

have to respond to developments in the world and give impulses by choosing texts that represent and challenge the world today.

FOCUS: Thank you very much for the interview.

Adler: Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you.

Julia Baker and Aine Zimmerman contributed to this interview.

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Leni Riefenstahl and Propaganda Film:

A Conversation with David Culbert

Dr. David Culbert is a Professor of History at Louisiana State University and editor of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. The title of his latest book is *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*. He has written on film, radio and television as history and propaganda in the U.S. and Germany during World War II.

FOCUS: You have written extensively on propaganda and film. What sparked your interest in these topics?

David Culbert: Until I began work on my doctoral thesis, I never had a single teacher that placed any faith in any of these topics, and so it probably seemed interesting to me for that reason. It has been my good fortune to have had a number of teachers along the way who let me study what interested me, although I think on the whole they were somewhat surprised that something so interesting came of it. I wrote a doctoral thesis on radio commentators discussing foreign policies in the 1930s, and I have an undergraduate degree in organ performance from Oberlin, so I had some interest in aural images based on that. I became interested in German film propaganda when I first saw *Triumph des Willens* in graduate school, and thought it was extraordinary.

FOCUS: Extraordinary in what way? In terms of the cinematography?

Culbert: Yes. Perhaps not those few opening intertitles, nor the endless parade of people marching by, although eventually I learned that there is some significance to those early scenes as well. For in spite of Leni Riefenstahl's often proclaimed statement that she was too young to know anything about politics (although she was thirty-

five when she made *Sieg des Glaubens*), this film was certainly made by someone who understands politics. There has been an ongoing controversy for years: for a very long time the original 'Zensurkarte' for *Triumph des Willens* was missing in 35 mm, but more recently a 16 mm 'Zensurkarte' emerged, and the difference between the two films is precisely the cut that's made between the released cut and the 16 mm. That is because the 'Stahlhelm' was dissolved, and it is the sequence of the 'Stahlhelm' that was omitted from the 16 mm version. This certainly seems to suggest that the film itself is a very useful depiction of changing power relationships in Germany. Basically, if you are in close up, and you had a lot of airtime, then you are significant. In the new DVD version of *Sieg des Glaubens*, when you see the central position of Ernst Boehm in the car with Hitler, that can be quite instructive about the differences as depicted in celluloid between power relationships in December 1933 when that film premiered, and then the literal blood-letting in June of 1935.

FOCUS: I have noticed a surge of interest in Leni Riefenstahl since the late 1980s. What contributed to this development?

Culbert: There has been a rebirth of interest in Riefenstahl on the part of persons who wish to pay some sort of homage, and then of course it is also related to the extraordinary longevity of Leni herself, as she died at 101. Her death signals basically the last living person who could claim to have some sort of direct, meaningful connection with Hitler. In Riefenstahl's case, she was very interested in publicity and gave countless interviews. I recorded two interviews with her, and I did not get anything useful out of those interviews, although I certainly tried. I conducted the interviews in German in the hopes not that I could get her to say: 'Yes, I always was a Nazi and I was lying all these years' — for that is an unreasonable thing to expect from an interview — but rather I hoped she would say something about editing techniques and camera angles, although she was not forthcoming about that either.

I have a photograph that I took with me when I went to interview her at her house. She had said that she never saw Hitler between

the end of the party rally in Nuremberg on September 10, 1934, and the premiere of the film in March 1935. Yet in this picture, there is Leni in an expensive white roadster, and on the back of the photograph is the date: 16.9.1934 in Berchtesgaden. When I showed this photograph to her and asked her to explain the date, she said she couldn't find her glasses, and was unable to see the photograph without them. And I thought that at the time this was a rather clumsy subterfuge. I have a transcript of that interview, but I never attempted to publish it, for it seemed to me that I did not get anything interesting. I only got from her a number of answers that did not seem to be very likely.

She started giving interviews very early in her career, and now that she is dead, I think about what motivated her, and one might charitably say that she came to believe the things she came to say over and over again. She said repeatedly, for example, that *Triumph des Willens* is not a propaganda film. Interestingly, Leni insisted on the awkward English title, *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, as the translation of the film *Macht der Bilder*. Over the years I believe that her English language interviews became an excuse to say that she was misquoted or that she could not express herself clearly [in English]. She would frequently make those claims about interview statements that did not seem terribly true. I think that she became fixated on giving interviews, a simply stupendous number of interviews.

FOCUS: In order to defend herself?

Culbert: Yes, it seems quite likely that she gave interviews because they helped strengthen her convictions about which things were true and which were not. Persons in film studies would be poorly served if they took any interview and presumed that this was an important insight in the way she made her films, or information about her skills to get people on her team. There is plenty of information to be had about Leni, her films, and many significant parts of her career, but not necessarily based on interviews.

Her longevity was also an issue in terms of access to her films and

it comes as no surprise that her first party rally film, *Sieg des Glaubens*, is just now available on DVD in 2003. Previous to this, it was very difficult to gain permission to show excerpts of her films. She insisted that she controlled the rights and would not grant permission, even for showing at big exhibitions. The difficulty is that especially in Germany after 1945, the Bavarian State Government already knew enough of what people were saying, and did not necessarily want to be the official agency that was licensing Nazi era films glorifying Hitler. It was a gray area and Leni asserted copyright control rather early on. Eventually in 1963, Transit was the agency that was set to provide assistance. Transit was an official agency of the then-West German government, and signed an agreement with Leni for thirty years giving her a handsome percentage. Some of these issues of copyright have now evaporated with her demise.

FOCUS: Did Leni Riefenstahl claim from the beginning that she did not know what was being done with her films and why they were being produced?

Culbert: In the 1930s she functioned as a sort of ambassador for these extraordinary feature films, such as the Olympia film. I think she enjoyed doing those, and threw herself into it, so when she came to the US in late 1938 to try and get an American distribution in Hollywood for the two-part Olympian film, this was all a treat for her. Certainly since 1945, or rather and from 1952 on, after the end of her lawsuits, litigations, and de-nazification, she created a set piece about her attitudes and she was aided by the fact that records from the propaganda ministry were mostly destroyed in air raids. Yet there is just too much that has emerged over the years that has caused her tales to not hold up very well. These films are made specifically by request of the Nazi party. They are funded by the Nazi party. In some ways, she could not assert copyright, but on the other hand, who wanted to be collecting royalties in a country where there is so much unease about the Nazi past? It was a big problem, as there was no government agency willing to do so. For a long time, though, nobody knew that her party rally films from 1933 survived. She was very aggressive in trying to shout down their existence. In some scenes of *Macht der Bilder*, Buehler persuaded Leni to return to

the 'Parteigelände' in Nuremberg, and when he brings up the subject of *Sieg des Glaubens*, she actually shakes him.

FOCUS: Why is it that she made no more movies after 1945, but Veit Harlan did? He went on to create a large body of work.

Culbert: That's true, although most of it was not very successful. None of the post-1950 Harlan films were anything like the success of his wartime films. In the case of Leni, one possibility is that once she is fifty, she is a well-preserved woman, she would not have been able to return to being a leading lady. But her real claim to fame is not as a feature film actress in the 20s and 30s. At a bare minimum, she is an extraordinary catalyst. If we want to say that her legacy was the ability to make it her business to know who are the most creative, clever, able people at the time and get them on a team. She certainly deserves credit for that. She is a producer rather than a brilliant editor.

FOCUS: Would you say that some of the cinematography then was not necessarily her idea? Was she simply able to organize the talented people at the time to help her?

Culbert: When you see the first ten reels of *Sieg des Glaubens*, you realize that Leni must have had access to some of the finest cameramen in Germany. Hans Ertl, for example, was one of the great cameramen at the time. Ertl had worked out an underwater camera for the Olympic pool in order to film part of the high diving sequences. They are one of the highlights of that film, and obviously she intended it that way. Part of its brilliance of those images is not just the editing of the images from below, so that they seem like they take flight, but rather the capturing of the body as it goes under the water. This was possible only because of the underwater camera developed by Ertl.

Clearly, she also had a great deal of assistance from Walter Ruttmann. He died in 1941, but many people think he may have played a more substantial role than she gave him credit for. I think she may have had some assistance from him with editing. It is also clear that Bela

Balusch, who was involved with *Das Blaue Licht*, volunteered to help her with the filming, and gave her advice. He then went to Moscow, and Leni sent him an eight page typewritten letter, in which she admits that she couldn't figure out how to edit *Das Blaue Licht* and had to go back to get some assistance from her mentor, Arnold Fanck. He then re-edited some of the reels, and she agreed that he had done a better job. In the case of Leni's film editing, there is something strange about the scenario. She makes only four films, and then nothing else ever works. If she is one of the most brilliant film editors we have ever known, then why was it that she was never able to turn her hand after 1945 to doing more work? It is true that she had no direct connection with the German film industry, but rather had direct lines of access to Hitler and was able to wheedle incredibly large sums of money. Yet there is a disconnect between all of this achievement, and it cannot all be explained by the fact that she did not have a base within the German film industry to return to, that there was no studio that would claim her as their own, as she has said.

FOCUS: I'd like to turn now to the reception of other propaganda films. Why do you think that *Der Ewige Jude* was not favorably received when it was released in Germany?

Culbert: In my opinion, it is a clumsy diatribe. Fritz Hippler was clearly not an artistic breakthrough in German filmmaking. But of all the films between 1933 and 45, this film is the only one I know of that was released in two versions. I have an official invitation that clearly says women and children are invited to come for a screening first, and then the men later. (In the second version, they took out the ritual slaughter scenes, which they thought would be too graphic for women and children.) Two versions can be problematic for a film. However, no one would sit through that film and think it is an artistic achievement. In some respects it betrays evidence of too many hands in its creation. One of last things added is especially tendentious: I call it the "slide lecture," because it is so tedious. This is the section of the film when pictures are presented of various figures, and the running commentary is: "Here is a rotten artist because he's Jewish, and here is rotten work of art, because it is done

by a Jewish artist," etc. This long list of names is not very effective filmmaking. Peter Bücher wrote a good article about the audience reception of *Der Ewige Jude*, where he examined the records from Berlin theaters where the film played, and within two weeks, there was only one theater showing the film. It just disappeared, whereas *Jud Süß*, for example, enjoys a long run, and was even re-released later. Also, it must be said, that in comparison to *Triumph des Willens* or the Olympia *Filme*, most other films of the time just come across as kitsch.

FOCUS: Moving to a more global question, do you think there are similarities in propaganda techniques across cultures? Is there an overarching paradigm?

Culbert: For Western Europe and the United States, I think you could find similarities. But if you were to go the Far East, you might find dramatically different things, although there are many ways in which Japanese wartime propaganda was similar to what was being done elsewhere. In a sense, all propaganda has the possibility of being cultural propaganda for one's own society. It could also be that as an American, I will never be fully sensitized to some aspect of cultural propaganda about my own society that is immediately apparent to someone who comes from some other society. It is, however, rarely the case that one propaganda film transforms society. If it has an impact, like *Jüd Süß* for example, then how does one control for all the other ways in which anti-Semitism is being cultivated in Nazi Germany? I don't think that anyone would seriously say that *Jüd Süß* turned each viewer into someone who wanted to see the Jews destroyed. It was made at the stage of the Final Solution where expulsion to Madagascar was being brooded on. I think it is a film that makes an explicit appeal to the issue of expulsion. Susan Tegel has suggested that a film like this might contribute to a general indifference to the plight of Jews, and I think that is a reasonable point. There is a disconnect between a person who looks at *Jüd Süß* for the first time and who is understandably horrified and says this is what Nazi propaganda is about. But there is no other feature film with such a tendentious message that had such enormous box office success that still holds up as a film.

FOCUS: How do you see the development of film history over the course of your career, and what directions do you think it might take in the future?

Culbert: I was fascinated to find out what is going on right here in German Studies. Here is a place where all kinds of media images are being integrated into an academic field where one previously might have been expected to write a thesis on Goethe. So one place media studies is going is into other departments in an interdisciplinary way. Then there is Film Studies itself. The caution here I think is that if one is not careful, this could lead to a fixation on viewing film itself or television programs as text with no real concern about the original context. Yet minus the context, the message is lost.

FOCUS: Thank you for this interview.

Culbert: Thank you.

*Interview by Aine Zimmerman
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Cincinnati, Ohio, USA*

Correction

Focus on German Studies wishes to extend a formal apology to the Wallstein Verlag in Göttingen, Germany for a copyright omission in Volume 9. The Wallstein Verlag generously granted permission to print the poem "Position Losing" by Dorothea Grünzweig and translated by Emily Jeremiah on page 268 of *Focus on German Studies Volume 9*. Unfortunately this information was unintentionally omitted from Volume 9. The information "© 1997 Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen" should have appeared immediately following the poem. We regret the oversight on our part, and thank the Wallstein Verlag for bringing it to our attention.

*With sincerest apologies,
Focus on German Studies*