

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 dislodgable 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 vicious 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

'On September 5 1934

20 years
after the outbreak
of the World War

16 years
after the start
of German suffering

19 months
after the beginning
of Germany's rebirth

Adolf Hitler flew
again to Nuremberg
to review the columns
of his faithful followers.'

Opening Titles
Triumph des Willens
(*Triumph of the Will*)

Riefenstahl's preferences also. Given our taste for the spectacle of the dehumanised mass (that part of fascist aesthetics which we all share), shots of 200,000 men in close formation become impressive not through the fact of filming, but because of the formation itself. Riefenstahl is as impressive as the next film-maker when she has that sort of spectacle to work with; but *Triumph of the Will*, with its tours of medieval Nuremberg, its folk parades and boy scout horseplay, its endless drives and dull speeches, is not for the most part that. All in all, what characterises the 107 minutes of film is a typically fascist gigantism, a lack of proportion, a failure to know when to stop.

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 organised as such by anybody other than a fully conscious political animal.

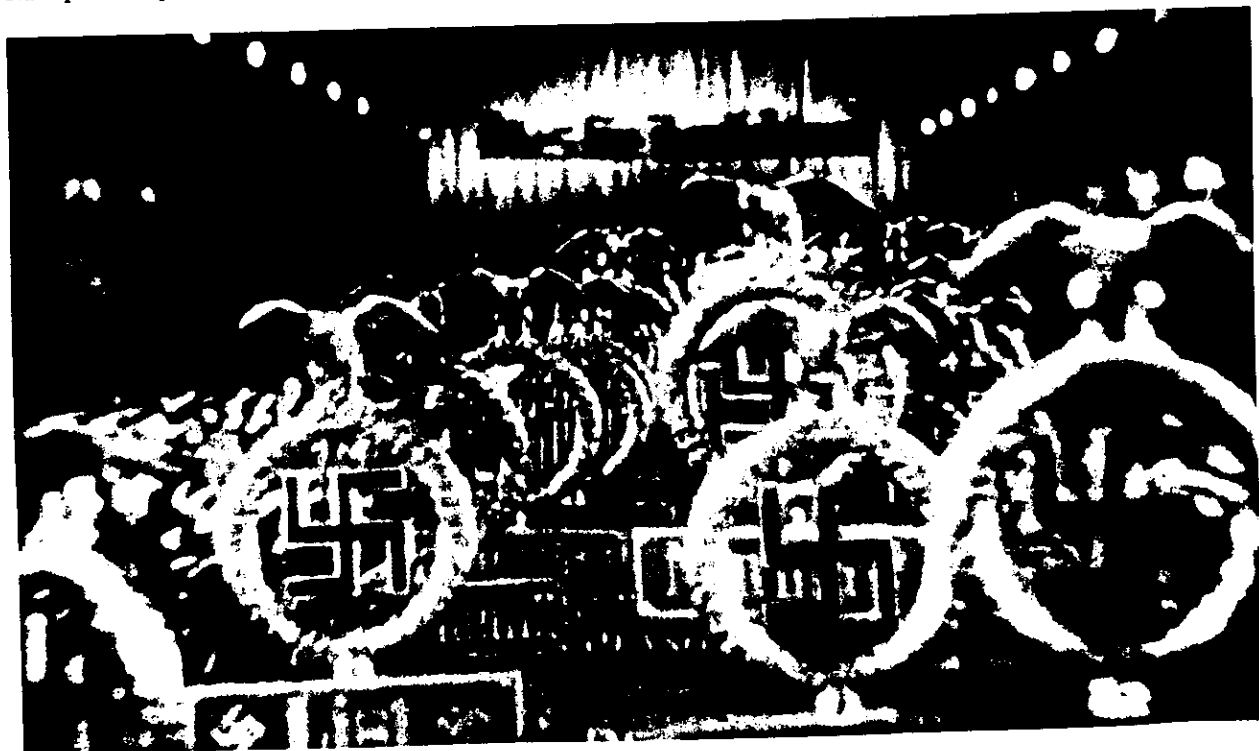
As to the film's effectiveness as propaganda, it was not widely used in Germany at the time, being crass and boring and too obviously about Hitler's difficulties with the SA. It is probably fair to say that for every fascist convert the film has made (and these do not, of course, include Riefenstahl's cinéaste 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, reconstructional) practices to a point where it becomes permissible to ask—if one knew no better—'Was Hitler really there?'

Covering the camera is, as any such a task will effort. However instructed, the can largely left to *Triumph of the* minimum of many from the uniforms wander of them senior the mainstream Riefenstahl creographed is to str to breaking poi film crew, Henr an interview (F she had a good This is not su she had spent actress and dire nature of loca mountain films her behaviour. applies to *Triu* instructive pict logistics super around from on like a maniac doing? how abc ing and hollerir maniac, she wa

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W: SIGHT AND SOUND, Spring 1981

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 newsreels 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 auteurist 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 Luitpold 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 Barsam: '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 Barsam in *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will* (Indiana University Press, 1975) gives in one place 19 cameramen, 19 assistants, plus one aerial and an unnumbered group from the newsreels; elsewhere he gives 36 cameramen and assistants, 9 aerial photographers, 17 newsreel crew, 12 newsreel crew from Tobis (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 Barsam, plus Riefenstahl's number of newsreel men (29), plus one (not 9!) aerial 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 Sontag 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 and drawn 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 statue; which is, as Hinz points out, 'an accurate 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 effectively co-opts the viewer. Inevitably, given our aesthetic history, 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. This is because, as Susan Sontag has documented, Riefenstahl's preoccupation with such iconography and themes continues unabated into the 70s. (In 1973, in an American documentary, one is astounded 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 ... heads.')

Fascist aesthetics, in Sontag'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 surrender, it exalts mindlessness.' The later 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.

*Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich*, trans. Kimber & Kimber. (Pantheon, New York, 1979).

†Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism', *New York Review of Books*, 1974. Reprinted in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Nichols. (University of California Press, 1976).



Leni Riefenstahl with Hitler.

In Riefenstahl's own contemporary (ghosted) description of the film it is, 'The Führer above all! Above the tremendous symphony of crowds, marching columns, meetings, commemorations, 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 fascism of the film.

The sequence in the tent 'city of soldiers and workers'—a city of mass ablutions, 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 Sontag'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 documenting the organisation of the Rally. She leaves the beauties of the city and the formal surface of ceremony and meeting to concentrate on such things as muscular young men standing on each other's backs and racing, like the charioteers in *Ben-Hur*. This is not without significance. The regret expressed by the Riefenstahl industry that 'there is a nearly ineradicable 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 of 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-synching, which it 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 sixty-one 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 cameras 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 Lufthansa stewards running for the door; Hitler steps out and the camera does not focus up 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 sequence, 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-serving 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

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Horseplay in the tent 'city of soldiers and workers'.

history, pure history.' What is crucially at stake here is her credibility with the Riefenstahl industry, who have for two decades dutifully reported the 'actual' nature of her coverage. First she simply denied Speer's stories, claiming that he was confused. Then in the mid-70s she started to claim that she in fact only re-filmed Streicher, because she forgot him, or because of a camera fault.

To forget Streicher, publisher of *Der Stürmer*, the most rabidly anti-semitic of the Nazi leaders, would of course be considered no sin. But if she did forget him it was because his obsession with racial purity was not the first order of business at the 6th Congress. It is anyway unlikely that she did any such thing. Streicher was Gauleiter of the Gau of Franconia, in which Nuremberg lies. He was credited by her with co-operation during the making of the film, including the provision of crew accommodation. More than that, in a legal dispute with her co-writer and director on *The Blue Light*, her first independent feature released in 1932, she invoked Streicher's aid. The man in dispute with her was Bela Balazs. He was a Jew.

Riefenstahl is helped by the simple fact that none of her credulous interlocutors ever closely examines the film. There are two shots of Hess and they do not mesh together; in one the serried ranks of men behind Hess suggest that the lectern was facing Hitler; in the other the background is light with a flagpole and the lectern seems to be facing the hall. This speech of Hess has the worst sync, apart from the music, in the film. In fact there are seven patterns of light on the backgrounds of the twelve speakers in this sequence. Two of those mentioned by Speer as having been reshot in Berlin share exactly the same background as two others not mentioned. Four have completely individual backgrounds, and of these again two are mentioned by Speer and two are not. It is probably safe to assume that only the four who share one pattern of background lighting and are not mentioned by Speer are in the Luitpold Hall. For

the rest it must be an open question, Riefenstahl's protests 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 columns 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

'A poet among hacks' — Richard Meran Barsam

concerned with creating 'hills and valleys'. Her notion of what these might be is attenuated. Take the great march past, described even by Barsam as 'lengthy'. It lasts eighteen minutes and four seconds. But it is preceded by a sequence—the Ceremony of the Fallen—which lasts eleven minutes and seventeen seconds, well over half of which is taken up with marching about; and it is followed by the closing sequence of the film in the Luitpold Hall, which begins with the lengthy marching in of the war banners (and concludes with Hitler's fifth speech of the film). Her notion of a valley includes one over ten minutes across in which a nicely shot tour of Nuremberg in the early morning is followed by the goings-on in Tent City and concludes with badly cut coverage of men, women and children in folk costume progressing, some of them eventually being presented to Hitler.

The film's reputation as a work of immense power depends—it seems to me, crucially depends—on those public domain prints which are of little more

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 filmmaking judgment (a failure, in part, repeated in her next two documentaries *Fest der Volkes* and *Fest der Schönheit*): 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 crudely to contrast formality and (comparative) informality, night and day, march and speech, to have 'hills and valleys'. But that is not the prime organising 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 Left SA men continued throughout Germany. 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 Seehofer, the name credited on the film as party propaganda consultant, talked to 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 with Hitler 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 première 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 6th 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 thus: 'Hitler faced his SA stormtroopers today for the first time since the bloody purge ... There was considerable tension in the stadium and I noticed that Hitler's own bodyguard was drawn up in front of him 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 break the SA but only those who dare to sin against them. Only a lunatic or a deliberate liar could think that I, or anybody, would ever dissolve what we ourselves have built up over many long years.' The eyewitness reports that the SA seemed unimpressed. Riefenstahl helps along this 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 of history. That she chooses to begin the speeches in the Congress—for nobody was ordering her—with Wagner reading Hitler's proclamation that 'no revolution could last for ever without 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 some way or another deals with the threat from the left posed 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 'tempestuously 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 party, Darre, the agriculture minister and Hierl of the Reich Labour Service all emphasise the progress that has been made in reviving work. Ley, the leader of the Reich Labour Front, sums 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. Lutze, 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 who are here tonight 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 an SA man now as I was then. We SA men know only one thing: fidelity to and fighting for the Führer.'

Neither the import of the message nor the quality of the shots suggests a reason for the inclusion of this sequence. Had we not Riefenstahl's denial, we could



'Hitler drives into Nuremberg ... in a Mercedes with a magic windscreen.'



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—as 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 so he mentions this. 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 in 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: 'I don't want 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, Riefenstahl breaks every editing rule in the book. She hacks pan to pan, she reverses action (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 false—in the blanket-tossing sequence). The matched cut is, in a multi-camera shoot at least, a sort of guarantee on the contract implied by the editing. Instead Riefenstahl uses the cutaway to cutaway style of Ruttman's *Berlin: die Symphonie einer Grossstadt*; a style invented not so that the normative rules of narrative editing might be suspended but rather that they might be by-passed when the footage was non-repetitive 'actuality'.

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. And one also knows that all film editing requires rearrangement and abridgement. What Riefenstahl does is to carry on that process with such disregard for the maintenance 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—descends through heavy cloud and at the same time casts a sharp edged shadow on the ground below, a meteorological situation not often encountered. All normative readings of narrative suggest that the shadowed columns 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 and in front of trees. There are no walls or trees 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 files of thirty people in

'Her brilliant control of montage'— Richard Meran Barsam

each), standing before the equally oddly deserted plane. Then there is a wide 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 would suggest that Riefenstahl was totally wrong-footed at the airport (the out of focus shot of Hitler comes here and is a further indication); and that on the evidence of the film the arrival was restaged with a small crowd of extras and the sequence constructed with material shot elsewhere.

Hitler then drives into Nuremberg. He does this in a Mercedes with a magic windscreen, which in some shots is up and in others laid flat on the bonnet. In fact this drive is constructed from two drives, the second (with the windscreen down) being used later in the film as

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well. It is lucky he spent most of the Congress in SA uniform. As with the windscreen, so with Hitler's hair, which is untidy and combed in different close-up shots. Also those shots in which he is haloed or 'marked' with light seem to be later in the day than either his arrival at the airfield or the hotel would allow, so there must be a possibility that another drive or drives is involved in the cutting. During the drive he enters a tunnel of quite different proportions from the one he exits. Close-ups at the hotel could not have been taken as he arrived because the camera needed for them is not in the establishing shot. (The foreshortening of these close-ups in which Hitler is seen surrounded by officials is not sufficient to suggest the use of an ultra-long [say 200mm] lens which could have been mounted out of the range of the other cameras.)

This construction of action, with cut-aways hung out on it like washing on a line, is a constant in the film. In the final parade, such are the changes among the leaders standing before the Mercedes Hitler is using as a reviewing stand, that one has no idea from the film how many parades there actually were. That Riefenstahl can do this with the material is a measure not of her editing skill, for one can see her doing it quite plainly, but of the limited variety of coverage she had. Bits from any one scene can, more or less, fit into any other scene, save only that night and day, interior and exterior are not cross-cut. That a certain rhythm is achieved is because the events, as she records them, all took place at about the same pace—a medium march or a twenty mile an hour car ride.

Given that Hitler, 'the figure who literally dominates', does so mainly in single shots or small tight group shots, it is actually possible for the viewer to ask (especially in the light of the added soundtrack with its sub-Wagnerian bands, laughs, guffaws and [perhaps—why not?] augmented applause and 'Sieg Heils') whether Hitler was really at Nuremberg for the 6th *Parteitag*. Only in the Ceremony of the Fallen, the youth rally and the final entry into the Luitpold Hall do we see Hitler with substantial numbers of people. Elsewhere the crowds are average to thin or he is so far away that it could be an extra impersonating him. This absurdist result is what all the little lies of the editing finally add up to. Far from being 'purely historical. I [Riefenstahl] state precisely: it is film *vérité*. It reflects the truth that was then, in 1934, history'; far from coming 'to surpass *Potemkin* as the ultimate cinema propaganda ... for one essential reason: *Triumph* is a true documentary, completely made up of "actual" footage—the ultimate in incontrovertible credibility' (Ken Kelman, *Film Culture*, 1973); far from all this, *Triumph of the Will*, ultimately because of its cutting, achieves the near impossible. So disoriented, so fictionalised, is the editing that it calls into question quite often material the veracity of which is assured us by other sources, other witnesses.

Goebbels 'was not satisfied with having 52 per cent of the nation and terrorising

the other 48 per cent. We want the people as the people, not only passively but actively.' The way to do this was, in part, to seize control of the means of media production, but not overtly to compromise that production. 'We National Socialists do not place any particular value on our SA marching across the stage or screen ... The National Socialist government has never asked that SA films should be made. On the contrary—it sees the danger in a surplus of them.' Thus Goebbels in 1933 (quoted in *Film Propaganda*, by Richard Taylor). Hitler, however, was not so sure.

Goebbels favoured the 'independence' of ideologically safe film-makers. Through the Reichsfilmkammer the industry had been purged of Jewish and other alien elements. It was safe to leave the remainder 'free'. This system applied not only to film-makers. 'Artists were not necessarily politically committed—many artists successful under national socialism would later cite this point to exonerate themselves' (Berthold Hinz). Which

**'The film genius lives
within you and you have
raised the cinema up to
the heights where it
usually does not ascend'**
—Jean Cocteau

is exactly what Riefenstahl has done. So determined was Goebbels to leave a simulacrum of 'independence' that even the newsreel companies, the regime's major visual propaganda medium, were taken over via a front organisation and only openly nationalised in 1940.

Riefenstahl has been embarrassed by the title on the release print of *Triumph of the Will* from UFA that the producer of the film was the party's own film section. She claims it is a lie, and cites the independent nature of her Olympic film production company to prove the independence of this earlier work. But the reality of film-making independence under National Socialism is a fiction. It really does not matter who commissioned, produced or financed the film. One way or another the Nazis ran the German film industry.

All of Riefenstahl's 'spiel' falls into place. Of course it was Hitler who asked her to make the film, since Goebbels, the apostle of indirect propaganda, would be against it. There is then the supposed hostility Goebbels had for her. There is no evidence of animosity beyond perhaps the sexism of the Nazis and a real belief that she was doing counter-productive work. In the event, Goebbels was right. The film was not well received. She claims that one of her demands from Hitler was that she never be asked to do a film for the Government again. Why would they want another? Hitler had disagreed with Goebbels, but *Triumph of the Will* had made Goebbels' point.

Goebbels was certainly friendly enough to give the film the 1935 National Film

Prize: she denies it to a tribunal in 1947. And as late as 1972 she is still denying that she ever received official recognition from the Nazis. 'I don't want to have any kind of official honour because I need my time ... I want to be 100 per cent independent.'

After *Triumph of the Will*, the main thrust of the Nazi propaganda machine in the area of actuality film was to exploit the audience's naive trust and belief in the newsreel; the sort of trust in the credibility of film nowhere more touchingly and lingeringly exhibited than by the Riefenstahl industry. 'The paintings of German fascism no longer reflected reality but presented it in such a way that it paralysed consciousness,' says Berthold Hinz. No more paralysed collection of consciousnesses can be found than those which have for twenty years or so assiduously devoted themselves to Riefenstahl. I can sympathise with those smitten by the charming persona of this still beautiful actress, with her lisp and little girl voice creating a picture not of a worldly wise political woman in her thirties, a dancer film star and film director in the Weimar Republic, but rather the innocent, uncorrupted Fraulein who never went to see Mr Hitler but she took her mother and father. But, without any caveats or saving pleas to art, to deal with this film is unavoidably to deal with Nazism. Art has nothing to do with it. 'It (the art of the Third Reich) was evasive, in that it made no reference whatever to what we regard as the salient features of the regime, and it was corroborative, in that it went along with what people most wanted to be told. As to the true nature of the times, it tells us nothing. As to the true nature of art, it tells us even less.' This stands for *Triumph of the Will*, perfectly. It is gross, sycophantic, mendacious and masochistic. It works only because of Speer's spectacle.

The West has too much enjoyed, not to say luxuriated in the spectacle of the dehumanised mass—the Trooping of the Colour, 42nd Street chorines, the sea of revolutionaries before the Winter Palace, the race for the Cimarron Strip. If we have paid a price for this taste, then it was a part of the price we paid to the fascists. For too long has Riefenstahl traded on critics' amnesia and their addiction to spectacle. Hers was no ancient hippodrome, no Monument Valley harmlessly to fascinate the film-maker. The parades of such fantasies, the pornography of such a notion of human perfection cost millions of dead. To be asked to forget them for any work of art is preposterous. To be asked to forget them for this piece of frantic yet turgidly crude technique is particularly unacceptable. ■

Speeches at the Nuremberg Congress are quoted from *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will*, by Richard Meran Barsam (Indiana University Press, 1975). Richard Taylor in *Film Propaganda* (1979) warns that official Congress texts differ from the speeches recorded in the film, and offers some alternative translations. Quotations from Leni Riefenstahl are taken from interviews in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1965), *Film Culture* (1973), and interviews quoted in *The Films of Leni Riefenstahl* by David B. Hinton (1978) and *Leni Riefenstahl—Fallen Film Goddess* by Glenn B. Intfield (1976).