RECONSIDERING 'TRIUMPH OF THE WILL'

WAS HITLER THERE?

BRIAN WINSTON

It is now 1981. Seventy-eight years after the birth of Leni Riefenstahl; forty-six years after Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg to review the columns of his faithful followers; forty-six years since he (days before making that flight) wiped out his own Left in an episode known to history as the Röhm Putsch; forty-five years since Riefenstahl constructed a film record of that healing event, the 6th Congress of the National German Workers' Party, and thereby earned for herself a seemingly disdiabled place in the auteurist pantheon; it is eighteen years since the serious business of the Riefenstahl industry began. The time to reconsider her and Triumph of the Will is long past.

The received opinion of Leni Riefenstahl's documentaries is that they are works of great artistic power which embody 'a vivid ideology'. They were made by 'an authentic genius', 'in a class of her own'; but they were also made by 'an artist of an immensely naive political nature', ignorant of the outside world'. Apart from the viciousness of the ideology (a viciousness which Riefenstahl has never disavowed), none of this can stand.

A cursory knowledge of how films are made reveals the limits of applying auteurist theory to works shot and edited, as this was, by many hands. The iconography of Triumph of the Will is not accidentally fascist (by virtue, as it were, of its fascist subject matter) but a veritable source and true reflection of Nazi pictorial preferences, which were

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It is only in the selection of speeches and incidents that Riefenstahl reveals a real skill. She is at least the equal of contemporary American political image-makers, for Triumph of the Will contains an orchestrated defence of Hitler's actions after the Röhm Putsch which could hardly have been organized as such by anybody other than a fully conscious political animal.

As to the film's effectiveness as propaganda, it was not widely used in Germany at the time, being crass and boring and too obviously about Hitler's difficulties with the Sa. It is probably fair to say that for every fascist convert the film has made (and these do not, of course, include Riefenstahl's cineaste admirers who, to a man, maintain their ability to resist her message), there must be many more who have learned from the film something of the central rottenness of the world Hitler and his party created, especially when it was re-edited by the enemies of Nazidom and used against them. This is a strange accolade to be finding in the literature on 'a masterpiece of film propaganda', 'the most successfully, most purely propagandistic film ever made'.

Above all, perhaps, Riefenstahl's manipulation of material, a manipulation one finds surprising given the resources at her command, stretches the limits of editing (and, to a lesser extent, reconstruction) to a point where it becomes permissible to ask—if one knew no better—Was Hitler really there?

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*The number of Barsam in Film* (Indiana University Press) place 19 cameras on film and a newswreel, three and assistants newswreel crew (for sound). Five men using this since 1966. The newswreel men photographer those on camera is not matter any typical.
Covering an event with more than one camera is, as any director charged with such a task will tell you, a co-operative effort. However well briefed and instructed, the camera operators must be largely left to their own devices. On Triumph of the Will Riefenstahl had a minimum of forty-nine cameramen, many from the newsreel dressed in SA uniforms wandering at will, but nineteen of them senior cinematographers from the mainstream of the industry. To give Riefenstahl credit for what they photographed is to stretch the ecstatic conceit to breaking point. One of her Olympic film crew, Henry Jaworsky, attested in an interview (Film Culture, 1973) that she had a good grasp of technicalities. This is not surprising, given the years she had spent in the business as an actress and director and the co-operative nature of location work on her early mountain films. But his description of her behaviour, which presumably also applies to Triumph of the Will, is a more instructive picture of the film director as logistics supervisor: ‘She would rush around from one cameraman to the other like a maniac saying — how are you doing? how about this and this? screaming and hollering, oh she was an absolute maniac, she was wild.’ How then did her cameramen do? The amount of material which is either out of focus or reframed in mid-shot suggests that they did not do as well as is normally suggested by the critical acclaim the film has received. Of course, the aerials of the marching columns, the general view of the City of Tents, the arrival of the battle standards in the Ludendorff Hall and the Ceremony of the Fallen are impressive, because such massiveness impresses itself automatically on us. But even in these sequences not all the operation is good. At other points in the film the spray gun technique of the newsreel men is more apparent in shots which crab and track from little to less. There is also the occasional yank to centre frame the object of the shot. One can only agree with one of Riefenstahl’s leading apologists, Richard Meran Barnam: ‘The achievements of Riefenstahl’s large crew are unimpressive. This is not true of shot composition, as there is almost no moment even in the most prosaic of shots when the aesthetic principles of the Greeks are not being obeyed. But before crediting Riefenstahl with this it would be as well to remember the overall aesthetic atmosphere that was being created around the party, which is documented in Art in the Third Reich.

*The number claimed varies. Richard Meran Barnam in Filmguide to Triumph of the Will (Indiana University Press, 1973) gives in one place 19 cameramen, 19 assistants, plus one serial and an unnumbered group from the newsreel; elsewhere he gives 36 cameramen and assistants, 3 serial photographers, 17 newsreel crew, 13 newsreel crew (from Tobias for sound). Riefenstahl has given 16 cameramen using thirty cameras (not impossible, since assistants would normally be given the opportunity to use second cameras). I have taken the named cameramen from the credit list in Barnam, plus Riefenstahl’s number of newreel men (29), plus one (not 91) serial photographer to give a total of 49. Clearly more cameras could have been at work. It does not matter much except that the confusion is typical.

Left: the banners of Nuremberg. Above: Leni Riefenstahl with a cameraman in brownshirt uniform; Hitler on the platform.
by Berthold Hinz. As aesthetic practitioners, her cameramen could have been expected, even without her explicit instruction, to frame deliberately left or right or, above all, to look constantly upwards, not just at the Führer but at the entire cast of characters including bit players and extras, especially if those extras are in uniform.

One of the central problems of fascism, as both Hinz and Susan Sonntag have pointed out, is that its aesthetics offer no discontinuity in the aesthetic development of our culture. Fascist aesthetics are a product of Western aesthetics. This is why the Riefenstahl industry can be so enamoured of the form of Triumph of the Will while desperately trying to disavow its content. That cannot be done; and consideration of the low angle, the most prevalent compositional technique in the film, neatly illustrates why not.

The original technique of low angle viewpoint was used in the Renaissance in drawing classical statuary. Since these statues were usually mounted on pedestals it was inevitable that they were seen from below. . . . Renaissance worship of the sublime added to this naturalistic effect (Berthold Hinz). The viewpoint places the observer level with the feet of the statues. Such is, as Hinz has pointed out, a naturalistic reflection of fascist reality in the sense that a kick in the face is a constant threat. Thus a pre-fascist artistic convention, with specific connotations, is taken up by the fascists and those connotations are thereby extended. The result is not an automatic revulsion in the non-fascist viewer; on the contrary, the shared aesthetic effect is for the viewer. Inevitably, given our aesthetic heritage, the low angle dominates Triumph of the Will.

It is not an inconsistency that I can both deny Riefenstahl’s real responsibility for the camerawork yet claim that the film reflects her oneness with fascist aesthetics. For, as Susan Sonntag has documented, Riefenstahl’s preoccupation with such iconography and themes continues unabated into the 70s. (In 1973, in an American Art Review magazine, one is awed to hear her describe the extras in one of her films as ‘coming from the past;’ from the Gothic . . . West Gothic, and they have decadent faces; long, small, and they have big . . . beards.) Fascist aesthetics, in Sonntag’s words, ‘flow from and justify a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behaviour and extravagant effort; the turning of people into things; the multiplication of things and groupings of people/things around an all powerful hypnotic leader figure or force. Fascist art glorifies subjugation, it is its mindlessness.’ The latter part of this quotation covers the dominant iconography of Triumph of the Will—the singularity of Hitler and the mass of the crowd. The ideology of this opposition is transparent.

In Riefenstahl’s own contemporary (ghosted) description of the film it is, ‘The Führer above all! Above the tremendous symphony of crowds, marching columns, parades,                                                                  marches and congresses.’ How she achieves this opposition is a second and more significant reason, beyond a simplistic view of content, why the Riefenstahl industry cannot avoid or separate out in some way the inherent fascist of the film.

The sequence in the tent ‘city of soldiers and workers’—a city of mass abductions, mass consumption of sausage and black bread, the labour of logging and the horseplay of wrestling and blanket-tossing—is the film’s most perfect illustration of Sonntag’s ‘situations of control, submissive behaviour and extravagant effort.’ This is the nearest the film comes to looking behind the scenes; but Riefenstahl is not interested in demystifying or the operation of the Rally. She leaves the beauties of the city and the formal surface of ceremony and meeting to concentrate on such things as men standing on each other’s backs and racing, like the charioteers in Ben-Hur. This is without significance. The regret expressed by the Riefenstahl industry that ‘there is a nearly inextricable relationship between Leni Riefenstahl and Nazism’ would be, in the light of these choices, absurd were it not so distasteful.

This tent city sequence also contains further evidence of the limitations of the filming. The camera pans resolutely away from some wrestling action to frame a line of tents. Obviously the crew then spotted the wrestling and repositioned to film it, using reflectors crudely to light the boys. This crudeness is a piece with the other lighting in the film. It is claimed that Riefenstahl was pioneering a number of location lighting techniques; the results of these experiments are bravely included in the final cut. But throwing a searchlight across part of a crowd is simple, ineffective and ultimately not very adventurous. Those night shots of the band outside Hitler’s hotel are for the most part just well enough exposed for one to see the badness of the post-synch, which should be said is no worse than its time. Inside the Luitpold Hall a better job was done—but that auditorium can be considered as a studio, and one which had been available for planning for at least seven months.

More astonishing, in view of the sixtyone hours of material, is the fact that there are a few out of focus shots in the film and that these are of the Führer. In other words, not one of all her camera could give Riefenstahl a good shot of Hitler at a couple of crucial moments. The most crucial is when the plane lands in the first sequence. The shot begins with two out of focus Luftwaffes running for the door; Hitler steps out and the camera does not focus upon him until Goebbels steps out after him. It is not until five shots after his first appearance that we see him in focus. Riefenstahl has never disputed Siegfried Kracauer’s reading of the significance of her opening shot, that it is a god descending. The whole thing would fall apart if Hitler is at the end of it all discovered already on the ground. Hence, soft shots.

Apart from being forced to use out of focus shots, Riefenstahl was also required to reshoot some other material. This is revealed by Albert Speer in his memoirs, Inside the Third Reich. The introductory speech of Hess and the statements of Rosenberg, Frank and Streicher were filmed, he says, later in Berlin. Speer claims, with that self-sacrificing naivety all surviving Nazis seem to adopt, that he was upset by Hess’ ability to duplicate on the duplicate set in Berlin, in the absence of the Führer, exactly the same passion he had called up in Nuremberg. But, he says, ‘Frau Riefenstahl on the other hand thought the acted scenes better than the original presentation.’ For Riefenstahl this revelation was a blow, because she has always claimed that despite the fact she is a great artist she did nothing more at Nuremberg than film the event. ‘Not a single scene is staged. Everything is genuine . . . It is history, pure hist at stake here is a Riefenstahl indu decades dutifully nature of her cow denied Speer ad was abandoned. It started to claim filmed Streicher, or because of a To forget Stürmer, the most Nazi leaders considered no sin him it was beca racial purity was business at the 6i unlikely that sh Streicher was GI Franconia, in wh was credited by during the mas the provision of More than that, her co-writer and Light, her first released in 1932, aid. The man in Bela Balazs. He sw Riefenstahl is fact that none & locutors ever clo There are two sh mesh together ranks of men be the lectern was fa the background and the lectern hall. This spee sync, apart from In fact there are on the backgr in this sec mentioned by i reshoot in Berlin background as tw Four have come grounds, and of mentioned by Sp is probably safe four who share ground lighting by Speer are in
Horseplay in the tent 'city of soldiers and workers'.

The rest it must be an open question, Riefenstahl's protest notwithstanding.

Since the filming was neither effective nor totally actual, Riefenstahl’s skill as an editor becomes a main plank of the Riefenstahl industry's platform. Let us turn to that claim, beginning with the structure of the film as a whole.

At 107 minutes, given the limited subject matter, the film is inordinately long and crushingly repetitive, marching column and marches, meetings and congresses and commemorations. Riefenstahl offers an account of her restructuring of the chronology of the congress which suggests she was simply

than an hour's duration. The shorter (sixty-minute) cut, concentrating as it does on the more effective big scenes, is an infinitely better made film than Riefenstahl's. But it is not Riefenstahl's film. Her work reveals a failure of film-making judgment (a failure, in part, repeated in her next two documentaries Fest der Volks and Fest der Schöpfung) she is as in love with her own material as the average film student. Thus it was that Triumph of the Will was far too long to serve any useful purpose, except to influence those already committed to Nazism. And in 1934–35 there was a pressing reason why such a film might be needed.

The structure of the film is obviously crude, consisting of formality and (comparative) informality, night and day, March and speech, to have 'hills and valleys'. But that is not the prime organizing requirement. Neither is the theme that Hitler has come from the sky to kindle ancient Nuremberg with the primal Teutonic fire, to liberate the energy and spirit of the German people (Ken Kelman, Film Culture, 1973). This sort of statement of the obvious does not explain why the film is the way it is and why what is said, is said. These questions can only be answered by looking closely at the actual political message of the film in its time. The Rally was held seventy days after the Röhm Putsch. The film was cut and released as the purge of the Sa men continued throughout the summer. For Riefenstahl to maintain her status as an 'artist', it is necessary for her constantly to claim that she had no idea about the internal situation of the party. (Although what Herbert Seehoff, the name credited on the film as party propaganda consultant, told her about must thereby remain unclear.) She says in interviews, 'I have not one moment thought of Röhm,' and 'I told Hitler that I don't know what is Sa and what is SS.'

It is important to establish what terms Riefenstahl claims she agreed to for the making of the film. 'Nobody of the party, including Goebbels, including Hitler, has seen one metre.' She was allowed to shoot, edit and premiere the picture with no interference, except of course that the film was registered with the censorship apparatus before public screening. She claims in her interviews her complete independence of the party. Taking her at her word, the careful and coherent political structure of the film becomes a puzzle. It is of course possible for her to have arrived at this political structure by accident.

The first line propaganda importance of the 8th Annual Party Congress and, therefore, of Triumph of the Will remains in the account both the event and the film offer of the aftermath of the Röhm Putsch. A contemporary American diarist quoted in Hinton's The Films of Leni Riefenstahl describes the scene at the ceremony for the Fallen this time now the bloody purges

There was considerable tension in the stadium and I noticed that Hitler's own bodyguard was drawn up in front of the film separating him from the mass of brownshirts.'
Hitler did not rise to the occasion: 'Men of the SA and the SS. A few months ago, a black shadow spread over the movement. Neither, the SA, nor any other institution of the party, has anything to do with this shadow... And if anyone sins against the spirit of the SA, this will not be the SA but only those who dare to sin against them. Only a lunatic or a deliberate liar could think that I, or anybody else, would ever dissolve what we ourselves have built up over many long years.' The eyewitness reports that the SA seemed unimpressed. Riefenstahl had hoped along these rather poor performance of the big lie in action by emphasising the dazzling spectacle of the setting. One must of course sympathise with Hitler's rhetorical problem on this occasion. Even as he spoke thousands of lower level SA cadres were being dismissed from the party and some arrested. Between two and four hundred had already been killed.

Yet Riefenstahl knew nothing of this. That Hitler is seen in the film more in brown shirt SA uniform than any other is a fact for history. That he is to begin the speeches in the Congress—for nobody was ordering her—with Wagner reading Hitler's proclamation that 'no revolution could last for eighteenth leading to total anarchy' was an accident.

It was a political accident and purely artistic that every speaker in the film but three and Hitler on each occasion that he speaks in the same white desert and air, the desert from the left poled by the SA. Rosenberg speaks of today's 'special youth' (the SA was dominated by 20-year-olds as well as schoolteachers and civil servants) who are 'temporarily charging forward' and who 'will one day be called upon to continue the efforts begun in the stormy years of the 1918 Munich revolution.' (My italics.) 'One day' the social revolution then implied will continue—but not now. The speeches of Todt, the chief autobahn engineer, Reinhardt, head of the speech training school of the past, Darre, the agriculture minister, and Hierl of the Reich Labour Service all emphasised the progress that has been made in reviving work. Ley, the leader of the Reich Labour Front, summed it up: 'One thought alone must dominate all our work: to make the German worker an upstanding proud citizen enjoying equal rights with the rest of the nation.'

This social trust dominates Riefenstahl's selection to the point where other topics on the party agenda are almost forgotten.

Apart from this sequence of speakers, only on one occasion do we see a gathering being addressed without Hitler. Ludwig, one of the least effective of Nazi speakers, the man who had succeeded Röhm, is heard to utter these (immortal?) words: 'Comrades, many of you are here tonight who know me from those first years of our movement when I marched with you in your rank and file as an SA man. I am as much of a SA man now as ever, perhaps even more than before...'

Neither the import of the message nor the quality of the shots suggest a reason for the inclusion of this sequence. We had not Riefenstahl's denial, we could perhaps understand it. In the last speech of the film, Hitler returns to the task: 'In the past our adversaries, through suppression and persecution, have cleaned the party from time to time of the rubbish that began to appear. Today we must do the mustering out and discarding of what have proven to be bad...'

Riefenstahl's first defence to this case that the film has an obvious and dominant political line is to claim she knew nothing because she was out of Germany over the summer of 1934—so if radio and newspapers were yet to be invented. 'I was at this time in Spain... look, in the whole film as Hitler is speaking to the SA he mentions in one moment the Röhm affair... Hitler mentions this because it was coming out from this and that is the reason. But I have not thought to make this... it is only separate. Even Hitler has spoken only a very few words about this.' (Film Culture interview, 1973.)

The film, as we have seen, is structured around Hitler's immediate need to contain the numerically powerful but leaderless SA. In so far as the SA were contained and so far as Triumph of the Will operated in that containment, thus far it was successful as propaganda. Let Riefenstahl know nothing of Röhm. It is but a small matter compared to other things she also claims no knowledge of even to be linked with concentration camps. I have never seen them. I had nothing to do with them.

Normative editing rules are a contract, as it were, between film-maker and audience as to the nature and quality of 'the reality' on offer. Yet, with forty-nine or more cameras, Riefensthal bred every pan to pan, she reverses acting (crosses the line), she jump cuts sync. action. But most significant of all is the fact that all those cameras yield a scant half-dozen matched cuts in the entire film and most of those are falsities—(in the blanket-toeing sequence). The matched cut is, in a multi-camera shoot at least, a sort of guarantee on the contract. Yet the editing is not suspended but rather that they might be by-passed if the footage was non-repetitive 'actualism.'

The cutaway to cutaway technique destroys the possibility of the viewer reading off the relationship of any shot to any other shot except where an obvious interruption takes place. The result is that 'the concrete reality' of Nuremberg becomes tenuous, as even the Riefenstahl industry has noticed. Of course one knows that, at ninety feet a minute, on portable cameras long takes were then difficult. Again one also knows that all film editing requires rearrangement and abridgment. What Riefenstahl does is to carry on that process with such disregard for the manner of continuity of time and place that she reaches an extreme.

Take the opening of the film: Hitler's plane—a plane we never see Hitler in. He descends through grey clouds and at the same time casts a sharp edged shadow on the ground below, a meteorological situation not often encountered. All normative readings of this narrative suggest that the shadowed column are marching to meet the plane. They never get there. The crowd at the airfield is not at the airfield: this crowd is shown standing on walls of no trees or office at the airfield, as is revealed in the widest of the establishing shots of the plane. This shot is itself a little strange, since it shows a crowd, oddly thin (about six films of thirty people in each), standing before the equally oddly deserted plane. Then the 'actual shot' of the plane surrounded by officials and cars. But the plane itself is a little strange, for it appears to have quite different markings on either side of its tail. I suggest that Riefenstahl was totally wrong-footed at the airport (the only of focus shot of Hitler comes here and is a further indication); and that on the evidence of the film the aircraft was re-staged with a small crowd of extras and the sequence constructed with material shot elsewhere.

Her brilliant control of montage—
Richard Meran Barssam

well. It is a Congress in a windscreen, is untidy and up shots. All halved or '... later in the c the airfield there must be a drive or drive. During the same the quite differs he exits. There have been the camera a establishing these close-ups surrounded I suggest the 100mm lens mounted on camera.

This con puts always hung line, is a con parade, such leaders stand Hitler is using no one has no id parade there stahl can do measure not can see her daughter the limited 96 bits from at least, fit into that night an are not costs achieved is to records the same pace—4 a mile an hour. Given that really domk single shots is actually p (especially i soundtracks bands, laugh why not?) at Heils' which Nuremberg in the Deren rally and the Nu do we numbers of are average that it could him. This at little lies of... Far from Riefenstahl etc. It reflects the 1934, Inust pass Peter a propaganda Triumph is pletely mutilated in... Ken Kelso from all this mainly the near to fictionalised into quest verity of sources, out... Geobbel 52 per cent...
The film genius lives within you and you have raised the cinema up to the heights where it usually does not ascend — Jean Cocteau