges of the frame. Using strategies similar to the ones she employs in *The Blue Light*, Riefenstahl further aestheticizes these robust German bodies by positioning them in front of jutting green mountains and dramatic billows of clouds. Yet, without the face as a mediator between the physical and the ethereal, *Olympia* resists psychologizing its own oppositions,<sup>1</sup> and thereby, in Balázs's terms, suppresses the poetic sensibility of its director. In other words, *Olympia* suspends its own meta-discourse in order to provoke its spectator's un-meditative absorption in the totality of the aesthetic spectacle.

As Amelie Hastie asserts in her essay, *Circuits of History and Memory*: "Both the rediscovery and the production of alternative histories have been an important part of feminist scholarship, as this work seeks to bring to light new knowledge about women's lives that has been forgotten and/or made invisible" (36). I would suggest as a complementary effort to Hastie's excavation of invisible histories, a more extensive probing of the female filmmaking histories that mainstream publics already recognize.

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<sup>1</sup> The marathon sequence, which cuts between close-ups of athletes' strenuously engaged limbs and their point-of-view reverse shots, represents a striking exception to the film's tendencies not to psychologize its grueling bodily performances.

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