jects them to the distortions of exoticism. They become, in effect, terms in a discourse of protest against the reality of social relations in the industrial era.

Works Cited


The Mass Psychology of Fascist Cinema

Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will

Frank P. Tomasulo

Most of the scholarly literature on Leni Riefenstahl’s mammoth spectacle Triumph of the Will (1935) deals with the hoary questions of whether or not the film’s director was a Nazi, supported the National Socialists, or had an affair with Adolf Hitler. Over the past sixty years, these biographical issues have been addressed by many cinema critics, a series of postwar “denazification” boards, the filmmaker’s autobiography, Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir, and, most recently, in the documentary film The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl (1994).

The purpose of this essay is to reframe the discussion on Triumph of the Will by examining the text of the film, its cinematic imagery and “political” content, and the psychological context in which it was made—the 1930s historical conjuncture of the German masses with fascist ideology. Synthesizing the three modes of analysis—the ideological, psychological, and cinematic—is crucial because, as Siegfried Kracauer has said, “What films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions—those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness” (6). To explore the nexus between ideology, psychology, and cinematic style in Triumph of the Will, the ideas and writings of a contemporaneous thinker, Wilhelm Reich, will be recruited in an effort both to understand the fascinating appeal of fascism to the German Volk of the period and to analyze how Riefenstahl’s film style, even in the documentary mode, ap-
pealed to and positioned spectators (socially and psychologically), and thereby transmitted a meaning beneficial to the Nazi cause.

**Wilhelm Reich: The Mass Psychology of Fascism**

Wilhelm Reich, who combined psychological insight with sociopolitical analysis, offers a historically contemporaneous explanation of the mesmerizing way in which *Triumph of the Will* interpellated viewers.1 His classic study, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, is a unique Marx-Freudian contribution to our understanding of fascism as a crucial phenomenon of modern life.

Reich repudiated the idea that fascism is an ideology or an action of a single individual or national group or of any ethnic or political group. As he put it, “Fascism is not a political party but a specific concept of life and attitude toward humankind, love, and work” (xxii). So, for Reich, fascism is an expression of the irrational character structure of the average human being whose primary biological needs and impulses have been suppressed by the authoritarian patriarchal family and the Church for thousands of years. According to Reich, “The abominable excesses of the capitalist era . . . were possible only because the human structure of the untold masses had become totally dependent upon authority, incapable of freedom and extremely accessible to mystification” (xxvi–xxvii). Thus, Reich perceived fascism to be more than a mere epiphenomenal “false consciousness,” more than a befogging or deception of the masses; instead, Reich argued, the masses were fully accessible to the “Nazi psychosis” and hence responsible for every social process: “Fascism is to be regarded as a problem of the masses, and not as a problem of Hitler as a person or the politics of the National Socialist Party” (98).

Reich studied the 1932 voting statistics in Germany and learned that “it was precisely the wretched masses (i.e., the lower middle class) who helped to put fascism into power” (10). But why would millions of people affirm their own suppression? The answer lies in what Reich called “complete identification with state power” (46). In short, feeling at one with the authoritarian father figure makes a person feel at one with the fatherland. Such emotional identification with the stern and decisive father produces “the self-confidence that the individual derives from the ‘greatness of the nation’ ” (Reich 63).2

How does a fascist film position its viewers, according to the Reichian model? One has to start with the subject because “every social order produces in its masses that structure which it needs to achieve its main aims” (Reich 23). And one must begin before the person ever sees a film, because “the structural reproduction of society takes place in the first four or five years of life and in the authoritarian family” (Reich 30).

Three other factors in Reich’s teachings are significant to his analysis of fascism: the role of religion, characterological armor (what contemporary psychologists call “body language”), and the sexual symbolism of the swastika. Reich constantly referred to all religion as “organized mysticism.” Based on his clinical research, Reich also developed the concept of characterological armor, represented physiologically by muscular tension and disturbances in posture. For Reich, the repressed, inhibited, and unspontaneous neurotic betrays a rigid, taut, and unrelaxed muscularity, carriage, and overall affect (Rycroft 67). The unconscious social effects of the swastika help explain fascism’s mass appeal, and its frequent display in *Triumph of the Will*: “This symbol depicting two interlocked figures acts as a powerful stimulus . . . that proves to be that much more powerful, the more dissatisfied, the more burning with sexual desire, a person is” (Reich 103). The swastika was originally a sexual symbol, portraying the act of copulation, although it later took on connotations of a millwheel, the symbol for work. Ironically, it dates back to the Semites, to the Myrtle court of the Alhambra in Granada and to the synagogues of Edd-Dikke in East Jordania (Reich 101–2).

Reich knew that it was not enough to present reasoned political platforms to the apathetic masses; an authoritative fascist leader had to strive to embody the nation’s myths and thereby become “the personification of the nation” (62). By subjectifying cultural iconography into the person of one father figure and onto powerful national symbols, potent objective forces were put in place. In a nation undergoing economic and political crises, such as Germany did during the Weimar period, the longstanding myths of that culture became effective symbolic tools to promote fascism, and, in the twentieth century, those cultural myths were most forcefully conveyed on film.

**Triumph of the Will: A Text in Context**

*Triumph of the Will* was commissioned by Chancellor Adolf Hitler, who was hailed (or heiled) as a charismatic leader. It was meant to be the official document of the annual Party Congress of September 4–10, 1934. Riefenstahl’s film essentially promulgated fascism and the National Socialist Party (NSDAP) as the bases for renewed German nationalism and patriotism. As Joseph Goebbels once said, “We are convinced that films constitute one of the most modern and scientific means of influencing the masses” (quoted in Downing 21).

Although *Triumph of the Will* was made about the party convention, it does not really articulate any specific political policy or substantive ideology. Instead, pretentious symbolic imagery and vague patriotic appeals are used to address the emotional concerns of the populace. Indeed, Hitler repeatedly stressed that one could not sway the masses with arguments, logic, or knowledge, only with feelings and beliefs. True to form, the documentary establishes a “cult of personality” around its “star,” a mystical aura associated
with Nature, religion, and a “folksish” family-based patriotism. The film spectacle often connects its heroic leader with the sky, the earth, and animals; Christian and pagan religious connotations abound; and flags, parades, torchlight rituals, and military-national symbols dominate the mise-en-scène. Indeed, all the signifying mechanisms of the cinema—camera angles, editing, music, set design, lighting, and narration—are marshaled to appeal to the irrational character structure of its malleable mass audience.

In content, the film emphasizes upbeat and patriotic themes that convey a renewed sense of national identity and unity following a period of economic and political instability. This is precisely the mood one would expect in a motion picture depicting the annual rally of a partisan political party; however, Leni Riefenstahl’s insistence that “there is no tendentious commentary for the simple reason that there is no commentary at all. It is history—pure history” (interview with Delahaye 460) is too simplistic.

Susan Sontag has argued that the film “has no commentary because it doesn’t need one, for Triumph of the Will represents an already achieved and radical transformation of reality: history become theater” (83). The fascist aesthetic valorized and derived pleasure from “situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain.” Furthermore, “Fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets,” uniformly garbed and shown in ever swelling numbers” (Sontag 91).

Although hundreds of thousands of people attended the Nuremberg rally, Riefenstahl’s telephoto lens often magnifies those numbers by compressing and melting the crowds together cinematically, thereby conveying the ideological point that the masses are closer together (united) and solidly behind their chancellor. In fact, with the aid of 16 cameramen, 135 technicians, and a rally stage-managed by Third Reich architect Albert Speer, she created, rather than merely documented, an event that would not have occurred in quite the same way without the presence of cameras and microphones. The spectacle of reality became reality. The film’s concatenation of artificial images—its sights and sounds—created a simulacrum of a revitalized Zeitgeist that appeared to be real to many viewers. It was not merely an economic revitalization that the Nazis were trumpeting, but a spiritual rebirth and redemption as well.

What follows is a careful examination of Triumph’s design, which is usually divided into thirteen parts (Hinton 34–37).

I. Hitler’s Arrival

The film begins with a specific date: September 5, 1934—the first day of the Party Congress. After that, Riefenstahl’s chronology is not very strict. She positions events that occurred toward the beginning of the seven-day rally toward the middle of the film and places scenes that were filmed at the end of the proceedings near the beginning. Furthermore, many of the speeches were reshot in a studio after the convention because of difficulties in recording sound at the original location.

From its very opening, Triumph of the Will establishes audience identification with its hero, in much the same way fictional films do. Riefenstahl’s camera shows us the literal and figurative point of view of Hitler from inside his airplane as it descends upon Nuremberg from the heavens. Der Führer’s visual “God’s eye” point of view is seen as the plane literally parts the clouds (of postwar confusion?) while soaring above the medieval city. Krakauer compares Triumph’s opening sequence to a “reincarnation of All-Father Odin” (290), but these early images are also replete with Christian iconography, literalizing as they do New Testament references to “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30), “a mighty angel coming down from the heavens, wrapped in a cloud” (Revelations 8:4), and “lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a gold crown on his head” (Revelations 14:14). In short, der Führer comes out of the clouds just as the Book of Revelations predicted that the Second Coming would take place; the verbal imagery and Old German titles nail the religious point home: “Sixteen years after Germany’s crucifixion, nineteen months after Germany’s Wiedergeburt” (renaissance, sometimes...
translated as resurrection). Thus, Hitler is cast as a veritable German Messiah who will save the nation, if only the citizenry will put its destiny in his hands.

The alliance of religion and politics in the film’s imagery stems from the fact that, according to Reich, “our idea of God is identical with our idea of father” (145). Reich also contended that there was pleasure connected with “the idea of religious excitement ... includ[ing] the excitement experienced by submissive masses when they open themselves to a beloved leader’s speech” (144). He added that although “fascism is supposed to be a reversion to paganism and an archenemy of religion,” it is, in fact, “the supreme expression of religious mysticism” (xv).

The musical accompaniment to this opening sequence is serene and peaceful (Herbert Windt’s mix of Wagner’s Die Meistersinger with the Nazi marching anthem, the “Horst Wessel Lied”). Hitler’s plane is shown literally über Alles, so much so that it soars above and out of the frame in several shots. Its shadow is seen over the columns of marching paraders, resembling an eagle, one of the most frequently displayed symbols of the Third Reich.

Once the airplane lands, anticipation is carefully built up through the montage and sound track. Repeated crosscuts between the plane taxiing to a halt and the huge crowd of enthusiastic greeters at the airport create suspense. Here, as elsewhere, telephoto shots of the overpopulated crowd make it appear that their numbers are larger than they are, while compressing the background-foreground planes of the image to suggest that the people are closely united. Their coordinated Sieg Heil salutes are composed along the diagonal of the frame, a powerful dynamization of screen space that visually conveys the strength of the people’s devotion to their savior.

When Hitler does emerge from the plane, the assembled masses burst into a loud Heil! precisely as the music reaches its crescendo. Backlighting on the leader is used to create an aura of religiosity; as the rim lighting creates a halo-like effect, clearly giving Hitler a godlike aura, it also lightens his dark hair to make his appearance better fit the fair-haired Aryan stereotype, as seen in so many close-ups of rally participants.

As the chancellor’s motorcade begins to drive through the streets of Nuremberg, one shot is repeated several times: a medium shot or close-up that shows der Führer stable and solid, centered in the frame, arm upraised in a Sieg Heil posture, while the people along the route are an amorphous, out-of-focus blur. This single, reiterated image tells the whole story of Triumph of the Will in miniature: an unfocused and confused Germany is once again on the move, in the person of its solid, focused leader, who is the unifying frame of reference for the audience and the nation. Frequent cuts between adoring crowd members and Hitler corroborate that message.

Later, the “nation on the move” theme is strongly associated with the moving camera, which follows Hitler’s motorcade through the streets, under dramatic archways, and into tunnels, often from the chancellor’s point of view. The lighting in this scene is metaphorical: der Führer’s grand entrance from the darkness of the tunnel to the sunlight parallels the emergence of Germany from the dark shadows of Weimar into the Nazi renaissance.

The buildings along the motorcade route are festooned with huge Nazi flags and standards. The camera often glides past them, looking up in intoxicating awe at the conjuncture of the old and the new. As the camera trucks past one building, it looks up at an open window. In an eyeliner match, a house cat turns its head dramatically to stare at Hitler and the passing Nazi cavalcade. Although this shot may not have been staged, its insertion into the flow of the images suggests that even nature is impressed by the sweep of the National Socialists’ advance.

Next, a mother and her fair-haired daughter come up to Hitler’s staff car and present him with a bouquet of flowers. The film then cuts to two other blonde girls in the crowd who seem to observe this scene. Finally, the first girl, boosted up in her mother’s arms, gives a cute Sieg Heil gesture to the chancellor. These images of maternal bliss, youthful innocence, and nature link Hitler to peace and love and thus create the impression that he is a benign and caring ruler to his flock.

Once Hitler reaches his hotel, the telephoto lens is again used to “pack” the crowd. The people’s gaze up toward the second-floor balcony is mirrored in the camera’s tilt up to follow their glances, culminating in a low-angle shot of der Führer at the window, basking in the public adulation. Here, the subtle upward camera tilt participates in and adds to the libidinal agitation of the expectant throng below.

II. Hitler’s Serenade

In Triumph’s first night scene, torchlight is used to illuminate the area around Hitler’s hotel and the人民银行 held aloft by the mob outside. A military marching band plays as uniformed police push back the hordes of followers trying to get a glimpse of their leader. Although all of this was no doubt part of the historical reality of the event, the director emphasizes the vastness of the congregation by filming it in deep-focus space. The pageantry of a torchlit procession, replete with huge bonfires along the route, is accentuated both by the dramatic flickering backlighting on the silhouetted marching soldiers and by the camera’s motility.

III. The City Awakens

In this section, Riefenstahl creates a city symphony in miniature. A window is seen opening onto a panoramic vista of Nuremberg in the early morning light. We see the city’s medieval churches, its industrial smokestacks, and the rivers and bridges. In one shot, the camera slowly glides along the river, looking up at a cathedral’s spires. Riefenstahl then boldly cuts to a high-angle
shot, photographed from an overhead airplane, looking down on the tent city. We see young drummer and bugle boys preparing to wake the Hitlerjungens, who proceed to engage in their morning ablutions: shaving, combing each other's hair, squirting water from hoses, stoking firewood. Steamy noodle soup is prepared, and sausages are arrayed in formation like the thousands of young men and women in attendance. These images of youthful exuberance (boxing matches, foot races, shenanigans) are notable for the consistency of costume, activity, and facial reaction (smiles). A unity of national purpose is thereby established through the clothing, action, and countenances of the beaming young people. The lone exception is Adolf Hitler, who wanders through the pseudo-boot camp in his military uniform.

IV. Folk Parade

The adoring looks of the costumed Bavarian peasant women reiterates the theme of female idealization of the Führer established in the earlier airport and motorcade sequences. For these women and for the youngsters, the libidinal object (Hitler) has been put in the place of an ego ideal. It is just a short step to national hypnosis and subjection. Traditional folk music is played over these scenes until, eventually, an accordion player and people in matching Bavarian costumes begin to march in parade formation. After the parade, the “Horst Wessel Lied” emerges from the folk airs, a sonic suggestion that the Nazis materialized out of the native populace.

V. Congress Opening

After the folk parade, Deputy Chancellor Rudolf Hess officially opens the Party Congress. In an indoor meeting hall, Hess announces the death of Reichspresident Paul von Hindenburg. As he does so, the camera tilts up to a huge swastika emblem, visually linking Hindenburg with a symbol of the Third Reich. At the precise instant that Hess calls Hindenburg the “first soldier of the Great War,” there is a cut to a helmeted soldier in the auditorium, thereby visually associating the dead octogenarian with his contemporary avatar, the new Nazi warrior. Hess’s verbal tribute to the fallen warrior, like the film’s editing here, attempts to connect Germany’s past and the present in an effort to create a historical unity of purpose that belies the fact that Hindenburg was adamantly opposed to the Nazis.

Later in his eulogy, Hess makes another linkage when, addressing Hitler, he exclaims, “You are Germany!” Riefenstahl cuts to two reaction shots: one of an older woman applauding the remark and another of a young girl who also claps loudly, thus linking the generations. Such reaction shots in a film often lead and legitimate the spectator’s response by creating a diegetic “climate” for a shared reaction between spectacle and spectator. The effect on a spectator of viewing a positive reaction shot is, generally speaking, to induce the same sort of euphoria in the viewer through a process akin to “contagion.”

Other speakers come to the podium to tout the tyrant’s virtues. Von Wagner reads from der Führer’s proclamation; Rosenberg expresses “our hope in the youth”; Toth extols the recent improvements in Germany; Darré emphasizes “the health of our farmers” and the improved agricultural export situation; Streicher stresses “racial purity”; and Frank, leader of the German legal profession, avers that “our Supreme Führer is our Supreme Judge.” Finally, Goebbels closes this segment by summarizing “the creative art of modern political propaganda”: “It may be good to [use guns] but it is far better to win the hearts of the people.” In the context of Triumph’s filmic rhetoric, Goebbels’ statement can be read as self-reflexive. All of the speeches given in the assembly hall are obviously designed to secure the allegiance of the populace, but the effectiveness of Riefenstahl’s film is similar: to influence spectators’ “hearts” through cinematic means of manipulation.

VI. The Labor Corps Rally

In this sequence, Hitler addresses the 52,000-member Labor Corps—the chancellor’s answer to German unemployment—who come with Nazi ensigns and their strong-lunged Heils. With precision timing, the drill team raises and lowers its spades, as if it were a military color guard. Rows of drummers pound out a slow, solemn beat as the crowd intones “On with Germany to a new era.” These images help to forge a common national identity. Triumph also shows the Volk working together, despite their regional differences, epitomized by the many workers who call out the names of their regions (Bavaria, Konigsberg, Dresden, Black Forest, the Saar). These individual close-ups can be considered metonymies of a splintered Germany or as celebrations of the individual spirit, but the true rhetoric of the scene is to build a sense of German unity through the accretion of such images.

Similarly, the slow montage of images that follows unites three concepts into a seamless whole. On the sound track, the masses chant “One People, One Führer, One Reich,” and with each phrase the film cuts, respectively, to a Labor Corpsman with a lowered flag, a huge close-up of Hitler, and an ironworks sculpture of an eagle surmounting a swastika. The solemn rhythm, edited to the cadence of the chanted words, amplifies the message of German unity under one leader and one (NSDAP) banner. Shortly thereafter, the technique is repeated when the workers, in unison, murmur, “We plant forests, we build roads . . . for Germany.” Precisely at the word “Germany,” there is a cut to an extreme close-up of Hitler, again making a direct visual link between the nation and der Führer.

Sympathy is evoked when a flag is lowered by first one, then many, soldiers as they recall the martyrs of World War I and shout out the names of
famous battles. When Hitler addresses this group, he reminds them of the NSDAP’s accomplishments: “The Red Front and reaction are all dead.” On that sentence, there is a cut on a pronounced drumbeat to swastikas being raised, thereby linking the demise of leftist parties to the rise of Nazism. Referring to the German war dead, Hitler says, “You are not dead. You live in Germany!” This oration at a memorial service for Nazi “revolutionaries” thus invokes the idea of the resurrection of martyrs, a theme that is prominent throughout the documentary.

As Hitler continues his address to the Labor Corps, he is photographed in profile, centered solidly in the frame, while the huge mob seen behind him is out of focus. Again, the leader is presented cinematically as focused, prominent, and powerful, while the masses are shown as unfocused, secondary, and powerless. When der Führer proclaims, “Work . . . will bind us together,” Riefenstahl cuts immediately to a shot that visually binds the throng, a pan taken with a telephoto lens.

Shortly thereafter, a low-angle close-up of Hitler against a bald white sky presents a highly dramatic view of the leader at the same time as it provides a child’s-eye view of the father figure. Der Führer then makes the patriarchal context most explicit, as he shouts to the assembled Labor Corps, “Germany proudly sees its sons in your image.” The shot ends with the despot’s arm in a dynamic Heil salute across the diagonal of the screen. That position is maintained as the image dissolves to a low-angle view looking up at hundreds of shoveling marching soldiers as martial music plays on the sound track, again accentuating the strength of the growing war machine. Finally, the sequence ends as the Labor brigades, singing in staccato fashion, march directly at the camera. The military connotations of the Labor Corps’ uniforms, shovels, flags, drill teams, parades, and precise regimentation are clearly in evidence.

VII. The S.A. (Sturm-Angriff)

Dramatic lighting is at the heart of the sequence in which S.A. chief Viktor Lutze addresses his stormtroopers. It opens with flags and standards blowing in the nighttime breeze. The camera moves around the Nazi symbols to reveal a blazing bonfire surrounded by singing men. At the smoke-enveloped speaker’s platform, searchlights and magnesium torches abound, creating a striking configuration on Lutze’s face. In his speech, the S.A. chief stresses that “we S.A. men know only to be loyal to our Führer and fight for him!” Just then, the film cuts to an upward tilt shot that reveals a large swastika flag, a juxtaposition that links the S.A., Lutze, Hitler, and the symbols of the Reich in a visual mythic unity. The event ends with fireworks exploding and a return to the bonfires and moving torchlights. In its entirety, this sequence—replete with its firelight, smoke, fireworks, and sensational Sieg Heil salutes—cultivates a milieu of ritualized male initiation and idolatry, the sort of mass mesmerization diagnosed by Wilhelm Reich.

VIII. Hitler Youth

This section begins with a giant close-up of a blaring bugle that fills the screen, followed by a cut to another circular shape, a round drum being pounded. Finally, we cut to a boy beating the drum with two sphere-headed batons. From these close-ups of rounded (cunnic) and straight (phallic) shapes, the camera pulls back to include a wide shot of the Hitlerjugend standing on their tiptoes to see their hero’s arrival at the huge amphitheater, the noise level rising to build anticipation. As Hitler enters, Riefenstahl cuts to a shot of phallic trumpets bellowing. On cue, the youth Heil Hitler en masse. Thus, the sequence builds from explicit individual sexual symbols to mass excitement that culminates with the appearance of der Führer. Again, Hitler is backlit in order to augment his godlike aura and lighten his hair, while the youthful crowd is out of focus.

The lectures to the Hitler Youth are permeated with messages of unity and subservience to the leader: “a youth that knows no class distinctions,” “the youth of our nation is shaped in Hitler’s image,” “we want to be one people,” and “we want this people to be obedient and you must practice this obedience.” But beyond these verbal injunctions, Triumph uses cinematic means to impart the same ideas. In one particular long shot, the enormous assemblage stands and shouts, “Heil.” In the foreground several people salute and cheer Hitler, while the deep-focus space of the background is filled with thousands of closely packed youngsters.

Later, a high-angle image shows the grandiose crowd arranged in box-shaped patterns, imparting the sort of symmetry the Nazis were trying to impose on the chaotic German nation. This image of disciplined, rectangular order is followed by the chancellor’s pronouncement, “We want to be one people,” thereby linking the visual and verbal themes. A series of reaction shots of beaming, fair-haired youths reiterates that message, while adding a subtle Aryan dimension to the idea of national unity.

Even when Hitler is stationary in the frame, as he is when he speaks to the packed stadium, the camera dollies around him, imparting an intoxicating kinesthetic quality to an otherwise static image. The cut—to an extreme long shot showing thousands of closely crammed-together youngsters Heiling their leader—bolsters the relationship between Hitler and his youth movement, especially since the arm salutes are composed across the diagonal of the frame. Thus, the juxtaposition of the moving camera shot that circumnavigates der Führer with the static long shot of the Heiling masses of young people establishes a wished-for paternal nexus between this “father” and his “children” that belies the fact that six to ten years later he ordered these same young men
into battle as cannon fodder for the imagined glory of the Third Reich. Ironically, Hitler’s speech includes a line—“In Germany, you will live!”—that is followed by a reaction shot of a grinning face in the crowd. At the end of his oration, Hitler reinvokes the religious connotations that have been just below the surface of the entire party rally. Lecturing the young people, he declares, “You are flesh from our flesh and blood from our blood.” a formulation that conjoins Eucharistic (“This is my body; this is my blood”) and Aryan undertones.

The final image of the sequence is an elaborate tracking shot that travels around the entire circumference of the massive stadium, focusing on the enormous line of youths on the stadium floor. Although the swirling image may suggest destabilization, the triumphant music on the sound track in fact underscores the physical movement and psychological captivation of the entire “Hitler Youth” scene.

IX. Review of the Army

When Hitler reviews the army, the film’s rhetoric becomes divided. For internal German consumption, Riefenstahl shows the army’s maneuvers—a nationalist and militaristic display of flags, precision horsemen galloping in review, mini-tanks driving in formation, and cannons being drawn along by horses. As such, the film cannily portrays the economic, military, and spiritual recovery of the German nation. When exported, however, these images suggested to the world that Germany’s army was a less-than-mighty force with outdated technology, ostensibly in compliance with the demilitarization provisions of the Treaty of Versailles.

X. The Evening Rally

The sequence begins with a view of storm clouds, but the camera gradually tilts down to reveal a scliced eagle grasping a swastika. Here, through a shrewd camera movement, Riefenstahl lies a portentous scene of nature with the force of the Reich. We then see masses of party bureaucrats hoisting swastika flags to the beat of triumphant music. Telephoto lenses capture the held-aloft standards on the move, squeezing them together to evince the “tightness” of the Party’s supporters, and an extreme long shot documents the sheer number of disciples who attended the rally. (Hitler observes that 200,000 people are assembled.)

In his speech, der Führer says, “The State does not order us [to attend]! We order the State! We created the State!” He adds, “Our movement stands like a rock!” Both these verbal assertions are aided by the cinematography. Hitler is photographed as erect and ramrod straight, firmly centralized in the mise-en-scène, his Sieg Heil salute acknowledging the plaudits of the roaring mob.

Another torchlight procession commences, shot as a montage of marching feet, solemn faces, and upraised pennants, all to the incessant rhythm of martial music. At one point, Riefenstahl cuts from a high-angle view down on the gigantic crowd to a low-angle shot looking up at Hitler, underscoring his power, authority, and superiority to the masses.

XI. Hitler and the S.A.

The segment begins with a shot of a giant stone statue of an eagle astride a swastika. Then Riefenstahl cuts to one of the most famous images in Triumph of the Will, an extreme long shot showing three men (Hitler, Lutze, and S.S. chief Heinrich Himmler), tiny in the frame, marching up an imposing aisle in a vast outdoor stadium, the War Memorial, surrounded on both sides by a sea of humanity. The three men walk slowly toward three mammoth swastika banners unfurled at a tall granite platform at the top of the screen. The camera glides majestically as funereal music marks the solemnity of the event—the laying of a wreath at the eternal flame dedicated to Nazi martyrs.

Again, Riefenstahl uses aggressive framing on the marchers walking.

Triumph of the Will: Hitler, Lutze, and Himmler at the War Memorial.
directly toward the camera, along with bird’s-eye views looking down on the organized masses. These contradictory viewpoints suggest that the German people are both active and passive, on the move, but only as followers. The telephoto lens is used again from a high angle to show hundreds of Nazi banners approaching the camera, seeming to have a life of their own. In another montage, the director cuts from a long shot of men marching in formation to a close up of Hermann Göring, then to an extreme long shot of the rally, followed by close-ups of a swastika and an eagle. These juxtaposed images link the military, Nazi leaders, the masses, and the symbols of the Reich in a mystical bond of unity and obeisance. Reich has noted that “the sexual effect of a uniform, the erotically provocative effect of rhythmically executed goosestepping, [and] the exhibitionistic nature of militaristic procedures” are often exploited by fascism (32). The segment concludes as one of the military leaders declares, “We comrades know only to obey.”

In Hitler’s address to the S.A. and S.S., photographed against a threatening, cloud-filled sky, he attempts to quell any internal fears about dissension in the ranks or the “blood purge” of disloyal Nazis. He avers that there is no split in the Party, adding that “our Party stands like a rock!” This remark, delivered from a massive stone platform, is the second such invocation of a rock analogy in the film, a metaphor that may derive from Christ’s founding of the apostolic church on the pun “Thou art Peter [stone], and on this rock I found my church.” But the Nazi “rock” comes with a sword, not an olive branch: after Hitler’s fiery speech, artillery is fired and the flags of the regiment are consecrated in a paganism rite.10

XII. The Parade

The parade scene begins with an extravagantly theatrical shot: the camera glides under an immense swastika flag to reveal the arrival of der Führer. This perspective approximates the raising of a theater curtain and sets the stage for an excitable entrance. Huge throngs are seen hanging out of windows to catch a glimpse of Hitler’s motorcade. Drummers and marchers in military apparel parade through town, along with goosesteppers, who lead the way with Nazi standards and Heil Hitler salutes.

In a composition reminiscent of earlier shots, Hitler is situated in the foreground as a legion of out-of-focus troops file past in the background. Even the army is presented as unfocused, needing the solid hub of der Führer for guidance and direction. This shot is followed by a cut to a metonymic close-up that shows only the dictator’s extended right arm in the foreground (the marchers remain blurred) until the camera pans across his arm to reveal his face. His willful and emphatic gesture—emphazized by Riefenstahl’s camera angle—tells us more about the NSDAP policies than all the perorations in Triumph of the Will because, at its base, the Third Reich was about the exercise of brute force over a country seeking direction. Fascism did not promulgate a rational political discourse or policy; instead, Hitler revived the concepts of the German philosopher Hegel concerning the exultation of the Will.11 But in the end, Triumph of the Will is not really about the will at all; as Sontag observed, the film is “about the triumph of power” (87).

Constantly moving shots of Nuremberg are used in this sequence—of cathedrals, medieval architecture, porticos, bridges, the city hall, the river, and packed reviewing stands—to the accompaniment of radiant music, all in an effort to demonstrate how the city has turned out for the rally. One shot from on high shows the entire metropolis decked out in fascist regalia, permeated with saluting citizens. Hundreds of marchers file across the screen along the diagonal or as seen from above, looking like a meticulously orchestrated ant colony. One image of thousands of paraders is shot from directly overhead, highlighting the rigid geometric configuration of the people.

This section provides evidence that the rally’s chronology was altered substantially in the editing room. In particular, footage of der Führer wearing a light-colored outfit (with light shirt and tie) was intermixed throughout the parade sequence with footage from another day on which he wore a darker jacket with a wide belt. The reason for combining footage from two separate occasions was probably to extend the screen time of the final parade. The sequence ends with the appearance of a goosestepping color guard bearing the Party flags through the streets.

XIII. The Closing—Entry of the Party Standards

The closing scene begins with the ubiquitous Nazi emblem, featuring an eagle surmounting a swastika, but Riefenstahl quickly cuts to a shot of Hitler entering the Congresshalle with dozens of Party officials. The camera tilts up slowly to reveal the enormity of the spacious auditorium and the immense swastika insignia draped over the podium. Loud shouts of the faithful are initially mixed with soft music, but the tune segues to a more martial melody once the standards are brought in. Everyone Heils the hundreds of banners, which seem to march straight at the camera without the aid of any human agency. The low camera angle foregrounds and imparts life to the standards over the human beings who display them. This optical rhetoric is perfectly appropriate to the spirit of fascism, which favors devotion to the autocrat and his symbols over individualism.

Nonetheless, individuals are singled out in Triumph of the Will. At the beginning of der Führer’s final address at the rally, for instance, he refers to “the old fighters” of the NSDAP. At that moment, Göring, Himmler, Goebbels, and other longtime allies are shown, listening intently. One line sums up the content of Hitler’s closing address: remembering the early days of the Party, he proclaims, “We wanted to be the one and only power in Germany.”
The next cut—to the eagle-over-swastika standard—brings home the message. Hitler's parting words are "Long live National Socialism! Long live Germany!" thereby equating his movement with the state.

His concluding speech shows how Adolf Hitler was able to capitalize on both his oratorical style and the cinematic depiction of that style in *Triumph of the Will*. Throughout the film, *der Führer* evinces stiff and rigid postures. For rhetorical flourishes, he frequently folds his arms over his chest, the classic body armor of the unresponsive, unemotional individual. His gestures are limited to the ever-present *Sieg Heil* salute, another stilted physiological movement. As he himself says, "The German people are happy to know that this fleeting image [the troubled past] has been replaced by a fixed pole." He posits himself as the national phallic and acts the part physiologically by maintaining ramrod poses for the camera. In Wilhelm Reich's schema, neurotic individual traits are also present on a collective (i.e., national) scale (Cattier 48).

In his final harangue, however, Hitler's body language is decidedly different than in his previous sermons, in which he evinced symptoms of the "characterological armor" and "biologic rigidity" Reich felt were at the basis of both personal neurosis and national fascism (342). It is only in his last speech that the dictator manifests any kinesthetic passion, moving about on the platform, gesticulating dramatically, and raising his voice. As a fitting conclusion to a motion picture that emphasized duty, submission, and a rein on one's emotions, *der Führer*'s "star power"—his uninhibited surrender to the flow of biological energy and his ability to discharge pent-up sexual passion through animated facial reactions—allows the audience to experience national catharsis and orgastic release at the climax. In Reichian terms, a nation composed of frustrated individuals who repress their hostility behaves in a pathological manner, leaving them inaccessible to logical proof; such a people easily fall victim to the demagogic propaganda of mystical fascism.

All that is left is for Hess to reappear and affirm that "the Party is Hitler, and Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler." This irrational "syllogism" leads to the entire assembly breaking into the "Horst Wessel Lied" as the camera pans around the hall. The "documentary" ends on a dissolve from that singing mob to a huge swastika, then to a striking low-angle shot of hundreds of men marching against a background of clouds.

**Conclusion: The Mass Psychology of Fascist Cinema**

Through the emotional appeal of *Triumph of the Will*, viewers are positioned in a very accustomed place—their own psyches. The myth, story, and spectacle created by this "nonfiction" film found receptive homes in the hearts and minds of their German viewers because the imaginary discourse it established was preconstructed in the German "national character" (Kracauer 8). The epic film succeeded because its emotional program resembled that of the vast cross-section of the public known collectively as the nation. Propaganda films such as *Triumph of the Will* not only promote the mythic rebirth of their nations, they also celebrate the rebirth of myth itself. There is only one role for the individual or collective spectator of these spectacles: as acceptor of the foreordained meanings of their cultural myths. Viewers are hailed (or *Heiled*) into "participation," but only if political, racial, gender, and class differences are elided in favor of an acceptance of an all-encompassing "we." As Kracauer indicated, "The technique, the story content, and the evolution of the films of a nation are fully understandable only in relation to the psychological pattern of that nation" (5).

That may be true because, as Karl Marx postulated, "In every epoch, the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas. . . . The class that has the means of material production at its disposal also has the means of ideological
‘production’ at its disposal” (89). In what Walter Benjamin called “the age of mechanical reproduction” (i.e., the film epoch), Marx’s famous formulation has a special relevance. Not only those who control the means of production but also those who control the means of production of meaning-production have power over both the material facts and the ideological spirit of an era.

Reich understood that in the twentieth century, the classic Marxist model—according to which the economic relations of production determine the artistic and philosophical trends of a given era—needed modification. In the modern world, propaganda artifacts like Triumph of the Will mingle historical realities and cultural expression to such an extent that the film has a tangible material and historical effect on society and social consciousness. As Reich stated, “Social ideology not only reproduces itself in man but [it] has become an active force, a material power” because “the ideology of every social formation has the function not only of reflecting the economic process of the society, but also . . . of embedding the economic process in the psychic structures of the people” (17–18).

The phenomenon of mass domination is hardly a recent development, but Reich added a new wrinkle to the scrutiny of an ancient political practice. The “bread and circuses” doled out to the Roman masses of yore at least had one nutritious ingredient, bread, in a two-course menu for promoting ideology and manipulating political hegemony; Triumph of the Will provided only mindless spectacle and empty optimism for its passive public, but it achieved the same results because “the films of a nation reflect its mentality . . . [because] films address themselves and appeal to the anonymous multitude. Popular screen motifs can therefore be supposed to satisfy existing mass desires” (Kracauer 5).

As Joanne Morreale noted in reference to more recent propaganda cinema, “There is increasing difficulty reading from ‘outside’ the dominant ideology when psychological, political, cultural, and technological apparatus[es] work to keep the reader/viewer inside” (90). Wilhelm Reich’s ideas can therefore be used to illuminate how material, historical, psychoanalytical, and mythic determinants in spectators’ lives, long before they are subject to a given film text, influence their comprehension of the content and style of a fascist text like Triumph of the Will—and the larger texts of life and society. No one is ever interpellated by a single text; we come to every film with the accumulated baggage of a lifetime of moviegoing—and living. Cinema scholars tend to analyze only the epiphenomenal symptoms of society—the individual films and the institution of cinema—rather than those complex and overdetermined extra-cinematic subjective factors of history that play such a vital role in positioning viewers long before they ever enter a movie theater.

Critics can “deconstruct” and perform oppositional readings of fascist propaganda films, but the hard work of raising consciousness entails much more. Rereading Hitler and Triumph of the Will necessitates reframing our entire experience of history, the world, and the cinema. The subject in history, not just the subject of a given motion picture text, must be analyzed if we ever expect to understand the complex mechanisms of film spectatorship and the mass psychology of fascist cinema.

Notes

1. An early member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and Freud’s assistant at the Polyclinic (1920–27), Reich was also a member of the Austrian and German Communist parties (1927–1933). During the early Fascist period (1933–34), however, Reich was expelled from both the International Psychoanalytic Association and the Communist Party. His expulsion from the former was due to theoretical differences regarding the social implications of psychoanalysis. In particular, the German Psychoanalytical Society felt it could not survive the rise of Nazism if it was associated with communism. Ironically, Reich was barred from the Communist Party because he was perceived to be diverting energies into mental health and sexual hygiene campaigns (Rycroft 5–7).


3. For a complete chronology of the events as they appear in the film, as well as their actual dates, see Hinton 37.

4. Indeed, the first image of the film is a fade-in to a stone eagle perched on a swastika. The camera then tilts down to the title, Triumph des Willens, in bold, severe block letters.

5. The “city symphony” is a genre of documentary film, popular in the 1920s and 1930s, that creates impressionistic portraits of various international cities through rhythmic editing and lyrical musical scores. Examples include Berlin, Symphony of a Great City (1927), directed by Walter Ruttmann, who also designed the titles for Triumph of the Will; Alberto Cavalcanti’s Rien que les heures (1927); Doiga Vertov’s The Man with a Movie Camera (1929); and Jean Vigo’s À Propos de Nice (1930).

6. Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934, a scant month before the Nuremberg rally. Hindenburg’s demise allowed Hitler to consolidate the office of president, held by Hindenburg, with that of chancellor. As such, Hitler became both the head of state and the leader of the government (Hinton 132).


8. This apparent show of solidarity masks the story of how Lutze came to be named S.A. chief. Former S.A. commander Ernst Röhm and his chief supporters were assassinated in the “blood purge” of June 30, 1934—just two months before the Nuremberg rally. The tension was so intense that extra Gestapo security was put in place to prevent an assassination attempt on Hitler by his own Brownshirts. See William L. Shirer, Berlin Diary (New York: Popular Library, 1940), 20–21. The

9. This shot is so ubiquitous in film history books that it was even copied in the final scene of George Lucas’s Star Wars (1977), in which Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and the Wookie Chewbacca walk up an aisle to receive their awards for saving the galaxy.

10. Hitler consecrates the flags by pressing the Nazi “blood flag” against other flags held by the stormtroopers. The “blood flag” was the banner carried during the 1923 Munich Beer Hall Putsch, in which fourteen Nazis were killed and Göring wounded. See Alex de Jonge, The Weimar Chronicle: Prelude to Hitler (New York: New American Library, 1978), 111–20.

11. The exultation of the Will is loosely based on the tradition of German Idealism. Schopenhauer emphasized the Will as a metaphysical concept, while Nietzsche decreed the “slave morality” of Judaism and democracy and valorized the Übermensch, developed in harsh regimen and striving for global rule as “Lords of the Earth.” Wagner’s anti-Semitic writings and operas stressed the pagan blood feuds and tribal codes of German antiquity.

Works Cited


American Documentary Finds Its Voice

Persuasion and Expression in The Plow That Broke the Plains and The City

Charlie Keil

I left still photography because it could not provide the things that I knew films could provide. I was excited and interested in film as a pure medium of expression, but I was more interested in using it for a social end.

WILLARD VAN DYKE, “Thirty Years of Social Inquiry”

During the [1930s], the idea that documentary filmmaking was a poetic activity emerged as a recurring critical theme: the force of cinematic composition, of patterns of light and movement, and of montage rhythms and juxtapositions was widely recognized as central to documentary forms.

CHARLES WOLFE, “Poetics and Politics”

If we accept that documentary filmmaking has gravitated toward a limited number of broad functions—identified by Michael Renov as preservation, analysis, persuasion, and expression (21)—then independent American nonfiction films of the 1930s demonstrably embraced the latter two tendencies. And as Willard Van Dyke’s statement reveals, documentary filmmakers during this period understood the medium of film to be particularly suited to both. Arguably, the very formulation of the term “documentary,” which occurred in the U.S. during the 1930s, was predicated upon the meaningful convergence