First Exhibit. Here is a book of 126 splendid color photographs by Leni Riefenstahl, certainly the most ravishing book of photographs published anywhere in recent years. In the intractable desert of the southern Sudan live about eight thousand aloof, godlike Nuba, emblems of physical perfection, with large, well-shaped, partly shaven heads, expressive faces, and muscular bodies which are depilated and decorated with scars; smeared with sacred gray-white ash, the men prance, squat, brood, wrestle in the arid sand. And here is a fascinating layout of twelve black-and-white photographs of Leni Riefenstahl on the back cover of the book, also ravishing, a chronological sequence of expressions (from sultry inwardness to the grin of a Texas matron on safari) vanquishing the intractable march of aging.

The first photograph was taken in 1927 when she was twenty-five and already a movie star, the most recent are dated 1969 (she is cuddling a naked African baby) and 1972 (she is holding a camera), and each of them shows some version of an ideal presence, a kind of imperishable beauty, like Elisabeth Schwarzkopf’s, that only gets gayer and more metallic and healthier-looking with old age. And here is a biographical sketch of Riefenstahl on the dust jacket, and an introduction (unsigned) entitled “How Leni Riefenstahl came to study the Mesakin Nuba of Kordofan”—full of disquieting lies.

The introduction, which gives a detailed account of Riefenstahl’s pilgrimage to the Sudan (inspired, we are told, by reading Hemingway’s The Green Hills of Africa “one sleepless night in the mid-1950s”), laconically identifies the photographer as “something
of a mythical figure as a film-maker before the war, half-forgotten by a nation which chose to wipe from its memory an era of its history.” Who but Riefenstahl herself could have thought up this fable about what is mistily referred to as “a nation” which for some unnamed reason “chose” to perform the deplorable act of cowardice of forgetting “an era”—tactfully left unspecified—“of its history”? Presumably, at least some readers will be startled by this coy allusion to Germany and to the Third Reich. (It does, however, dare more than the all-concealing brevity of Harper & Row’s ads for *The Last of the Nuba*, which identify Riefenstahl simply as “the renowned film maker.”)

Compared with the introduction, the jacket of the book is positively expansive on the subject of the photographer’s career, parroting the misinformation that Riefenstahl has been dispensing for the last twenty years.

It was during Germany’s blighted and momentous 1930s that Leni Riefenstahl sprang to international fame as a film director. She was born in 1902, and her first devotion was to creative dancing. This led to her participation in silent films, and soon she was herself making—and starring in—her own talkies, such as *The Mountain* (1929).

These tensely romantic productions were widely admired, not least by Adolf Hitler who, having attained power in 1933, commissioned Riefenstahl to make a documentary on the Nuremberg Rally in 1934.

It takes a certain originality to describe the Nazi era as “Germany’s blighted and momentous 1930s,” to summarize the events of 1933 as Hitler’s “having attained power,” and to assert that Riefenstahl, most of whose work was in its own decade correctly identified as Nazi propaganda, enjoyed “international fame as a film director,” ostensibly like her contemporaries Renoir, Lubitsch, and Flaherty. (Could the publishers have let LR write the jacket copy herself? One hesitates to entertain so unkind a thought, although “her first devotion was to dancing” is a phrase few native speakers of English would be capable of.)

The facts are, of course, inaccurate or invented. For starters, not only did Riefenstahl not make—or star in—a talkie called *The Mountain* (1929). No such film exists. More generally: Riefenstahl did not first simply participate in silent films, then, when sound came in, begin directing her own films, in which she took the starring role. From the first to the last of all nine films she ever acted in, Riefenstahl was the star; and seven of these she did not direct.

These seven films were: *The Holy Mountain* (*Der Heilige Berg*, 1926), *The Big Jump*...
(Der Gross Sprung, 1927), Fate of the House of Hapsburg (Das Schicksal der von Hapsburg, 1929), The White Hell of Pitz Palü (Die Weisse Hölle von Piz Palü, 1929)—all silents—followed by Avalanche (Sturm über dem Montblanc, 1930), White Frenzy (Der Weisse Rausch, 1931), and SOS Iceberg (SOS Eisberg, 1932-1933). All but one were directed by Dr. Arnold Fanck, auteur of hugely successful Alpine epics since 1919, whose career, after Riefenstahl left him to strike out on her own as a director in 1932, petered out with a German-Japanese coproduction, The Daughter of the Samurai (Die Tochter des Samurai, 1937), and A Robinson Crusoe (Ein Robinson, 1938), both flops. (The film not directed by Fanck is Fate of the House of Hapsburg, a royalist weepie made in Austria in which Riefenstahl played Marie Vetsera, Crown Prince Rudolf’s co-suicidee at Mayerling. No print seems to have survived.)

These films were not simply “tensely romantic.” Fanck’s pop-Wagnerian vehicles for Riefenstahl were no doubt thought of as apolitical when they were made but they can also be seen in retrospect, as Siegfried Kracauer has argued, as an anthology of proto-Nazi sentiments. The mountain climbing in Fanck’s pictures was a visually irresistible metaphor of unlimited aspiration toward the high mystic goal, both beautiful and terrifying, which was later to become concrete in Führerworship. The character that Riefenstahl generally played was that of a wild girl who dares to scale the peak that others, the “valley pigs,” shrink from. Her first role, in the silent The Holy Mountain (1926), is that of a young dancer named Diotima being wooed by an ardent climber who converts her to the healthy ecstasies of Alpinism. This character underwent a progressive aggrandizement. In her first talkie, Avalanche (1930), Riefenstahl is a mountain-possessed girl in love with a young meteorologist, who saves him when he is stranded on his storm-wrecked observatory on the peak of Mont Blanc.

Riefenstahl herself directed six feature films. Her first, which was released in 1932, was another mountain film—The Blue Light (Das Blaue Licht). Riefenstahl starred in it as well, playing a role similar to the ones in Fanck’s films for which she had been “so widely admired, not least by Adolf Hitler,” but allegorizing the dark themes of longing, purity, and death that Fanck had treated rather scoutishly. As usual, the mountain is represented as both supremely beautiful and dangerous, that majestic force which invites the ultimate affirmation of and escape from the self—into the brotherhood of courage and into death. (On nights when the moon is full, a mysterious blue light radiates from the peak of Mount Cristallo, luring the young villagers to try to climb it. Parents try to keep their children home behind closed window shutters, but the young are drawn away like somnambulists and fall to their deaths on the rocks.)

The role Riefenstahl devised for herself is of “Junta,” a primitive creature who has a
unique relation to a destructive power. (Only Junta, a ragclad outcast girl of the village, is able to reach the blue light safely.) She is brought to her death, not by the impossibility of the goal symbolized by the mountain but by the materialist, prosaic spirit of envious villagers and the blind rationalism of a well-meaning visitor from the city. (Junta knows that the blue light is emitted by precious stones; being a creature of pure spirit, she revels in the jewels’ beauty, indifferent to their material value. But she falls in love with a vacationing painter and naively confides in him the secret. He tells the villagers, who scale the mountain, remove the treasure, and sell it; when Junta starts her ascent at the next full moon, the blue light is no longer there to guide her, and she falls and dies.)

After *The Blue Light*, the next film Riefenstahl directed was not “a documentary on the Nuremberg Rally in 1934,” for Riefenstahl made five non-fiction films—not two, as she has claimed since the 1950s and as all current white-washing accounts of her dutifully repeat. It was *Victory of Faith* (*Sieg des Glaubens*, 1933), celebrating the first National Socialist Party Congress held after Hitler seized power. Her third film, *Day of Freedom: Our Army* (*Tag der Freiheit: Unsere Wehrmacht*, 1933; released in 1935), was made for the army, and depicts the beauty of soldiers and soldiering for the Führer. Then came the two films which did indeed make her internationally famous—the first of which is *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1935), whose title is never mentioned on the jacket of *The Last of the Nuba*, lest it awaken lingering anti-Teutonic prejudices in the book-buyer of the 1970s perhaps.

The jacket copy continues:

Riefenstahl’s refusal to submit to Goebbels’ attempt to subject her visualisation of his strictly propagandistic requirements led to a battle of wills which came to a head when Riefenstahl made her film of the 1936 Olympic Games, *Olympia*. This, Goebbels attempted to destroy; and it was only saved by the personal intervention of Hitler.

With two of the most remarkable documentaries of the 1930s to her credit, Riefenstahl continued making films of her devising, unconnected with the rise of Nazi Germany, until 1941, when war conditions made it impossible to continue.

Her acquaintance with the Nazi leadership led to her arrest at the end of the Second World War: she was tried twice, and acquitted twice. Her reputation was in eclipse, and she was half forgotten—although to a whole generation of Germans her name had been a household word.
Except for the bit about her having once been a household word, in Nazi Germany, not one part of the above is true.

To cast Riefenstahl in the familiar role of the individualist-artist, defying philistine bureaucrats and censorship by the patron state, is a bold try. Nevertheless, the idea of her resisting “Goebbels’ attempt to subject her visualisation to his strictly propagandistic requirements” should seem like nonsense to anyone who has seen *Triumph of the Will*—the most successfully, most purely propagandistic film ever made, whose very conception negates the possibility of the film maker’s having an aesthetic or visual conception independent of propaganda.

Besides the evidence of the film itself, the facts (denied by Riefenstahl since the war) tell quite another story. There was never any struggle between the film maker and the German minister of propaganda. *Triumph of the Will*, after all her third film for the Nazis, was made with the fullest cooperation any film maker has ever had from any government. She had an unlimited budget, a crew of 120, and a huge number of cameras—estimated at between thirty and fifty—at her disposal. Far from being an artist who was conscripted for a political task and later ran into trouble, Riefenstahl was, as she relates in the book she published in 1935 about the making of *Triumph of the Will*, ¹ in on the planning of the rally—which was, from the beginning, conceived as the set of a film spectacle.

*Olympiad* is actually two films, one called *Festival of the People* (*Fest der Völker*) and the other *Festival of Beauty* (*Fest der Schönheit*). Riefenstahl has been maintaining in interviews since the 1950s that both Olympics films were commissioned by the International Olympic Committee, produced by her own company, and made over Goebbels’s protests. The truth is that the films were commissioned and entirely financed by the Nazi government (a dummy company was set up in Riefenstahl’s name because it was thought “unwise for the government itself to appear as the producer”) and facilitated by Goebbels’s ministry at every stage of the shooting. ²

Riefenstahl worked for two years on the editing, finishing in time so that the film could have its world premiere on April 29, 1938, in Berlin, as part of the festivities for Hitler’s forty-ninth birthday. And later in the year *Olympiad* was the principal German entry at the 1938 Venice Film Festival, where it was awarded the Gold Medal. (Riefenstahl had already gotten the Gold Medal at the government-sponsored Venice festival in 1932 for *The Blue Light*.) Even the plausible-sounding legend of Goebbels objecting to her footage of the triumphs of the black American track star Jesse Owens is untrue. For this film, like the previous ones, Riefenstahl had Goebbels’s full support.
More nonsense: to say that Riefenstahl “continued making films of her devising, unconnected with the rise of Nazi Germany, until 1941.” In 1938, as a present to Hitler, she made *Berchtesgaden über Salzburg*, a fifty-minute lyric portrait of the Führer against the rugged mountain scenery of his new retreat. In 1939, she accompanied the invading Wehrmacht into Poland as a uniformed army war correspondent with her own camera team; but there is no record of any of this material surviving the war. After *Olympiad*, Riefenstahl made exactly one more feature film, *Tiefland*, which she began in 1941 and, after an interruption, finished in 1944 (in the Barrandov Film Studios in Nazi-occupied Prague). *Tiefland*, already in preparation in 1934, has echoes of *The Blue Light*, and once again the protagonist (played by Riefenstahl) is a beautiful outcast; it was released in 1954 to resounding indifference. Clearly Riefenstahl would prefer to give the impression that there were only two documentaries in an otherwise long career as a director. The truth is that four of the six feature films she directed are documentaries, made for and financed by the Nazi government.

It is less than accurate to describe Riefenstahl’s professional relationship to and intimacy with Hitler and Goebbels as “her acquaintance with the Nazi leadership.” Far from being an actress-director whom Hitler happened to fancy and then gave an assignment to, Riefenstahl was a close friend and companion of Hitler’s—long before 1932. She was a friend, not just an acquaintance, of Goebbels, too. No evidence supports Riefenstahl’s persistent claim since the 1950s that Goebbels hated her. Moreover, any suggestion that Goebbels had the power to interfere with Riefenstahl’s work is unrealistic. With her unlimited personal access to Hitler, Riefenstahl was the only German film maker who was not responsible to Goebbels. (Normally she would have been under the “Short and Propaganda Production” section of the Reich Film Chamber of Goebbels’s ministry of propaganda.)

Last, it is misleading to say that Riefenstahl was “tried twice, and acquitted twice” after the war. What happened is that she was briefly arrested by the Allies in 1945 and two of her sumptuous houses (in Berlin and Munich) were seized. Examinations and court appearances started in 1948, continuing intermittently until 1952 when she was finally “de-Nazified” with the verdict: “No political activity in support of the Nazi regime which would warrant punishment.” Most important: whether or not Riefenstahl deserved punishment at the hands of the law, it was not her “acquaintance” with the Nazi leadership but her activities as a leading propagandist for the Third Reich that were at issue.

The jacket copy of *The Last of the Nuba* summarizes faithfully the main line of the self-vindication which Riefenstahl fabricated in the 1950s and which is most fully spelled out...
in the interview she gave to the prestigious French magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* in September, 1965. There she denied that any of her work was propaganda, insisting it was cinema verité. “Not a single scene is staged,” Riefenstahl says of *Triumph of the Will*. “Everything is genuine. And there is no tendentious commentary for the simple reason that there is no commentary at all. It is *history*—*pure history*.”

Although *Triumph of the Will* has no narrative voice it does open with a written text that heralds the rally as the redemptive culmination of German history. But this opening commentary is the least original of the ways in which the film is tendentious. *Triumph of the Will* represents an already achieved and radical transformation of reality: history become theater. In her book published in 1935, Riefenstahl had told the truth. The Nuremberg Rally “was planned not only as a spectacular mass meeting—but as a spectacular propaganda film…. The ceremonies and precise plans of the parades, marches, processions, the architecture of the halls and stadium were designed for the convenience of the cameras.” How the Party convention was staged was determined by the decision to produce *Triumph of the Will*. The event, instead of being an end in itself, served as the set of a film which was then to assume the character of an authentic documentary. Anyone who defends Riefenstahl’s films as documentaries, if documentary is to be distinguished from propaganda, is being ingenuous. In *Triumph of the Will*, the document (the image) is no longer simply the record of reality; “reality” has been constructed to serve the image.

The rehabilitation of proscribed figures in liberal societies does not happen with the sweeping bureaucratic finality of the *Soviet Encyclopedia*, in which each new edition brings forward a dozen hitherto unmentionable figures and lowers an equal or greater number through the trap door of nonexistence. Our rehabilitations are softer, more insidious. It is not that Riefenstahl’s Nazi past has suddenly become acceptable. It is simply that, with the turn of the cultural wheel, it no longer matters. The purification of Leni Riefenstahl’s reputation of its Nazi dross has been gathering momentum for some time, but it reached some kind of climax this past year, with Riefenstahl the guest of honor at a new cinéphile-controlled film festival held in the summer in Colorado and the subject of a two-part interview program on CBS’s “Camera, Three,” and now with the publication of *The Last of the Nuba*.

Part of the impetus behind Riefenstahl’s recent promotion to the status of a cultural monument surely is owing to the fact that she is a woman. In the roll call that runs from Germaine Dulac and Dorothy Arzner to Vera Chytilova, Agnès Varda, Mai Zetterling, Shirley Clarke, et al., Riefenstahl stands out as the only woman director who has done work likely to turn up on lists of the Twenty Greatest Films Of All Time. The 1973 New
York Film Festival poster, made by a well-known artist who is also a feminist, shows a blond doll-woman whose right breast is encircled by three names: Agnes Leni Shirley. Feminists would feel a pang at having to sacrifice the one woman who made films that everybody acknowledges to be first-rate.

But a stronger reason for the change in attitude toward Riefenstahl lies in a shift in taste which simply makes it impossible to reject art if it is “beautiful.” The line taken by Riefenstahl’s defenders, who now include the most influential voices in the avant-garde film establishment, is that she was always concerned with beauty. This, of course, has been Riefenstahl’s own contention for some years. Thus the Cahiers du Cinéma interviewer set Riefenstahl up by observing fatuously that what Triumph of the Will and Olympiad “have in common is that they both give form to a certain reality, itself based on a certain idea of form. Do you see anything peculiarly German about this concern for form?” To this Riefenstahl answered:

I can simply say that I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful. Yes: beauty, harmony. And perhaps this care for composition, this aspiration to form is in effect something very German. But I don’t know these things myself, exactly. It comes from the unconscious and not from my knowledge…. What do you want me to add? Whatever is purely realistic, slice-of-life, what is average, quotidian, doesn’t interest me…. I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living. I seek harmony. When harmony is produced I am happy. I believe, with this, that I have answered you.

This is why The Last of the Nuba is the final, necessary step in Riefenstahl’s rehabilitation. It is the final rewrite of the past; or, for her partisans, the definitive confirmation that she was always a beauty-freak rather than a horrid propagandist. Inside the beautifully produced book, photographs of the perfect, noble tribe. And on the jacket, photographs of “my perfect German woman” (as Hitler called Riefenstahl), vanquishing the slights of history, all smiles.

Admittedly, if The Last of the Nuba were not signed by Leni Riefenstahl one would not necessarily suspect that these photographs had been taken by the most interesting, talented, and effective artist of the Nazi regime. Most people who leaf through The Last of the Nuba will probably look at the pictures as one more lament for vanishing primitives, of which the greatest example is Lévi-Strauss on the Bororo Indians in Brazil in Tristes Tropiques. But if the photographs are examined carefully, in conjunction with the lengthy text written by Riefenstahl, it becomes clear that they are continuous with her Nazi work.
Riefenstahl’s choice of photographic subject—this tribe and not another—expresses a very particular slant. She interprets the Nuba as a mystical people with an extraordinarily developed artistic sense (one of the few possessions which everyone owns is a lyre). They are all beautiful (Nuba men, Riefenstahl notes, “have an athletic build rare in any other African tribe”); although they have to work hard to survive in the unhospitable desert (they are cattle herders and hunters), she insists that their principal activity is ceremonial. The Last of the Nuba is about a primitivist ideal: a portrait of a people subsisting untouched by “civilization,” in a pure harmony with their environment.

All four of Riefenstahl’s commissioned Nazi films—whether about Party congresses, the Wehrmacht, or athletes—celebrate the rebirth of the body and of community, mediated through the worship of an irresistible leader. They follow directly from the films of Fanck in which she acted and from her own The Blue Light. The fictional mountain films are tales of longing for high places, of the challenge and ordeal of the elemental, the primitive; the Nazi films are epics of achieved community, in which triumph over everyday reality is achieved by ecstatic self-control and submission. The Last of the Nuba, an elegy for the soon-to-be-extinguished beauty and mystic powers of primitives, can be seen as the third in Riefenstahl’s triptych of fascist visuals.

In the first panel, the mountain films, heavily dressed people strain upward to prove themselves in the purity of the cold; vitality is identified with physical ordeal. Middle panel, the films made for the Nazi government: Triumph of the Will uses overpopulated wide shots of massed figures alternating with close-ups that isolate a single passion, a single perfect submission; clean-cut people in uniforms group and regroup, as if seeking the right choreography to express their ecstatic fealty. In Olympiad, the richest visually of all her films, one straining scantily clad figure after another seeks the ecstasy of victory, cheered on by ranks of compatriots in the stands, all under the still gaze of the benign Super-Spectator, Hitler, whose presence in the stadium consecrates this effort. (Olympiad, which could as well have been entitled Triumph of the Will, emphasizes that there are no easy victories.) In the third panel, The Last of the Nuba, the stripped-down primitives, awaiting the final ordeal of their proud heroic community, their imminent extinction, frolic and pose in the hot clean desert.

It is Gotterdammerung time. The important events in Nuba society are wrestling matches and funerals: vivid encounters of beautiful male bodies and death. The Nuba, as Riefenstahl interprets them, are a tribe of aesthetes. Like the henna-daubed Masai and the so-called Mudmen of New Guinea, the Nuba paint themselves for all important social and religious occasions, smearing on their bodies a white-gray ash which unmistakably suggests death. Riefenstahl claims to have arrived “just in time,” for in the
few years since these photographs were taken the glorious Nuba have already started being corrupted by money, jobs, clothes. And, probably, by war—which Riefenstahl never mentions since she cares only about myth, not history. The civil war that has been tearing up that part of Sudan for a dozen years must have brought with it new technology and a lot of detritus.

Although the Nuba are black, not Aryan, Riefenstahl’s portrait of them is consistent with some of the larger themes of Nazi ideology: 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.” (The book bonfire of May, 1933, was launched with Goebbels’s cry: “The age of extreme Jewish intellectualism has now ended, and the success of the German revolution has again given the right of way to the German spirit.” And when Goebbels officially forbade art criticism in November, 1936, it was for having “typically Jewish traits of character”: putting the head over the heart, the individual over the community, intellect over feeling.) Now it is “civilization” itself that is the defiler.

What is distinctive about the fascist version of the old idea of the Noble Savage is its contempt for all that is reflective, critical, and pluralistic. In Riefenstahl’s casebook of primitive virtue, it is hardly the intricacy and subtlety of primitive myth, social organization, or thinking that are being extolled. She is especially enthusiastic about the ways the Nuba are exalted and unified by the physical ordeals of their wrestling matches, in which the “heaving and straining” Nuba men, “huge muscles bulging,” throw one another to the ground—fighting not for material prizes but “for the renewal of sacred vitality of the tribe.”

Wrestling and the rituals that go with it, in Riefenstahl’s account, bind the Nuba together:

Wrestling provides, for the Nuba, much of what the search for wealth, power and status does for the individual in the West. Wrestling generates the most passionate loyalty and emotional participation in the team’s supporters, who are, in fact, the entire “non-playing” population of the village….

[Wrestling is] a basic concept in the idea of “Nuba” as a whole. Its importance as the expression of the total outlook of the Mesakin and Korongo cannot be exaggerated; it is the expression in the visible and social world of the invisible world of the mind and of the spirit.
In celebrating a society where the exhibition of physical skill and courage and the victory of the stronger man over the weaker have, at least as she sees it, become the unifying symbol of the communal culture—where success in fighting is the “main aspiration of a man’s life”—Riefenstahl seems only to have modified the ideas of her Nazi films. And she seems right on target with her choice, as a photographic subject, of a society whose most enthusiastic and lavish ceremony is the funeral. *Viva la muerte.*

It may seem ungrateful and rancorous to refuse to cut loose *The Last of the Nuba* from Riefenstahl’s past, but there are salutary lessons to be learned from the continuity of her work as well as from that curious and implacable recent event—her rehabilitation. Other artists who embraced fascism, such as Céline and Benn and Marinetti and Pound (not to mention those, like Pabst and Pirandello and Hamsun, who became fascists in the decline of their powers), are not instructive in the same way. For Riefenstahl is the only major artist who was completely identified with the Nazi era and whose work—not only during the Third Reich but thirty years after its fall—has consistently illustrated some of the themes of fascist aesthetics.

Fascist aesthetics include but go far beyond the rather special celebration of the primitive to be found in *The Nuba*. They also flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, and extravagant effort; they exalt two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude. The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication of things and grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader figure or force. The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets. Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, “virile” posing. Fascist art glorifies surrender; it exalts mindlessness: it glamorizes death.

Such art is hardly confined to works labeled as fascist or produced under fascist governments. (To keep to films only, Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*, Busby Berkeley’s *The Gang’s All Here*, and Kubrick’s *2001* can also be seen as illustrating certain of the formal structures, and the themes, of fascist art.) And, of course, features of fascist art proliferate in the official art of communist countries. The tastes for the monumental and for mass obeisance to the hero are common to both fascist and communist art, reflecting the view of all totalitarian regimes that art has the function of “immortalizing” its leaders and doctrines. The rendering of movement in grandiose and rigid patterns is another element in common, for such choreography rehearses the very unity of the polity. Hence mass athletic demonstrations, a choreography and display of bodies, are a valued activity in all totalitarian countries.
But fascist art has characteristics which show it to be, in part, a special variant of totalitarian art. The official art of countries like the Soviet Union and China is based on a utopian morality. Fascist art displays a utopian aesthetics—that of physical perfection. Painters and sculptors under the Nazis often depicted the nude, but they were forbidden to show any bodily imperfections. Their nudes look like pictures in male health magazines: pinups which are both sanctimoniously asexual and (in a technical sense) pornographic, for they have the perfection of a fantasy.

Riefenstahl’s promotion of the beautiful, it must be said, was much more sophisticated. Beauty in Riefenstahl’s representations is never witless, as it is in other Nazi visual art. She appreciated a range of body types; in matters of beauty she was not a racist. And she does show what could be considered an imperfection by more naive Nazi aesthetic standards, genuine effort—as in the straining veined bodies and popping eyes of the athletes in *Olympiad*.

In contrast to the asexual chasteness of official communist art, Nazi art is both prurient and idealizing. A utopian aesthetics (identity as a biological given) implies an ideal eroticism (sexuality converted into the magnetism of leaders and the joy of followers). The fascist ideal is to transform sexual energy into a “spiritual” force, for the benefit of the community. The erotic is always present as a temptation, with the most admirable response being a heroic repression of the sexual impulse. Thus Riefenstahl explains why Nuba marriages, in contrast to their splendid funerals, involve no ceremonies or feasts. “A Nuba man’s greatest desire is not union with a woman but to be a good wrestler, thereby affirming the principle of abstemiousness. The Nuba dance ceremonies are not sensual occasions but rather ‘festivals of chastity’—of containment of the life force.”

In the official art of communist countries, there is some democracy of the will: the workers and peasants are sometimes shown doing something on their own. In fascist art, the will always reflects the contact between leaders and followers. In fascist and communist politics, the will is staged publicly, in the drama of the leader and the chorus. What is interesting about the relation between politics and art under National Socialism is not that art was subordinated to political needs, for this is true of all dictatorships, both of the right and the left, but that politics appropriated the rhetoric of art—art in its late romantic phase. Politics is “the highest and most comprehensive art there is,” Goebbels said in 1933, “and we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves to be artists…the task of art and the artist [being] to form, to give shape, to remove the diseased and create freedom for the healthy.”

Nazi art has always been thought of as reactionary, defiantly outside the century’s
mainstream of achievement in the arts. But just for this reason it has been gaining a place in contemporary taste. The left-wing organizers of a current exhibition of Nazi painting and sculpture (the first since the war) in Frankfurt have found, to their dismay, the attendance excessively large and hardly as serious-minded as they had hoped. Even when flanked with didactic admonitions from Brecht and concentration camp photographs, Nazi art still could remind these crowds of—other art. It looks dated now, and therefore more like other art styles of the 1930s, notably Art Deco. The same aesthetic responsible for the bronze colossi of Arno Breker—Hitler’s (and, briefly, Cocteau’s) favorite sculptor—and of Joseph Thorak also produced the muscle-bound Atlas in front of Manhattan’s Rockefeller Center and the faintly lewd monument to the fallen doughboys of World War I inside Philadelphia’s Thirtieth Street railroad station.

To an unsophisticated public in Germany, the appeal of Nazi art may have been that it was simple, figurative, emotional; not intellectual; a relief from the demanding complexities of modernist art. To a more sophisticated public now, the appeal is partly to that avidity which is now bent on retrieving all the styles of the past, especially the most pilloried. But a revival of Nazi art, following the revivals of Art Nouveau, Pre-Raphaelite painting, and Art Deco, is most unlikely. The painting and sculpture are not just sententious; they are astonishingly meager as art. But precisely these qualities invite people to look at Nazi art with knowing and sniggering detachment, as a form of Pop art.

Riefenstahl’s work is free of the amateurism and naivety one finds in other art produced in the Nazi era, but it still promotes many of the same values. And the same very modern sensibility can appreciate her as well. The ironies of pop sophistication make for a way of looking at Riefenstahl’s work in which not only its formal beauty but its political fervor are viewed as a form of aesthetic excess. And alongside this detached appreciation of Riefenstahl is a response, whether conscious or unconscious, to the subject itself, which gives her work its power.

*Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad* are undoubtedly superb films (they may be the two greatest documentaries ever made), but they are not really important in the history of cinema as an art form. Nobody making films today alludes to Riefenstahl, while many film makers (including myself) regard the early Soviet director Djiga Vertov as an inexhaustible provocation and source of ideas about film language. Yet it is arguable that Vertov—the most important figure in documentary films—never made a film as purely effective and thrilling as *Triumph of the Will* or *Olympiad*. (Of course Vertov never had the means at his disposal that Riefenstahl had. The Soviet government’s budget for propaganda films was less than lavish.) Similarly, *The Last of the Nuba* is a stunning book of photographs, but one can’t imagine that it could become important to other
photographers, that it could change the way people see and photograph (as has the work of Weston and Walker Evans and Diane Arbus).

In dealing with propagandistic art on the left and on the right, a double standard prevails. Few people would admit that the manipulation of emotions in Vertov’s later films and in Riefenstahl’s provides similar kinds of exhilaration. When explaining why they are moved, most people are sentimental in the case of Vertov and dishonest in the case of Riefenstahl. Thus Vertov’s work evokes a good deal of moral sympathy on the part of his cinéphile audience all over the world; people consent to be moved. With Riefenstahl’s work, the trick is to filter out the noxious political ideology of her films, leaving only their “aesthetic” merits.

Thus praise of Vertov’s films always presupposes the knowledge that he was an attractive person and an intelligent and original artist-thinker, eventually crushed by the dictatorship which he served. And most of the contemporary audience for Vertov (as for Eisenstein and Pudovkin) assumes that the film propagandists in the early years of the Soviet Union were illustrating a noble ideal, however much it was betrayed in practice. But praise of Riefenstahl has no such recourse, since nobody, not even her rehabilitators, has managed to make Riefenstahl seem even likable; and she is no thinker at all. More important, it is generally thought that National Socialism stands only for brutishness and terror. But this is not true. National Socialism—or, more broadly, fascism—also stands for an ideal, and one that is also persistent today, under other banners: the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders).

These ideals are vivid and moving to many people, and it is dishonest—and tautological—to say that one is affected by *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad* because they were made by a film maker of genius. Riefenstahl’s films are still effective because, among other reasons, their longings are still felt, because their content is a romantic ideal to which many continue to be attached, and which is expressed in such diverse modes of cultural dissidence and propaganda for new forms of community as the youth/rock culture, primal therapy, Laing’s antipsychiatry, Third World camp-following, and belief in gurus and the occult. The exaltation of community does not preclude the search for absolute leadership; on the contrary, it may inevitably lead to it. (Not surprisingly, a fair number of the young people now prostrating themselves before gurus and submitting to the most grotesquely autocratic discipline are former anti-authoritarians and anti-elitists of the 1960s.) And Riefenstahl’s devotion to the Nuba, a tribe not ruled by one supreme chief or shaman, does not mean she has lost her eye for the seducer-performer—even if
she has to settle for a nonpolitician. Since she finished her work on the Nuba some years ago, one of her main projects has been photographing Mick Jagger.

Riefenstahl’s current de-Nazification and vindication as indomitable priestess of the beautiful—as a film maker and, now, as a photographer—do not augur well for the keenness of current abilities to detect the fascist longings in our midst. The force of her work is precisely in the continuity of its political and aesthetic ideas. What is interesting is that this was once seen so much more clearly than it seems to be now.

II

Second Exhibit. Here is a book to be purchased at airport magazine stands and in “adult” bookstores, a relatively cheap paperback, not an expensive coffee table item appealing to aesthetes and the bien-pensant like The Last of the Nuba. Yet both books share a certain community of moral origin, a certain root preoccupation. The same preoccupation at different stages of evolution—the ideas that animate The Last of the Nuba being less out of the moral closet than the cruder, more efficient idea that lies behind SS Regalia. Though SS Regalia is a respectable British-made compilation (with a three-page historical preface and detailed notes in the back), one knows that its appeal is not scholarly but sexual. The Last of the Nuba, whatever the dubious aesthetic underlying it, is certainly not pornographic; SS Regalia is. The cover already makes that clear. Across the large black swastika in the Nazi flag is a diagonal yellow stripe which reads “Over 100 Brilliant Four-Color Photographs” and the price, exactly the way a sticker with the price on it used to be affixed—part tease, part deference to censorship—dead center, covering the model’s genitalia, on the covers of pornographic magazines.

Uniforms suggest fantasies of community, order, identity (through ranks, badges, medals which “say” who the wearer is and what he has done: his worth is recognized), competence, legitimate authority, the legitimate exercise of violence. But uniforms are not the same thing as photographs of uniforms. Photographs of uniforms are erotic material, and particularly photographs of SS uniforms. Why the SS? Because the SS seems to be the most perfect incarnation of fascism in its overt assertion of the righteousness of violence, the right to have total power over others and to treat them as absolutely inferior. It was in the SS that this assertion seemed most complete, because they acted it out in a singularly brutal and efficient manner; and because they dramatized it by linking themselves to certain aesthetic standards. The SS was designed as an elite military community that would be not only supremely violent but also supremely beautiful. (One is not likely to come across a book of this sort called “Brownshirt Regalia.” The SA, whom the SS replaced, were not known for being any less brutal than their successors, but they have gone down in history as beefy, squat, beerhall types.)
SS uniforms are stylish, well-cut, with a touch (but not too much) of eccentricity. Compare the rather boring and not very well cut American army uniform: jacket, shirt, tie, pants, socks, and lace-up shoes, essentially civilian clothes. SS uniforms were tight, heavy, stiff. The boots made legs and feet feel heavy, encased, obliging then wearer to stand up straight. As the jacket of SS Regalia explains: “The uniform was black, a color which had important overtones in Germany. On that, the SS wore a vast variety of decorations, symbols, badges to distinguish rank, from the collar runes to the death’s head. The appearance was both dramatic and menacing.”

The tone of the cover is an almost wistful come-on, not quite preparing one for the banality of most of the photographs. Besides those celebrated black uniforms, SS troopers were issued almost American-army looking khaki uniforms and camouflaged ponchos and jackets. And besides uniforms, there are pages of collar patches, cuffbands, chevrons, belt buckles, commemorative badges, regimental standards, trumpet banners, field caps, service medals, shoulder flashes, permits, passes—few of these bearing either the notorious runes or the death’s head; all meticulously identified by rank, unit, and year and season of issue. Precisely the innocuousness of practically all of the photographs testifies to the power of the image. For fantasy to have depth, it needs detail. What was the color of the travel permit an SS sergeant would have needed to get from Trier to Lubeck in the spring of 1944? One needs all the documentary evidence.

If the message of fascism has been neutralized by an aesthetic view of life, its trappings have been sexualized. This eroticization of fascism has been remarked, but mostly in connection with its fancier and more publicized manifestations, as in Mishima’s Confessions of a Mask and Storm of Steel, and in films like Kenneth Anger’s Scorpio Rising, Visconti’s The Damned, and Liliana Cavani’s The Night Porter.

The solemn eroticism of fascism must be distinguished from a sophisticated playing with cultural horror, where there is an element of the put-on. The poster Robert Morris made for his recent show at the Castelli Gallery in April, 1974, is a photograph of the artist, naked to the waist, wearing dark glasses, what appears to be a Nazi helmet, and a spiked steel collar, attached to which is a large chain which he holds in his manacled, uplifted hands. Morris is said to have considered this to be the only image that still has any power to shock: a singular virtue to those who take for granted that art is a sequence of ever-fresh gestures of provocation. But the point of the poster is its own negation. Shocking people in this context also means inuring them, as Nazi material enters the vast repertory of popular iconography usable for the ironic commentaries of Pop art.

But the material is intransigent. For one thing, Nazism fascinates in a way other
iconography staked out by the pop sensibility (from Mao Tse-tung to Marilyn Monroe) does not. No doubt some part of the general rise of interest in fascism can be set down as a product of curiosity. For those born after the early 1940s, bludgeoned by a lifetime’s palaver, pro and con, about communism, fascism—the great conversation piece of their parents’ generation—represents the exotic, the unknown. Then, there is a general fascination among the young with horror, with the irrational. Courses dealing with the history of fascism are, along with those on the occult (including vampirism), among the best attended these days on college campuses. And beyond this the definitely sexual lure of fascism, which SS Regalia testifies to with unabashed plainness, seems impervious to deflation by irony or overfamiliarity.

In pornographic literature, films, and gadgetry throughout the world, especially in the United States, England, France, Japan, Scandinavia, Holland, and Germany, the SS has become a reference of sexual adventurism. Much of the imagery of far-out sex has been placed under the sign of Nazism. More or less Nazi costumes with boots, leather, chains, Iron Crosses on gleaming torsos, swastikas, have become, along with meat hooks and heavy motorcycles, the secret and most lucrative paraphernalia of eroticism. In the sex shops, the baths, the leather bars, the brothels, people are dragging out their gear. But why? Why has Nazi Germany, which was a sexually repressive society, become erotic? How could a regime which persecuted homosexuals become a gay turn-on?

A clue lies in the predilections of the fascist leaders for highly sexual metaphors. (Like Nietzsche and Wagner, Hitler regarded leadership as sexual mastery of the “feminine” masses, as rape. The expression of the crowds in Triumph of the Will is one of ecstasy. The leader makes the crowd come.) Left-wing movements have tended to be unisex, and asexual in their imagery. Extreme right-wing movements, however puritanical and repressive the realities they usher in, have an erotic surface. Certainly Nazism is “sexier” than communism. (Which is not something to the Nazis’ credit, but rather shows something of the nature and limits of the sexual imagination.)

Of course most people who are turned on by SS uniforms are not signifying approval of what the Nazis did, if indeed they have more than the sketchiest idea of what that might be. Nevertheless, there are powerful and growing currents of sexual feeling, those that generally go by the name of sadomasochism, which make playing at Nazism seem erotic. These sadomasochistic fantasies and practices are to be found among heterosexuals as well as homosexuals, although it is among homosexuals that the eroticizing of Nazism is most visible.

Fascism is theater,” as Genet said. And sadomasochistic sexuality is more theatrical
than any other. When sexuality depends so much on its being “staged,” sex (like politics) becomes choreography. Regulars of sadomasochistic sex are expert costumers and choreographers; they are performers in the professional sense. And in a drama that is all the more exciting because it is forbidden to ordinary people. “What is purely realistic, slice of life,” Leni Riefenstahl said, “what is average, quotidian, doesn’t interest me.” Crossing over from sadomasochistic fantasies, which are common enough, into action itself carries with it the thrill of transgression, blasphemy, entry into the kind of defiling experience that “nice” and “civilized” people can never have.

Sadomasochism, of course, does not just mean people hurting their sexual partners, which has always occurred—and generally means men beating up women. The perennial drunken Russian peasant thrashing his wife is just doing something he feels like doing (because he is unhappy, oppressed, stupefied; and because women are handy victims). But the Englishman in a brothel being whipped is recreating his own experience. He is paying a whore to act out a piece of theater with him, to re-enact or re-evoke the past—experiences of his schooldays or nursery which now hold for him a huge reserve of sexual energy. Today it may be the Nazi past that people invoke, in the theatricalization of sexuality, because it is that past (imaginary, for most) from which they hope a reserve of sexual energy can now be tapped. What the French call “the English vice” could, however, be said to be something of an artful affirmation of individuality: the playlet referred, after all, to the subject’s own personal case history. The fad for Nazi regalia may indicate something quite different: a response to an oppressive freedom of choice in sex (and, possibly, in other matters), to an unbearable degree of individuality.

The rituals of sadomasochism being more and more practiced, the art that is more and more devoted to rendering its themes, are perhaps only a logical extension of an affluent society’s tendency to turn every part of people’s lives into a taste, a choice. In all societies up to now, sex has mostly been an activity (something to do, without thinking about it). But once sex becomes defined as a taste, it is perhaps already on its way to becoming a self-conscious form of theater, which is what sadomasochism—a form of gratification that is both violent and indirect, very mental—is all about.

Sadomasochism has always been an experience in which sex becomes detached from personality, severed from relationships, from love. It should not be surprising that it has become attached to Nazi symbolism in recent years. Never before in history was the relation of masters and slaves realized with so consciously artistic a design. Sade had to make up his theater of punishment and delight from scratch, improvising the decor and costumes and blasphemous rites. Now there is a master scenario available to everyone. The color is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is
honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death.

LETTERS

An Exchange on Leni Riefenstahl September 18, 1975

Feminism and Fascism: An Exchange March 20, 1975

Credit for Kracauer March 6, 1975

1.  

2.  
See Hans Barkhausen, "Footnote to the History of Riefenstahl's 'Olympia,' " *Film Quarterly*, Fall, 1974—a rare act of informed dissent amid the large number of tributes to Riefenstahl that have appeared in American and Western European film magazines during the last few years.

3.  
This is how Jonas Mekas (*Village Voice*, October 31, 1974) salutes the publication of *The Last of the Nuba*. "[Leni Riefenstahl] continues her celebration—or is it a search?—of the classical beauty of the human body, the search which she began in her films. She is interested in the ideal, in the monumental." Mekas in the same paper on November 7, 1974: "And here is my own final statement on Riefenstahl's films: If you are an idealist, you will see idealism; if you are a classicist, you will see in her films an ode to classicism; if you are a Nazi, you will see Nazism."

4.  
It was Genet, in his novel *Pompes funèbres*, who provided one of the first texts which showed the erotic allure fascism exercised on someone who was not a fascist. Another prescient description is by Sartre, an unlikely candidate for these feelings himself and who may have heard about them from Genet. In *La Mort dans l'âme* (1949), the third novel in his four-part *Chemins de la liberté*, Sartre describes one of his protagonists experiencing the entry of the German army into Paris in 1940.

"[Daniel] was not afraid, he yielded trustingly to those thousands of eyes, he thought 'Our conquerors!' and he was supremely happy. He looked them in the eye, he feasted on their fair hair, their sunburned faces with eyes which looked like lakes
of ice, their slim bodies, their incredibly long and muscular hips. He murmured: 'How handsome they are!' Something had fallen from the sky: it was the ancient law. The society of judges had collapsed, the sentence had been obliterated; those ghastly little khaki soldiers, the defenders of the rights of man, had been routed. An unbearable, delicious sensation spread through his body; he could hardly see properly; he repeated, gasping, 'As if it were butter—they're entering Paris as if it were butter.' He would like to have been a woman to throw them flowers.