

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE EMERGENCE OF THE FASCIST  
AESTHETIC IN EARLY GERMAN CINEMA

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My thesis explores the development of a fascist aesthetic in German films, examining three significant, active filmmakers between 1922 and 1939 (Fritz Lang, Arnold Fanck, and Leni Riefenstahl), whose works feature an aesthetic continuity before and after 1933. Despite political differences, formal and thematic similarities exist in the works of these filmmakers, which have sometimes been discussed in the context of a “fascist aesthetic” that was initially conceptualized in the Weimar era and became increasingly instrumentalized by filmmakers during the Nazi era.

While scholars have long debated the idea and substance of a fascist aesthetic, renewed debates about the concept at the contemporary moment underscore the importance of reconsidering the topic at the point of its origin. I approach the problem by contextualizing this aesthetic in the forms it takes pre- and post-1933 and emphasizing that this aesthetic is comprised of motifs and images that are contextually specific.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE FASCIST AESTHETIC IN EARLY GERMAN  
CINEMA

by

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## Dedication

To my parents, Amy, John, and my fellow graduate students at the University of Maryland, whose continual support, no matter the distance, has been invaluable.

To “Grandma S.,” whose love of German culture and language was instrumental to my pursuit of a career in German studies.

To Cathy, whom I miss dearly.

To Herr Berger, Drs. LaFountain, Herold, and Baer, without whom I could not have made it this far.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Introduction

Critical conversations about the fascist aesthetic invariably reference, in some capacity, Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and Susan Sontag's 1975 New York Review of Books article "Fascinating Fascism." The film is known for several scenes, in which Adolf Hitler gives speeches at the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. In one of them, the use of repeating lines (represented by columns, banners, or groups of people) draws the eye to Hitler, while making a spectacle of the control he exerts over the disciplined masses, who appear keen to be in service to the state and to this leader. Riefenstahl replicates this trope throughout the film: the parade scene, for example, once more puts her choreography on display as a seemingly unending mass of marching soldiers passes below her camera lens. There is little ambiguity regarding how these visuals function within this supposedly documentary, yet propagandistic film, as Riefenstahl spoon-feeds her audience compelling images of military exercises and crowds demonstrating fanatic support of the Nazi party.

In her article, Sontag identifies that which is specific to fascist art: "[It] glorifies surrender; it exalts mindlessness: it glamorizes death... The tastes for the monumental and for mass obeisance to the hero... reflect... the view of all totalitarian regimes that art has the function of 'immortalizing' its leaders and doctrines" (Sontag). Sontag also explores depictions of the human body, analyzing how the glorification of physical perfection plays a role in the fascist aesthetic's engagement with sexuality. She examines the spectator's relation to the fascist aesthetic, arguing



that the aesthetic dominates the submissive viewer. *Triumph* exhibits all of these aspects: shots from below of Hitler elevate his status to the monumental (or as that which is to be immortalized and revered), while the groupings and movements of the masses demonstrate submission and obedience. Riefenstahl's use of repeating lines not only draws the eye to that which is most significant, but it also simplifies the otherwise overwhelming visual of thousands of people moving in sync. The viewer is visually overwhelmed to surrender to the sight, the eyes do not have to work to see or to find meaning. Sontag's idea that the fascist aesthetic immortalizes is true not only of the aesthetic's subject (in Riefenstahl's example, Hitler, the Führer's control over the masses, and the military might of the Nazi party, etc.), but also of its artists: Riefenstahl is known for her work as a Nazi filmmaker, and her work is referenced not only in critical, academic conversations but also in multiple kinds of artworks.

Although lauded for her cinematography, however manipulative and problematic, Riefenstahl was not the lone creator of the fascist aesthetic that one sees in *Triumph*, but rather, she assimilated many prominent thematic and visual elements from Weimar cinema. Among her predecessors Fritz Lang and Arnold Fanck, who created films that pioneered the use of repeating lines and that also developed the contrast between an individual and a mass or monument, visuals that are informed by thematic binaries. This oft-debated similarity between proto- or pre-fascist tendencies in Weimar cinema and fascist films provokes the following questions: To what degree did German filmmakers before 1933 engage with the fascist aesthetic? Did the Nazis recycle imagery from the Weimar era? What can be said about the fascist aesthetic in German cinema before and after the Nazis came to power?

Research on early German cinema tends to be polarizing: some see Weimar film as a separate category from Nazi film, stressing that any similarity should not be mistaken for continuity, while others find the similarities between the two time periods to be indicative of a cause/effect relationship between the Weimar and Nazi eras. Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) is undoubtedly the most influential work about fascist aesthetics and filmic continuities between the Weimar and Nazi eras, yet Kracauer's psychological reading of an entire society paints with very broad strokes the role of film in facilitating (or at least foreshadowing) the rise of fascism, leading to a lack of nuance in the treatment of certain artists. Distancing himself from ideas of continuity, Eric Rentschler comments upon the tendency to "overemphasize how the mountain film points ahead to the Third Reich and [to] underestimate how it functions within the Weimar Republic," a tendency first evident in *From Caligari to Hitler* (Rentschler 138). By contrast, the editors of *Continuity and Crisis in German Cinema, 1928-1936*, find substantial evidence of continuities not only within the German film industry across the Weimar and Nazi periods, but also in German culture more broadly (Hales, Petrescu, and Weinstein 2-7). They list multiple aspects of Weimar society and culture that enabled the support and might of the Nazi Party, and they refute the tradition of understanding these eras as separated by the year 1933. I find that the continuities between the Weimar and Nazi periods are important, but I also believe that reading works individually (without a constant focus on the continuity question) is a valuable practice. In the research that follows, I tend towards prioritizing the continuities, as I am interested in the development of the fascist

aesthetic over time, meaning that my analyses of on any given film cannot be limited to any single time period or to the canon of Weimar and Nazi cinema.

An example of a conflict that emerges when the relationship between Weimar and Nazi cinema is oversimplified can be seen in Kracauer's reading of cloud formations in Arnold Fanck's *Bergfilme* (mountain films) and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935). Kracauer finds that the masses of clouds surrounding the mountaintops in Fanck's films are echoed in the infamous opening scene of *Triumph*, when Adolf Hitler's airplane descends from the clouds (Kracauer 258). Certainly, the clouds represent something heavenly in any of Fanck's *Bergfilme*, as well as in *Triumph*. The mountain top is a space that is unfamiliar to the audience and is presented in Fanck's films in the same way that Mount Olympus was understood by the ancient Greeks: it was unattainable and therefore the space for "divine" or "superhuman" acts. This can be seen, for instance, in Dr. Krafft's sacrifice to save the newlyweds in *Die Weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Piz Palu*, 1929) or the rescue of the meteorologist in *Stürme über dem Mont Blanc* (*Storms over Mont Blanc*, 1930). In Riefenstahl's film, Hitler is clearly meant to be venerated, and showing him descending from the heavens is an obvious choice for a propaganda film. Clouds and mountains themselves, however, are not reliable symbols of fascist or Nazi sympathies, meaning that these similarities are part of a larger aesthetic movement, rather than being indicative of a core group or "cult" of fascist filmmakers.

Many Weimar filmmakers did not support the Nazi party in its youth. Rather, their unique aesthetic language developed in response to social and political changes

in the Weimar Republic, such as changing gender roles (a result of the loss or permanent disability of an enormous number of men in World War I and the new political and economic clout of women due to women's suffrage and the changing labor market), an ever-increasing amount of new technology, an unstable economy, a divided government, and a continued lack of unity under a single German identity. The Nazi party was also responding to these changes, not least through the appropriation of the Weimar film aesthetic. The common use of a particular aesthetic in Weimar and Nazi films, however, is not necessarily a signal of coordination or cooperation between filmmakers.

In *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, Thomas Elsaesser attempts to explain Weimar cinema's relationship to Expressionism and Weimar society through a different paradigm than that offered by Kracauer or by Lotte Eisner in her important study *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. Rather than working within the frameworks of psychology and national identity (Kracauer) or art movements (Eisner), Elsaesser instead discusses the "historical imaginary" of Weimar cinema, which he identifies as the product of a "kind of slippage between cinematic representation and a nation's history" (Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* 4). He furthermore finds that the tension between the terms "Weimar cinema" and "Expressionist film" (referring to Kracauer and Eisner, respectively) is productive, in that the terms and their authors have views that are not exactly complementary, yet refer to the same historical imaginary, that being the construction of a cohesive conception of film aesthetics in the Weimar Republic

(Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* 24, 34–36).

Elsaesser's historical perspective on Kracauer and Eisner is useful for synthesizing the two disparate arguments, while also proposing a new way to look at Weimar cinema that nevertheless recognizes the validity of older research.

Building on Elsaesser's interpretation of the similarities among the works of Weimar filmmakers, I consider Weimar films not merely the result of an aesthetic movement but also a production of individual ideas. Rather than understanding the use of film aesthetics as something that multiplies, branching off from a single site (for Siegfried Kracauer, this is *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*), I propose that early German cinema should be understood as developing in disparate ways among various directors, who each had their own distinctive vision, as well as their own ideas of what to represent and how. These aesthetic choices would later be appropriated by the Nazi party to create a product that was recognizable to audiences.

### *The Fascist Aesthetic*

The co-optation of Weimar style as a cloak for Nazi ideology begs a discussion of the relationship between politics and art, a relationship from which the fascist aesthetic stems. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), one of the first texts to theorize the relationship between politics and art in the context of fascism, Walter Benjamin describes the effect of reproducibility on the authenticity of an artwork, with particular attention to photography and film:

From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art

is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics. (Benjamin 20)

Benjamin further explains the value of photography as being related to cult or exhibition value, which means the difference between reverence for the object being reproduced in private (for the cult) or in public (as an exhibition) (Benjamin 21–22). This takes on a particularly interesting meaning when thinking about depictions of Hitler in film, in which cultish reverence is encouraged during a public exhibition of the film. In the epilogue, Benjamin describes fascism as “the introduction of aesthetics into political life,” while the fascist aesthetic incites war: “All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (Benjamin 47). The final sentence in the epilogue declares, “Communism responds by politicizing art” (Benjamin 48). Through this framework laid out by Benjamin, we can fairly assume that film was essential to Nazi propaganda because it rendered accessible an object of reverence (that being, Hitler and the Nazi Party ideology) to enormous audiences while partaking in a larger project of aestheticizing or beautifying politics, an argument later echoed by Susan Sontag. The Nazi deployment of film, then, was not only a method of creating cultish admiration of the party within a popular and easily consumable art form, but also an act of propaganda creation, culminating in war.

In his book *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*, Lutz Koepnick synthesizes Benjamin’s ideas in order to create a more comprehensive picture of fascist aesthetics. In his introduction, Koepnick’s definition of the fascist aesthetic recalls Hannah Arendt’s explanation of the audience of propaganda, who suspend belief in reality in favor of an uninterrupted fantasy:

[W]hat aesthetic politics does is to colonize the structure of modern experience, to engage popular sentiments, and to discipline sense perception with the ambition of integrating society and mobilizing the masses for future warfare. The fascist spectacle massages minds and emotions in such a way that modern postauratic perception loses its progressive thrust and succumbs to the signifiers of vitalistic power. Fascist aesthetics, in the concept's original meaning, is anesthetic – it assaults perception, neutralizes the senses, and denies the private body as an autonomous site of corporeal pleasure.

(Koepnick 4; cf. Arendt 351)

The fascist aesthetic is built upon Nazi ideals and is deployed to persuade the audience with something that is pleasurable to watch and familiar, an easily consumable and accessible art form which stifles anti-fascist thinking. Aestheticizing the political, then, means to make propaganda palatable. Benjamin's work on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and the fascist aesthetic, has been reworked over the years through myriad perspectives.

Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* is the seminal text on aesthetic continuities between Weimar and Nazi films. Kracauer identifies periods of filmmaking in German cinema ("The Archaic Period (1895-1918)", "The Postwar Period (1918-1924)", "The Stabilized Period (1924-1929)", "The Pre-Hitler Period (1930-1933)", and in the supplement, he includes an analysis of Nazi cinema), but he does not treat these periods as entirely separate entities. Kracauer maintains a psychological reading of German society throughout the book, with the premise that films, as products of collaborative work that are received by the masses, "reflect [a

nation's] mentality" and, therefore, "the evolution of the films of a nation are fully understandable only in relation to the actual psychological pattern of this nation" (Kracauer 5). By observing and evaluating the expression of middle-class workers' fears in films, Kracauer hopes to identify the causes for Adolf Hitler's rise to power (Kracauer 11). Although *From Caligari to Hitler* is a persuasive and extremely influential text, Kracauer assumes that Weimar filmmakers were all equally likely to be part of the same psychological trauma imposed upon the German people by the First World War, and that they therefore had an equal share in the expression of that trauma in film. This book, thanks to its breadth and timing (it was published immediately after the end of World War II), is referenced, and reacted to, by any scholar interested in Weimar and Nazi cinema.

Susan Sontag's *Fascinating Fascism* (1975) returns to both Benjamin and Kracauer when reviewing Riefenstahl's book *Die Nuba (The Last of the Nuba, 1973)*. A commonplace of the research surrounding the term "fascist aesthetic" is its association with Riefenstahl's work, which is, in part, due to Sontag's book review. Developed in the context of her incisive critique of Riefenstahl, Susan Sontag's well-known development of the term "fascist aesthetic" refers to images that

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 rendering of



movement in grandiose and rigid patterns is another element... for such choreography rehearses the very unity of polity. Hence mass athletic demonstrations, a choreography and display of bodies, are a valued activity in all totalitarian countries. (Sontag)

This definition is not only comprehensive, but also influential. It highlights aspects of Riefenstahl's visuals which support fascist politics; fascism necessitates a dictator and control of the masses, which Sontag finds not only in the content of Riefenstahl's work (in the representation and choreography of masses, leading the eye to the Führer) but also in its form (film is shown in theaters, presented to the masses, whose attention is drawn to a single source). Sontag's article is referenced in nearly every biography about Riefenstahl and scholars often use her conception of "fascist aesthetics" as a springboard (see for example Heinsohn, Rentschler, 1996, and Weinstein). Sontag's concept is useful because it recognizes that "[s]uch art is hardly confined to works labeled as fascist or produced under fascist governments... Fascist art displays a utopian aesthetics – that of physical perfection," meaning that not only are fascist aesthetics beautiful outside of fascist contexts, but also that they effectively make beautiful, glorify, and, to use her word, immortalize party leaders and beliefs (Sontag). She finds Riefenstahl especially competent in this regard, especially with her fixation on the beautiful. Sontag also argues that nostalgia plays a role in the renewed interest in fascism, focusing on its art: "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.” This postmodern nostalgia helps to explain the revival of Riefenstahl’s styles (such as her choreography) in, for example, the first *Star Wars* film in 1977, or in other forms of media aside from film, such as music videos, spanning the gamut from Nicki Minaj to Rammstein.

Thomas Elsaesser suggests that “we keep coming back to [Weimar and Nazi] films (and to their director [Riefenstahl])... [because] they have become prototypes of genres which to this day are central, if not to the cinema, then to the aesthetics of television” (Elsaesser, “Leni Riefenstahl: The Body Beautiful, Art Cinema, and Fascist Aesthetic” 187). He cites, in the same article, “[t]he coverage of presidential elections, political summits, the staging of the Olympic Games [as programs that] can all be traced back to Riefenstahl’s invention of the ‘photo-opportunity’ which is *Triumph of the Will*” (187). When artists reference her works in theirs, they do this in a variety of contexts, spanning the gamut from journalism to narrative works. When analyzing the use of Riefenstahl-esque images in music videos from the metal band Rammstein, Weinstein references images which fit Sontag’s description. She interprets Rammstein’s choice of inspiration as practical: “Rammstein’s use of Riefenstahl’s image as a shock tactic and a marketing tool relies on her as a reliable symbol of a “fascist aesthetics” that will provoke controversy and garner publicity... [H]owever, Rammstein’s videos treat her images not as inherently fascist, but rather as an element of a visual vocabulary” (Weinstein 144). Riefenstahl’s images have become shorthand for fascism.

Yet Riefenstahl, however influential, was not the sole individual responsible for the emergence of a fascist aesthetic; in collaboration with the Nazi party, she and other filmmakers appropriated elements from Weimar cinema that subsequently became identifiable as indicative of the Nazi visual vocabulary (which, of course, does not necessarily mean that Weimar filmmakers are complicit in the development of that aesthetic). Elsaesser's concept of the historical imaginary may help to explain *why* the Nazis chose to appropriate Weimar aesthetics. Elsaesser argues that Kracauer and Eisner "detect proto-fascist tendencies in Weimar cinema... resid[ing]... in the supposed allegories of leader figures and demonic seducers," which he finds less compelling than the idea that "the Nazi entertainment industry, in crucial respects, took over the carnival of styles, the 'imperso-Nation' of roles and poses, tailoring them to the new rulers' chief ideological requirement on the home front: to appropriate national history by inventing for its own *idées fixes* a 'tradition', a historicist legitimation and a pedigree" (Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* 13). While he writes about the scholarship on early German cinema, one might appropriate the concept of a historical imaginary, in which history is reimagined or reinvented to explain a phenomenon, to make visible possible motivators in the production of Nazi cinema. The Nazi party based its ideologies upon a historical imaginary: *Lebensraum* (literally "living space," *Lebensraum* is a claim to land that was previously "German"), *Blut und Boden* ("blood and soil," a combination between *jus sanguinis* and *jus soli* that acted as justification for "Aryans" to take back "German" soil), and the superiority of the Aryan race (to which Germans belong) are examples of Nazi ideologies with flimsy

premises. By recreating Weimar aesthetics in fascist films, the Nazi party was able to insert itself into the tradition of Weimar filmmaking while creating space for its own ideologies within popular cinema.

While theorizing the “Nazi myth,” Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy also draw connections between aesthetics and politics. They approach the construction of the historical imaginary by the Nazis somewhat differently, in that they claim that Nazism (specifically the construction of the Aryan race), is necessarily racist and mythological (Lacoue-Labarthe et al. 296). They propose an alternative to the traditional understanding of the relationship of politics to aesthetics in the context of Nazism:

[O]ne will better understand why National Socialism did not simply represent, as Benjamin said, an “aestheticization of politics” (to which it would have been sufficient to respond, in a Brechtian manner, with a “politicization of art,” as if totalitarianism were not perfectly capable of assimilating that as well), but rather a fusion of politics and art, *the production of the political as work of art*.

(Lacoue-Labarthe et al. 303)

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy understand the politics and aesthetics of Nazi Germany as conjoined into one entity, rather than one informing the other. This is not true of the Weimar Republic, however, and a combination of Benjamin’s and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s theories may be helpful to understanding how the Nazi appropriation of Weimar aesthetics transformed the relationship between politics and film.

The use of particular aesthetics in Nazi films, borrowed from Weimar films, is most clear in narrative cinema rather than in explicit propaganda (such as *Triumph des Willens*), in which the space between diegesis and reality becomes seamless. Based on the variations of attempts to describe and analyze the fascist aesthetic, one conclusion to be drawn is that the fascist aesthetic is less concrete than might be conducive to research. Benjamin, Kracauer, and Sontag offer early explanations (Kracauer and Sontag in hindsight, of course) of the concept which revolve around the relationship between politics and aesthetics, as well as the relationship between filmmaker and politics. Later research tends to emphasize the role of the imaginary in the production of Nazi cinema and politics. Yet, amidst all the research, there is no unanimous conclusion regarding the exact extent to which there is continuity between Weimar and Nazi films.

#### *A Note on Film Authorship*

My analysis of Weimar and Nazi cinemas begins with a brief consideration of the relationship of filmmakers to fascism, before turning to thematic and aesthetic binaries which are deployed to support or reject political and social aspects of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. I focus on three filmmakers, each with a different degree of sympathy towards the Nazi party: Fritz Lang (December 5, 1890 – August 2, 1976), Arnold Fanck (March 6, 1889 – 28 September 1974), and Leni Riefenstahl (August 22, 1902 – September 8, 2003). Lang, Fanck, and Riefenstahl represent disparate relationships to the party. While Fanck's membership has yet to be proven, Lang and Riefenstahl were never party members. This is an enormous problem when comparing these filmmakers' works, against which Kracauer also comes: Lang was

against the party, and Riefenstahl's work suggests she was not entirely resistant to it, but both filmmakers make some use of a fascist aesthetic, which shows how unreliable the relationship between party membership and the use of fascist aesthetics is. Authorial intention can never be proven, and I do not consider the films analyzed here as merely reducible to the political affiliations of their directors (even if those political affiliations could easily be pinned down). For the sake of clarity, I offer biographical information about each filmmaker, but my subsequent analysis focuses on aesthetics in early German cinema rather than emphasizing the filmmakers' relationships to political developments.

Fritz Lang spent less than half of his life in Germany: he was born in Vienna, had been living in France when the First World War began, and returned to Vienna to serve in the Austrian army. He moved to Berlin at the end of the war, and then to the United States (receiving citizenship just five years after he arrived), where he spent the rest of his days (Grant xvii–xix). His marriage to Thea von Harbou, with whom he collaborated on films, lasted approximately thirteen years; they divorced after she joined the Nazi party and Lang departed permanently for the United States, having been invited by Joseph Goebbels to make films for the party (Barson). Lang's aversion to the Nazis, evidenced by his refusal to work with the party or to maintain a marriage with his wife once her political sympathies became clear, as well as by his eagerness to comment upon Nazism and German society through his films, make Lang the ideal representative of the anti-Nazi end of the spectrum to be discussed here.

Arnold Fanck's relationship to the Nazi party is less clear, with some sources citing membership, while others dispute it; his role as auteur of the *Bergfilm* is unanimously agreed upon. Kracauer, for example, associates Fanck with Nazism frequently throughout his book, citing him in a list among many fascist filmmakers, while Gertrud Steiner cites the unpopularity of *Die Tochter des Samurai* (*The Daughter of the Samurai*, 1937) as the reason for Fanck's being distanced from the party (Steiner 254). Valerie Weinstein, also without definitive proof of his party membership, identifies factors in the production of *Tochter* that hint at some level of involvement with the party on the part of Fanck (Weinstein 34–35). Fanck had lived in the Swiss Alps in his youth after he was prescribed fresh air and exercise for a childhood illness. It was there that he developed and trained his photographic eye (Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* 391). Fanck stands somewhere between Lang and Riefenstahl, neither explicitly rejecting nor actively supporting the Nazi party.

Before becoming an actor and director, Riefenstahl had pursued a career as a dancer, which ended after a knee injury in 1923 (Sigmund 96). Fanck and Riefenstahl often worked together; she played the leading role in several of his films, and their collaboration continued even after she had launched her own career as a director. Riefenstahl's role as Nazi propagandist is infamous; the visuals of *Triumph des Willens* are still cited by filmmakers today. Riefenstahl was never a member of the party, but her association with Hitler and Goebbels, as well as her brilliant innovations in the creation of propaganda films, emphasize her active role in embracing and promoting the Nazi cause ("Leni Riefenstahl").

### The Case Studies

From each director's oeuvre, I have chosen significant films that reflect the aesthetic choices representative of that filmmaker. I have opted not to return to the well-trodden terrain of the three filmmakers' most famous films: *Metropolis* (1927), *Stürme über dem Montblanc*, and *Triumph des Willens*. Instead, I aim to widen the scope of German film scholarship by provoking new discussion of films that have received overall less attention in the secondary literature. Lang's "Dr. Mabuse" trilogy spans the length of his career, as well as the pre- and post-war eras (*Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, 1922), *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933), and *Die 1000 Augen des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*, 1960)). Made in Germany during the Weimar era and just before the Nazi takeover, the first two *Mabuse* films are of particular significance here. Arnold Fanck did not continue to produce mountain films beyond the end of the war, but his influential *Bergfilme* bridge the Weimar and Nazi eras: *Die Weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* and *Die Tochter des Samurai* are representative of Fanck's filmic work in both eras. Leni Riefenstahl's career behind the camera began with her directorial debut in *Das blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*, 1932) and continued through the war. *Olympia* (1938) is the last propaganda film she completed before the war broke out.

Rather than considering each director separately, which would invite interpretations based on the filmmakers' political views, my chapters compare films of similar time periods, breaking down the span between 1922 and 1938 into three periods, named for their relation to the development of the fascist aesthetic: the proto-



fascist aesthetic (comparing *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* and *Die Weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü*), the pre-fascist aesthetic (addressing *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* and *Das blaue Licht*), and the fascist aesthetic (represented by *Die Tochter des Samurai* and *Olympia*).

Brief considerations of the filmmakers' political leanings are one aspect to analyzing the development of the fascist aesthetic, but are not as effective as contextualizing the films and comparing them in new pairings, making the development of the fascist aesthetic over time visible. Contextualizing the films helps to explain the gradual aestheticization of politics, which, under Nazi rule, would be transformed into the aforementioned "production of the political as work of art," as explained by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. Lang's Germany (Weimar, post-World War I, yet pre-economic-depression, fractured and unable to unite under a single political entity) was different from Fanck's (who had seen the economic decline and was reacting negatively towards the institutions that allowed such a thing) and from Riefenstahl's (whose Germany was taking action, with promises of political and social change). The proto-fascist aesthetic is found in Lang's works, as well as early works from Fanck; it emphasizes the political use of the aesthetic, rather than an outright aestheticization of the political (which would be developed over time, especially in the Third Reich), resulting in critical representations of Weimar society. The pre-fascist aesthetic can be found in Lang's later (German) works and in Riefenstahl's first film; in these works, political ideologies shift towards the center of attention of the aesthetic, while social commentary begins to support political leanings. The fascist aesthetic is found in the majority of Riefenstahl's films and in

Fanck's later films; by this time, the transition in early German cinema to Party-commissioned art had been completed, such that the full support of the Nazi party is clear, and the audience should be persuaded to also support the party.

By juxtaposing films and categorizing the pairs of films into eras, I seek to make the continuities between these disparate films more visible. At first glance, it might be difficult to see what an urban crime film has to do with a dramatic *Bergfilm*, or what a *Bergfilm* set in Japan has to do with the Olympic games. As I demonstrate, these films all employ thematic and aesthetic binaries not because the filmmakers shared common goals, but rather, because there was something effective and familiar about these binaries. They are not only plastic, fitting into the mold of the social critiques of the Weimar and Nazi filmmakers, but also beautiful, making them pleasurable to view for audiences in any time period. Riefenstahl's enormity as a filmmaker should not be attributed entirely to originality. While her works were groundbreaking in some ways (such as her use of a new film stock, complicated filming rigs, and choreography which draws the eye to the Führer), in other ways, she appropriated an aesthetic that is seen in Lang's and Fanck's films. While I seek to decentralize Riefenstahl from the discussion of fascist aesthetics to make space for a discussion of the development of this aesthetic (as opposed to a prediction of it), I also do not wish, as a result, to minimize the significance of her role as a female filmmaker at a time when female directors in the industry were a rarity (even more so than they are today). It is also not my intention to suggest that Lang's films are the ultimate predecessor to the fascist aesthetic. Any semblance of his work to Riefenstahl's should be understood as Riefenstahl reworking what Lang contributed to early

German cinema, rather than Lang subconsciously “predicting” the fascist aesthetic.

Putting the aesthetic in the center of the discussion, rather than the filmmakers themselves, brings clarity to the development of the aesthetic over time.

## Chapter 2: Protofascist Aesthetic: *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922) and *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (1929)

Although Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, 1922) was made and screened in a different historical context than Arnold Fanck's *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Piz Palu*, 1929), both films are representative of a protofascist aesthetic: they feature visuals that are typical of Weimar-era cinema as well as a set of thematic binaries which foreshadow the later Nazi films. In 1922, the Nazi party was just beginning to gain traction as a party that represented the political desires of a considerable portion of the population. By 1929, the party had stabilized and in the following years, it gained popularity rapidly, securing a majority of the vote in 1933. The 1920s were a decade of transition and change for Germany, but despite this, certain filmic aspects persisted, even after 1933, a year viewed by some as a break in German history. *Dr. Mabuse* and *Weiße Hölle* evidence noteworthy similarities, despite their generic differences and the different historical circumstances in which they were produced (namely, a Germany recently weakened by the war, enormous reparations, and a heavily divided political scene, compared to a Germany on the brink of economic collapse). Both films feature binaries (nature/modernity, physical and mental fitness/weakness, and masculinity/femininity), with a clear thematic slant towards characters who are aligned with nature, who exhibit a specific definition of fitness, and who are masculine. Themes of monumentalization and control and domination in these films are early examples of the fascist aesthetic, which Riefenstahl would later perfect. These binaries would be used again in later films, at the time of the election of the

Nazi party and afterwards, too. They comprise my definition of a fascist aesthetic because they demonstrate the continued preference for certain values across two disparate time periods, which impacted the political decisions of German voters and politicians alike.

An early example of Weimar art cinema, Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* is a four-hour-long silent film, comprised of two parts: "Der große Spieler: Ein Bild der Zeit" ("The Gambler: A Picture of the Times" and "Inferno: Ein Spiel von Menschen unserer Zeit" ("Inferno: Men of Our Times"). The first part of the film begins by depicting the criminality of Mabuse (Rudolf Klein-Rogge): he has a workshop for counterfeiting money that exploits blind people, he wreaks havoc on the stock market, and he plays cards with Edgar Hull (Paul Richter), forcing Hull through hypnosis to play recklessly and lose not only the game, but also a massive amount of money. Hull seeks help from a prosecutor, Norbert von Wenk (Bernhard Goetzke), who goes incognito in an attempt to catch Mabuse. Wenk orders a raid on a casino which results in the capture of Cara Carozza (Aud Egede-Nissen), one of Mabuse's cronies. She gives information neither to the police nor to the Countess Told (Gertrude Welcker), hired to help temporarily with the case. Towards the end of the film, the Countess holds a séance, with Mabuse in attendance. After the séance, the men play poker, where the Countess's husband (Alfred Abel) is hypnotized by Mabuse into cheating, causing an uproar during which Mabuse sneaks off with the countess in tow.

In "Inferno," the Count seeks psychiatric help from Dr. Mabuse (the Count does not, of course, recognize Mabuse), but his mental health diminishes. Mabuse

begins to have his cronies murdered for their incompetence. His powers seem to work no matter the distance, as he causes the murders and the suicide of the Count, without having to be in the immediate vicinity of those he kills. Wenk continues to investigate the case, turning to Mabuse, who is disguised as Weltemann, a magician and hypnotist. Mabuse attempts to use his powers to cause Wenk to kill himself, but the police intervene, leading to a chase scene. Mabuse flees, trapping himself in the counterfeiting workshop and becoming mentally unstable. The film ends with Mabuse in the workshop, seeing visions and being carried away by the police.



Figure 1 - Establishing shots from *Mabuse* (left) and *Weißer Hölle* (right) make the urban and mountain locations of the narratives clear.

At first glance, *Mabuse* seems to have little in common with *Weißer Hölle*: the former is a crime thriller set in a city, while the latter is a typical *Bergfilm*, featuring a love triangle and the epic struggle of man against nature, set in a well-known but sparsely visited mountain range. However, the two films are related in their symbolic depiction of binaries within Weimar society which would later become noted features of propagandistic films. *Weißer Hölle* takes place in the Swiss Alps. A newlywed couple, Hans Brandt and Maria Maioni (Ernst Petersen and Leni Riefenstahl) spend their honeymoon in a hut on Piz Palu. They share the hut with Dr. Johannes Krafft (Gustav Diessl), a climber whose wife was killed in a hiking accident; he remains on

the mountain in hopes of finding her corpse. A love triangle begins to develop, causing Hans to act rashly: during a climb together, Hans is determined to take the lead, a dangerous role for an inexperienced climber. Another accident occurs, and Hans is unable to climb further. Stranded on the mountain, Krafft sacrifices himself by wrapping the couple in his own clothing and braving the wind and snow to signal for help. Hans and Maria are rescued at the end of the film, but Krafft dies on the mountain.

Research about the two films has tended to be polarizing, not only in terms of their relevance to their respective audiences, but also regarding their relationship to subsequent films made after the Nazi takeover and during the immediate prewar years. *Mabuse* is a self-proclaimed “Bild der Zeit,” yet there is no consensus in the literature about the closeness of Lang’s representation of Weimar society to the reality of early 1920s Germany. In his analysis of the tyrant motif in early German cinema, Siegfried Kracauer identifies *Mabuse* as one of those films whose themes and aesthetics are directly inherited from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, which he dubs the “[a]rchetype of all forthcoming postwar films” (Kracauer 3). Kracauer asks whether the depictions of tyrants by Weimar filmmakers “[were]... kindled by the fear of bolshevism... [o]r did the... [filmmakers] call upon these frightful visions to exorcise lusts which, they sensed, were their own and now threatened to possess them...?” (Kracauer 77). Speaking specifically about *Mabuse*, Kracauer writes, “It is by no means a documentary film, but it is a documentary of the time,” by which he means that despite the exaggerated settings and expressionistic elements of the film, it creates a critique of Weimar society which “has fallen prey to lawlessness and

depravity” (Kracauer 82). *Mabuse* certainly is a tyrant within the family tree of Weimar cinema’s tyrannical characters, a descendant of Dr. Caligari (they notably both wear glasses, have long, frizzy hair, and hypnotize others), and is clearly an allegory for fascist leadership. This “Bild der Zeit” is, therefore, not a direct representation of Weimar society, but rather a critique of the times.

By contrast, Lotte Eisner’s discussion of *Mabuse* emphasizes the centrality of the audience, rather than of the filmmakers, in the film’s relation to reality:

The Berlin critics, more sagacious than we today, saw in this film, which to us seems to fall half way between reality and fantasy, something quite different... And the critics of 1922 recognized the unflattering but authentic reflection of their own day, of the inflation of the mad lost years when every vice and passion was rife. So we find this film going beyond what we took to be simple adventure and becoming a kind of document on the early twenties when people tried at all costs to forget the disasters of the war and poverty of the immediate post-war period. (Eisner 240)

Here, Eisner identifies *Mabuse* not only as an escapist film, but also as a sort of primary source for understanding the chaotic reality of Weimar society; the fantastic elements of *Mabuse*, such as chase scenes, hallucinations, and telekinesis, are escapist elements embedded in a documentary-style commentary.

Thomas Elsaesser, in opposition to Kracauer and Eisner, finds Lang to be a poor portraitist of reality, preferring instead to describe the similarity of Dr. Mabuse to Adolf Hitler as “metaphor,” “mimicry,” and “parody” (Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* 153). Furthermore, he states that “[t]he



difficult delights of his [Lang's] work are that strictly speaking, there never seems to be a 'ground', a solid world from which the realm of appearances might be confidently asserted to be either true or false" (Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* 153). This is an example of the historical imaginary which Elsaesser theorizes in his introduction; in an analogous relationship to the researchers of early German cinema, who create a historical imaginary about the harmonious or continuous relationship between representations of Weimar society and reality, Lang, from Elsaesser's point of view, is creating a historical imaginary of his own time. By analyzing *Mabuse* as a metaphor, Elsaesser also acknowledges, as Kracauer and Eisner do, that Lang is criticizing Weimar society, but Elsaesser rejects the idea that the society in the diegesis created by Lang is based on reality.



2 - Examples of the idyllic settings in *Weißer Hölle*, in which the juxtaposition of small humans against the enormous mountains creates a sense of awe and fantasy, contributing to the theme of monumentalization.



3 – Another example of the idyllic settings in *Weiße Hölle*, in which the juxtaposition of small humans against the enormous mountains creates a sense of awe and fantasy.

Kracauer, Eisner, and Elsaesser provide critical readings that explain the relationship between what is seen in *Mabuse* and what actually existed or could be observed in Weimar society: *Mabuse* is indeed one of those films in which contemporary “lusts” are put on display and critiqued, not only through a realistic and recognizable depiction of contemporary issues, but also through fantasy, metaphor, and mimicry, which underscore and make visible the film’s critical representation of the Weimar Republic. *Mabuse*, therefore, is neither a mere depiction of the times nor pure fantasy; it combines both to create a social critique of modernity, which enables particular kinds of mental and physical illness and an undesirable form of femininity,

the depiction of which results in the appearance of the protofascist aesthetic, before it was appropriated by the Nazi Party.

While *Mabuse* critiques society through its escapist plot, mountain films, including *Weißer Hölle*, use visual escapism, found in the aesthetic of the film rather than the plot, primarily in the beautiful and monumentalizing shots of mountains, clouds, and hikers struggling against the background of a massive mountainside, making available a world unattainable for many: “With sensational visuals Fanck’s early films showcase the skiers’ skills and power of will to conquer the icy peaks. Even though these [early Fanck] films had no plot, the theatres were filled to capacity when Fanck showed them in his hometown of Freiburg, at the foot of the Black Forest” (Majer-O’Sickey, “The Cult of the Cold and the Gendered Body in Mountain Films” 375). Discussions of Fanck’s work usually prioritize the aesthetic qualities of his mountain films over the psychological themes or social critiques presented in his work; they also mention that the mountain films were shot on mountainsides (as opposed to within a studio). By comparing the fantastic plot and familiar or close-to-home imagery of *Mabuse* with the fantastic imagery and the more realistic plot of *Weißer Hölle*, I would like to call attention to both films’ use of escapism and tension between plot and image to convey societal critique without resorting to didacticism or sacrificing entertainment value. While *Mabuse* criticizes society by exaggerating it within an urban setting, the mountain setting of *Weißer Hölle* allows the new Weimar society to be tested outside of the modern, urban milieu. The depiction of its failures in both settings comprises the critique of both films.

Despite (or because of) their realism, however, Fanck's narrative mountain films play a crucial role in the development of a fascist aesthetic throughout the Weimar and Nazi eras. Kracauer recognizes the role of the mountain film in facilitating the transition between protofascist and fascist cinematography:

The surge of pro-Nazi tendencies during the pre-Hitler period could not better be confirmed than by the increase and specific evolution of the mountain films... The film [*Stürme über dem Montblanc*]... pictures the horrors and beauties of the high mountains, this time with particular emphasis on majestic cloud displays. (That in the opening sequence of the Nazi documentary *Triumph of the Will*, of 1936, similar cloud masses surround Hitler's airplane on its flight to Nuremberg, reveals the ultimate fusion of the mountain cult and the Hitler cult..." (Kracauer 257-258)

Kracauer uses the cloud formations as an example of the way that the *Bergfilme* anticipate visual cues in Nazi films, but this is ultimately an unreliable way to identify a proto- or pre-fascist aesthetic, let alone explain the phenomenon of the development of the fascist aesthetic over the decades spanning the Weimar and Nazi eras. The occasional visual reference alone is not representative of a political or aesthetic movement, but rather, the repetition of a visual reference indicates agreement among artists (not necessarily towards a common goal, but a shared filmic language is indicative of a common motivator).

Later studies have identified the mountain's pluralistically symbolic function in Fanck's social commentary, expressed through the *Bergfilm*. In her discussion of female bodies in Weimar society as symbols of industrialization and ambiguous

sexual identity, Ingeborg Majer-O'Sickey finds that, despite the distance of the mountain film's setting from modern cities, critiques about urban spaces are still to be found, and are connected with discourse on female sexuality: "Thus we see the new discourses of the urban space interjected into the mountain film in the guise of insecure characters (the woman and the weaker of the male duo) that are, more often than not, portrayed as the trespassing Other into hyper-masculinized mountain spaces" (Majer-O'Sickey, "The Cult of the Cold and the Gendered Body in Mountain Films" 378). Although my reading of the film interprets mountains as feminized and therefore villainized spaces in the *Bergfilme*, Majer-O'Sickey's interpretation is also plausible, given that Weimar society saw the Othering of gender roles for men and women alike. Both interpretations confirm the depiction of femininity as something dangerous: the mountain as a feminized space is analogous to the *femme fatale* archetype, while the mountain as a masculine space into which women can trespass denotes a weak masculine presence compared to the trespassing feminine one.

Lang's *Mabuse* does not clearly gender spaces the way that Fanck's *Weißer Hölle* does. It also does not oppose nature and modernity through juxtaposition, the way that Fanck does in *Weißer Hölle*, but rather, it uses supernatural motifs in the place of depictions of nature, while criticizing urban settings and modern society. The relationship between nature and modernity is different in this film than the depiction of this binary in Fanck's film, in that the natural is not directly referenced or visualized, but rather, is symbolized through the supernatural elements in the film. Mabuse's supernatural powers manipulate the modern world. Visual signs make Mabuse's role in the chaos of the stock market clear, while making use of an early

form of the fascist aesthetic, by which a single figure is the sole point to which the eye is drawn: he stands above the rest of the men, calling out occasionally that he is buying and selling, and after the exchange closes, his face is superimposed over the room, the floor of which is littered with papers from the day's activity.



*4 - Mabuse's disguise (left) fades away (right) as his superimposed face looms over the stock market.*

The gaze motif is repeated throughout the film to signal various aspects of supernatural activity. Mabuse's face is fixed in an unblinking gaze when he wreaks havoc at the stock market or forces Hull to lose at cards. In another card-playing scene, a character is distracted by the words "Tsi Nan Fu," the name of a Chinese city, which appear before him, replacing the numbers and suits on cards or popping out from behind piles of cards, after Mabuse flashes a magical pair of glasses (implying, then, that the supernatural gaze can be mediated by an accessory which allows those with impaired vision to see, although Mabuse's earlier meddling proves he does not need this). When Mabuse acts as Weltmann, a hypnotist, he uses a glass and, once more, the words "Tsi Nan Fu" to hypnotize an audience member; he continues to gaze without blinking, and the audience member is allowed to see

through Mabuse's disguise, temporarily. Throughout the film, gazes are related to the supernatural through the theme of hypnosis. Modern people, especially men, as represented by Mabuse's victims, cannot fight against the supernatural in any way; they succumb to those powers swiftly. The supernatural powers are depicted as more potent than modernity and its new technology, providing a criticism about the rapid advancements of Weimar society. The film does not necessitate a return to traditional values, either, but the potency of the supernatural suggests that, despite humanity's efforts to make progress, there will always be some irresistible obstacle which hinders progress.



5 - *The séance.*

Mabuse is not alone in his pursuit of the supernatural, or in his use of gazing or looking. Toward the end of part one, there is a séance held in the Told residence. The scene is introduced by an intertitle, “Die andere Welt...” (“The other world...”).

Everyone at the table has both hands on its surface, with their eyes cast down, while the medium has hers cast upwards, with only the whites of her eyes visible. She announces there is a spirit present, and someone at the table turns the lights on. The Countess excuses herself from the ceremony, identifying herself as that strange presence, and explains to Mabuse, while smoking a long pipe, that she finds everything related to the modern world boring; he responds by explaining his preference to meddle in everyday lives and destinies.



6 - The Countess smokes a long pipe while explaining to Mabuse that she finds the modern world boring.

While a séance may seem to belong to the supernatural realm, rather than the modern realm, the ceremony was representative of a connection between the two realms and became a popular practice during the Weimar era, made possible by female mediums, whose mediating powers were synonymous with the ambiguous social role of the *Neue Frau* (“New Woman” (Hales 319). The *Neue Frau* was an



archetype of woman who exercised newly-gained rights after Weimar society adjusted to post-war life: during World War I, women remained at home and, as their husbands died or suffered permanent injuries, they found new ways to express, and provide for, themselves, especially after the war. German women first gained suffrage in 1919, and they fought for abortion rights, eventually winning them. These moves towards independence from the male breadwinner, along with more androgynous fashion styles, were perceived as threatening to the existence of the heterosexual male, a plight which finds sympathy in the séance scene in *Mabuse*.

A complex system of “Othering” occurs in this scene, in which séances are not only performed by “Others,” but there are also boundaries drawn between those who fit into that “Othering” (the medium, especially, with her heavy eye makeup and dramatic eye rolls and shoulder jerks) and those who do not, yet are still “Other” to the audience (such as the Countess, who proclaims she cannot relate to, or be interested in, the mysticism of the séance or the modern day). The intersection between the Othering of women and of the supernatural serves to enhance the strangeness of each; women are Other because they dabble in the occult, and the occult is Other because it is a feminine act. In *Mabuse*, the séance is interrupted and the audience does not actually view the theatrics of the ceremony, an intervention from Lang suggesting a skepticism towards female supernatural powers, or a hierarchy in legitimacy (while Mabuse’s powers are used frequently and effectively, the medium’s powers are never shown, but rather, are immediately debunked, as the “fremdes Element” (“alien element”) at the table is actually the Countess). The

séance scene is just one way in which Lang participates in the binary depiction of the sexes, which ultimately privileges men over women.



*7 - A glutton shovels food into his mouth, a fork in each hand.*

While Mabuse's powers expose the weaknesses of modern technology and social constructions, the background characters further the critique of urban settings. The film spends little time showing society outside of the slums and clubs, giving the impression that there either is no other society, or that anything outside of what is depicted is not noteworthy. Toward the beginning of the film, a drunkard stumbles through an alleyway while an old woman knitting in a doorway confronts him for his behavior. Cheating at cards is an infrequent, yet severely punished behavior. Throughout the film, slovenly men are shown in theaters, overly excited by Carozza's dance, or in restaurants, eating too much. Similarly, the audience watching the film is indulging in a stimulating bodily experience, represented by the Countess's role as an observer in the film. Detective von Wenk even asks Countess Told why she spends her time in the company of cheats, prostitutes, and gamblers: "Wie kommt eine Frau wie Sie in diese Umgebung? – Zwischen Schieber, Spieler, und Dirnen?..." ("How does a woman like you get into such company – among pushers, gamblers, and prostitutes?") She explains that observing this lifestyle is healthy for her: "Wir haben

müdes Blut, Herr von Wenk! Wir brauchen Sensationen ganz besonderer Art, um das Leben ertragen zu können!” (“I have become sluggish, Mr. von Wenk! To rise to life, I require strong sensations.”) They both watch a Russian woman, devastated over the gambling loss of a pearl necklace from Tiffany, panic at the card table, which the Countess observes with particular glee: “Wollen Sie Charakterstudien machen? Dann schauen Sie die Russin an... Wenn sie verliert, ist sie fabelhaft!” (“Do you want character studies? Then look at that Russian woman – when she is losing, she is fabulous!”) In this scene the audience, Countess Told, and von Wenk share a position of gazing: the gaze of the characters upon this part of society is no different from ours. The implied social commentary in the film is twofold: that the upper classes observe the struggles of the lower classes for entertainment, while the lower classes engage in undesirable behaviors like gambling, drinking, and taking drugs.

*Weißer Hölle* also features an untamable nature, the mountain, against which modern technology is useless. This is made especially clear with the appearance of Ernst Udet, a World War I flying ace whose role is a symbol of “underlying efforts by nationalist circles of Weimar society to break the perceived crisis caused by the ‘shackles of Versailles,’ especially with regard to the limitations imposed on a future German air force” (Wilms 169). Wilms interprets the characteristics of flying aces in Fanck’s films as inspiring for viewers, rather than as an example of the failures of modern technology: “the aviator gave the war a new face and a masculine ideal: one that fused the fast-moving plane, the machine gun, and the chivalrous individual fighter pilot into a deadly apparatus characterized by tempo, mobility, and unrivaled vision” (Wilms 176). However, a tension exists between the heroics of the flying ace

and his ineffectual attempts to save the main characters in the film. Udet stars as himself in the film, flying loop-the-loops and dropping goods to the climbers, scenes to which Fanck dedicates significant time. At the beginning of the film, Udet successfully drops a care package for the newlyweds nearly at their feet, but towards the end of the film, his stellar flying does not successfully get supplies to the stranded climbers. They are rescued instead by climbers with relatively low-tech climbing gear (when compared to an airplane): they are armed with ropes, pickaxes, and crampons, which emphasizes the theme of technophobia in the nature/modernity binary. During their rescue, the storm on the mountain continues, showing that the natural weather patterns cannot truly be bested, but rather, that man can persist against those harsh conditions when he uses older technology; new technology, like planes, is ineffective in this particular struggle. Underlining the ineffectiveness of technology is a theme that persists in Weimar films, and is repeated in the later films during and after the Nazi rise to power.

Both films exhibit multiple examples of mental and physical prowess and weakness, which correspond to social expectations of fitness or illness in Weimar reality. In *Mabuse*, characters are driven to madness on various occasions by Mabuse, and he himself becomes mentally unwell at the end of "Inferno." Lang repeatedly uses superimposition to recreate the hallucinations that the characters see, in scenes that depict mental illness provoked by Mabuse's powers. Making the "hallucinations" of characters (most of whom are under Mabuse's influence) visible to the audience forces the viewer to be immersed not only in the diegesis, but also in a particular form of viewing in which visibility and invisibility play central roles. During part one, a

card player is enchanted by the phrase “Tsi Nan Fu”: the words are superimposed to appear on and beneath the cards, disappearing temporarily when the player attempts to cover them up with the cards in his hand and forcing the player to lose his concentration, and eventually, the game. At the end of the second part, superimposed figures surround and haunt Mabuse, signaling hysteria from the overwhelming guilt of his crimes, such as his exploitation of blind people for his counterfeiting business. In other scenes, the line of sight for the audience is restricted as the film is edited to shrink the viewer’s scope, another example of the emphasis on a single figure, central to the fascist aesthetic.



*8 - Darkness from the top and bottom shrink the field of vision so that only Mabuse's staring eyes are visible (compare with figures 12 and 17).*

For example, when Mabuse first uses his Tsi Nan Fu trick, he is seen in the center of the scene, and, while the camera tracks in on his face, the rest of the scene fades to black, so that the viewer (who, while watching this, is sharing the perspective of the hypnotized man), has nowhere to look but into Mabuse’s eyes. The audience is given

a glimpse into this lapse in mental wellness of the character, implying that Mabuse's supernatural powers are so effective that they can cross the boundary into the reality of the viewer, a boundary already crossed by the thrill-seeking viewer.



9 - Darkness encroaches from the left and right, shrinking the field of vision so that only Mabuse's victim is visible.

The question of physical and mental health also plays a central role in *Weisse Hölle*, where Fanck makes it clear that only particular kinds of fitness are effective in the mountain range. By symbolically aligning femininity with the mountain setting, Fanck's film codes mountain settings as female, while positing femininity as a threat to masculinity. Numerous scenes show a narrow range of bodies climbing the mountain, such as the younger bodies of the Frankfurter climbing club, or the adult bodies of the three main characters. Hans's lack of physical fitness to lead the group as they climb leads to disaster, as he breaks his leg and therefore not only becomes completely unfit to climb, but also forces the other two characters to stop their progress. Their dire situation as they await rescue leads to a deterioration in Hans's mental health, made obvious by his slack face and suicide attempt. The divisions between wellness and illness intersect with those between masculinity and femininity in *Weisse Hölle*. It is noteworthy that Maria, the female lead, endures the adventure in the mountains and remains unscathed, marking her as the heroine, the conqueror of the mountain. She neither sustains injuries nor suffers from mental illness as a result

of the journey. Ironically, before the climb begins, Dr. Krafft warns her not to climb, because “Das ist nix für ein Mädchen.” (“This is not for a girl”).



10 - In Weiße Hölle, crevasses are extremely abstracted, such that they appear vaginal (compare with figure 14).

The stereotypical strength of masculinity in general is questioned in this film, a reflection of the weakened masculine presence in Weimar society, clearly demonstrated by Hans’s insecurity when in the company of Dr. Krafft as well as by his later inability to physically and mentally endure the crisis on the mountain: when he decides to climb the mountain, he intends to leave Maria behind in order to prove himself: “ich gehe mit Dr. Johannes die Nordwand versuchen, denn es läßt mir keine Ruhe – ich will zeigen, daß ich auch was kann.” (“I’m going with Dr. Johannes to attempt the north face, because it leaves me no peace. I want to prove that I can achieve something, too.”) Maria, by contrast, upon deciding to join the men, has nothing to prove, but only wishes not to be alone: “Ihr könnt mich doch nicht allein auf der Hütte lassen – Ihr müsst mich mitnehmen!” (“You cannot leave me alone in

the hut – you have to take me with you!”). Maria’s hardiness in the face of adversity brings her to the center of the conflict in the film; the men must battle against the dangerous conditions on the mountain, which indirectly translates into a struggle for Maria’s affection. She and the mountain become nearly synonymous, confirming that Maria’s feminine physicality, while leading to the physical and mental destruction of the men (Dr. Krafft and Hans, respectively), is the superior kind of mental and physical well-being which can survive in the antagonistic mountainside.

While empowering for the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, this depiction of women in *Weißer Hölle* is rather negative, in that it reflects the independence of Weimar women in such a way that the men in the film are disadvantaged. Maria’s wandering eye is depicted as the root of the conflict and Hans’s masculine insecurities, exasperating physical disability (he is already an inexperienced climber, who then becomes entirely unable to climb) and inducing mental illness through her hypnotic gaze, which is not unlike Mabuse’s gaze (Hans’s extreme jealousy leads to reckless behavior, and the desperate situation on the summit pushes him to consider suicide). Maria’s control or mastery of the mountainside (and manipulation of men through her gaze) is similar to themes of conquest that are heavily emphasized in fascist films, although *Weißer Hölle* depicts this domination as something to be feared, rather than something to be revered.

*Weißer Hölle* has a single female character, while *Mabuse* has two female protagonists (there are other female characters, but their roles are minor). The women of *Mabuse* are relegated to sidekick roles, while the men are the central characters; the women act for the benefit of the opposing male leads, Mabuse and von Wenk, or



are visual objects for both the diegetic and the cinema audiences. Carozza's dance scene at the beginning of "Bild der Zeit", and the exaggerated approval of the mostly male audience (including the exaggerated disapproval of the female audience vis-à-vis the men), has little bearing on the plot, although it does provide some context to the audience. The stage is set with backgrounds and enormous props that recall key elements of Expressionism, and Carozza's performance is an example of expressionist dance, confirming that the scene depicted does indeed take place in Weimar-era Germany. A scene at the beginning of "Inferno" shows a rare instance of female bonding. The Countess visits Carozza in prison, attempting to gain her trust so that she will aid in the capture of Mabuse. Carozza eventually commits suicide, as she has given up trying to win Mabuse's affection and would only continue to be the target of interrogation if she was still alive. The attempt at bonding or friendship between the two women ultimately cannot be understood as feminist solidarity; each woman is pitted against the other, operating for the benefit of her respective man and not for the benefit of the other woman. Sexual difference plays an opposite role in *Weißer Hölle*. While women are sidekicks in *Mabuse*, the only living woman in *Weißer Hölle* has a central, leadership role (both roles, however, are rather sexist, in that they reinforce stereotypical gender roles of Western society, in which men are supposed to be powerful leaders, while women are supposed to be passive followers). Maria's alignment with nature makes her as formidable as the mountain and its treacherous weather: she alone withstands the storm at the end of the film unscathed, while the men are defeated by it. Hans and Dr. Krafft compete for Maria's affection, trying to

best each other as the most masculine. After the newlyweds first meet Dr. Krafft, he goes outside of the hut to chop down a large dripping icicle.



11 - Dr. Krafft swings an axe to chop down the phallic symbol.

This is clearly a symbolic emasculation, since in the prior scene, when the couple encounter Dr. Krafft for the first time, a shot/reverse shot of Maria's admiring face and her husband's grimace makes Hans's jealousy towards the very masculine stranger obvious. Femininity is construed as threatening and manipulating in this film, especially through its use of symbols; the chopped icicle was previously hanging on a space that is typically coded as feminine, emphasizing the idea that Maria's capability to perform in masculine ways is a threat to the men in the film, whom she does not need. Maria's desiring gaze upon Dr. Krafft has a hypnotizing effect on Hans, similar to the effect of Mabuse's gaze upon his victims; these gazes cause characters to self-destruct, either through eager attempts to display power or through socially unacceptable behaviors (in the case of the *Mabuse* film, cheating at cards).



*12 - Maria's gaze eventually turns from Dr. Krafft to the audience (compare to figures 8 and 17).*

In the protofascist aesthetic demonstrated by these two films, binaries are employed to create a tension between opposites, in which one is favored over the other: nature reigns over modernity, the physically and mentally fit survive the plot, and women are either subservient to men or depicted as a threat to masculinity. These themes persist through German film during the Nazi takeover of Germany and in the years immediately before the beginning of the second World War because they were effective in conveying societal ideals that lost no traction between 1922 and 1938. Lang's use of these binaries is not an indication of any fascist sympathies on his part, but rather, a sign that his aesthetic preferences were shared by other filmmakers of his time, some of whom were sympathetic (however ambiguously, as in the case of Fanck), to the political goals of the Nazi party. *Mabuse* and *Weißer Hölle* lay the foundation for the development of the fascist aesthetic by providing examples of how one can comment upon contemporary societal changes with filmic language.

### Chapter 3: Prefascist Aesthetic: *Das blaue Licht* (1932) and *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (1933)

Each of the films to be discussed in this chapter was released in the transitional period straddling Weimar and Nazi Germany, a significant time in German film history. The previous decade witnessed an increase in the politicization of cinema, a trend that gained momentum especially after 1933. This politicization brought into sharp relief the binaries outlined in the previous chapter: the poles of nature and modernity, physical and mental illness and wellness, and masculinity and femininity continue to clash against one another—favoring the former over its respective latter—in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Das blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*, 1932) and Fritz Lang’s *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933). While films produced before 1933 toyed with the relationship between reality and filmic representation through escapism, these films made around 1933 focused on more direct or intense depictions or representations of reality.

During the Nazi rise to power in Germany, the aesthetic of mainstream cinema underwent few changes, despite advances in the technology used in the industry, evident merely in the general improvement of the quality of images and the newly available synchronization of image and sound. Leni Riefenstahl experimented with lenses to obtain just the right visuals and lighting, turning to outside sources when the materials available in Germany would not suffice: “[S]he had portrait lenses sent from Hollywood, because at that point the close-up was more technically perfected in America than in Germany... She had the German film company Agfa develop a new film stock (the so-called R stock), which she could use to film night

shots – difficult to light in the mountains – during the day, with the help of certain light filters” (Trimborn 43–44). While transitioning from actress to director, a transformation seen in *Das blaue Licht*, Riefenstahl played a role in improving the filmic image through experimentation as described above, but she also played a role in the development of the fascist aesthetic, building upon a foundation set during the Weimar era.

At about the same time, Lang was working on *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*, which would be his final film made in Germany. Despite its eventual ban by the Nazis, *Das Testament* shares aesthetic similarities with *Das blaue Licht*, as well as with other films of the era. Riefenstahl and Lang as directors represent disparate relationships to Nazism: Lang’s fame can be attributed not only to his international success as a filmmaker, but also to his rejection of the Nazi party, evidenced by his eagerness to critique the party with one of his films. As he states in an interview: “At first I refused [to make a sequel to *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*], since I had left Mabuse in an asylum at the end of the last film, and I didn’t know how to get him out. I only accepted when I realized that there was the possibility of a commentary on Nazism in the subject of an asylum director hypnotized by his own sickness” (Berg 55). Much contemporary research, meanwhile, debates Riefenstahl’s enthusiasm for her renowned filmmaking completed in collaboration with the party. This conversation, as I have already explained, is not the most productive way to examine continuities between her films and the films of Lang and Fanck; Riefenstahl was not pressured into making propaganda films any more so than Lang was “pressured” to make a thriller or Fanck was “pressured” to make a mountain film (see Sigmund, Trimborn).

Regardless of their relationships to the Nazi party, Lang and Riefenstahl use similar filmic language to convey critiques about modernity, mental and physical wellness and illness, and femininity.

The popularity of the Nazi party and the politicization of cinema developed concurrently, making the interpretation of a nascent fascist aesthetic in films released in the transitory stage between Weimar and Nazi Germany crucial. Indeed, the Nazis commissioned both Arnold Fanck and Leni Riefenstahl to make films, resulting in a thematic and aesthetic continuity. Both Fanck and Riefenstahl borrowed storylines, characters, and images not only from the escapist Weimar films, but also from 1930s Lang, who refused to work with the party, and from their own aesthetic vocabulary, developed in the pre-1933 films.

*Das blaue Licht* is Riefenstahl's last film before committing to a career as a Nazi propagandist, representing multiple changes for the filmmaker: from actress to director, from fictional work to propagandistic "documentary" work, and from ostensibly unpolitical filmmaking to blatantly political filmmaking. *Das blaue Licht* is particularly important due to Riefenstahl's role as both director and actress, in which she is "split into the possessor of the gaze and the gazed upon (actor and acted upon)" (Majer-O'Sickey, "The Cult of the Cold and the Gendered Body in Mountain Films" 372). This double-duty would not be repeated by Riefenstahl until *Tiefland* (eventually released in 1954), because, during the interim, she dedicated herself to the filmic needs of the Nazi party, which included the strategic depiction of rallies, speeches, and the Olympic games. Even before her work for the party, her directorial debut features elements of the fascist aesthetic that were visible in earlier films

(monumentalization and the glorification of a single character return here), and she would eventually perfect the usage of these visuals, such that she is known for these things above all else.



13 - Junta descends from the mountain early in the film, during the arrival of Vigo. She is dwarfed by cliffs and boulders (compare to Figures 2 and 3).

*Das blaue Licht* takes place in the Dolomites and in a nearby village, in which the villagers are wary of Junta (Leni Riefenstahl). The film is chock-full of symbols of femininity: while Junta can climb the local mountain with ease, the villagers cannot perform this feat and therefore cannot share in the apparent joy or comfort of the mystical crystals that adorn the mountaintop and shine in moonlight (notably, it is the light of a full moon that enters a cave in order to create this glowing effect). The villagers are drawn to the treacherous climb, but lack the skill to complete it, and subsequently fall to their deaths. A Viennese visitor to the village, Vigo (Mathias Wieman), accomplishes the climb with Junta, and he brings the knowledge of the correct way to climb to the villagers. The villagers take advantage of the situation and



clear the cave of all its crystals, to the dismay of Junta, who commits suicide by climbing to the very top of the mountain and releasing her grip at the summit.

Prior to *Das blaue Licht*, Riefenstahl had acted in lead roles in many of Arnold Fanck's *Bergfilme*, including *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*, 1926), *Der große Sprung* (*The Great Leap*, 1927), *Die Weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The White Hell of Piz Palu*, 1929) and *Stürme über dem Montblanc* (*Storms over Montblanc*, 1930). Due to the amicable relationship between Fanck and Riefenstahl as director and actress, it is unsurprising that Riefenstahl's first film would borrow aesthetic elements from her mentor's oeuvre. *Das blaue Licht* loosely follows Fanck's *Bergfilm* formula, which Gertraud Steiner characterizes as "Stummfilme..., [die] heroische Landschaften [zeigen], Wolkengebilde, nächtliche Fackelzüge, Eisgebilde, Gletscherspalten, Lawinen, und... immer wieder die Bergkameradschaft [preisen]" ("silent films that show heroic landscapes, cloudscapes, nightly torchlight processions, ice formations, crevasses, avalanches, and... always glorify the mountain camaraderie") (Steiner 254, my translation). While it borrows these elements (and others, such as the monumentalization via contrasting human silhouettes against the mountain backdrop), *Das blaue Licht* refrains from giving the mountain too much camera time, preferring instead to focus on the plot and the theme of irrationalism, a key characteristic of the natural realm in comparison to the rationality of the modern world (whereas in Fanck's films, the plot and irrationalism of the characters are consequences of climbing) (Steiner 256). Steven Bach explains the key difference between Fanck's *Bergfilme* and Riefenstahl's film set on a mountain: "Fanck's films were *about* the mountains in the end, the ordeals and

reverence they inspired, while *The Blue Light* was designed to shift attention to the foreground, onto the character [Riefenstahl] had invented for herself” (Bach 70).



14 - Vaginal mountain formations, like the ones in *Weißer Hölle*, are recreated in *Das blaue Licht* (compare to figure 10).

Prioritizing the psyche of the characters over the power of the mountains results, however, in a similar reverence for nature and everything nature represents in opposition to modernity, one of the key binaries to understanding the fascist aesthetic: “The film’s [*Blaue Licht*] romantic images hallow nature’s mystery and impart to the elemental a stirring resonance; the narrative, on the other hand, ultimately renders seemingly inexplicable phenomena both straightforward and transparent” (Pages, Rhiel, and Majer-O’Sickey 157). Thus, the mystical is aligned with the natural, yet is not rendered untouchable or inexplicable; the blue light attracts climbers like a siren song, causing unskilled climbers to die in their pursuit of the natural, but the illusion (that Junta is a witch) is broken when Vigo informs the villagers about the safe path to the summit. Even “modernity,” as infrequently as it appears in the film, is obedient to the magical influence of nature, such as Vigo’s arrival in the village: he arrives in a carriage, climbs out with his luggage, and is in the process of counting his things when the door shuts (seemingly, by itself), and the carriage drives away without him,

while his fellow passengers cast knowing glances back at him. The audience, too, is to a certain extent subservient to the “magic” of Riefenstahl’s photography; for example, with the use of a new film stock, she could shoot at any time of day, but still achieve a look as though she had shot the scenes during nighttime, or, with careful framing she hides, perhaps, a hand pulling on the carriage door, forcing a suspension of disbelief. The use of sound contributes to the power of the natural mountain setting over modern filmmaking and viewing. In a scene in which Vigo brings bread and cheese and inquires about where he might sleep, the music echoes their voices (violin strings are plucked after specific words, matching the pitch of the speakers’ voices), in the same way that the shepherd boy and Vigo call Junta’s name and hear its echo in the mountains. The mountain setting positively dominates the plot, as the echoing is reproduced in diegetic and extradiegetic sound.

Riefenstahl combines images of the supernatural and the tangible; much like her mentor, Fanck, and very much unlike her competitor, Lang, her entire cast remains limited to only doing that which is possible in the real world. Although the village people are suspicious of Junta’s mountain climbing abilities, her abilities are never conveyed in such a way that they might be understood as inhuman (in contrast with Mabuse’s hypnosis, which draws the audience in in such a way that it is analogous to the experience of the characters in the film). Wellness and illness play a much more subdued role in this film than in any of the other films discussed here; Junta’s physical prowess and the irrational suspicions of the townsfolk are the aspects of the film which come closest to depictions of physical and mental health and might be better understood in terms of a less problematic difference between educated

people and uneducated people. Junta is educated in mountain climbing, whereas the villagers are not, but rather, turn to an archaic belief in magic to explain their failings as climbers, resorting to mob violence when yet another villager dies during the moonlit climb. Notably, Junta's ability to climb the mountain is treated as something strange or foreign (a theme one might remember from *Weißer Hölle* – here, too, a woman conquers the mountain), as one villager complains: “Senior... Warum kann die Junta aussteigen, die steile Wand, zum blauen Licht... wenn die Burschen oben stürzen... Die Junta... diese verfluchte Teufelshex'...” (“How can she climb towards the blue light on the steep side of the mountain, while the young boys fall down every time? This Junta, she's the damned devil's witch.”) Junta herself, however, is not immune to the magic of the crystals. When admiring them herself, she seems locked in a kind of trance until she is interrupted by Vigo.



15 - Vigo cautiously approaches Junta, who seems to be hypnotized by the magical crystal.

Also true to the *Bergfilm* genre, and indicative of the fascist aesthetic, is the depiction of men and women in *Das blaue Licht*. Similar to Maria in *Weißer Hölle*, Junta is “Othered” by her prowess as a mountain climber and her affinity for nature, although Junta is eventually defeated by human greed, rather than the men of the

story being killed by the might of the mountain. This reversal of gendered archetypes is not a reversal of proposed values or morals, but rather a reflection of changing societal values. In Weimar society, the Neue Frau archetype was criticized for her masculinity, independence, and unusual fashion in light of the poor condition of the returning soldiers, while Nazi society preferred motherly women for the perpetuation of the “Aryan race.” This film, produced and exhibited during the transitional time between Weimar and the Third Reich, demonstrates the continued othering of women by the rejection of specific “non-feminine” values, although through different means. Junta’s difference from the other characters is highlighted even further by her use of language. Junta speaks Italian, not German; while the villagers seem divided between their use of Italian and German, the German audience would likely have had difficulty understanding her Italian, ensuring her otherness to the audience. The use of sound here is particularly important, especially in comparison with Fanck’s silent *Bergfilme*. In his films, Fanck produced dialog between characters through the use of intertitles, a necessary choice based on the available technology; one of his protagonists, Maria, has a name that sounds Italian, but all of her lines are produced in German in the intertitles; it is therefore unclear if the audience is meant to assume that the characters are speaking German or Italian, or if the intertitles are a translation of the original speech. *Das blaue Licht*, by contrast, is a sound film, and all of Junta’s Italian lines are left untranslated; for any audience member at the time who did not understand Italian, this would have made Junta a double other, as a skilled mountaineer and as a speaker of a foreign language.

The motif of the “nonverbal” Other is just one connection between the Riefenstahl film and the Lang film. In *Testament*, Dr. Mabuse, locked up in a mental health facility, scribbles on page after page, speaking to no one, yet still mysteriously exerting his supernatural influence on people outside of the facility. The sequel to *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* revolves around this mystery: Lohmann returns to solve a new series of crimes, beginning with a phone call from an informant, Hofmeister (Karl Meixner), who is traumatized when he is nearly murdered while reporting a counterfeiting operation. Lohmann is not the only person interested in Mabuse and his schemes; a professor gives lectures and works with another doctor, who is killed by Mabuse’s cronies during his investigation. Mabuse dies in the asylum, but his criminal schemes continue. One of Mabuse’s gang, Thomas Kent (Gustav Diessl), questions his own commitment to Mabuse and confides in his love interest, Lilli (Wera Liessem). Their plot to work against Mabuse is also met with interference from Mabuse’s allies, in which they are concealed in a room with a bomb. It is later revealed that the lecturing professor of psychology, Baum (Oscar Beregi, Sr.), has been possessed by the ghost of Mabuse, causing him to devise a plan to attack a chemical plant and attempt to assassinate Hofmeister. At the end of the film, Baum is admitted to the asylum.

Similar to *Der Spieler*, the setting of this film is primarily urban. Instead of comparing the modern urban world to the natural through juxtaposing scenes, the supernatural realm is pitted against the tangible world through Mabuse’s telekinesis and his haunting presence after his death. As in *Der Spieler*, Mabuse can manipulate people, no matter the distance from or willpower of his victim, baffling and

bamboozling police and scientists alike. A new addition to his powers, however, is his ability to haunt his victims even after his death, when he possesses Baum.



17 - *Mabuse's ghost gazes not only at Baum, but also at the audience (compare to Figures 8 and 12).*



16 - *Mabuse's ghost is rendered as a double superimposed image, making the depiction of a possession possible.*

These supernatural powers are a motif shared by *Der Spieler* and *Testament*, but in the context of a Germany that has seen the rise to power of the Nazi party, these

powers in *Testament* take on a more sinister symbolism, in which they exaggerate Hitler's influence to something larger and less easily controlled than charisma and fear-mongering rhetoric.

A significant scene depicting Mabuse's supernatural powers and haunting takes place in the middle of the film, in which Baum goes through Mabuse's notes, written in a style reminiscent of Expressionist or Dadaist paintings. Baum reads aloud from the notes:

Herrschaft des Verbrechens. Die Seele der Menschen muss in ihren tiefsten Tiefen verängstigt werden, durch unerforschliche und scheinbar sinnlose Verbrechen... Verbrechen, deren Zweck nicht einmal die erfassen, die sie ausüben... Verbrechen, die niemandem Nutzen bringen – die nur den einen Sinn haben, Angst und Schrecken zu verbreiten!

(Empire of crime. Humanity's soul must be shaken to its very depths, frightened by unfathomable and seemingly senseless crimes. Crimes that benefit no one, whose only objective is to inspire fear and terror!)

Before Mabuse's ghost appears to both Baum and the audience, it continues the thoughts laid out in the notes: "Denn der letzte Sinn des Verbrechens ist, eine unbeschränkte Herrschaft des Verbrechens aufzurichten... ein Zustand vollkommener Unsicherheit und Anarchie, aufgebaut auf den zerstörten Idealen in der Welt, die zum Untergang verurteilt ist!" ("Because the ultimate purpose of crime is to establish the endless empire of crime. A state of complete insecurity and anarchy, founded upon the tainted ideals of a world doomed to annihilation."). The ghost duplicates itself, appearing behind Baum, moving a sheet of paper in front of the doctor, and



then sitting in the doctor's place. Both ghosts disappear suddenly, and Baum reads the set of notes before him: „Attentate auf Eisenbahnlinien, Gasometer, Chemische Fabriken.” (“Attacks upon railroad lines, gas storage tanks, chemical factories.”) Here one might assume that Baum has just been possessed by Mabuse's ghost and will carry out the plans laid by Mabuse, another occurrence of the theme of control. This scene is a clear, critical depiction of Hitler and the Nazi Party: they are depicted as creating a senseless empire bent entirely on destruction for the benefit of no one, while taking control of the innocent through the use of some unknown power.

Related to the role of the supernatural in this film is its depiction of sanity and insanity. While *Der Spieler* features mental illness as a result of Mabuse's meddling, *Testament* depicts mental illness as a result of a traumatic event: Mabuse seems to have gone mad from his harrowing experiences in the first film, incapable of speech outside of his scribbles; Hofmeister, similarly, cannot be approached by other human beings without screaming and singing, “Gloria, Gloria! Schön sind die Mädels von Batavia,” (“Gloria, Gloria! Lovely are the maidens from Batavia.”), a result of his trauma from nearly being murdered. In his book *Shell Shock Cinema*, Anton Kaes explains the myriad ways film expressed the woes of soldiers returning home to Germany after the first world war, and rightly mentions that these men find representation in many of Lang's films: “Although Lang never depicted World War I explicitly, his German films are filled with characters who suffer from various kinds and degrees of ‘nervous disorders,’ from *Destiny* (1920) and *Dr. Mabuse* (1922) to *M* (1931) and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933)” (Kaes 152). The suffering of these characters, along with the all-too-obvious depiction of Hitler through Mabuse, creates

a complex portrait of the relationship between the supernatural and tangible realms. What does Lang express when telekinesis is exercised by a traumatized man? On the one hand, it appears as though the typical hierarchy seen in previous films, in which a particular image of mental and physical wellness is given preference above mental and physical illness, has been flipped; even in death, Mabuse has the upper-hand. On the other hand, Lang constructs, in this film and in the films Kaes lists, a complicated yet sympathetic image of mental illness: the audience is supposed to feel a mixture of disgust and pity towards Mabuse, much like they do towards Hans Beckert, the serial child-murderer in *M*. This continuity is compounded by the use of a set design remarkably similar to that used in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, visible to the audience only when the camera is facing from the same position as Hofmeister, himself. Hofmeister, however, cannot be read in this same way as Mabuse; he is undoubtedly a sympathetic character.



18 - Expressionist settings make a comeback in *Testament* and are combined with superimposition to enhance the shared experience of the audience with the patient.



19 - Expressionist settings make a comeback in *Testament* and are combined with superimposition to enhance the shared experience of the audience with the patient.

Lang's repeated use of the same themes and aesthetics present in his previous films can also be seen in the depiction of men and women in *Testament*. The cast of *Testament* is largely male, with just one significant female protagonist, Lilli. Her role is further diminished in importance by the plot, in which the major events of the film are negotiated and completed by the men. Perhaps her most important contributions to the plot are during the flashback, in which she gives Kent money when there are no jobs at the employment office, and during the bomb scene, when she and Kent try every possible method of escape, eventually deciding on flooding the room. Lilli exists solely for the sake of a romantic plotline within the major plot line; she represents an ideal woman in that she longingly waits for Kent, has no qualms about

his prison time (or about the crimes he committed that led to his imprisonment), and her appearance is always feminine, at times bordering on prepubescent: her short hair is nevertheless styled impeccably, and her clothing always shows off her curvy body (without showing much skin). The men in the film are the major characters; they advance the plot of the film with active roles, while the women (Lilli and one of Mabuse's followers) have passive roles (that could probably be removed without changing the plot of the film in any significant way). The male-centric plot leaves little room for female representation or significance of any kind, firmly placing *Testament* on the masculine side of the male/female binary.

In the transitional period around 1933, the fascist aesthetic developed from escapist depictions of reality to more direct, targeted depictions of reality. Lang's continued use of the supernatural motif, which took on a significant new meaning as an analogy for Hitler, or Riefenstahl's borrowing of the *Bergfilm* to make a commentary on the psychology of Weimar society, rather than on societal norms, are examples of continuities between filmic eras. Films like *Weißer Hölle* and *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* set the foundation for depictions of societal values through the binaries of nature/modernity, wellness/illness, and masculinity/femininity. *Das blaue Licht* and *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* built upon those foundations; they continued the tradition of prioritizing depictions of nature, wellness, and masculinity above modernity, illness, and femininity, while projecting contemporary comments on society and politics, such as the "Othering" of women or the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party. Films produced under the Nazi party's direction continued the trend of

politicizing films, appropriating the media for the sake of familiarity, strengthening their production of propaganda.

## Chapter 4: The Fascist Aesthetic: *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937) and *Olympia* (1938)

The immediate pre-war years represent the culmination of the development of the fascist aesthetic, which has its foundation in the Weimar era and saw continual advancement into the late 1930s, after the Nazi party began to create its own films for the purpose of spreading and supporting party ideals. Here, monumentalization, glorification of specific characters, and domination are represented in ways that most closely resemble that which appears in *Triumph of the Will*. In the Weimar films, reality is mediated through escapism, meaning that the fantastic elements and the critiques of social reality were equally visible. The films for the Nazi Party also work with a tension between reality and its depiction. Fanck's *Die Tochter des Samurai* (1937) is a narrative film but takes place in Japan, a place inaccessible for many German viewers, creating once more that sense of fantasy that was achieved in the *Bergfilme*. Yet the protagonist performs a similar role to that of a documentary commentator; she tours urban and rural spaces in Japan, commenting on what she sees. In this regard, *Die Tochter des Samurai* functions almost as an essay film, a quality that it shares with Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938). While *Tochter* was escapist in that it provided German viewers access to a country typically inaccessible to them, *Olympia* was escapist in that it transformed the Olympic games, held within German borders, into a spectacle that celebrated national identity and physical prowess. The only documentary film discussed here, *Olympia* departs from key formal markers of the genre: there is neither a voiceover nor a narrative. Riefenstahl's trademark choreography of the masses of athletes and fans shines through, not only as beautiful

cinematography, but also as a clear example of her mediation of the story of the 1936 summer Olympic games in Berlin: she does not merely document the Olympic games, but instead edits the film in such a way that the film makes a case for the celebration of national identity and duty to one's country, as well as a positive portrait of Hitler, an audience member at the games.

While Leni Riefenstahl is famous for her role as a filmmaker in service to the party, especially with her film *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935), Arnold Fanck's role is more ambiguous. Reading through materials about Fanck provides no unanimous proof of whether he was a party member, a supporter, or an "innocent" caught up in the frenzy that the party inspired. Regardless of the filmmakers' intentions, I consider the completed films, with the understanding that both directors could have abandoned their work with the party, or never begun cooperating with the party at all, as was the case with Fritz Lang and many other artists and writers who fled Germany shortly after the Nazis' rise to power. *Die Tochter des Samurai* and *Olympia* are well-made films, clearly directed with the discerning eyes of artists who cared about their work and the political party for whom they were working.

As with the films discussed previously, *Tochter* and *Olympia* appropriate the three binaries, in service to the Nazi Party, that inform earlier conceptions of the fascist aesthetic (nature/modernity, mental and physical wellness/illness, and masculinity/femininity). However, there is a shift in thematic focus from societal and political problems to the use of these images specifically for the purpose of depicting and supporting Nazi ideals. Previously, in each of the *Mabuse* films, Lang had

attempted a societal critique, with the 1933 film specifically critiquing the Nazi party and Hitler through the use of metaphor. Fanck, in his earlier *Bergfilme*, established ideals about gender roles in a romantic, yet exciting, setting. Riefenstahl, still relatively new to directing when *Olympia* premiered, had previously worked with Fanck as an actress in his *Bergfilme*, borrowing filmic and thematic aspects of his films when she struck out on her own, starring in and directing *Das blaue Licht*. Fanck and Riefenstahl each had the opportunity to bring their individual preferences or styles of filmmaking while still serving the political goals of the party. Fanck repurposed the formulaic *Bergfilm* so that *Tochter* could take place in Japan; the love triangle in this film occurs between two women and a man (as opposed to two men and a woman), the mountain is replaced with a volcano (geologically speaking, this is not an enormous leap to make, but symbolically speaking, the cold mountain compared to the hot volcano creates an entirely different meaning system), and the spectacle of an exotic space (for German audiences) is put on full display (rather than the summit of a mountain, it is urban and rural areas within Japan). *Olympia*, reflects many motifs common to Riefenstahl's other films produced during the Nazi period: the movement of masses of people, the depiction of the Führer, and the focus on national identity are characteristic of her work. While directing films in the Third Reich, Fanck and Riefenstahl reused tropes of their film careers prior to 1933; however, to maintain the caution with which I approach continuities between the Weimar and Nazi eras, I will continue to compare Riefenstahl's work with that of her contemporaries, defining her fascist aesthetic as one which, especially in service of the Nazi party, appropriates Weimar aesthetics.



Fanck's *Die Tochter des Samurai* is a transnational work, made in cooperation not only with Nazi party values and ideology but also with Japanese director Mansaku Itami. After being invited to work in Japan by the film producer Nagasama Kawakita, Fanck and Itami initially collaborated on the film while German and Japanese political officials worked on the Anti-Comintern Pact, in which Japan and Germany (and later Italy, who signed the pact approximately a year later), agreed to protect each other against the "menace" of the Communistic International ("Anti-Comintern Pact"; Rosenstock and Shen 6; Weinstein, "Reflecting Chiral Modernities: The Function of Genre in Arnold Fanck's Transnational Bergfilm, *The Samurai's Daughter* (1936-37)" 34). After feuds over personality and artistic differences, two versions of the film were made: a German version under Fanck's supervision (*Tochter*) and a Japanese version under Itami's supervision (*Atarashiki Tsuchi*, or *New Earth*<sup>1</sup>) (Weinstein, "Reflecting Chiral Modernities: The Function of Genre in Arnold Fanck's Transnational Bergfilm, *The Samurai's Daughter* (1936-37)" 35). Fanck's version begins with Teruo Yamato (Isamu Kosugi) and Gerda Storm (Ruth Eweler) on a ship from Europe to Japan; Teruo is returning to his family after studying abroad in Germany, while Gerda is a journalist, recording his story. At home in Japan, Mitsuko Yamato (Setsuko Hara) is waiting for her arranged marriage with Teruo. Upon his arrival, he announces that he has no intention of marrying a Japanese woman, but rather an Aryan one, causing Mitsuko great distress. Teruo shows Gerda around Tokyo, introducing her to the sights, sounds, and flavors of Japan, while

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<sup>1</sup> This version is exceedingly difficult to obtain, and as such, the research in this thesis is, unfortunately, focused on the German version only.

Mitsuko struggles to accept Teruo's rejection. Mitsuko decides to commit suicide by jumping into a nearby volcano when Teruo continues to reject her. After speaking with his sensei, and after Gerda takes her (rather anticlimactic) leave of Japan, Teruo realizes the error of his ways; he has a duty to his people and his country to marry a Japanese woman, and he rescues Mitsuko at the last moment. Finally, they marry, have a child, and take up farming in Manchuria.



20 - Gerda, the European woman, is frightened by the volcano. Mitsuko, the Japanese woman, is unfazed.

The concept of the power of nature over modernity already present in the *Bergfilm* is played with in *Tochter*, with an ending that suggests a happy marriage between the two forces. Rumbblings from the volcano interrupt pleasant conversations and meals, which is uncomfortable for Gerda, the European visitor. During Teruo's frantic climb to the top of the volcano to save Mitsuko, he first attempts to drive up to the top with a vehicle, which just happens to get a flat tire on the way. He must also cross a lake, first taking off his shoes in order to swim across. Implied here is that Teruo cannot possibly conquer nature with the aid of anything modern (in contrast, Mitsuko, clad in a traditional wedding kimono, climbs the mountain with ease). The volcano exerts its force by rejecting everything modern, permitting only interactions with things that are natural or traditional. Mitsuko plays multiple roles in this film,

not only as mediator between nature and modernity, but also as the mediator between East and West, which is subjected to depiction through the fascist aesthetic. Significantly, it is her silhouette which is contrasted against the mountainside, her body in the foreground against a background of lined-up women, and her emotions which are the object to be gazed upon, especially by the ambassador for the German audience, Gerda.



*21 - Mitsuko's training. A "Western" brand piano didactically reminds the audience of the relationship between the East and the West.*

In another sequence, modernized/industrialized Tokyo is made into a spectacle for the German viewer, who was less likely to have traveled to Japan. This sequence also aligns nature with Eastern traditions, and modernity with Western values. Gerda and Teruo are driven around in a taxi to admire the many lights and marquees, such that Gerda is apparently impressed with the similarity to Germany: "Du, sag mal. Sind wir jetzt in Japan oder sind wir in Berlin?... So habe ich Tokio nicht vorgestellt!" ("Now tell me. Are we in Japan or in Berlin?... I never imagined Tokyo being like that!"). Teruo emphasizes that Japanese culture is capable of embracing the old and the new: "Wir haben zwei Gesichter – ein altes und ein

junges.” (“We have two faces – one old and one young”). After their drive around the city, Teruo and Gerda return to the “Hotel Europe,” where Teruo is informed that his father and Mitsuko are on their way. Gerda, knowing Teruo’s feelings, states, “Arme Mitsuko,” (“Poor Mitsuko”) and the scene cuts to Mitsuko’s crying face while she is sleeping; another cut shows a montage of Teruo’s departure from Japan and Mitsuko’s training to become the ideal wife while he was away. Her training includes a mixture of Western and Eastern skills, as well as a mixture of domestic skills (for the benefit of her future husband) and skills for her own betterment: she learns German, dances, cooks, rows, swims, shoots arrows with a bow, gardens, sews (by hand and with a machine), makes tea, cleans, practices fighting with swords, does Ikebana,<sup>2</sup> and plays music (koto<sup>3</sup> and piano). Through depictions of Japan (the lights, the Noh performance, and the volcano scene, in particular) and through Mitsuko, the combination of Western and Eastern aspects seems to coexist in an uneasy harmony. Mitsuko, as the ideal wife and woman, is able to mediate both worlds, while Teruo interprets these things as existing in opposition to each other. His decision to marry Mitsuko is representative of the only possible way to reconcile his yearning for a Western or Aryan wife with his national duties to marry a Japanese woman and to have a Japanese family. Because Mitsuko has been trained in Western and Eastern arts and languages (and because the actress herself may have had Asian and European heritage, so that her appearance was an ambiguous mix of Japanese and possibly

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<sup>2</sup> The art of flower arrangement, an ancient art form

<sup>3</sup> A plucked-string instrument with 13 strings, of Japanese descent

German), she represents a compromise between Teruo's apparently incompatible desires for the Western and the Eastern (Haukamp 14).



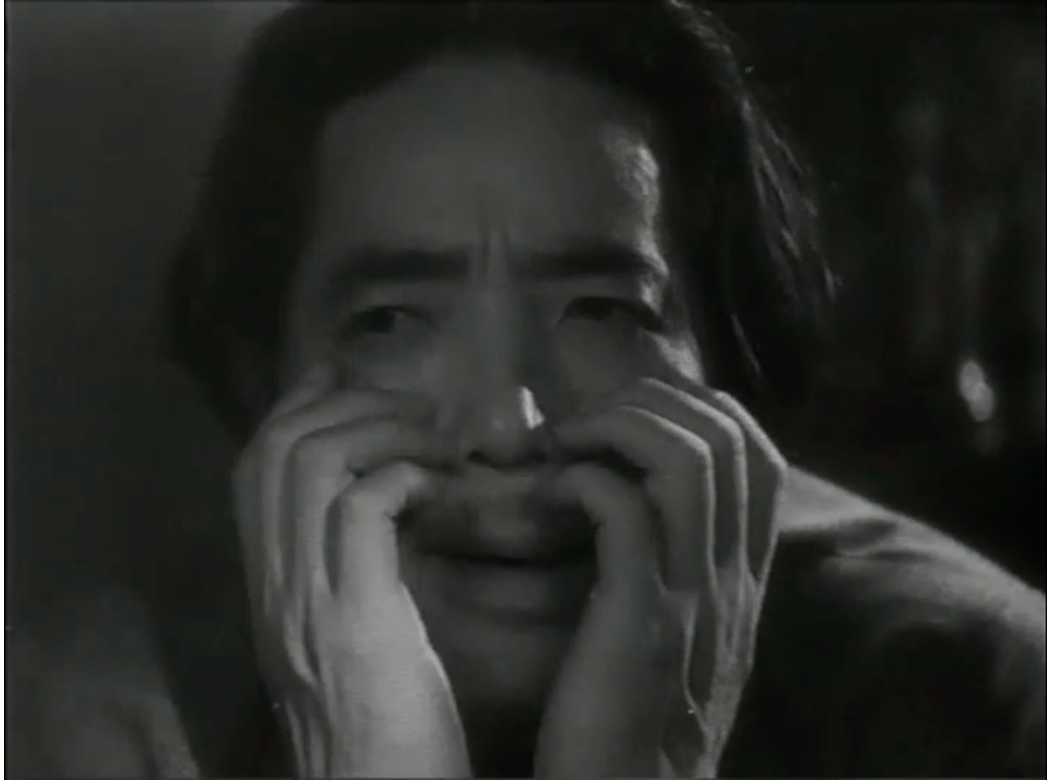
22 - Mitsuko's training. Mitsuko exercises with a cohort of young women (compare to figure 25).

The trope of fitness and wellness is continued from the pattern set by Fanck's earlier *Bergfilme* in *Tochter*. While the cold, beautiful mountain was previously representative of the power of German women over men (as well as a plot in which rationality plays a role in the conquering of the mountain), the hot, menacing volcano

is representative of a self-destructive tendency of the Japanese people, a result of an irrational and emotional outburst. Mitsuko's decision to commit suicide is not attributed to any kind of mental illness or extreme reaction to rejection, but rather, a feminine national identity, in which the temper of the women of Japan is comparable to the temperament of a volcano, as Mitsuko's German teacher explains to Gerda: "Was schlummert in diesen kleinen japanischen Frauen, das gleiche vulkanische Temperament wie in den Männern dieses vulkanischen Landes, und einmal, entweder bricht der Vulkan aus, oder... Oder sie stürzen sich hinein." ("In these small Japanese women lies dormant the same volcanic temper as in the men of this volcanic country and once, either the volcano erupts, or... or they rush into it").<sup>4</sup> Mitsuko's depression contrasts with her physical strength: as seen previously, Mitsuko is capable of participating in many sports and can easily climb a volcano in a dress that restricts the movement of the legs. In contrast, Teruo struggles to climb the volcano, and he does not seem to have received the extensive training that Mitsuko has; he is proficient in writing and language, but has no physical training. He, too, suffers from moments of mental illness, such as in the sequence in which he goes out to drink, and winds up drinking in excess; shots of him drinking sake are superimposed by shots of him grasping his hair and pulling at his face with an expression of distress.

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<sup>4</sup> A better translation of "sie stürzen sich hinein" in this context would be that "they throw themselves into it [the volcano]".



*23 - Teruo is depressed and intoxicated.*

Masculinity and femininity are depicted through idealized gender roles throughout the film, and they intersect with national identity. Women are subservient to men in ways not evident in the other films considered here, while men continue to be the main driving force of the narrative. Gerda and Mitsuko are involved in a love triangle with Teruo (although the relationship between Gerda and Teruo is somewhat ambiguous, as it is not immediately clear whether the characters are meant to be understood as in love). The relationships of the individuals are, however, subservient to their respective nations (and, in effect, are the main vehicle for propaganda in this film); ultimately, Teruo and Gerda conclude that a relationship with one another would be wrong, as they would not be serving their respective nations. While Mitsuko represents the middle ground between Western and Eastern ideals for

Japanese women, Gerda and Teruo represent opposing gender and national identities: Gerda is the European woman and Teruo is the Japanese man. Christin Bohnke reads Mitsuko as a representative of Japan, who is “at once as fragile as a cherry blossom and yet as forceful as a volcano” (Bohnke 82). While it is true that Fanck relies on stereotypical images to symbolize Japan (one rarely sees a Japanese character in this film who is not accompanied by a cherry blossom tree), it is not entirely correct to suggest that Mitsuko is trapped between two kinds of Japanese identity. Bohnke recognizes also that Mitsuko’s physical fitness makes her attractive to National Socialists, but does not attribute this to a difference between the Western and Eastern aspects of her personality and training, but rather, to a kind of schizophrenic Japanese identity (Bohnke 85). Mitsuko’s training sequence is a demonstration of the harmonious relationship between East and West as embodied in Mitsuko. The characters are separated not only by gender and national identity, but also by hemispheres.

Although they never speak directly to one another about why their relationship is wrong, it becomes clear, especially through the words of Mitsuko’s German teacher, that their relationship would be harmful to their national identities: “Die Familie ist die Grundlage unseres Staates, der Berg, auf dem wir aufgebaut haben... Unser Japan, das ist unser heiliges Haus. Unser heiliges Haus ist Japan.” (“The family is the foundation of our state, the rock upon which we have built... Our Japan is our sacred house. Our sacred house is Japan”). The German teacher makes the relationship between the state and one’s family clear: they are inseparable. If Teruo and Gerda were to marry or have children, it would be tantamount to treason; it



would be an additional affront to the Nazi ideal of the Aryan race and to the Japanese claim to Manchurian soil. Furthermore, in her good-bye letter to Teruo, she signs off as “Deine Deutsche Freundin” (“Your German friend”), confirming not only her difference from Teruo as a German woman, but also that anything romantic between them has officially come to an end.

Throughout the film, symbols of feminine duty to the nation are embedded in the land; significantly, during the climax of the film, Mitsuko squeezes through thin, vaginal-like spaces atop the volcano, and at the end of the film, Teruo lays his newborn in the divots left by tractor wheels in the fertile land in Manchuria. The volcano, shorthand in this film for the feminized mountain from the *Bergfilme*, is also a feminine and anti-modern space, while the farmland in Manchuria is made into a metaphor for the propagation of the Japanese people through birth, a feminine act, and the acquisition of land and resources. *Tochter*, although a Japanese-German coproduction, is ultimately a racist celebration of national identity and purity, which borrows from the familiar tropes of Weimar film to support the political agendas that align childbirth and the propagation of a “race” with land acquisition, something that the German and Japanese governments shared. This sharing of ideas can be seen in the choice of a volcano, rather than a mountain, as the setting for the action of the film. Although the erupting volcano is different from the iced-over mountain, they both are the result of tectonic activities. These geographical formations are metaphors for the fascist governments of Germany and Japan which share common ideologies but express them differently.

Similarly to *Tochter*, national identity plays a central role in the first half of Leni Riefenstahl's two-part film *Olympia*, which documented the Olympic games held in Berlin in 1936. The Olympic games inevitably transform national identity into a spectacle, pitting athletic representatives from multiple countries against one another; the totaling of medal counts during the games could be interpreted as a means of determining which country is overall the most athletic. Riefenstahl's films, subtitled *Fest der Völker* (Festival of Nations) and *Fest der Schönheit* (Festival of Beauty), maximize the spectacle of the games in general, by calling the viewers' attention not only to the celebration of nationalities (highlighted by the panning of the camera over maps and landscapes, from which the names of participating countries spring forward), but also to the celebration of the idealized human body, regardless of nationality. In his book *The Seduction of Genius*, Rainer Rother argues that *Olympia* "was, after all, another documentary about a large-scale spectacle rather than a feature film..." (Rother 79). This is true, although this interpretation does not offer a complete view of what the spectacle in *Olympia* is. As the examples I provide later show, the spectacle of the masses is indeed thematized in the film, but other spectacles exist, too: Hitler, athletic bodies, and national identity become spectacles as well. As Riefenstahl's final film before the outbreak of the war (also her last work to premiere in the Third Reich), *Olympia* represents the culmination of the fascist aesthetic in the context of Nazism.

Nature and modernity are seen in this film as a comparison between the games during the era of the ancient Greeks and the contemporary games, in which Riefenstahl seems to suggest that the Germans in particular are carrying on the

tradition of ancient Greece: she repeats the motifs of high modernism (for example, clean and repeating lines, monumentalism), found in the ancient ruins, to suggest continuity between the two empires (ancient Greece and Nazi Germany). Here, nature might be better described as an affiliation with tradition. The title of the film and the opening credits appear as if they had been carved in stone, mimicking the aesthetic of the ancient Greeks and contributing to the historical imaginary of inheriting that aesthetic. In the opening sequence of *Fest der Völker*, the camera pans through multiple sites of ancient ruins, paying special attention to crumbling statues and pillars (some holding up a structure, others standing despite the ruins of the rest of the structure). The opening sequence contains the least amount of documentary material, appearing more like the beginning of a narrative film than of a documentary. The statues seem to come to life as images of people doing shotput or throwing discus are spliced in between the images of statues, not only resurrecting the old traditions but also reaffirming the connection of the modern games to the ancient ones. The costumes of these figures are also very anti-modern, in that they are simplistic and reminiscent of a time before clothing was complicated and mass-produced: men wear thongs while women are seen, breasts exposed, from below, a position denoting reverence for the subject (in this case, an idealized female body). By depicting these people romantically (slow-motion emphasizes the grace of the athletes' movements), Riefenstahl avoids a depiction of the ancient Greeks as primitive in comparison to the civilizations of the 1930s. Images of people doing calisthenics in a circle are a reference to the Olympic rings; eventually, these narrative-esque images give way to

the documentation of the games, as the torch is carried from the ancient people to 1936 Berlin.



24 - Images transition from statues to living people.

The footage that follows the opening sequence in *Völker* consists entirely of game coverage; the successes and failures of all participating nations are depicted. Insofar as it documents an event based entirely on athletic ability, there is no room in this film for the depiction of people who are mentally or physically unwell, a point which is made especially clear by the depiction of the statues in the opening sequence, which eventually come to “life,” creating that connection between the ancient and the modern people. When the ancient Greeks depicted their gods in their artwork, they did so through representations of idealized human bodies, befitting their definition of perfection. However, there are rare instances of physicality in the film that do not fit the Aryan expectations of “fitness.” Jesse Owen’s record-tying and -setting runs in the 100 meters, disqualified due to “wind,” are recorded in Riefenstahl’s film (and, while other disqualifications are also depicted, Owens’s is the only one which is the result of a success, compared with the others, who threw their discus outside of the designated area, for example). Given the Nazi preoccupation

with race, one can understandably be skeptical of this explanation for the disqualification of Owens's record-breaking time. Riefenstahl includes, shortly after Owens's runs, footage of a race with a false start, another example of imperfection in spite of the idealization of the Olympian.

Although each gold, silver, and bronze winner is announced at the conclusion of the footage of a given sport, and although each athlete is depicted positively (in that they are filmed from flattering angles, showing off the achievements of these healthy, disciplined bodies), the national is ultimately granted more importance in this film than the individual achievements of the athletes. After the torch-lighting ceremony, commentators from numerous countries are heard, before settling on the German-speaking commentator for the rest of the film. Gold-winning countries are congratulated with the insertion of a clip from that country's national anthem, while the footage of fellow athletes and audience members shows celebration or sympathy towards the successes and failures of their fellow citizens. What ultimately overshadows the representation of multiple nationalities, however, is the screen-time given to Germany's allies and, in particular, the non-German athletes who used the Hitlergruß.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the women's 80-meter hurdle race, for example, Trebisonda Valla of Italy wins the gold medal, and the scene fades to black after showing her giving the Hitlergruß for nearly ten seconds.

The division of men and women, a characteristic of the fascist aesthetic, is more prominent in *Fest der Schönheit* than it is in *Völker*, which is not, in the strictest sense of understanding these genres, a documentary or a narrative film, but rather an

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<sup>5</sup> The Nazi salute, or, literally, the Hitler salute.

elongated series of montages that puts the beauty of the athletic body on display. In this half of the film, more footage from the games is shown (particularly the more modern ones, such as boxing, sailing, and fencing) alongside clips of athletes training, stretching, and dancing. In one scene, a woman stretches, moving her body fluidly, as if she were dancing. Accompanying this is an extradiegetic track of a single flute playing. A cut reveals more women nearby the first one, and more flutes join in the music. An escalating series of cuts reveals an ever greater number of women in the frame, until the camera pans across an enormous field of women all doing this same exercise routine, in a scene rather reminiscent of the quintessential Riefenstahl shot from *Triumph des Willens*; instead of rows of soldiers standing at Hitler's attention, there is a mass of exercising women.



25 - Women exercise in a field en masse.

This massive depiction of healthy female bodies is significant to the context in which it was filmed, as the ideal Aryan woman was supposed to be healthy enough to propagate the Aryan “race,” a concept symbolized by the multiplying of the single exercising woman into many women and the single flute into multiple flutes in the

music. In contrast to the depiction of women is the depiction of men. While they are also shown in large numbers, acting together as a mass of exercising and marching men, there is the notable exception of a sequence toward the beginning of this half of the film in which the men are shown bathing. In this communal bath, they talk with one another, splash water on each other, and give each other massages, and after bathing, they stretch, train, and play sports with one another. This kind of interpersonal interaction is not only lacking in the depictions of the women, who are performing an exercise routine in tandem, but it is also reminiscent of multiple aspects of ancient Greek culture, such as the relatively open display (compared to the Nazi era) of homosexuality, or of numerous scenes in *The Odyssey*, in which men's bodies are rubbed with oil at the end of a strenuous day or journey. The eroticism of the male body is contrasted with the mechanical movement and depiction of the female body, providing a connection between the nature/modernity binary; while men engage in the physical traditions of the ancient Greeks, women are involved in more modern exercise routines.

While masquerading as narrative and documentary films respectively, both *Tochter* and *Olympia* serve the needs of the Nazi party as propaganda. In *Tochter*, the relationship between Japanese and German culture is depicted in a positive way (such as the friendship between Gerda and Teruo, or their mutual adoration and respect for the other person's culture and society), but it is ultimately clear that the two cultures must remain separate to protect their own (albeit similar, and not entirely incompatible) ideologies. Teruo is reminded of his duty to his nation by his sensei, which is remarkably similar to the Nazi ideology of propagating the Aryan race.

Gerda's role in the film is particularly important for the German audience, who can easily identify with her and her attempts to understand Japanese culture which, by the end of the film, still remain strange to her: she still cannot get used to the frequent earthquakes caused by the volcano, she cannot eat with chopsticks, and she cannot refrain from commenting on any and all similarities and differences between Japan and Germany. In *Olympia*, it is necessary for Riefenstahl to depict multiple nationalities, as that is the nature of the Olympic games, but she does not neglect her duties as propagandist. Her depiction of Hitler is rather flattering: he opens the games with a short announcement, and the people respond with cheers and salutes. He is also seen watching the games, responding similarly to other people in the audience. He smiles and cheers when athletes perform well and commiserates when they do not. He, therefore, is depicted as friendly or approachable; despite being venerated, he is just as relatable as the ordinary citizens who are watching the historical games.



*26 - Hitler enthusiastically watches the Olympic games, expressing joy when athletes perform well (left) and concern when they do not (right).*

Additionally, each foreign (to Germany) nationality is treated exactly the same; no country is given more camera time than another, and no country is filmed in more positive or flattering ways than the others. But, the occasional shot of Hitler (quick



injections of glorification of the Nazi party leader) reminds the audience that he is constantly present and observing, as if he were a kind of omniscient being, keeping an eye on not only “his” people, but also the peoples of the world.<sup>6</sup>

These propagandistic films, released just prior to the outbreak of war, emphasize the importance of national duty while utilizing thematic and aesthetic aspects of previous films to create a sense of familiarity (and therefore a sense of authenticity or authority) for the audience. The binaries prominent in the Weimar era were repurposed (although without significant modification) for use in Nazi films. It was crucial to the success of their campaign for the Nazis to favor nature, fitness, and masculinity over modernity, unfitness, and femininity. By blaming certain aspects of Weimar society for the loss of German identity and power, and offering instead a positive depiction of the opposite of those aspects, the Nazis were able to persuade people through a beloved medium that a change in the opposite direction was necessary. With a return to traditional values and nature, which includes traditional gender roles, and with an emphasis on creating a “healthy” “German” people, Nazism gained traction among the Volk, creating security or faith in the state and the military.

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<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that the first half of the film is called *Fest der Völker* and not *Fest der Nationen*; the former implies a unity among all nations in that they are all comprised of people, while the latter implies sameness on the level of the nation but not on the level of the individuals, who are divided by nationality.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Leni Riefenstahl's success as a filmmaker before and during her service to the Nazi Party makes her an unsurprising representative of fascist aesthetics. She is central to nearly all discussions about fascist aesthetics, and her work continues to be referenced in various forms of media that wish to depict fascism. Her trademark low-angle shots, choreographed masses, and use of lines that guide the eye to the spectacle are easily recognizable. These images and other tropes are not entirely of her own design, however, as many researchers have grappled with the question of similarities in aesthetic choices between the works of apparently non-fascist filmmakers and Riefenstahl. Siegfried Kracauer led by example early on, outlining all those aspects of Weimar film that eerily anticipate the reality of Nazi Germany and using a psychological framework to bridge the gap between the political extremes of the Weimar filmmakers. He refers often to Riefenstahl, using her work as a model against which other works are held in order to determine their relation to fascism. My analysis of the binary themes and aesthetics of individual films expands the discussion beyond a narrow focus on Riefenstahl and minimizes the importance of the biographies of the filmmakers in this field of research. All the films discussed here share in common prejudices against modernity, mental and physical illness, and femininity; likewise, all of them glorify nature, wellness, and masculinity.

By pairing films that are rarely, if ever, compared and contrasted with each other, I have aimed to explain and demonstrate how Weimar aesthetics were appropriated in Nazi films to create a sense of familiarity for the viewership, despite the disparate political milieus before and after 1933. I use the tradition of

periodization within the established scholarship (Kracauer et al.) as a springboard for my own research, but I see 1933 as a transitional year, rather than an abrupt end of the Weimar Republic and a dramatic start to the Nazi era. While pairing films within eras (before, during, and after 1933), I have also given attention to the film's thematic binaries and various aspects of mimesis in order to describe the extent to which each pair contributes to an aestheticization of the political, and to an appropriation of an earlier aesthetic. Proto-fascist films like *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* and *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü*, use fantastic elements to comment upon social and political happenings in Germany, criticizing modernity's meekness when compared to nature's might, celebrating wellness and pitying illness, and positing femininity as a threat to masculinity. Pre-fascist films move towards more realistic depictions of reality, with a different kind of commentary on society: the natural has evolved into the supernatural, wellness is applied more sparingly, and femininity is "Othered" in an attempt to bolster masculinity. The fascist era necessitates depictions of reality which confirm Nazi beliefs, which are based upon flimsy racial and nationalistic premises. *Olympia* and *Die Tochter des Samurai* make further use of the same binaries seen in the proto- and pre-fascist films, indicating Riefenstahl's lack of authorship in this regard. The aesthetic in use prior to 1933 was part of filmic vocabulary, which the Nazis used for the sake of propaganda and indoctrination.

By comparing seemingly disparate films, I am to make the similarities between the films even more obvious. The use of gazes, for example, in both the urban thriller and the mountain film, or the translation of a mountain into a volcano within the *Bergfilm* genre, are glaring similarities amidst the otherwise polar opposite

films from the greatly differing filmmakers Fritz Lang, Arnold Fanck, and Leni Riefenstahl. Lang should not be understood as the creator or predictor of the fascist aesthetic, and Riefenstahl's oeuvre should not be the sole thing around which all discussions of fascist aesthetics revolve. By putting the aesthetic and themes of filmmaking in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich in the center of my discussion, I hope to bring clarity to the fact that the fascist aesthetic developed over time, starting with societal critiques and evolving later into, or being appropriated by, a filmmaking tendency that supported Nazi ideology. Furthermore, in the midst of what may or may not be a "Weimar moment," to borrow Jochen Bittner's terminology, I find that there is no better time to problematize conceptions of fascist aesthetics. If Riefenstahl is not the creator of the fascist aesthetic, but rather the best executor of it, it would be fruitful to investigate contemporary resurgences of fascism or fascist activity in the hopes of identifying, and subsequently removing access to, potential footholds for a 21<sup>st</sup> century fascist aesthetic.

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