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Propaganda As Vision: *Triumph of The Will*

by
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Propaganda is hardly less true than any traditional art which seeks to achieve certain specific emotional effects, to manifest a vision of the world compellingly. Its poor reputation rests largely on the fact that it succeeds so seldom or partially. Such failure is virtually a condition of the fiction propaganda film, where the world presented is not necessarily the real one, where the work is ostensibly imagined, and though emotion may be stirred, it is not stirred by the facts of life. Since propaganda is concerned with influencing attitudes toward life in a given time and place, and indeed in terms of specific events and people, its ideal must always be to present this life, these events, these people. When this is done in the context of a story, with actors playing realities, the limitations mentioned above still obtain, fiction is most obtrusively strange when it works with specific fragments of "truth". The semi-documentary approach, sticking as close to fact as possible, using history rather than story, minimizing the role of actors (particularly actors of famous personages) so there is no sense of the creation of the illusion of Lenin or Kerenski; this re-enactment of event is Eisenstein's way, and Goebbels so admired the power of *Potemkin* that he made it an ideal of German propagandists in the thirties.

However, *Triumph of the Will* did come to surpass *Potemkin* as the ultimate in cinema propaganda. This is for one essential reason: *Triumph* is a true documentary, completely made up of "actual" footage-the ultimate in incontrovertible credibility. The wonderful paradox here is that under any conditions but this absolute reportorial truth, the propaganda itself would be quite incredible.

The reportorial truth is footage of the Nuremberg rallies of 1934. The propaganda is the myth of resurrection of Germany to its ancient heroism through the medium of one man, Adolf Hitler, the savior. To fuse such truth with such propaganda, compromising neither, Riefenstahl creates a unique cinema: a cinema which transfigures "real life" while apparently recording it; which is essentially avant-garde while ostensibly conventional; which, in

short, is dedicated to the creation of grand and ultimate illusion. Magic of various sorts has always been a staple of fiction film, archetypally reputed to be escapist entertainment. But documentary has invariably been considered the spinach or castor oil of cinema fare, the occasional dose of fact that can be sugar-coated or spiced, but never can have magic or even much imagination without becoming something other than documentary. This tradition is the formal point of Riefenstahl's departure, and subtle play with documentary convention is her basic alchemical technique.

Triumph of the Will is structured straightforwardly enough, in the most literal documentary narrative tradition, events proceeding according to strict chronological order, starting with Hitler's arrival in Nuremberg, continuing through processions, rallies, and speeches in the order they happened, and ending with the Führer's final address. To the events themselves nothing is added (except some music), and apparently nothing left out save for purposes of economy. Yet Riefenstahl transfigures all, and this by the unobtrusive manipulation of standard cinema devices: camera set-ups and movement, editing, dissolves.

With these devices the basic images or motifs are varied, orchestrated. These motifs are: ancient things (buildings, statues, icons); the sky; clouds (or smoke); fire; the swastika; marching; the masses; Hitler. The central theme which they develop is that Hitler has come from the sky to kindle ancient Nuremberg with primal Teutonic fire, to liberate the energy and spirit of the German people through a dynamic new movement with roots deep in their racial consciousness.

Riefenstahl's choice of motifs to repeat and emphasize is greatly facilitated by the staged nature of the events, in which most of these images were deliberately conceived to function "live". Indeed, the structures built to accommodate the rally are--'reminiscent of film sets of the 'twenties, most pointedly Lang's *Nibelungenlied*. But Riefenstahl's precise cinematic rendering of them creates yet another dimension, purging whatever "worldliness" remains, while preserving the appearance of "reality". What at first glance may appear just picturesque photography-dramatic angles," buildings seen through mist, silhouettes against the sky-on closer examination turns out to be a truly fantastic "point of view" most subtly imposed upon the material.

Camera set-ups create two fundamental, related effects: *disorientation* and *animation*. Disorientation is achieved by leaving some crucial aspect of

“reality” out of the frame; mainly by showing only the upper parts of things and people; giving them “nothing to stand on”. Thus more often than not we see buildings in relation to the sky and not the earth, some literally castles in the air. This is one way in which the material events of the Rally are “spiritualized”, and all the marching masses after all are just the word of Hitler made flesh.

Animation, that is the imparting of spirit or life to matter, is achieved by close-up and angle of vision. Most remarkable here is the episode of flags parading, in which there are the merest glimpses of those bearing them. Close-up plunges the viewer into the midst of flags that seem to move of themselves, and in longer shots the camera angle obscures any human presence. Again, “reality” becomes figurative, things move as if charged with supernatural power, with a will of their own, or more precisely, the will of Hitler.

Such transfiguration, or triumph of the will over the world, is further realized through camera movement, a venerable Germanic cinema tradition whose silent virtuosi were Murnau, Dupont, Pabst. As a rule when the subject is not in motion (and often when it is) the camera moves. Thus a sense is created of being caught up in the Movement, the dynamic of the Cause. Further, this being caught up in almost constant motion constitutes a quasihypnotic disorientation of the spectator from the stable world where “objective fact” holds still to be examined. And further yet, the camera movement animates still subjects, moving them with the spirit of the occasion—the life Riefenstahl imparts to buildings is quite remarkable.

Editing also disorients the viewer, making him lose perspective by sudden shifts of angle or from close-up to long shot. And the cut can reinforce the animistic power of the image overwhelmingly, as when the crowd cheering within a stadium suddenly becomes, in a long shot from outside, the stadium itself emitting the spirited cry. Thus by constant flux of subject matter, constant motion of camera, constant shift of viewpoint, the concrete “reality” of Nuremberg becomes tenuous, figments which are coherent only in a dream, a vision with no perspective but only absolute vistas.

Indeed the dissolution of the material, “reality”, is evoked and symbolized in specific imagery, that of mist or smoke, and that of night. There is a considerable vapor floating through the film, and whether it suggests spirits in the air, primeval Teutonic mist, or quasi-religious incense, it surely does

create an “atmosphere” of literally transfigured and rarefied matter. Again, there are scenes where the earth is lost in darkness, and people and objects move in indeterminate space. Thousands of torches become flickering stars, and fireworks shot high complete the confusion of heaven and earth, confirming and celebrating the union of the lower world with that from which the Führer descended.

Of course dissolution of the subject matter is most directly, literally expressed in-the “dissolve.” Like all the other cinematic devices, it is employed unobtrusively, almost as if it were just the standard ‘thirties technique for facile smooth transition. But when Riefenstahl dissolves from banners or monolithic symbols to camp grounds or crowds, she does not just make the shift; she leaves the symbol superimposed for a telling time over the new subject before washing it out. Thus the apparent transition is in effect a hovering over her subject matter of the transparent spirit of the previous shot, whether eagle or swastika. Triumph even ends with a dissolve, from a giant swastika to marchers who represent its powers incarnate and militant. The marchers themselves are shot from an angle to show them not merely against the sky, but heading up into it. The final shots then become a developed image for “his [Hitler’s] spirit goes marching on”; a subtle, even subliminal ascension of the German nation to the heavens from which, in the beginning, the Führer came.

Before discussing this beginning in more detail, a brief consideration of one aspect of the end-the technique of symbolism -would be appropriate. Essentially this technique, used throughout the film, is to relate the masses to specific symbolic objects, and it takes as many guises as there are filmic devices. Riefenstahl frames crowds dominated by huge banners or movements; has the camera move from swastikas or eagles to the masses, or vice versa; cuts directly from people to gigantic Nazi emblems in close-up; or, finally, dissolves the distance from symbol to “reality.” Thus within the constantly shifting, at times almost phantasmagoric spectacle staged in ancient streets and modern stadia, the swastika and eagle are the stable images, constantly emerging; while all human beings, save Hitler, come and go like apparitions, individuals submerged in massive waves of racial demonstration. Again and again by camera, cut, or lab, mass passion is connected to the heraldry of Nazism, the *Geist* is rendered unequivocal.

Most intensely possessing and possessed by this spirit is Hitler, not so much a god as a prophet who has been in the realm of vision and returns to inspire

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his people with the true word. His arrival on earth, the start of the film, is worthy of particular examination, being a statement of the key themes of *Triumph*, and an unusually inspired (even for Riefenstahl) development of them.

In the beginning all is without form and void. The documentary genre is maintained by making it clear we are in an airplane which is flying the Führer to Nuremberg. But the essential impact of the sequence is far, infinitely removed, from the merely reportorial. The flight through the sky is reminiscent of that in Murnau's *Faust*, but really more fantastic. The endless processions of clouds suggest both an eternal realm of the spirit and the primeval chaos out of which worlds are created. Soon the earth does emerge, born from the clouds. The ancient spires of Nuremberg are wrapped in mist like the afterbirth of the heavens. Hitler, the genius of the German renaissance, now nears the earth. The shadow or spirit of his airplane travels over the streets, touching the city, possessing it. The plane makes contact with the earth. The German people await their leader. The airplane door opens, there is mysterious, suspenseful emptiness. Crowds gape with expectation. Borne out of the heavens, Hitler now emerges, through the dark opening of his vessel, in the flesh.

Even in this most extravagant and romantic passage the technical bounds of "documentary" are never strained beyond the breaking point. The Führer's ministry on earth which follows—complete with speeches or sermons or prophecies, and vast throngs, titanic structures or miracles—never exceeds "correct" reportage. Thus Riefenstahl ultimately succeeds by virtue of her objective genre and material, combined with her intensely but subtly subjective vision, in creating perhaps the definitive cinematic obliteration of the division between fantasy and "reality".

Afterword

This is a response to events subsequent to the above essay, and to material about and by Riefenstahl which appeared in the same issue of *Film Culture* as said essay, and of course immediately to the death of Reifenstahl.

It all could have been said thirty years ago, since nothing crucial has changed; and since nothing still has changed, it is all the more worth saying now.

No matter what new facts have or have not emerged, Riefenstahl is always admired and despise, always controversial in the same predictable, inevitable ways. Why has nothing changed? Why can't it?

Consider *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, a highly regarded documentary, distinguished for perhaps the most politically correct title in the history of cinema. The idea which informs the title is that artists are responsible for their work. How, exactly, is a question not sufficiently simple to engage the filmmaker. But Riefenstahl did serve Hitler, and if you dine with that particular devil you had better use an infinitely long spoon, which she obviously did not. I think her spoon was quite long enough, although at times she seemed to make it look a lot shorter.

Riefenstahl's problem has two basic aspects. The first claim by her antagonists is that any relationship with Hitler is absolutely reprehensible, since Hitler was absolutely evil. The second is that no matter what Riefenstahl said she knew, she had to know or, at the very least, she should have known.

The big thing against Riefenstahl is big indeed – *Triumph of the Will* is the greatest documentary ever, and the supreme cinematic achievement of the thirties. And this tremendous film does make Hitler look good. Case closed? Not really. One has to put the making of the film into context. The Hitler of *Triumph* was not the astoundingly triumphant conqueror of 1940, or the unmitigated invader of 1941. Hitler in 1934 was a figure of some doubt and controversy, but generally perceived throughout Europe as a promising statesman who was learning to play by the rules; and in Germany as the restorer of national pride, the rejuvenator of the economy, the architect of an effective government – the man on a white horse. All this was not mere propaganda – it was virtually true. And there were no invasions, no concentration camps – what was not to like? Of course Hitler was clearly a demagogue and a reformed terrorist, but it was understood that a tough job required a tough guy.

So why was it so wrong to advocate Hitler in 1934? It wasn't then, it is, now. Now we know. Then we didn't. And that's the problem. Maybe Riefenstahl didn't know then, but did know later. And she acted like it was all right, she wouldn't compromise. She always told it like she thought it was. Hitler wasn't so bad, said Riefenstahl. Certainly not then, in 1934, and she was right, which many considered unforgivable. Since Hitler, being absolute evil, must have

always been so bad. Such abstraction meant nothing to Riefenstahl. She was an idealist, but intensely pragmatic. Ideology was alien to her. She knew what she knew, and it wasn't theory. She believed in her art, and in her perceptions, and in her memories, and not in anyone else's. She was strong and alone.

So she offered explanations. To many they appeared disingenuous. Actually, they were ingenuous, the naiveté of the confirmed idealist. Her most provocative claim, of course, is that *Triumph* is not propaganda.

Could Riefenstahl have been unaware of her mythologizing? Of the precise power of her symbols? Of their very existence? Such unawareness would indicate a great but credible political indifference; but also a breathtaking cultural obliviousness. Or, "pure" genius? Riefenstahl was certainly inspired. She may well have found her images subconsciously; that is, not out of calculation, not looking to mesmerize or even to persuade, totally absorbed in the act of creation.

Even so, is it possible that in editing, in the whole process of viewing and reviewing *Triumph* over six months, it did not occur to Riefenstahl that Hitler comes across as heroic, indeed a messianic figure? It may well be that she was transported by the Nuremberg drama and spectacle, and only express, "documented" her own response. Fair enough, it's now scientific commonplace that the act of observation changes the thing observed. But, Riefenstahl was then in the position of observing over and over her original response, the effect she recorded, Could she then not have recognized it as serving the purpose of propaganda? Precisely. This was her blind spot. She always was adamant in her "purity." She refused to perceive that she did not do as she originally intended – to make a true documentary, a work of art above the merely political. It was impossible for her to admit, or even to see that something had gone out of control; that for all her skill and discipline and will, the unexpected had taken over. Ironically enough, that is what made the film particularly notorious, and transcendent, and uniquely great. Inspiration betrayed intention. The result was not pure documentary, but pure genius. And terrific propaganda.