More letters on Leni Riefenstahl

14 October 2003

We are posting below two letters in response to a letter from Chicago Sun-Times *film critic Robert Ebert, posted on the WSWS October 9 [*"A letter from Roger Ebert on Leni Riefenstahl*"]*

Mr. Ebert wrote in response to a letter from WSWS reader RG on an obituary by Stephan Steinberg posted on the WSWS on September 15 ["Leni Riefenstahl—propagandist for the Third Reich*"]. In his letter, RG included comments on Ebert's obituary of Riefenstahl—*"Riefenstahl dies at 101; tainted by link to Hitler*"—which was published September 10 in the* Sun-Times.

Dear WSWS,

I did not mean the quote from Mr. Ebert's article to be unfairly selective nor did I mean to directly incriminate him along with those media elements who most actively manipulated public opinion in order to promote the illegal combat now taking place in Iraq. Furthermore, if he (or anyone else) perceived my remarks as an implication that he is an outright apologist for Leni Riefenstahl, then I apologize for any flaws in the way my letter was written. I did not mean to damage Mr. Ebert's reputation in any small manner through a "cheap shot." The phrase "a final and telling piece of fluff" was also flippant and perhaps should have been left out.

I nonetheless stand by my point that Mr. Ebert's article, like nearly all others in the corporate press, excluded serious discussion that might lead readers to note the glaring relevance of Riefenstahl today. In the wake of the Iraq war we have witnessed the complete degeneration of the mass media's ability to function as any kind of "check and balance" on the government. The quote from his article was included in order to supplement this main point, as an example of the treatment the mass media typically gives to historical questions.

Riefenstahl assumes the utmost relevance today. Movies such as *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers* can not be viewed as "just entertainment" any more than *Triumph of the Will* was "art for art's sake." Although not directly state sponsored, these movies serve a definite ideological function. Both recent films follow a similar formula: historical background information is for the most part conveniently ignored, and then "our boys" go into battle. They didn't decisively win in the streets of Mogadishu or in la Drang Valley, but you can forget about what they were fighting for, because at least they fought valiantly. This mindless approach maintains that it was simply about the men fighting next to you, with all political, economic, and historical factors being irrelevant. The problem is that Nazis could employ this approach just as neatly. I had hoped that at least film critics, of all people, would have noted the parallels between Reifenstahl's work and these films, and that they would in some manner attempt to nudge readers towards the contemporary ramifications.

To put the issue of Riefenstahl as simply as possible, Leon Trotsky remarked in his autobiography that "ideas do not fall from the sky." A meaningful discussion of her work is impossible without examining the origin of her ideas in the material world. The quote that I included from Mr. Ebert's article was the closest thing I found in it that provided a hint of an analysis of Nazism. (While the quote is Mr. Ebert's own assertion and can stand alone as a complete thought, I should have indicated that it was part of a longer sentence. It was an easy oversight to make, since the first word in the quote, "Nazism," begins with a capital letter.)

A more in-depth analysis of fascism would observe that it arose in response to the collapse of the world economy in the 1930s. It was not limited to Germany, having also arisen in Italy, Spain, and almost France, indicating that it had more to do with the troubled economy than with mass insanity, a sick German culture, a "bad Hitler," or any other explanation that ignores material reality. Such an analysis ultimately

© World Socialist Web Site

leads back to the economic foundation of society.

Trotsky's observation applies to the ideas being produced by the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) think tank, in the same manner that it does to Nazi ideology. The eruption of American militarism has more to do with current economic difficulties than it does with terrorism.

The mass media may have given Ari Fleischer a blank check to claim that oil was "not a factor" in the Iraq invasion, but Americans have surely not forgotten waiting in gas lines during the oil embargoes. The price of oil, and the currency that oil trades in, makes a significant difference to the American economy. It's also easy enough to dig up some figures and charts which show that the world economy has experienced long-term difficulties since the 1970s, and that America's dominant position relative to its economic rivals has been slipping.

In response to these economic difficulties, "democracy" is breaking down and more authoritarian forms of rule (although not necessarily fascism) are appearing. Elections, which are farcically influenced by massive amounts of money in the first place, can barely be held anymore without the outcome being contested. The proposed Operation TIPS aimed to form a nationwide network of informants, in which telephone men and plumbers spy on people. We were supposed to accept this because it would only target vulnerable minorities, immediately bringing Niemöller's famous passage to mind ("then when they came for me, there was no one left to stand up for me"). No mass media outlet is waging a determined fight against this obvious political trajectory. While the crimes of German media giant Bertelsman during the Nazi era have been dutifully reported, certain sections of the American media have yet to be called to account for their own crimes.

I thus stand by the content, although maybe not the style, of what I wrote. The issue is not the veracity of what was included in most articles I surveyed, but the veracity of what was excluded. The articles about Riefenstahl in the corporate press were superficial, at best.

In closing, I have noted much talk about "freedom" in newspapers. I can't help but notice that while readers have much "freedom" to choose from the wide variety of consumer products that are advertised, they are presented with a shockingly narrow range of political ideas. You'd think that media outlets which devote so much ink to promoting "freedom" for Iraq would be able to spare some in order to give readers the freedom of an additional and genuinely distinct viewpoint. I would love to see the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Mr. Ebert's employer, print an uncensored guest column by a member of the WSWS editorial board, alongside the likes of George Will, Robert Novak, Daniel Pipes, and whatever token "leftists" are included for good measure. I say this not because I have a prejudice in favor of WSWS writers (based on who they are, their race, gender, etc.), but because of their ideas, which are well-researched, well-argued, and distinct. "Freedom" is meaningful choice, and very little of it appears in American public life.

Yet I know that because the business community purchases advertisements in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, such ideas are unlikely to appear there. Likewise, since the Pentagon lent Ridley Scott military hardware, he produced a movie that is amenable to their needs, and the Nazis patronized Riefenstahl in order to obtain "art" that suited theirs. Ideas do not fall from the sky, nor do they land in certain places without reason.

RG

Dear Sir:

First, if Ebert writes that "much of the rally was deliberately staged with the film in mind," then how does the film become "one of the most important documentaries ever made, and by general consent one of the best"?

Also, what does Ebert mean by "cheap shot"? Is he implying that he does not argue that Nazism "was an exercise in mass hypnotism" but states that the film "helps explain" such? I'm not sure how a film can help explain a point that one does not support.

RA

Philippines

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site