

# Riefenstahl on safari

## Embodied contemplation in East Africa

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**Fig. 1.** Leni Riefenstahl with her Nuba friend, 1976.

In 2003, German photographer and filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl died at the age of 101. That same year, German company Constantin Film was preparing for filming *Die weiße Masai* (*The white Maasai*) in Kenya, based on the novel by Corinne Hofmann. Narrating the relationship between Carola, a Swiss tourist in Kenya, and Lemalian, a Samburu 'warrior', the film was to be shot chiefly in the semi-arid lands of the Samburu District. Before filming began, a search was organized in the town of Maralal in Northern Kenya for 'eligible' Samburu men to cast. 'Many people went,' Mohamed, a young Samburu man, recalled. But 'they didn't take us, because [they said] we were not tall enough... They said Samburu are tall and slim... you're not Samburu.' But what 'Samburu' did the filmmakers have in mind? The answer came when the film was released in 2005. They were after the 'Samburu' of coffee-table books and romanticized movies, whose bodies resemble

the way photographers such as Pavitt (1991) and Magor (1994) portrayed them after Leni Riefenstahl.

Riefenstahl (1902-2003) remains a controversial figure in contemporary debates about aesthetics, film and photography. She is vilified for her early collaboration with the Nazi regime, her production of 'propaganda' films (such as *The triumph of the will*) and for her close friendship with Hitler. On the other hand, her innovative aesthetics and contributions to the techniques of film and photography have been praised. Riefenstahl's depiction of East Africa has only recently become the subject of academic scrutiny (Faris 2002, 2007, Ludewig 2006). As Faris (2007) cautions, 'Riefenstahl is not at all unique in her photography of Africans,' in that she 'shares a modernist aesthetic widely adored and adopted in the West'. Her work has had a profound influence on various artistic productions, such as the film described above.

When I began my fieldwork in Kenya in 2005, I encountered Riefenstahl's coffee-table books on African peoples (along with other such photographic books sharing a 'Riefenstahlian' aesthetics) in my investigation of the search by female tourists from Europe, Australia, Japan and North America for the ideal male body. Such tourists began visiting Kenya in the late 1980s, driven by an eroticized nostalgia for the famous cliché of the Maasai and the Samburu 'warrior'. The image of tall, slim male bodies, dressed in red and carrying spears and clubs, was part of an 'aestheticization' and commodification of the Samburu man (Kasfir 1999, 2004). Among Samburu men in northern Kenya, this idealized aesthetics has given rise, in turn, to a striving to meet the tourists' aesthetic quest for Samburu men whose physique most corresponds to such perfection. In this article, I argue that the 'artfulness'



**Fig. 2.** After her death at the age of 101, Riefenstahl's spirit is still present in East Africa, haunting sites of social tension.

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FAIR USE / L. RIEFENSTAHL PRODUCTION

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of Riefenstahl's photographs (like those of her followers) lies in their capacity to stimulate what I call an embodied reading, that is, a complex of intersensorial and emotional responses that materialize in the form of a politics of 'limits' in the subjected reader.

#### 'Africa had embraced me – forever'

Riefenstahl visited Africa for the first time in April 1956, when she went to Kenya to prepare for filming *Black cargo*. Here she encountered the Maasai, whose 'aura of being untouched by civilization' (Riefenstahl 1982b: 17) she found deeply fascinating. In 1962, she visited the Nuba of Sudan, among whom she carried out extensive photographic work. 'I loved the Nuba,' Riefenstahl later confessed, 'and it was wonderful to be among them' (1987: 526). Between 1962 and 1977 she undertook half a dozen trips to different Nuba groups in Sudan (Bach 2007), and further photo-safaris in Kenya. These trips were followed by the publication of four coffee-table books: two on the Nuba (1974, 1976), and two on various peoples of East Africa (1982a, 1982b), including the Maasai, the Samburu, the Dinka, the Shilluk, the Falata, the Murle etc. Riefenstahl's quest for 'beauty' among East African people may be read as part of an aesthetic movement known as primitivism, a form of European and Euro-American art inspired by non-Western art and artefacts (Ludewig 2006, Faris 2007). In this kind of work, one discovers one's most 'authentic' inner self through distance and difference, through contact with an 'authentic' Otherness. Solomon-Godeau defines primitivism as both 'a form of mythic

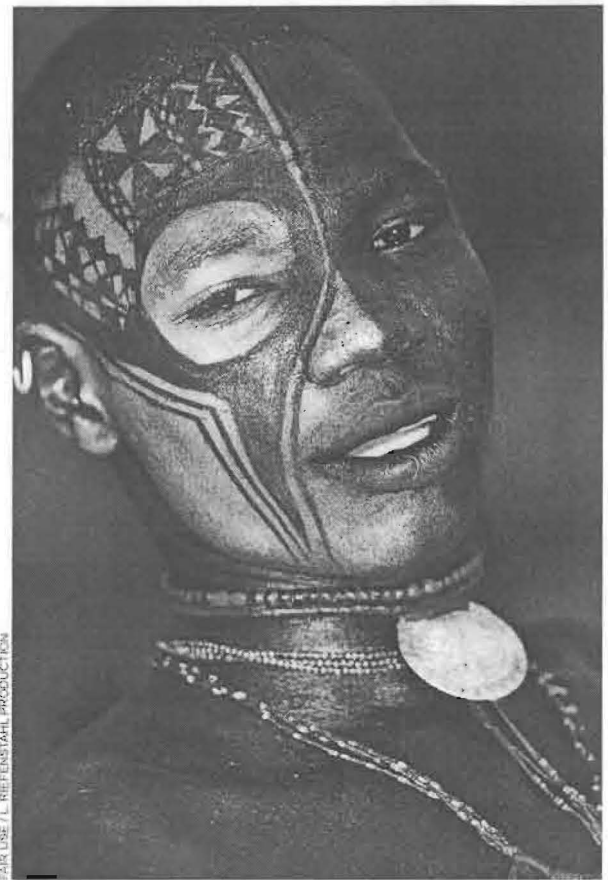


Fig. 3 (right) Portrait of a Nuba man. Photograph by Riefenstahl, 1976.

Fig. 4 (below). Nuba girl. Photograph by Riefenstahl, 1976.



speech' and 'a productive discourse,' constitutive of social relations (1986: 314). The primitivist artist responds to an inner war of the self: the need to choose between the constraints of 'civilization' and the 'liberty' of a mythical return to nature.

After the fall of the Nazi regime, Riefenstahl realized that she could not escape the stigma of being a Nazi herself, and decided to leave Europe to work among African people. 'Africa,' Bach observes, 'the arena of the newest of her lives, asked no questions, hurled no charges, and permitted her to shed her skin' (2007: 253). In Africa, Riefenstahl sought 'redemption' and 'solace for her soul' (Ludewig 2006: 84–85). She considered moving permanently to live among the Nuba of Sudan, saying that 'it would be easier for me to die among my Nuba than here in the big city, where I led a very solitary life' (Riefenstahl 1987: 526).

As the title of one of her last coffee-table books – *Leni Riefenstahl's Africa* (1982) – overtly suggests, the Africa she tried to depict was one of her own making. Ludewig (2006) shows that Riefenstahl's subsequent depictions of the Nuba, for example, are anything but static. Her initial photographic romanticism was considerably heightened during her later photographic journeys, particularly in response to the rapid social transformations that the Nuba were undergoing. The parameters within which she dreamed 'her' Africa were carefully staged and scripted. First, Riefenstahl stated openly that she had no interest in locals who wore clothes, for 'they look no different from the blacks in the big cities' (Riefenstahl 1987: 467–468). Faris (2007) argues that Riefenstahl would only agree to photograph 'the undressed [...] indeed, people who visited her with clothing were turned away.' Secondly, she firmly believed that 'it is impossible to find a male or female Nuba with even an ounce of fat because they consider fat ugly' (Riefenstahl 1987: 609), meanwhile choosing to ignore the 'imperfect' bodies of the old and sick. Thirdly, Faris argues that Riefenstahl 'introduced new colors (European lip glosses)' among the Nuba, and 'encouraged the usage of a much more limited repertoire of design',

rapidly created at her request. Moreover, she 'consistently moved people to locations she felt more photogenic, and posed them in postures, however grotesque, that she felt more appropriate to her vision.' Riefenstahl authoritatively recalls how 'I then told the Nuba what I wanted them to do...' (1987: 559-560).

#### 'One feels their breath'

Whereas Sontag (1975) believes that Riefenstahl's photographic exploration of African people was an extension of her 'fascist' aesthetics from the Aryan body onto the bodies of Africans, anthropologist James Faris (2007) argues that merely labelling of Riefenstahl's work as 'fascist' generates analytical reductionism, and fails to account for the huge volume of positive responses to her representations of African people. However, Faris sees nothing 'at all unique' in Riefenstahl's photography of Africans. Within this debate, a perspective derived from an embodied reading of such photographs, I argue, can allow for a more complex understanding both of their effects and of the epistemological grounds for controversial interpretations of them.

In his book *Body fascism* (2002), Brian Pronger draws on Foucault to point to two different conceptualizations of the word 'fascism'. On one hand, he argues, there is the historical *moment* of fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini. On the other hand, there is a wider historical *attitude*, characteristic of modernity and an ontology of technological 'advancement'. This is, as Foucault put it, 'the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us' (Foucault 1983: xiii). It is the latter, Pronger argues, that persists in the contemporary technologies of the body and physical fitness, in their attempt to achieve a politicized 'perfection' that transforms bodies into economic resources. If one agrees with the use of the term 'fascism' in this latter sense, then indeed Riefenstahl's representations of African bodies can be described as fascist, but not more so than the work of other primitivist or simply modernist photographers (e.g. in *National Geographic* and *GEO* magazines),

and particularly *not* because of her early associations with the Nazi regime (as Sontag claims).

The embedding of a politics of exclusion in the code of Riefenstahl's photography of African people (as well as in her early films) is thus concurrent with and indivisible from the techno-scientific production of bodies in modernity. Herein, the inscription of 'limits' upon processes of embodiment plays an important role. Revisiting Derrida, Pronger maintains that all social systems 'impose structural limits on the power to appreciate material reality [...] which in turn undermines our political power to formulate alternative realities' (Pronger 2002: 12). The epistemology of the Enlightenment, an epistemology of (self-)control through rationality, envisions bodies and their parts as *things-in-themselves* (cf. Kant 'Dinge an sich'), as objectified non-relational entities that are thus readily controllable. Since the 19th century, the photographic representation of the body has proved to be one of the most efficient vehicles of 'limits' in the process of bodily subjection, carrying in its code and accentuating in the subject-reader a particular hegemonic ontology.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) formulated this principle of 'limits' with reference to the interplay between 'puissance' and 'pouvoir', two different types of power. *Puissance* refers to 'a capacity to multiply connections that may be realized by a given "body" to varying degrees in different situations' (Massumi, quoted in Pronger 2002: 66); it is 'our potential for infinite connectivity' (Pronger 2002: 114), and constitutes the very field upon which *pouvoir* inscribes its 'limited, finite path' (ibid.). *Pouvoir* is the power of subjection, an 'instituted and reproducible relation of force, a selective concretization of potential' (Foucault, quoted in Pronger 2002: 66). The politics of exclusion and abjection inherent in what Pronger calls 'fascist desire' is characterized by a sublime interplay between *puissance* and *pouvoir*. 'Pouvoir produces puissance as its pouvoir, and puissance gives pouvoir its puissance' (ibid.: 113).

To read Riefenstahl's photographs is to be faced with this neurotic interplay of *pouvoir* and *puissance*, of the 'limits' and the *beyond* that they suggest. It engenders what Derrida called a *logic of parergonality*, a 'way in which the establishment of a system as a system suggests a beyond it. That beyond consists of that which the system excludes, by virtue either of what it cannot comprehend or of what it prohibits in order to accomplish its systematic objectives' (ibid.: 13). The bodily perfection of Riefenstahl's photographs sublimely impresses the reader not so much in and for itself as through that which it excludes: fat bodies, short bodies, disabled bodies, clothed bodies, non-symmetric bodies, sick bodies. These are the bodies *against* which 'beauty' is established, but which in spite of their material absence from the photographs as such, are very much present in the fluid 'secondness' (cf. Pierce) of any reading, in that which the code of *pouvoir* establishes as being beyond its limits.

These neurotic dialectics of the encoded limits and their beyond interfere with the sublime processes of an embodied aesthetic contemplation. Ludwig, for example, notes vis-à-vis Riefenstahl's close-up portraits of some Nuba men that 'one can imagine one feels their breath'; 'the viewer is made to feel he or she is experiencing an intimate encounter with the near life-size depictions' (2006: 93). The embodied contemplation of such images becomes what Gregory Bateson has called a 'meta-message', 'a message that acts as a *higher* context for another message in a system where each message is concrete and of a lower order than the referent to which it is attached' (Harries-Jones 1995: 134). This meta-communication, characteristic of artistic production, is 'a sort of play behavior whose function is, amongst other things, to practice and make more perfect communication of this



Fig. 5. Samburu 'morans' (warriors). Photograph by Pavitt, 1991.

MIGUEL PAVITT / PYLE CATHIE LIMITED



**Fig. 6.** At a wedding in the Samburu District, I gave my camera to my Samburu assistant. Here, he photographed the bride and her girlfriends posing in a fashion prevalent at the photo studios in the towns of northern Kenya.



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kind' (Bateson 1971: 137). The synaesthetic perception of Riefenstahl's depictions of African bodies comprises as such a meta-communication of this sort, one struggling to perfect a sense of intimacy leading concomitantly to discomfort and sexual excitation, to intellectual frustration and voyeuristic gratification.

### 'Romantically uninhibited and sexually liberated'

Even though she herself played a role in Nazi propaganda early in her life, it would be reductionist to describe the aesthetics expressed in Riefenstahl's later work on Africa as 'fascist' in the narrow sense of descending from the propagandist politics of the Nazi regime (Sontag 1975). In terms of their thematic selection and meta-narrative, Riefenstahl's depictions of African peoples should be read in the context of the broader work of other primitivist photographers. Nevertheless her aesthetics, in her fascination with a contemplation of the select body, does imply a particular code suggestive of continuities with the earlier Nazi propaganda.

Sontag (1975) observes that fascist aesthetics brought the human body into a utopian light of physical perfection and harmonious symmetry. This, however, coincided with and was related to a larger (Euro-American) modernist struggle for bodily perfection coming with the advancement of technology (Pronger 2002, Dutton 1995). The institutionalized aesthetics of the Nazi propagandistic politics, nevertheless, carried its own aesthetic preferences (see Peucker 2004, Ravetto 2001).

Most importantly, in terms of the body proper, the later, more narrowly defined fascist aesthetics represents in part a continuation of Winckelmann's philosophy, according to which 'the beautiful body is the posed body, its contours in harmonious balance' (Peucker 2004: 284-285). Riefenstahl's photographs indeed depict the body as sculpture. Peucker calls this type of gaze '*tableau vivant*', an artistic style borrowed from the Venetian Baroque. In this form, the body is pictured in an 'arrested motion', becoming static and objectified in a very strict sense. The 'arrested motion' characteristic of the *tableau vivant* style imposes a given morphological contradiction: one can see bodies frozen in movement. There is a battle between the Dionysian desire for excess and self-transcendence and the Apollonian spirit of rationality and conformity, resulting in posed bodies, bodies rendered sculptural (Peucker 2004). I agree with Sontag (1975) that Riefenstahl successfully transposed this morphological code to her representation of African people. The code of the *tableau vivant* – as it was applied in her early propaganda films – was later reinvented within an African landscape. Yet the question is, to what extent could this otherwise antagonistic code call for similar interpretations?

The code of 'arrested motions' is suggestive of an initial fascist ideal of a petrified eroticism according to which sexual energy needs to be transformed into spiritual force. In fascist politics, sexuality was ideally diverted from the achievement of orgasm to 'an erotic contemplation at once frustrating and pleasurable' (Peucker 2004: 280). The ideal sculptural body thus prefers to surpass such aesthetic stimuli heroically rather than consuming them sexually. Yet the question remains: what interpretations does this code prompt once it has gone beyond what was a merely political ideal?

It is here that a new set of paradoxes emerges. Ravetto paraphrases Foucault in asking rhetorically: 'how could nazism [sic], which fashioned itself on its own model of blood purity and masculine mastery, become the ultimate sign of [what it saw as] decadent erotic sexuality?' (2001: 71). Historically and politically displaced, and reinterpreted through what I called an embodied contemplation, Riefenstahl's images confer different spectacles around the 'limits' they preserve, and the *beyond* that they carry. It is in this sense, for example, that her depictions of the young Aryan men (in *The triumph of the will*), created in a context of institutionalized homophobia, could ironically become part of American gay iconography and constitute, as Schulman (2003) put it, the single greatest influence on homoerotic representations, since the Greeks. Meanwhile, as I briefly suggested at the beginning of this article, in the context of increased tourist consumption of such imagery, Riefenstahl's depictions of African men participate in a form of cultural voyeurism most often gratified in contexts of sexual tourism, rather than 'heroically surpassed.'

It is the same tension of the interplay between the 'limits' and their beyond, so evident in Riefenstahl's work, that also prompts speculation about her own sexuality and thus leads to another level of voyeurism within an embodied (often academic) contemplation. Was her artistic endeavour intended to be a cognitive fixation on 'beauty'? Or was the 'art' she claimed to pursue drawn from an embodied (here, voyeuristic) enjoyment of 'beauty'? Neither her work nor her repeated claims to simply be interested in 'beauty' allow for a concrete answer. 'Leni', Bach writes, 'had been romantically uninhibited and sexually liberated since her self-scripted deflowering at twenty' (2007: 210). Riefenstahl was often accused – as she claims – that she 'occasionally withdrew to her tent with very big and "strong" Nuba men' (quoted in Bach 2007: 272) or that 'my Nuba photography was the result of my being attracted by the Nubian's oversized genitalia'. This she vehemently denied, particularly, she said, when 'I pride myself on my well-known almost virginal sexual history' (ibid.).

### 'Bestselling images of Kenya'

The intense experience of embodied contemplation of Riefenstahl's photographs of African people influenced groups of tourists, sometimes indirectly, to visit the Nuba. 'Touring companies at the time, in both Germany and Sudan,' Faris claims, 'set up specific photographic tours to the Southeast Nuba for people to capture their own Riefenstahlian experience' (2007: note 24). In the German-speaking countries, Riefenstahl's long engagement with the Nuba has become a myth ritually reenacted through tourism in Sudan, and so her aesthetics continues to have a direct impact on Nuba life.

In Kenya, the impact of Riefenstahl's work is generally more complex and less straightforward. For example, Riefenstahl's coffee-table books are sold in tourist shops in Nairobi and Mombasa, and many 'cultural' tourists that I have encountered claim to own or at least know of these books. Moreover, female tourists I spoke to who went on to marry Samburu men and moved to Kenya referred to their copies of Riefenstahl's books in their attempt to 'document'

**Fig. 7.** In the northern Samburu District, the so-called 'modern' Samburu men who went to school wear jeans and T-shirts to distinguish themselves from their 'traditional' cattle-herding brothers. When they migrate to the coast, however, they put on shukas (toga-like body dress) and beads to attract tourists.



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their 'adoptive' culture. (Ironically, it was in such a context that I encountered Riefenstahl in East Africa and started thinking about her work's potential effects.)

On the other hand, the eventual popularization of her imagery must also be considered. Kenya's democratic politics and the role of the Kenyan tourism industry as the primary foreign exchange earner have facilitated processes of aestheticization, commodification and consumption of everyday life. Over the last two decades, the Maasai and the Samburu have become 'bestselling images of Kenya' (Obonyo and Nyassy 2004: 3), and – as I noted above – female tourists began seeking liaisons with the stereotypical pastoralist 'warrior'. Here, however, Riefenstahl's influence is subtle, and merges with post-colonial reinventions of old imperial paradigms. From 19th-century travel memoirs to colonial ethnographies, from coffee-table books to tourist postcards and T-shirts, the image of the Maasai or Samburu 'warrior' has a dynamic historical continuity, in which Kasfir more generally identifies 'a nostalgia being voiced for physical perfection itself' (1999: 73; see also Hughes 2006).

The significance of a Riefenstahlian aesthetics emerging among the Samburu and Maasai of Kenya thus has to be understood through the role photography plays in shaping bodily ideals. It is through the previously unmatched 'immediacy or sense of actuality provided by the photograph... [w]ith the photographer's eye for, and access to, some of the most beautifully formed bodies of his [sic] time, [that] the very status of the body as a visual object had been irreversibly transformed' (Dutton 1995: 97).

In Kenya, photographers such as Angela Fischer, Carol Beckwith, Mohamed Amin, Mirella Ricciardi, Nigel Pavitt, Thomasin Magor and others have, to a certain extent, continued a Riefenstahlian aesthetic tradition, working among the Maasai or the Samburu. Probably interested, as Riefenstahl was, in creating vehicles of 'beauty', and in 'salvage ethnography', these authors have also, to varying degrees, maintained a certain politicized 'beauty'. While they continued working within a modernist, primitivist, and indeed neo-imperialist paradigm, certain visual codes were evidently appropriated from Riefenstahl's famous and influential work among East African people.

These later works perpetuate some of Riefenstahl's aesthetics. Firstly, they continue to be read with the idea of bodily symmetric perfection through depiction of the 'arrested motion' of the *tableau vivant*. The morphological

anchoring of the *puissance* of embodiment in the disconnected perfection of the graciously sculptural body keeps the *other* forms of embodiment – static, fat, short, ill, disabled etc. – beyond the 'limits' of the code. Second, the 'purification' of the social body achieved through a visual homogenization of 'culture' imposes its own 'limits' on the frame of the photograph. Like Riefenstahl, Pavitt (1991) and Magor (1994), for example, idealize 'Samburu culture', deliberately excluding individuals wearing non-'traditional' clothes, living in non-'traditional' houses, and doing non-'traditional' tasks. The presence of and interaction with individuals of other ethnic groups, otherwise a fundamental aspect of the social life in northern Kenya, is also silenced. Third, pain and the heroic endurance of it constitute yet other motifs inherited from Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl truly venerated Nuba wrestling, taking numerous photographs of Nuba men fighting in rivers of blood, or of women cutting decorative scars on each other's bodies. Likewise, contemporary photographers working among the Samburu and the Maasai depict scenes of circumcision or clitoridectomy with a clear emphasis on the painful instant of cutting (Beckwith and Fischer 1999: 85, 90; Magor 1994: 178; Pavitt 1991: 100).

### 'God, are they beautiful'

In conclusion, Riefenstahl's aesthetic style, as evidenced in her late work in East Africa, carries a code that enables 'sublime' embodied contemplations, and thus more easily participates in politics of abjection in various cultural contexts. The implication of these codes cannot therefore be comprehended without reference to the synaesthetic readings that they enable. Further research on the effects of Riefenstahl's aesthetics in East Africa also needs to consider the political implications of this embodied reading and its role in reconfiguring bodies and their relations.

'Let me show you two books with pictures,' Denise suggests. 'My husband bought them for me in Nairobi.' Denise, a French woman in her forties, arrived in Kenya in 1991. During a holiday in the coastal town of Malindi, she fell in love with Eltombe, a Samburu man. In 1993 they got married, and after seven more visits she moved to Kenya to live with her husband in the Samburu District. As she puts the books down on the table, I catch sight of their covers, both of which are familiar to me: the first, Nigel Pavitt, the second... Leni Riefenstahl. Denise opens them and, as if mesmerized, exclaims: 'God, are they beautiful!' ●