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Karin Wieland
Dietrich & Riefenstahl:
The dream of the new woman

Translated by Shelley Frisch

pp. 24-35

Otto Dix had made Anita Berber the quintessence of the decadent 1920s when he painted her iconic portrait, and now it was Anita Berber, of all people, who was clearing the way for Leni Riefenstahl's first stage performance. Berber, who had also been a student of dance at Grimm-Reiter, was a rising star just after the revolution. Frau Grimm-Reiter was planning for her prominent pupil to perform at Blütner Hall, but Berber fell ill and had to cancel. The posters had been printed and the room rented. No one had any idea of how to find someone to substitute for her. Then Leni Riefenstahl admitted that she had been secretly observing Berber during rehearsals and had reenacted her dances in private. Why not stand in for Berber? Alfred Riefenstahl was sent off to a hastily arranged card party, and his daughter hurried onstage. She later wrote that she was exuberant, and the applause following her performance never seemed to end. No one appeared to mind Berber's absence, we are told, and everyone now loved Leni Riefenstahl.[1]

The story did not end well. When her father got wind of what she had done, he sent her away to a girls' boarding school in the Harz Mountains, in the hope that Thale, the "pearl of the Harz," would cure her of any artistic ambitions. In Berlin, the name Thale still had the ring of high society; Thale is where ladies with nervous conditions were once sent.[2] Alfred Riefenstahl wanted Leni to marry a rich man and forget about art. After a year in the Harz, Leni Riefenstahl wrote her father a letter, swearing off art and expressing her willingness to work at his company. However, she insisted on being allowed to continue taking dance classes—purely for fun. Alfred Riefenstahl agreed, and welcomed his daughter to the Berlin office.

Woman who worked as typists in Berlin may have rushed to work every morning, but many dreamed of becoming film stars when they went to the movies in the evening. They had a good grip on their modest lives; they were young, unmarried, and employed. They wore their hair short, smoked cigarettes dangling from cigarette holders in perfect form, and knew their way

[1] Leni Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 16f. In the Cologne dance archives, there are playbills for performances by the Helen-Grimm-Reiter-Schule. For promotional purposes, the names of well-known pupils were also listed here. Leni Riefenstahl's name is not on any of the playbills.
[2] Theodor Fontane portrayed a Berlin society lady seeking rest and relaxation in the Harz Mountains in his novel *Cécile*, which was published in 1884.

around men. Leni Riefenstahl was not like this. She was also young, unmarried, and employed, but she worked in her father's office. Alfred Riefenstahl appeared to be quite pleased that the repentant sinner had returned. In these troubled times, he wanted reassurance that his family was gathered around him. His wife kept house, and Leni and Heinz were right there with him at the company. He had prevailed: he had forbidden his son to work in interior design and had disabused his daughter of her nonsensical notions about dance. He was upholding the principles of a patriarch, even though that was no longer the modern thing to do. Now more than ever, he was intent on maintaining his professional pride, and regarded his family's participation in the business as an expression of firmly ingrained class consciousness.

But he was sadly mistaken. For the first time, Leni Riefenstahl was hoodwinking her father. She had no intention of giving up art and idolizing other performers. Quite the opposite: she wanted to be an idol herself, and was leading a double life. She spent many hours a day on stenography, bookkeeping, and typing, and devoted three days a week to art. Her cheeks shed their chubbiness, and her features were now marked by defiance and denial. She took up sports again and signed up at a tennis club. Her father had agreed to this activity, because tennis was regarded as the sport of the wealthy, and he hoped she would meet a rich man there. Every day, father and daughter took the train to the city. She had long ago stopped trying to strike up a conversation with her father, because he would shut down on the spot, and he had no interest in her plans for the future anyway. Day after day, they sat across from each other in the compartment in silence. The father read the newspaper, and his daughter parked herself in the corner and dreamed. Alfred Riefenstahl sensed her growing discontent. He was exasperated to realize that she was no longer finding fulfillment in her family, their work together in the office, and life in the country. Leni Riefenstahl had discovered the city for himself. Berlin knocked you down or lifted you up; this is where you would sink or swim. An ambitious girl and the hectic pace of the city were a good fit. It was not a moral clash that stood between the father and his daughter; it was the attitude toward life of two different generations. Leni Riefenstahl had come to realize from her father that times had changed. She was the new type, and her father "the fossil, the man who had outlived his day, the man from a sinking epoch who refused to believe

that the tide of the earth had turned."[3] He embraced new technology, but his lifestyle and family values remained firmly patriarchal.

Leni Riefenstahl had grown up with the pride of modern Wilhelmine Germany, but also with the slogans of the *Wandervogel* movement, a youth organization that emphasized hiking, camping, and the spirit of adventure. The previous century had offered a well-ordered world. Age and time had had different dimensions. Being young was equated with a lack of dependability and respectability. All gestures that might have suggested the curiosity or exuberance of youth were avoided, and people as young as forty took pleasure in stylizing themselves as venerable ladies and gentlemen. By contrast, the new generation now claimed that just as the century was young, so were the people in it. The Youth Movement demonstrated its lack of affiliation with the world of their parents. Girls wore their dresses loose instead of tightly laced, and boys preferred open-necked shirts (known as *Schillerkragen*) to starched shirts. Both boys and girls opted for sandals. The vitality of the young body was contrasted with bourgeois life paralyzed by convention. Air, light, and sun liberated young people from the historical deadwood of past eras. The Youth Movement strongly emphasized comradeship. Mastery over one's own body held out the promise of courage, strength, and stamina. Personal experience took the place of reason. To be was to do.[4]

Leni Riefenstahl did not belong to the *Wandervogel* movement; she was too young to join. But like the two friends Walter and Ulrich in Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, she had "just been in time to catch a glimmer of it." This movement did not draw in the masses; it grew no larger than several thousands. Even so, young people were swayed by it: "Something at that time passed through the thicket of beliefs, as when many trees bend before one wind—a sectarian and reformist spirit, the blissful better self arising and setting forth, a little renascence and reformation such as only the best epochs know; and entering into the world in those days, even in coming round the very first corner one felt the breath of the spirit on one's cheeks."[5] It

[3] Peter von Matt, *Verkommene Söhne, missratene Töchter. Familiendesaster in der Literatur* (Munich/Vienna: dtv, 1995), p. 69.

[4] Prominent *Wandervogel* members included Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Jünger, Hermann Hesse, Gottfried Benn, and Martin Buber.

[5] Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities. Volume 1: A Sort of Introduction the Like of it Now Happens*, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 60.

was the spirit of vitality, of nature, and of community. All this, along with praise of technology, pleasure in objectivity, a will to success, and pride in the virtues of craftsmanship, formed the backdrop to Leni Riefenstahl's youth. She, too, felt a breath of this spirit "on her cheeks." The wordless art of the dance was her first bond with the trends of the era. The pioneers of modern dance celebrated their first successes in Berlin.[6] The American Isadora Duncan was the first to appear onstage barefoot and in see-through, Grecian tunics in Berlin.[7] Her admirers were at a loss for words, never having seen anything of the kind; her critics quipped that she was seeking her *soul* with her *sole*. Lovers of classical ballet felt as though they had been duped, and turned their backs on her. To their way of thinking, Duncan's dances were pure dilettantism. German *Lebensreformer* (back-to-nature advocates) and followers of the Youth Movement, however, saw that she was one of them. This impression was confirmed several times over, from her loose garments to her sandals to her reading of Nietzsche. The Germans found a dance concept of this kind, with its blend of Nietzsche, critique of civilization, feminism, nature worship, and spiritualism, irresistibly appealing. Duncan, who embraced the role of the anti-bourgeois, drew in young women from good families who now wanted to learn dance-based gymnastics instead of ballet. In 1904, she opened a school in a villa in Grunewald to train the dancers of the future. "My body is the temple of my art," was her motto.

Leni Riefenstahl cited two names in connection with her career as a dancer: Anita Berber, whose risqué behavior and lust for life had become a role model for girls from good middle-class families, and Mary Wigman, whose school in Dresden she attended in 1923. Mary Wigman, from Hanover, was one of the first dance students of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, who gave lessons in his *méthode rhythmique* in Hellerau, known as the "garden city." His maxim to his dancers was, "Now say it with your body." People needed to find their way back to a harmony of mind and body, a harmony that had fallen by the wayside in the course of civilization. Hellerau was a laboratory for modernity. Kafka, Le Corbusier, Poelzig, Diaghilev, and Rilke visited Hellerau on

[6] "In Berlin, an outdated tradition succumbed to the necessary process of destruction in order to open up the possibility of the birth of a new age. This was a new feeling, one that I had not known before." Maria Ley Piscator, *Der Tanz im Spiegel. Mein Leben mit Erwin Piscator* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1989), p. 77f.

[7] Isadora Duncan was born in San Francisco in 1878. In the 1910s, she became world famous, danced in Paris, and choreographed in Bayreuth. This barefoot dancer from the New World soon grew too old and too heavy. In the 1920s, her art no longer counted for much. In September 1927, she died in Nice during a joyride with one of her gigolos; her scarf had gotten caught in the open-spoked wheels of the Bugatti and broke her neck.

several occasions. Wigman lived there with Ada Bruhn, who would later marry the architect Mies van der Rohe, and with Erna Hoffmann, who would marry the psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn. Jaques-Dalcroze's belief in the natural giftedness of every body went hand in hand with a colossal sense of dilettantism. Anyone could get a diploma to certify his competence to lift other people onto a higher level of consciousness and experience. Every person was artistically gifted, every person could be cured of the harm wrought by civilization, and every person could become someone other than who he or she was. Experimentation trumped tradition. This unbridled dilettantism and the belief in the life-altering power of art made prewar Germany a field of experimentation for the new century.

Wigman found the perfect way to express the prevailing sentiments in the period immediately following the war, when people were fluctuating between euphoria and depression. In both ecstatic theater and *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance), the body was made to speak. Mary Wigman dispensed not only with music, but also with classical ballet costumes. The focus was on the self, shown barefoot. Wigman danced with such energy that the floor shook. She gave her dances abstract names that underscored the metaphysical background of her art. She preached a virtually cultic approach to one's own body, and she choreographed sacral themes and staged archaic rituals. She made dance an art of the chosen few, an approach that appealed to Leni Riefenstahl. Wigman was radical in her rejection of classical dance, and used the adjective "balletic" as an invective. She put the fear of God into prima donnas. Mary Wigman was a modern artist; while pursuing her calling, she did not neglect the professional aspect. In 1920, she opened her own school in Dresden. In describing her pupils, she commented: "I also believe that there is quite a bit of justified egoism in all these young women, an egoism that starts by having them seek out themselves before taking on their surroundings and the world at large. Seeking themselves, feeling themselves, experiencing themselves. Dance is an expression of a higher vitality, a declaration of belief in the present without any intellectual digressions. Unimpeded by the past, and as yet to form any notion of the future, the young generation of women lives in the present and expresses this belief in dance."[8] Most people had trouble grasping the notion of an explicitly unsentimental and energetic dance performed by a woman, but young women were enthralled. Many of them wanted to become artists in order to bring

[8] Mary Wigman, "The Dance and the Modern Woman," n.d., SAdK, Berlin, estate of Mary Wigman.

about a definitive break with authority and tradition. The question of whether they were actually talented was of secondary importance for them. Leni Riefenstahl was one of these young women.

She had stubbornly refused to comply with her father's vision for her future. She was neither looking for a suitable husband nor did she seem to be hoping to wind up as a junior director. Her eventual departure to Dresden was preceded by grueling years marked by relentless quarrels that were followed by reconciliations. Alfred Riefenstahl could not bear the thought of men paying to watch his daughter's body on stage. Indifferent to art, he regarded dance as no more than a display of erotic allure. And there were plenty of stories going around about expensive presents being exchanged for sexual favors in the dressing room. For a master craftsman, having a daughter become an artist signaled a betrayal of his professional honor. He told his daughter that if he were to read her name on an advertising pillar, he would spit in front of it. A study of the upward mobility patterns of daughters of skilled workers in the Weimar Republic concluded: "of the 61 visual artists and artisans, 3 are daughters of master craftsmen or 4.9 hundredths among 96 actresses and women singers, we have only 3 daughters of master craftsmen, that is, 3.1 hundredths of the total number."[9] Leni Riefenstahl was one of them. At some point, her father capitulated to the will of his daughter. Alfred Riefenstahl admitted defeat and declared his willingness to finance "top-notch training" for her.

She received instruction in classical ballet from a once-famous Russian principal dancer and spent time at the dance studio. She was actually too old to have success in such a strenuous profession. But she was never put off by obstacles of this kind, neither as a young nor as an old woman. She wanted to show the whole world what she was made of. "I practiced until I was sometimes ready to black out from exhaustion, but time and again, I was able to overcome my weakness through sheer force of will." Her mornings were reserved for toe dancing, and in the afternoons she practiced expressive dance. A photograph from this period shows her in a tutu with bulging thighs. She is smiling uncertainly into the camera, but it is easy to tell that she is enjoying the display of her body. She had yet to decide between the enchanting artificiality of

[9] Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, *Die radikale Mitte. Lebensweise und Politik von Handwerkern und Kleinhändlern in Deutschland seit 1848* (Munich: dtv, 1985), p. 110.

the ballerina and the dead seriousness of the expressive dancer. Ballet is concentrated lightness; expressive dance is pure energy. The ballerina is nineteenth century, and represents the ideal of the woman as a creature who serves only the beautiful. A ballerina dances the steps that the choreographer has arranged for her, and masks her effort with a smile. An expressive dancer, by contrast, is the harbinger of the twentieth century, proclaiming the end of sentimental emotion and mawkish beauty. She creates her choreography on her own, and obeys only the voice within her. It is not technical brilliance that is in the foreground; only the expression counts. Sigmund Freud was putting the history of the woman down on paper, while at the same time, the expressive dancer ventured to put her innermost feelings on display onstage and avow them to everyone in the audience. The form her art took was hers alone. She had parted ways with her male creator and brought herself forth as an artist. It is through her body rather than in words that she points the way into the creative unconscious.

In 1922, Leni Riefenstahl turned twenty. She was yearning for the event that would finally bring her into adulthood. The thought of the "not yet" preyed on her mind. She had not yet lost her virginity, and she had not yet achieved her breakthrough as an artist. Her adolescence had coincided with a grand historical event from which she was now profiting: The lost war had paved her way to her career. In the newly established Weimar Republic, women were put on an equal footing with men. Even as a child, she had not wanted to defer to her father's authority. She mobilized her body against her father's all-pervading power. Defiantly and mutely, she subjugated her body to her will. She played sports, and grew strong. At home, she shut herself in her room and abandoned herself to her dreams. Expressive dance was the culmination of her desires: Her body gave expression to the messages within her, and she came under the sway of a new order that was no longer her father's. Her struggle with her father's authority corresponded to the end of monarchic rule. The stage was empty. The Kaiser had fled to Holland and kept busy by chopping down trees there; his anachronistic court vanished into thin air. Berlin became what it actually was: a city of the traditionless masses.

The soldiers returning home had entered the city through the Brandenburg Gate, which was bedecked for the occasion. For them, Berlin was the embodiment of what they had fought for. Nowhere was their futile battle for national greatness clearer than at the site of the undamaged

city. Berlin, the city of the vanquished—and a city of women—had remained intact. The beaten-down man and the "new woman" came face to face. In 1918, the German man was a symbol of history and the German woman a symbol of society. Politicians did not trust this city of Berlin, which had thrown itself headlong into the arms of women and society. The first German republic was proclaimed in Weimar, and not in Berlin. By choosing the city of the classical writers, the elite of the period between the two world wars was once again counting on the decisive force and power of the word. But things had changed. The new physicality was a child of the war. In the legendary 1920s, the word was mistrusted and the body celebrated.[10] The new faces and bodies were a reflection of a society that played the great equalizer. They were slick, unembellished, well-trained, and matter-of-fact. The world of the aristocracy had gone under; the new societal dynamics not only changed ballroom dancing, but also rendered ballet meaningless. Harmony and serenity were passé; the new era called for expression and strength. Many people—primarily young women—embarked on a quest for a new (body) language that "lies dormant" within every individual (as Mary Wigman claimed). Those who wanted to keep up with the times engaged in rhythmic gymnastics or tried out expressive dance. Young women could not wait to sign up for gymnastics and dance schools, which sprang up everywhere. Dance is a perpetual present and was well-suited to Berlin, which was an unending work in progress and was constantly reinventing itself. "Modern art reflected the experience of crises that traditional art could not address. It expressed modernity in modern terms—and modern liberations as well."[11]

For Alfred and Bertha Riefenstahl, the lack of tradition in Berlin offered an opportunity to move up the social ladder. In a sense, their daughter was continuing along this path, because her success as an artist hinged on the end of traditional art. A period of experimentation had gotten underway. All those who were inclined to express what was on their minds with no holds barred were welcome to join in. Young girls with no more than a smidgen of talent felt called upon to demonstrate their dancing ability in public. By 1920, Mary Wigman noted this development in a

[10] "The French author of one article, entitled 'Berlin Amuses Itself,' noted with disbelief that even the invitation to a memorial service for the murdered Sparticist leader Karl Liebknecht stated that there would be dancing ['On dansera']." Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), p. 167.

[11] Thomas Nipperdey, *Wie das Bürgertum die Moderne erfand* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1988), p. 84.

text about her teacher, Rudolf Laban, in her comment describing the results of his growing number of students: "With it dilettantism grew, as one might expect, because up to that point, there were no yardsticks and directions to assess minor and major talents. Everyone had to figure it out on her own, in anxious isolation, worrying about her share of fame."[12] The audience got used to praising performances that were as yet incomplete, and applauding sketchy presentations. Self-designated dance masters opened schools that enjoyed healthy enrollments.

Once her father had unexpectedly given his consent in 1923, Leni Riefenstahl sent an application to Mary Wigman in Dresden. Wigman's school was housed in a villa with an enormous garden.[13] The rehearsal spaces had the size and functional look of a factory. They were empty rooms that were flooded with light; the walls were colorfully painted with a shiny varnish. The instruments were set up in a corner, and there were chairs for people who stopped in. Any visitor who entered the building was struck by the realization that this was a place of extremes come to life. The staircase was bright blue, and there were rooms painted green, yellow, and silver. Wigman's own living space, which was also in the villa, was similarly simple, functional, colorful, and sparsely furnished. And then there was Wigman herself, enveloped in cigarette smoke, clad in extravagant garb, in front of the red or gold studio walls and focused intensely on her students' presentations.

Photographs of the school's daily routine show young barefoot women in light clothing performing all kinds of acrobatic routines in the garden. They are studying one another, giving rounds of applause, and spurring one another on. The atmosphere is upbeat and casual, yet concentrated. By contrast, the photographs of the recitals show the young girls as priestesses clad in black. They seem solemn and serious; their high spirits have given way to a trance-like state. The Wigman school formed a tight-knit community of women, with Wigman's charismatic personality its undisputed center. She taught her students that dance arose from the

[12] Mary Wigman. *Rudolf von Labans Lehre vom Tanz*. Manuscript written in the summer of 1920. SAdK, Berlin, Estate of Mary Wigman.

[13] When the school first opened on September 1, 1920, there were seven girls enrolled; seven years later, the number had grown to 360.

unconscious.[14] She gave her dancers the freedom to do as they wished, provided that their movements were well-founded and well-motivated. Wigman was also devoted to caring for the girls entrusted to her. "I see her before me cooking thick soups in enormous pots to feed her lean and hungry pupils," the writer Vicki Baum recalled.[15] Wigman attended to their every need, helping them out with issues ranging from lovesickness to homesickness.

Leni Riefenstahl was accepted into the master class. "The very next day I was allowed to audition for Frau Wigman, who accepted me into the master class. I studied along with Palucca, Yvonne Georgi and Vera Skoronell."[16] Nevertheless, she did not enjoy her time in Dresden. Her memoirs reveal that she was lonely there. She was bothered by Wigman's ascetic style, and did not want to dispense with music. Moreover, she was assailed by doubts about her talent, which was no wonder, of course, in view of her fellow students. Leni Riefenstahl could not regard the new situation as a positive challenge; instead, she felt unmoored. If she did not find confirmation for her exceptional qualities, she took to her heels. She was not willing to be as forthright as Wigman demanded. In secret, she rehearsed the dances she liked in a room she rented for this express purpose. In so doing, she was replicating her standard pattern: She had to keep her talent to herself, work herself hard in solitude, to prepare to embark on her victory lap and dazzle the world with her art.

Leni Riefenstahl had no need for a mentor. She left the disciplined community of women and returned to Berlin. There is not a single reference to Leni Riefenstahl in Mary Wigman's papers—neither in her letters nor in her essays or notes. And she does not appear in Mary Wigman's ample photo albums full of pictures of important performances along with family photos of former students. She is nowhere to be found among the young women with their serious expressions and matching hairdos, although she was in a group of enormously successful students. Gret Palucca, Vera Skoronel, and Yvonne Georgi were acclaimed dancers. Riefenstahl's memoirs give oddly brief mention to her training in the famous Dresden villa.

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[14] Mary Wigman was the lover of the psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, who amassed the famous Prinzhorn collection in Heidelberg, and of the psychiatrist Herbert Binswanger, whose uncle, the psychiatrist Otto Binswanger, had treated Friedrich Nietzsche in Jena.

[15] Vicki Baum, *Es war alles ganz anders. Erinnerungen* (Stuttgart: Deutscher Bücherbund, 1987), p. 320.

[16] *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir*, p. 33.

Years of quarreling with her father lay behind her, and now that he was finally financing dance school and she was in a class with the up-and-coming bright lights of German expressive dance, she took off again after a scant few months. Her terse explanation was that she felt out of place there. She provided far more detailed information about any crazy admirer or psychic who came along than about her encounter with the dance greats of her era. Leni Riefenstahl wanted to convey the impression that she was an artist who had nothing left to learn. Her fellow students were surely not lacking in artistic self-assurance. Palucca, Trümpy, and Skoronel—to name just a few—did not remain tied to their teacher's apron strings, but instead pursued independent careers. Riefenstahl's claim that she was unable to develop as an artist in Dresden is belied by Wigman's avowal that every student was fostered in her individual form of expression and did not have to limit herself to imitation. Considering the noble intentions of their teacher, it was no easy matter to part ways with these talented students, and there were often heated disputes, but Leni Riefenstahl kept her distance even in this regard. She simply stole off from the illustrious flock and continued her training "more intensely than ever" in Berlin. Riefenstahl claimed never to have missed any performances by Wigman or Valeska Gert, and called the two dancers her "goddesses."[17] Quite apart from the fact that the difference between the two artists could not have been greater, we wonder why she did not stay with her goddess Wigman. These inconsistencies strongly suggest that she left Dresden out of fear that she was not the best among the talented dancers in her class.

Even as a young woman, she could not stand to be compared. She regarded herself as the measure of all things, and sidestepped any competition or evaluations. The few months in Dresden were the first and last time she ever joined a community of women. As a supposed student of Wigman, she had an easier time presenting herself as a promising artist. When she returned to Berlin, though, she realized that the competition was intense. Countless students of dance were competing for a place onstage. "The many would-be dancers, who had left their run-of-the-mill families in an appalling manner, thought that their running around barefoot was modern dance, and infested the concert halls and theaters. … Sporting events, the *Freiluftbewegung* (open air movement), nudism, hiking clubs, gymnastics: all these purely

[17] *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir*, p. 34.

practical activities had now culminated in modern dance, that is, in the landscape of art."[18] At this time of galloping inflation, in which a million reichsmarks in the morning might not be worth anything at all by the afternoon, a quick triumph was what mattered. Nowhere was this more evident than on the stage. Also, going onstage might be a way to earn money, because now that marriage had come out of fashion as a way to gain financial security, and many fathers had lost their assets, the daughters needed a source of income. Sebastian Haffner ascribed a key significance to the year 1923 in the history of the Germans, calling it "that extraordinary year" in which the Germans developed "the cool madness, the arrogant, unscrupulous, blind resolve to achieve the impossible." Inflation changed the country and the people: the young and alert did well, but those who were old and out of touch had few prospects of succeeding. "Amid all the misery, despair, and poverty there was an air of light-headed youthfulness, licentiousness, and carnival. Now, for once, the young had money and the old did not."[19] A "new realism" was holding sway in the arenas of love and money. Leni Riefenstahl profited from this new realism. Not only did she lose her virginity in 1923, but she also enjoyed her first self-organized appearance on stage. For Leni Riefenstahl, 1923 was the year in which she put an end to the tormenting "not yet."

[18] Fred Hildebrandt, *Die Tänzerin Valeska Gert* (Stuttgart: Hädecke, 1928), p. 99.

[19] Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler: A Memoir*, trans. Oliver Pretzel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), pp. 52, 56.

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Although Marlene Dietrich was blessed with lovers, sunshine, and luxury, she was unhappy. All the back and forth between Europe and America was taking its toll on her. A brittle, faded letter from Rudolf Siebers to the state authority in Prague, dated November 30, 1933, indicates that the Siebers were trying to apply for Czech citizenship. Sieber cited his merits on behalf of the country in World War I and asserted that he and his wife had taken on German citizenship against their will. "My wife is acting in Hollywood under her stage name, Marlene Dietrich … and has not gone back to Berlin since March 31, 1930 apart from a brief vacation in 1931. Likewise, I have not been in Berlin at all since 1931, but instead have been steadily employed in Paris as an executive producer at Paramount and I gave up my residency in Berlin as of April 1931 altogether." He affirmed that they intended to transfer their assets and settle down in the town of Aussig. It was hard to picture Marlene Dietrich leaving Hollywood to live in Aussig with her husband and their child. Once the fees were due, and they were required to disclose their finances, the Siebers withdrew their application.[20] As is evident here and elsewhere, their lack of money was a central theme of their relationship. Even though they had given up their apartment in Berlin, two households still had to be maintained. Rudolf Sieber hesitated to come to America, because Tamara Matul had only the Nansen passport that was issued to stateless individuals. The question was whether she would be able to get a visa for the United States. "Of course it would interest me to work with you in a position that is worthy of you, or of me as 'Herr Dietrich.' But how do we solve the problem of 'Tami'?"[21]

The last movie she filmed with Josef von Sternberg was *The Devil is a Woman*. Sternberg gave her no directives, and she had no idea what would be happening, yet she put in a brilliant performance. She first appeared on screen as a veiled beauty in a horse-driven carriage on the occasion of the Carnival celebrations. Marlene Dietrich did not know what Sternberg had in mind until she was already standing in the carriage. Balloons were covering her face. Then Sternberg shot at the balloons with an air gun. "When the scene began, I took aim and exploded the concealing balloons to reveal one of the most fearless and charming countenances in the

[20]According to Silke Ronneburg, Rudolf Sieber applied for Czech citizenship for himself and his wife in order to avoid paying back taxes in Germany.
[21] Rudi Sieber on December 7, 1933 to Marlene Dietrich, MDCB.

history of films. Not a quiver of an eyelash, nor the slightest twitch in the wide gleaming smile was recorded by the camera at a time when anyone other than this extraordinary woman would have trembled in fear." One last time, he would assert his power on the set over the woman he loved. He was quite sure that she would not bat an eyelash when he shot the pellets. As the daughter of a Prussian soldier, she was able to weather sadistic attacks of this kind. Right down to the end, she let him be her creator. Making up at home was just as much a part of this game as humiliation in front of everyone else. After his death, she admitted that she had suffered under him. "Before I close this chapter, I would like to mention what I was most afraid of with him: his scorn. A shocking experience. Several times a day, he sent me to my dressing room so I could have a good cry in peace. After speaking to me in German, he turned around and said to the technicians: "Cigarette break. Miss Dietrich is having a crying fit."[22] When he scorned her, she was seized with panic that he would send her back where he had found her. Marlene Dietrich believed that she could not act without the safeguard of Sternberg's genius.

The movie was based on the book *La Femme et le pantin* (The Woman and the Puppet) by Pierre Louys, and John Dos Passos helped develop the screenplay. Marlene Dietrich plays Concha Perez, who, like Carmen, works in a cigarette factory, where an older high-ranking officer named Don Pasqual takes an interest in her. Concha will use every trick in the book to destroy him. He squanders his fortune on her and has to give up his military career, all for a woman who no longer even lets him kiss her and is openly cheating on him. *The Devil is a Woman* is set during Carnival. Confetti, masks, costumes, balls, and streamers form the background of the movie. Everyone is in high spirits, and everything seems to be allowed. But death can lurk behind any mask. The only one who seems to fear neither death nor devil is Concha. Marlene Dietrich pulls out all the stops: she sweet-talks, pouts, offends, beguiles, triumphs, lies, seduces, deceives, and savors the power of a woman. Draped in fine lace, caressed by light and shadows, she waits like a spider for men to enter her web. Her wheel-sized hats and high mantillas make every man—even those in uniform or masks—appear small next to her. In this movie, Marlene Dietrich sings a seductive little song, yet barely shows her legs, and seems to be brimming with energy. She often strikes her signature pose, with arms akimbo, looking daggers at everybody and upstaging

[22] Marlene Dietrich, *Ich bin, Gott sei Dank, Berlinerin* (Frankfurt/Main, Berlin: Ullstein, 1987), p. 142.

them all. In April 1934, she wrote to her friend Max Kolpé in Paris that she fell quite ill after the filming of *Scarlet Empress* was completed:

> This movie was the hardest thing we ever made. I don't know if I'm any good—I don't think so. I'm not bad either, but insignificant, it seems to me. Sternberg was a pure genius once again. … Maybe because it's the spring over there, but all of a sudden I'm longing for Berlin. Here, in the everlasting summer, I really miss that. I think back to late afternoons in a car with the top down (down for the first time that season), heading along the Kurfürstendamm, and, for no apparent reason, a chuckle in my throat. Perhaps it was because we were young and at home. I am fighting so hard against feeling dead here and against feeling dead in general, against the hollow feeling inside. I keep giving, and I get nothing in return. The child is all grown up now. Please do write to me Marlene.[23]

There she was, sitting in her villa in Hollywood with a swimming pool, everlasting sunshine, and a Rolls Royce, and she was longing for a spring drive on the Kurfürstendamm. She recalls the "chuckle in my throat" that welled up "for no apparent reason." That kind of thing had not happened for quite some time, because in Hollywood nothing comes about inadvertently. Once the final movie with Jo had been shot, she felt as though she had no home, unlike her daughter Maria, who did not experience homesickness. The way Maria saw it, God lived in America, the land of comics, ice cream, and peanut butter. Her mother was feeling her youth slipping away at the age of thirty-three. She could not complain about a lack of lovers, but she *was* afraid of what the future held. And now she had to cope with the end of her work with Jo. The hollow feeling inside came back, a feeling that Jo had been able to assuage every now and then. To whom could she confide her doubts about her talent once Jo was gone? Marlene Dietrich was enough of a professional to know that Sternberg was no longer an option for her. As a lover, he became more and more draining, and in the film industry he was no longer considered a bigwig after a series of flops. The critics wrote that he had made her a "Paramount whore." Leaving him was essential for her, because as the daughter of a soldier, she knew that it was unwise to let any

[23] Marlene Dietrich to Max Kolpé, April 2, 1934, MDCB.

opportunities slip by. And Josef von Sternberg? He was giving the artist Marlene Dietrich back to the ordinary world of film. The other directors were already lining up to show the world what fabulous movies they could make with her. *The Devil is a Woman* confirmed their worst fears. With this film, Sternberg was intent on paying a final tribute to the woman he loved and the artist he had created. Marlene Dietrich understood that. *The Devil is a Woman* was her favorite film. May 3, 1935 was the premiere of their last film together in New York. From then on, their partnership was history.

And their love? Marlene Dietrich could always be sure of Sternberg. Time and again, he took her back, no matter whom she thought she was in love with at the time. Now that she was over thirty, she was forced to see love in a new light, not in the way she had back in Berlin when she was in her twenties. Even a woman like Dietrich could not get around the fact that a list of things she had not achieved and might never achieve was taking clear shape. Sternberg, who loved her, had shielded her from ideas of this kind. When she was an old woman—long after Sternberg had died—she took the blame upon herself for what had gone wrong: "At first, I didn't understand his feelings. Of course my 'emotional' shortcomings were regrettable. In this arena, everything was vague and simple on my part; I was unable to grasp certain subtleties, I did not want to acknowledge that they were right there … who knows?" Josef von Sternberg would love Marlene Dietrich all through his life. If you observe the way a hint of a smile lit up his serious face when he saw Lola Lola on the screen during a 1961 interview, you can see that he had never stopped loving her. When Peter Bogdanovich met with Sternberg in his later years, he sensed the latter's deep sorrow and pain about the love he had lost.[24] Sternberg was extremely reluctant to discuss his films with him, because doing so touched on the most sensitive spot of his emotional life, namely his unrequited love for Marlene Dietrich. Sternberg's movies were his way of wooing Marlene Dietrich. He offered her his artistic services, and demanded unconditional compliance in return. For him, training went hand in hand with discipline**,** and Marlene Dietrich, the daughter of a Prussian soldier, understood that. "It was not my beauty or charm that fascinated him, but rather my peculiar capacity for discipline, which is almost

[24] Peter Bogdanovich, "Joseph von Sternberg," in Peter Bogdanovich, *Wer hat denn den gedreht?* (Zurich: Haffmans Verlag, 2000), pp. 285-293.

unheard of among actresses, that attracted him to me." She would love him in her way, but he was head over heels in love with her. In 1935, he parted ways with his divine "Miss Dietrich."

Marlene Dietrich worked under the directors after Josef von Sternberg with the disdain of someone who is accustomed to better. And once she was gone, Sternberg was no longer capable of effecting transformations. They would both experience phantom pain for the rest of their lives.

"A slight man with one of those obligatory cashmere polo coats, complete with trailing belt. He was sharp, quick-witted, with a sense of humor and New York savvy." This was Maria Riva's description of Harry Edington, Marlene Dietrich's right-hand man. As her agent, he saw to all the details: the story, the director, the pay, the cameraman, the dressing room, and—in a matter that had now become essential—he made sure that her partner was not too young. He dealt with her landladies, made it his business to find her good housekeepers, rooms in hotels, and secretaries for several months. He took care of every matter, large and small, right down to which dresses, capes, and trousers would be arriving on which ship. He discreetly steered her away from movie magazines she would be better off not granting interviews to and told her what fees were appropriate for what tasks. On top of that, he made every effort to ensure her well-being, and sent her telegraphs with invitations to a game of tennis or a dinner. Edington, who also represented Greta Garbo, was regarded in Hollywood as one of the agents who had free access to the studio bosses. For Dietrich's next film, *Desire*, he negotiated a fee of 200,000 dollars. Frank Borzage was the director, and Ernst Lubitsch oversaw the artistic direction. By working with Ernst Lubitsch, Marlene Dietrich was in a sense returning to Berlin, yet at the same time, the opportunity to work with Lubitsch meant that she had truly arrived in America. Lubitsch was born on Schönhauser Strasse in Berlin and began his career at the Deutsches Theater; now he was a Hollywood hot shot, and the Americans loved his sophisticated comedies.

In *Desire*, Marlene Dietrich played the jewel thief Madelaine de Beaupré, who steals a pearl necklace in Paris and plants it on an American auto mechanic, Tom Bradley, at the Spanish border. Bradley unwittingly brings the stolen goods through customs. To get the pearls back, Madelaine has to resort to all kinds of tricks, but love foils her plan. She falls in love with the American man. The cunning jewel thief becomes an honest wife. Josef von Sternberg was sure

to have sneered at this shallow story. Marlene Dietrich was not a sphinx, but a beautiful con artist whom love brings back onto the straight and narrow path of virtue. *Desire* is set in the glamorous world of luxury hotels, grand suites, and champagne glasses. Somehow one feels reminded of the old silent films of Marlene Dietrich, although these could not begin to compete with *Desire* in décor, spirit, and humor. *Desire* is light and witty entertainment—nice to watch, but lacking depth. As Sternberg had predicted, the critics were pleased to find that at long last, Marlene Dietrich had departed drastically from her usual style. Her costumes were no longer supercilious, erotic, and fantasy-filled, as they had been in Sternberg's films. Madelaine de Beaupré is an elegantly dressed woman who wears double-breasted jackets and white, medium-length skirts, yet she also dons extravagant hats and dazzling evening gowns.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 had a profound impact on the fashion industry. Couturiers clothed their famous clients free of charge in the hope of getting a publicity boost. These influential clients were not just aristocratic women and artists' muses; most of them were actresses. In 1934, Marlene Dietrich became known as "the most imitated woman in the world." Her function as a role model in the world of fashion has continued to this day. In 1935, she was one of the leading ladies in the film *The Fashion Side of Hollywood*. Now that she had been freed from Sternberg's influence, she no longer had to traipse about on railway platforms in exotic countries wearing evening gowns, but could also appear in fashionable contemporary sports blouses and blazers. Marlene Dietrich was highly critical of her old roles and Sternberg's way of portraying her at arm's length. "Mr. von Sternberg never let me play love scenes—not ordinary ones, I mean, with hugging and all that, because he hates ordinary love scenes."[25] Since he was no longer there, she re-established a bond with her audiences, as evidenced in the photographs that were now circulated about her personal life.

One famous series of photographs taken by Eugene Richee in 1935 provides an uncommonly candid view of Marlene Dietrich. Dressed in a buttoned up white blouse, white shorts, and white high-heeled shoes, she is stretched out on a lounge chair at the pool. Basking in the sun, her laugh showing her full red lips, she is the very picture of the attractive sporty woman. She had

[25]Marlene Dietrich in *Daily Sketch*, December 24, 1936; quoted in Alexander Walker, *Dietrich* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 125f.

now become part of the Hollywood society that Sternberg disdained. Marlene Dietrich no longer sat at home and cooked while Jo worked his way through stacks of screenplays; she put in a cheerful appearance at parties, ceremonies, and premieres. Photographers from the publicity department were always on hand. A letter from Willi Forst reveals that she had started to drink alcohol at this time in order to fall asleep at night.[26] She was surely relieved about not having to work with Jo anymore, but it was not until they separated that she realized the extent to which he had smoothed things over for her.

Marlene Dietrich never felt truly comfortable in Hollywood, but in public she was able to act as though there was nothing more beautiful than life in America. In this respect, she had a special position among the Germans. By the mid and late 1930s, and into the 1940s, many German artists, such as Thomas Mann, Vicki Baum, Arnold Schönberg, Peter Lorre, Franz Wachsmann, and Friedrich Hollaender were living in California, having sought refuge from Hitler. The Americans took note of the presence of the Germans in a friendly but indifferent manner, and soon came to refer to them as the "Beiunskis," because their demeanor, their language, and their art appeared to be guided by the phrase *bei uns* (back where we come from), which the Americans considered egocentric. These exiles were still quite proud of German tradition and German culture, and that was something that held little interest for the Americans, least of all for the Americans who wanted to live in Hollywood and earn their living by making films. This was a painful experience for many. Marlene Dietrich generally kept her distance from the tightly knit and narrow-minded exile circles in Hollywood. From time to time, she dropped in on Salka Viertel's salon in Santa Monica. She knew that cultural or political arrogance would not bolster her career. She was an outsider among the outsiders. Marlene Dietrich was a German Protestant artist who happened to wind up in the United States in order to work there. Assimilation was not a problem for her. It was her profession to be an actress, and she could be seen in both good and bad movies. She did not actually enjoy life in Los Angeles. Although she got offers to work in Germany, she felt that the only decent option was to reject them. She had no intention of

[26] "Dearest … how strange that you, too, have to drink—in order to be able to sleep—I am finding the very same thing! I must say, though, that I am distressed by the thought that it could do damage to your face—the drinking!" Letter from Willi Forst to Marlene Dietrich, January 15, 1935, MDCB.

working with the National Socialists, and so she stayed in the desert, where a person could not put down roots.

Los Angeles is a city that has always attracted foreigners. Every resident is an emigrant from somewhere in the world, yet the diversity of backgrounds is undercut by the monotonous sameness of the living conditions. Southern California, with its mild climate, its wide horizon, and the virtually boundless space, developed into a mecca for talented architects, urban planners, and designers, who came to make Los Angeles a city of the future. Los Angeles was largely spared from the economic depression, and was the place in which the American dream was still center stage, unfazed by the woes everywhere else. The sun shone for everyone. Here there was the money, the optimism, and the space to build a new world. Wilshire Boulevard, which extended from the Pacific Ocean into the city, created a link between nature and culture. The stars cruised from their beach houses to the film studios in their sleek automobiles. This was the modernity that made southern California the envy of the world. One needed a car and a telephone to survive in this city. Anyone who was not mobile did not belong.[27] This was where the modern architectural designs for a mobile, consumer-oriented modernity were perfected. Supermarkets, motels, urban highways, gas stations, shopping centers, and drive-ins have come to be defining features of the middle class throughout the world, with bank withdrawals, purchases, breakups, and hellos and goodbyes handled by rolling down car windows. Business and everyday transactions were conducted matter-of-factly and with impersonal friendliness. Everyone was on his or her own. Los Angeles was an avaricious city that was all about winners. The climate could drive you crazy, Hannah Arendt claimed, and even people who were reminded of Italy would be hard pressed to find the beautiful soul of this city. What mattered here were roles and earnings; everything else was relegated to the sidelines. Party lists were put together according to box office success. All too easily, people were erased from these lists, and waited for invitations in vain.

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[27] " … the essence of Los Angeles lies in the fact that it hardly has a center. It is, if one can say this, a fluid, a 'moving' city, not only a city that moves itself—but also a city in which movement, freedom of movement, is a strong premise of life." Cees Nooteboom, "Autopia." In Charles G. Salas and Michael S. Roth, eds., *Looking for Los Angeles: Architecture, Film, Photography, and the Urban Landscape* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001), pp. 13-21; this quotation is on p. 15.

Eventually she came to accept the fact that she would have to remain in Hollywood, and tried to make the best of it. Marlene Dietrich, who was accustomed to spontaneous get-togethers back in Berlin, enjoyed going to the farmer's market that opened in 1934. It was laid out in the American colonial style, like a farm in the Midwest. There were stands that sold fruit, meat, vegetables, and fish, along with concession stands that had their own tables and chairs. Something was always going on here—people were shopping, haggling, talking, gossiping, drinking, and eating. She liked this rather European type of public space. A person could drop in on a casual basis and meet up with people without advanced planning or invitations. Marlene Dietrich also greatly enjoyed riding out to an amusement park in Ocean Park, Santa Monica,[28] perhaps because all the hustle and bustle reminded her of her life in Berlin.

In November 1932, Franklin Roosevelt was elected the thirty-second president of the United States of America. His message of making the "forgotten man" the central theme of his campaign proved to be a winning strategy. For the past fifteen years, the country had undergone a process of profound change: The entry of the United States into World War I had made the country a world power overnight. For the first time in the history of this country, millions of young men were being sent to a continent far away to wage war. After the dreadful years of the war and the Great Depression, Americans in the early 1930s were receptive to a politician who gave them cause for optimism. Roosevelt's inaugural address found just the right words for the country's state of mind. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." This statement was the new credo that Americans had been waiting for.

In contrast to the grim, inscrutable dictators in Europe and the Soviet Union, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a man who made no secret of his love of life. The dictators stayed in the background for quite some time. America was preoccupied with its own issues. Roosevelt won the presidential election of 1936 by an overwhelming majority. This success certainly rested in large measure on his promise not to lead the United States into war. The Americans did not want to be embroiled in the conflicts of others yet again. This was especially true of people in the film industry in Hollywood, who wanted to earn their money in peace. Adolph Zukor, head of Paramount Pictures, declared: "I don't think that Hollywood should deal with anything but

[28] Information from Cornelius Schnauber, Los Angeles.

entertainment. The newsreels take care of current events. To make films of political significance is a mistake. When they go to a theatre they want to forget."[29] In the 1930s, Hollywood was a world power. Nothing could make a bigger mockery of the dead seriousness of the dictators than the flippant refinement of Hollywood.

Marlene Dietrich chose to live in exile on her own. She remained in Hollywood. In letters, telephone calls, and telegrams, she kept up with what was going on in Berlin, Vienna, and Paris, but the extant correspondence barely mentioned the political situation. Personal issues and needs were front and center, as usual. She preferred to turn to her mother when she had medical questions. Marlene Dietrich suffered from the delusion that she was too fat, and her daughter too tall. There was no medical remedy for either of these conditions, but Josefine von Losch went ahead and asked Dr. Salomon in Berlin for advice, and telegraphed his reply to her daughter in Hollywood. Josefine von Losch was now so thrilled with her daughter's acting prowess that she even copied out movie reviews. She liked to put in her own two cents' worth on the subject of the people in her daughter's employ and she happily dispensed advice. She asked: "How satisfied are you with your staff? Are class distinctions emphasized or is everything peaceful?"[30] Her tone was affectionate, and she often reminded Marlene Dietrich of little sayings and ditties from her childhood. Aunt Jolly, whom she had never liked and who had now taken off with Ernst Udet, was making life difficult for her. She poured out her heart to her younger daughter about the hardships the merry widow was causing for her. Josefine von Losch devoted herself to firming up her daughter's reputation in Germany. SEND ME CABLE PROVING THAT YOU ARE NOT COMMITTED MENTAL INSTITUTION AS TRIBUNE HEADLINE SCREAMS HAVE TO DENY IGNORE RUMORS WRONG ATTITUDE ABOUT TIME YOU TAKE MY ADVICE MUTTI. There is no mention of her wanting to leave Germany and come to America. Quite the opposite: Josefine von Losch hoped that her daughter would return to Europe after parting with Sternberg, whom the family liked to call "Etoile." In August 1935, she wrote her a letter in which she expressed regret about her

[29] Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), p. 340.

[30] MDCB, May 21, 1931.

daughter's decision to remain in America. She thought it was terrible to live only for money, devoid of any joy and pleasure, the way Marlene was living.

> Everything that happened with Etoile, his hapless, divorced wife, everything? Everything took its toll in time and nerves. … Here it was said a thousand times that if Marlene Dietrich only didn't have that bizarre, eccentric Etoile anymore. … You are in any case to be pitied from the bottom of my soul. '*Landgraf werde hart.*' (Landgrave, grow hard.) I have a thousand worries that you will only be disappointed once again and you will eat up your disappointments slowly like tasty tidbits instead of getting a whiff of them beforehand and avoiding them in the first place. Poor, dear Lena; it's too bad that there is an ocean between us.

This letter reveals a side of Marlene Dietrich that she wanted to conceal from the public. Her mother characterized her as someone with a penchant for suffering, someone who gobbles up disappointments like tasty tidbits and makes no attempt to steer clear of them. In November 1936, Marlene Dietrich was terrified at the thought that she might have gotten this penchant from her father. Her mother tried to calm her down and assured her that she had been thoroughly examined back then. She urged her daughter to leave aside her brooding once and for all and to enjoy life.