This dissertation was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for my Bachelor's Honours Degree in French and German Studies at the University of Manchester, England, May 2002. I have published it on the Internet to help other students or those with an interest in Leni Riefenstahl and her work, *Triumph des Willens*. My thanks go to Dr. Matthew Philpotts and Dr. Cathy Gelbin for their help and support. My apologies that the quotes are not sourced (a problem with my html publisher!) But if you would like to know where any quotes can be found, I would be happy to help. Be warned some of the quotes are in German and are not translated. I welcome all constructive comments on ed_butcher at hotmail.com,

"To what extent are the labels of ‘propaganda’ and ‘art’ appropriate in the description of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (1935)?"

by Edmund Butcher

On 22 August 2002, Leni Riefenstahl will have two momentous milestones to celebrate: firstly, her hundredth birthday, a hundred turbulent years as a witness of and participant in German history; secondly, the release of *Impressionen unter Wasser*, her first directorial outing since the end of the Third Reich. As Riefenstahl celebrates, it is certain that attention will once again focus upon her past, as was the case with the publication of her photographs of the Nubian tribe in the 1970s. The ‘long shadow of shame’ will continue to chase her, and answers will be sought to questions first posed at her de-nazification trials over half a century ago.

Most of the scholarly literature on Leni Riefenstahl’s mammoth spectacle *Triumph of the Will* 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.

The contours of the debate surrounding Riefenstahl are ill-defined. In a recent interview given to *Die Welt* in order to promote her new film, she is asked a question about her previous fascination with Hitler and her desire to make his acquaintance even before he came to power. Of greater interest than her response to this question, is the nature of the enquiry itself. Elementary research would give an explanation of this fascination, as it is already thoroughly documented, for example in her autobiography and Ray Müller’s documentary, *Die Macht der Bilder* (1993). Nonetheless, interviewers and historians alike seem drawn to the circular and ultimately fruitless arguments concerning Riefenstahl’s character, based on largely disputed evidence, that seem to do little to further the understanding of her work and its context within Nazi Germany. These sensationalist and lurid tendencies find a parallel in the psycho-historical approach to ‘Hitler-centrism’ of the 1970s. Hans-Ulrich Wehler posed the pertinent and sarcastic question: ‘Does our understanding of National Socialist politics really depend on whether Hitler had only one testicle?’ Likewise, does our understanding of *Triumph des Willens* really depend on whether Riefenstahl had an affair with Hitler?

Any historian has to face the difficulties involved in separating fact from fiction

The treatment of any topic related to the National Socialist era is problematic, as Taylor highlights above. A fundamental difficulty is time. It is no longer possible to verify claims and validate evidence with those who had direct experience of the epoch and thus discussion has passed into the realm of historical discourse, where perspective and interpretation become as important as fact. The diametrically opposed views of the
historiographical debate concerning the role of Hitler demonstrate this phenomenon. American historian Norman Rich argues that, ‘the point cannot be stressed too strongly: Hitler was master in the Third Reich’, while Hans Mommsen concludes that Hitler was ‘unwilling to take decisions, frequently uncertain […] in some respects a weak dictator’. Both parties could proffer documentary evidence to support their argument and those wishing to refute either interpretation lack the most persuasive form of ‘proof’, that of first-hand knowledge and experience of the issue.

The notion of the strength of first-hand account must nevertheless be reconciled with the question of objectivity. In discussions of the life and work of Riefenstahl, the most obvious source of information would be Riefenstahl herself, for her experience and involvement in the matter is second to none. However, her objectivity is compromised by the sheer definition of the word. As Starkman points out, ‘This effort at presenting Riefenstahl in a style of "Objectivity" [...] proves immediately problematic with a personality like Riefenstahl, whose entire life and sense of self are about drama and fictive diversions.’ So, no matter what we perceive her agenda to be, its existence cannot be denied even if its nature can be disputed. Taken to the extremes, some perceive it to be that of the stoic artist defending her oeuvre, or conversely, the Nazi attempting to escape culpability.

In this investigation of Riefenstahl I will concentrate my analysis on her film *Triumph des Willens*. As a cultural object, unaltered since its creation, it is a primary historical source. This fact allows me to escape the popular debate surrounding Riefenstahl’s personal life which, to a large extent, relies upon speculation, lead by emotive arguments. Firstly, I will examine the role of propaganda in general and discover how film was employed by the Nazi dictatorship to propagate ideology. A greater understanding of what this film represents, of its position in history, will permit a more objective assessment of Riefenstahl, as the film’s ‘author’. Although *Triumph des Willens* was not her only cinematic accomplishment under Nazi rule, its indisputable combination of National Socialist political ideology and artistic devices bring it to the forefront of the debate. As Berman has remarked, *Triumph des Willens* is ‘ One of the few aesthetic monuments of German fascism that has attracted serious critical scrutiny.’ Thus, if to focus on *Triumph des Willens* is an attempt to escape the pitfalls where others have foundered, the question is: what tone should the discourse about this film take? Cook states, ‘Triumph of the Will asks an avalanche of questions about art and ethics. Does creating a record of such a sinister spectacle automatically legitimise it? Is a virtuoso account worse than a more mediocre version? Does every artist have a have point of view?’ Cook sees the core of the matter as a question between art and ethics, which presupposes that *Triumph des Willens* is art. Furthermore, what constitutes ethical behaviour defies a global definition. Since the birth of ‘Reason’ with the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, philosophers have grappled with the concept of universal morality, never reaching any absolutes. Therefore, we must presume that this matter remains firmly in the realm of the individual. If I were to make a judgement of Riefenstahl’s work as ethical or unethical, I would only be offering an opinion as perceived against my own moral standards. Thus, my argument will evolve round the concepts of art and propaganda in relation to *Triumph des Willens*, which will permit the reader to make their own judgement of Riefenstahl’s acts.

To pit art against propaganda is an artificial contradiction. Neither term is mutually exclusive; art can be propaganda and propaganda can be art. It nevertheless proves useful to delineate the divide between the major schools of thought towards *Triumph des Willens*. Taken to their respective conclusions, they lead to polarised views as to the nature of this cinematic piece and to the director’s role in its creation. However, if one were to conclude that the film is predominantly art, it would in fact justify the film’s ‘de-nazification’; since it would transcend its historical context, making it worthy of contemplation divorced from its subject matter. Equally, the conclusion that it is essentially a vehicle for Nazi ideology firmly categorises the film in
the highly politicised sphere of German fascist aesthetic with the implied contextual limitations concerning its analysis. A final and perhaps more novel conclusion is possible; that *Triumph des Willens* does not sit comfortably in either category, which could open the way to radical reassessment and the creation of unique classification. Nevertheless, the purpose of any of these conclusions is ultimately to shed light on Riefenstahl’s ‘long shadows of shame.’

**Propaganda and Film**

Propaganda, propaganda, propaganda. All that matters is propaganda.

* - Adolf Hitler

As a form of mass entertainment, education and information television has no equal.

The simplest argument for *Triumph des Willens* being propaganda is that it was commissioned by Hitler. This is a linear logic of cause and effect that neglects the complexities inherent to analysis of the Third Reich and the place of propaganda within it. Michelangelo’s ‘Creation’ on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was commissioned by Pope Julius IV, so the application of a similar methodology would suggest those wishing to classify this fresco should limit their discourse to the domain of Christian aesthetics. Before being able to comment on whether *Triumph des Willens* should be viewed predominately as a piece of Nazi propaganda, it is necessary to fully outline what is understood by this term. As defined by a dictionary it is, ‘the organised spreading of doctrine, true or false information, opinions etc., especially to bring about change or reform’. However, Welch notes there are generally two misconceptions concerning the study of propaganda. Firstly, he notes that for some propaganda ‘implies nothing less than the art of persuasion, which serves only to change attitudes and ideas.’ Undeniably, this is a one of the intrinsic purposes, but usually limited and secondary. He points out that propaganda more frequently ‘is concerned with reinforcing existing trends and beliefs; to sharpen and focus them’. Welch does not state it, but a good reason would seem that it is an easier task to remodel existing beliefs rather than to enforce completely new ones. Secondly, it is entirely incorrect to assume that propaganda is based totally on untruths. He continues by stating that it ‘operates with many different kinds of truth – from the outright lie, the half truth, to the truth out of context.’ These observations have significant consequences concerning the perception of ideology. To state that propaganda does not have to change beliefs suggests that some of the ideology and ideas propagated by the National Socialist movement already existed in pre-National Socialist Germany. Therefore, German fascist ideology should not be perceived as a completely alien force, but sometimes as a remoulding of concepts that were previously present. Likewise, what the Nazis presented as fact might not necessarily be a total untruth, sometimes being a distortion of the ‘objective’ truth.

Welch highlights the importance of the study of propaganda in relation to Nazi Germany: ‘Historians have been at great pains to explain why millions of Germans voted for the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in free elections and how such a regime could eventually acquire such an extensive European empire.’ The National Socialist movement’s relentless propaganda campaigns are frequently cited as an important factor in the process that changed a fundamentally democratic state into a totalitarian regime. This is not to negate the significance of the socio-economic problems of the Weimar republic. It was fears stemming from this epoch
that were widely exploited by the Nazis, for example the creation of the Jewish scapegoat, as the cause of Germany’s troubles. Yet, the prominence of propaganda in relation to various other factors is largely undisputed. As Welch confirms, ‘historians of widely different political persuasions and approaches have testified to the crucial role it [propaganda] played in mobilising support for the Nazis.’ Expressed more concisely, the NSDAP’s ‘skilful exploitation of propaganda techniques’ to a large extent explains its growth from its ‘insignificant beginnings’ to a truly mass movement.

Nazis themselves, beginning with Hitler and Goebbels and extending to the lowest ranks of the Nazi Party, attached to propaganda as the indispensable means of mobilising, manipulating, controlling, directing and (re-)educating the population

German fascist propaganda should be viewed as more than an exercise in pacifying the masses into submission. Rather, its aim was to create active supporters. It was not enough that Germans should accept policies with indifference, but they should truly believe in them and act on those beliefs. It was insufficient, for example, that Germans believed in racial inferiority of Jews, but they should actively implement this policy, in the early years of the regime, by boycotting Jewish businesses. An example of this mobilisation of the people is the Berlin University Book Burning of 1933. It is typically perceived to be an anti-Semitic outburst carried out by the Nazis, whereas it was in fact perpetrated the German Students’ movement, at that point a non-Nazi organisation, where Goebbels, head of the Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, was present but not orchestrating. This fact, in turn, can be seen as the result of successful propaganda that willed its recipients beyond acceptance to action.

Kershaw has broken down the specific aims of Nazi propaganda into two distinct categories. Firstly, the initial task was, ‘the restructuring of values’ which would make Germans believe in the ‘solidarity of national community’ and the ‘need for racial purity’, as well as inciting ‘hatred of enemies, outside and within’ the Reich and propagating ‘trust in leadership.’ Secondly, in the years preceding the war focus was turned to the ‘building of a new Nazified society [or] fighting community’ which included the psychological preparation and mobilisation for war,’ as well as the ‘upholding and strengthening of morale during the war years.’ But how were these aims transferred into a reality?

The full flavour of Nazi propaganda translated badly into the terms of the printed word: much of its emotive quality was lost in the process. Public meetings, party rallies, and all the other activities generated by the party and its manifold offshoots, were regarded as more suitable vehicles for agitation than the press.

As Zeman emphasises, the printed medium had a limited use within the propagandistic sphere. Thus, film was an essential weapon in the Nazis’ propaganda armoury. Expressed more succinctly, ‘daß die Nationalsozialisten unter den Massenmedien dem Film großen Wert beimaßen und ihn gezielt für ihre Zwecke einsetzen, ist allgemein bekannt und auch wissenschaftlich erweisen.’ Unlike newspapers, posters or radio, which could be put aside, ignored or switched off, in the cinema a captive audience is created that cannot easily escape from the presented reality. What is more, this reality resembles real life like no other medium; it employs two human senses, perhaps the two most important – visual and auditory. Once the spectators’ interest has been awoken, the screen becomes their field of vision and the camera lens their eyes. Furthermore, the constraints of reality no longer apply – events need not take place in their chronological order, objects can appear larger than they really are. The spectator can feel physically and emotional immersed into a given situation. As Rowe summarises, when in the cinema, ‘what occurs is a process of suspension of disbelief whereby we seem to accept temporarily the reality of what appears in front of us.’ Of course these claims must be qualified by the limitations of 1930s technology. Naturally, all cinematic presentations were in black and white, giving the spectator reason to question the reality presented. Also, most people see reality in colour, thus to completely associate with black and white images would be less
likely. The same supposition can be made about the poor sound quality at that time.

As well as being a useful propaganda tool, film was an important ideological symbol for Hitler. Although much of the party’s rhetoric anti-modern and seemingly retrograde, on the surface calling for a return to a pre-industrial agrarian civilisation, as characterised by the *Blut und Boden* and *Lebensraum* policy, the regime simultaneously embraced technological advances. This Janus-faced approach to modernity has been described as ‘reactionary modernism’ by Heff, or as a ‘nonsynchronous blend of pre-modern fantasies and technological instrumentalism’ but it is possible to conclude that the authority had in fact stronger leanings towards modernity and the technological benefits that it permitted:

Hitler ließ sich keineswegs von rückwärtsgewandten Visionen einer mittelalterlichen Gesellschaftsordnung leiten. Sein Vorbild waren in vieler Hinsicht die Vereinigten Staaten. Obwohl er […] die demokratische Ordnung der USA ablehnte, bewunderte er doch den dortigen Stand der technisch-industirellen Entwicklung, die er häufig als vorbildlich auch für Deutschland darstellte.

Therefore before commencing an analysis of the content of the *Triumph des Willens*, the fact that Hitler commissioned Riefenstahl to make a film, the most advanced and modern form of mass communication available at that time, gives the film a propagandistic significance. As a statement, the utilisation of the cinematic medium sent a powerful message of how forward-looking the government of the Third Reich was, and of its willing to embrace the future. Furthermore, the employment of film for overtly political purposes was a novel concept in 1930s Germany and Western Europe. Up until that point the USSR was the main producer of ideological films, for example Eisenstein’s ‘Battleship Potemkin’. For Goebbels, the characteristic and style of this film was an example to German directors and it should be emulated with the replacement of Nazi ideology:


In his description of the ideal film, Goebbels employs the term *Tendenz*. Welch defines this concept as, ‘a certain type of film that exhibited strong National Socialist leanings. In other words, without necessarily mentioning National Socialism, these films advocated various principles and themes identifiable with Nazism.’ Goebbels was not ignorant to effective ways of disseminating ideology through the cinematic medium. He knew that once audiences were aware of the propagandistic qualities of something they were watching or listening to, as was the case with newsreel and radio, the impact was diminished. However, if the message was surreptitiously delivered when it was least expected, as in a entertainment film, the ideas would be more effectively assimilated:

Even entertainment can be politically of special value, because the moment a person is conscious of propaganda, propaganda becomes ineffective. However, as soon as propaganda as a tendency, as a characteristic, as an attitude, remains in the background and becomes apparent through human beings, then propaganda becomes effective in every respect.

In conclusion, it has been established that propaganda played a pivotal role in the ascension to power of the Nazis, and in their retention of this power once in control in Germany. However, it would be incorrect to suppose that this result was accomplished completely through a process of mind manipulation based on lies, but rather the successful exploitation of widely held fears and the dissemination of distorted truths. As a symbol of modern technology, the Nazis were quick to embrace the medium of film, which by itself can be perceived as propagandist act, demonstrating their positive view towards modernity and its advances.

http://www.geocities.com/ebutcher1/
Equally, Goebbels realised the unsurpassed power of film as a channel for propaganda. Whilst an audience was relaxed and enjoying a film, they would be off-guard and unaware of the Nazi ideological message subconsciously being delivered. Conversely, by Goebbels’ own admission, once an audience is aware of the propagandistic qualities of film, its effect is diminished, which is an important consideration in the analysis of *Triumph des Willens*.

**Triumph des Willens as propaganda**

An examination of the opening sequence of *Triumph des Willens* shows how the film’s propagandistic characteristics do not ‘remain in the background’ and therefore cannot effectively be described as a *Tendenz*. The opening titles clearly contextualise the film:

**Triumph des Willens**

Das Dokument vom Reichsparteitag 1934

Hergestellt im Auftrage des Führers

Gestaltet von Leni Riefenstahl

Am 5. September 1934

20 Jahre nach dem Ausbruch des Weltkrieges

16 Jahre nach dem Anfang deutschen Leidens

19 Monate nach dem Beginn der deutschen Wiedergeburt

flog Adolf Hitler wiederum nach Nürnberg um Heerschau abzuhalten über seine [illegible]

Even before a single moving image is shown, the principle figure of the film is announced and his presence felt – Adolf Hitler. Indeed, the final line could be said to be a summary of the entire film and its purpose. As Tomasulo states, ‘From its very opening, *Triumph of the Will* establishes audience identification with its hero, in much the same way fictional films do.’ The first shot is an extended panorama of mountain-like clouds as seen from the interior of a plane, as if we were looking through Hitler’s eyes. This is followed by the clouds clearing to reveal Nuremberg, its ancient buildings draped in Nazi banners. The visible shadow of the plane resembles a ‘fantastic eagle’, the symbol of the Reich, as it passes over columns of marching brown-shirts. The camera cuts to the airport where large crowds are gathered, obviously waiting with much excitement for the arrival of the Führer. Kracauer has described this opening sequence as a ‘reincarnation of All-Father Odin’, the Scandinavian equivalent of the Germanic god Woden. Moreover, Tomasulo points to the striking similarities with Christian imagery: ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory’, and ‘lo, a white cloud and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a gold crown on his head.’ Thus, the images portray Hitler’s arrival as the Second Coming of Christ. As Tomasulo summarises, that ‘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 ideological message of this sequence is clear; the *Führerprinzip* is given visual form. This is the notion of the absolutism of the Führer, who had the ‘will and the power to actualise the *Volksstaat.*’ Further proof of the desire to portray Hitler in this manner is the fact that when he appears on screen, the camera is almost
invariably positioned below the level of his face, which has the effect of immediately subjugating the spectator. This process of deification was one of Goebbels’ proudest achievements. When addressing officials in his propaganda ministry in 1941, at the height of Germany’s military success, he pronounced that one of the greatest services he had rendered to the Party, which contributed to the current triumph was the Führerprinzip. In other words, through the ‘creation of the Führer myth Hitler had been given the halo of infallibility, with the result that many people who looked askance at the Party after 1933 had now complete confidence in Hitler.’ However, the manner in which National Socialist ideology is conveyed in Triumph des Willens could be described as incongruous with Goebbels own beliefs, as it is impossible to see how a 1930s German audience would have been ignorant to the propagandistic tendencies of the film.

Evidence to support the argument that the ideological message is far from subtle, but in fact somewhat over-exaggerated, is found in the depiction of the masses in the film. In his virtual political manifesto, Mein Kampf, an undoubtedly well-circulated text in the Nazi era, Hitler clearly outlines his view of the masses and the part they had to play in the National Socialist state:

Mass assemblies are necessary for the reason that, in attending them, the individual [...] now begins to feel isolated and in fear of being left alone as he acquires for the first time the picture of a great community which has a strengthening and encouraging effect on most people [...] And only a mass demonstration can impress upon him the greatness of this community [...] while seeking his way, he is gripped by the force of mass suggestion.

This description concerning mass gatherings is easily recognisable in Triumph des Willens. An example is found in the scene that takes place in the Lutpoldhain arena where Hitler pays his respects to a memorial to those who fell in the Great War, whilst surrounded by columns of faceless SA and SS men. It has been noted that telescopic lens were used to film such crowd scenes, which had the effect of enlarging the number of people in the crowd. Some could argue that the powerful emotive quality of seeing such vast numbers of people has a propagandistic value in itself; making the viewer yearn to be part of this collective. However, it is more difficult to purport that those who were ideologically indifferent or adverse to this symbolism would have been persuaded to reassess their political allegiance, as was the ultimate aim of propaganda. The fulcrum of this argument rests on the value that should be apportioned to the ‘force of mass suggestion,’ a variable that is difficult to quantify. As Kershaw notes, ‘trying to assess the reception of propaganda is of course an exercise considerably more difficult than the description of propaganda output.’ As he goes on to state, the reason for this is simple, because ‘in the absence of public opinion surveys and other means of quantifying reactions to propaganda, accurate measurement is naturally impossible’

Following the Goebbels’ definition of effective propaganda, Triumph des Willens cannot be categorised into the typical genre of Nazi propagandistic cinema, but does that mean it is not propaganda? Perhaps, Goebbels’ criteria as to the form of the propaganda film are too limiting and not necessarily exclusive. Before any consideration of the comparative propagandistic impact, one fundamental difference must be acknowledged, between the Tendenz film that he was advocating and Triumph des Willens. He saw the National Socialist Tendenz as a quality that should be incorporated into fictional feature films, such as Veit Harlan’s Der Herrscher (1937) whereas Triumph des Willens is ‘Das Dokument vom Reichsparteitag 1934,’ a filmic product created from real events. There has been much speculation surrounding the treatment of reality and the extent to which the spectacle was staged for the purposes of filming. A simple example of this is the aforementioned use of telescopic lens to exaggerate crowd numbers. Sontag, who has been particularly vociferous in her criticism of the film in this respect, states, ‘how the 1934 Party convention was staged was partly determined by the decision to produce Triumph of the Will.’ She continues by giving her commentary as to the result, that ‘the historical event serve as the set of a film which was then to assume the character of an authentic documentary.’ However, such an observation neglects several indisputable facts.
Firstly, the Nuremberg rally was a real event and its participants were not actors. Secondly, it was by no means a unique occurrence or without precedent. In fact, the Parteitag took place every year from 1933 to 1938 and grew in size from year to year. As Taylor and van der Will state, ‘in addition to the regular regional and national Party rallies, there were special mass spectacles, parades and Party gatherings which were arranged to coincide with important events such as the opening of public buildings and the celebration of anniversaries.’ Therefore, there is no reason to suggest that this public ceremony was any more stage-managed or artificial than the others were. As Taylor and van der Will point out, they were ‘arranged’ and thus already wholly artificial in nature.

The concept of public ceremony and its importance to the Nazis opens a window as to how Triumph des Willens can be classified as a work of propaganda. To return to what Goebbels considered his greatest accomplishments contributing to Nazi success in 1941, he also pronounced the equal importance of ‘the style and technique of the Party’s public ceremonies. The ceremonial of the mass demonstrations, the ritual of the great Party occasions.’ If Fascism can be described as the ‘aestheticisation of political life’ then grandiose, politically motivated public spectacles are the front-line in this process. In the search for legitimacy, the National Socialist sought to imbibe Nazism with tradition. As Taylor and van der Will describe it, ‘carefully calculated forms of symbolic expression and aesthetic presentation stimulated mass-psychological effects’ and this was accomplished through, ‘the marshalling of masses in geometrical formations […] through uniforms, insignia and ranking symbols and the integration of individuals in secular rituals of acclamation and submission.’ Here, Taylor and van der Will could be describing Triumph des Willens, since all these facets are present. The symbols of the Third Reich are unavoidable for in almost every scene an eagle or swastika is present, be it on the armbands of a soldier, the banners carried or the walls of the various venues. In addition more often than not the only discernible individuals on screen are Hitler and the party officials juxtaposed against the anonymous regimented forms of the masses, such as in the scene of the Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD) battalions assembled in the Zeppelin parade field. Included in this sequence RAD members are asked where they come from, the first member replying, ‘Ich stamme aus Friesland.’ This is repeated twelve times with members from all corners of Germany. Some could argue that this is a personalisation of the masses and recognition of the members’ individuality, but seen on a different level these shots serve simply to show the pan-German support implicating the complete German masses, or what Kershaw termed strengthening the ‘solidarity of the national community’.

However, it must be recognised that the greatest propagandistic effect of public parades is imposed on the participants rather than on a detached cinema audience. Surely, the one and half million people who actually took part would have been struck to far greater extent by the ‘force of mass suggestion.’ Facts such as the shots of Hitler taken from below could have the psychological effect on the viewers to make them think that they are part of the audience, but the viewer is never truly treated to a view from the perspective of the present audience. The camera always has a privileged view, invariably a third perspective, being neither that of the orator nor of the audience. Simply placing a camera in the middle of the crowds would have produced a more realistic point of view for the film’s audience. Thus, when Hitler addresses the crowds his voice would have been drowned out by cheers and his image obscured by hands raised in adoration. In this way, the cinema audience would have been more effectively immersed into the fervour and emotion of the event, heightening the propagandistic impact. Nevertheless, there is an argument to be made that regardless of what cinematic devices were employed, the full propagandistic quality can never be fully transformed from reality to celluloid. There is a world of difference between standing in columns of people and sitting in a comfortable cinema seat and passively observing seeing columns of people.

Brian Winston states the ‘the film was not used generally for propaganda purposes in Germany at the time.’
Herein lies the key to understanding how _Triumph des Willens_ can be considered as propaganda. As demonstrated, the film has limited propagandistic value to a German audience, as it is difficult to see how it could have manipulated audiences as effectively as the _Tendenz_ films. Furthermore, the act of recording a public ceremony is by no means comparable to actual participation, although it could be described as an advert for such events and encouraging further participation. However, for an external audience the effect would have been quite different. The principal target for Nazi propaganda was naturally the German populace, but the Nazis had a strong interest in promoting Germany abroad. Some would see this claim as incongruous with Nazi expansionist policy as demonstrated by the resulting Second World War. Why would they care what other nations thought of them, when a few years later they would invade and occupy virtually all of their neighbours? This question supposes that Hitler actually planned this territorial expansion or had a ‘programme’ and neglects the fact that some historians considered it ‘expansion without object’ and Hitler an ‘unprincipled opportunist.’

An understanding of the Nazis’ need to project a prestigious image is reached by returning to post the First World War _Volkgeist_. A defeated Germany was subjected to the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty, effectively admitting all culpability of the war and forced to pay reparations. This was followed by the era of the Weimar Republic, where Germany was dogged by hyperinflation, unprecedented high unemployment and general political instability. In the opening titles of _Triumph des Willens_, the film is situated, ‘16 Jahre nach dem Anfang deutschen Leidens,’ a synonym for this shameful epoch. Thus, the following frame announces, ‘19 Monate nach dem Beginn der deutschen Wiedergeburt.,’ in other words, the start of the National Socialist regime. The notion of rebirth is integral to the Nazis’ self projected image. In several respects, this is a truthful reflection of their accomplishments, for example creating sustainable inflation levels and usher in low unemployment through the rebuilding of the national infrastructure, such as the _Autobahn_ programme. Also, as further evidence, German Gross National Product grew from 58,000 million Reichsmarks in 1932 to 93,000 million RM in 1937 surpassing even the record levels of the ‘golden twenties’.

As Taylor and van der Will highlight, the National Socialist public ceremony was a means to ‘impress upon [... the rest of the world the extent of their mass support and the splendour of their accumulating power.’ Proof that _Triumph des Willens_ was widely circulated beyond Germany’s boarders is demonstrated by its winning of a gold medal at the Venice Biennale in 1935 and two years later, the Grand Prix from the French Government at the Paris Exposition of that year. A further manifestation of this desire to flaunt Germany’s prestige abroad is found in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, as Zeman says:

> The Olympic Games were an ideal vehicle for propaganda, and the transmissions from Berlin made an indelible impression on foreign audiences many times larger than those in attendance at the capital.

The aim of propaganda directed abroad was two-fold, firstly they wanted to dispel the ‘misconception’ that the Nazi movement was a band of thugs who through intimidation had fought their way to power and replace this image with one of a respectable government. Secondly, to show the victors of the First World War that Germany was once again a European superpower by throwing of the shrouds of shame of the past. As Salkeld exaggerates, ‘Abroad he [Hitler] wanted to be seen as in control of a willing populace, and it would not hurt if the film scared the hell out of foreign audiences.’ Expressed a little less sensationally, Hitler wanted it to be known that Germany was once again a force to be reckoned with and the militaristic images of the _Triumph des Willens_ would have firmly impressed this idea on to foreign audience.

Sontag has described _Triumph des Willens_ as, ‘the most successfully, most purely propagandistic film ever made.’ Such hyperbole is inappropriate after consideration of what the Nazis themselves considered
effective filmic propaganda. The film successfully presents and reinforces the fundamental tenets of National Socialist ideology, such as the *Führerprinzip*, as well as a demonstration of the Nazis’ willingness to embrace modernity. But surely to qualify for the accolade of the ‘most successfully, most purely propagandistic film ever made,’ it should be able to convert the sceptics? As Goebbels described of Battleship Potemkin, ‘Wer weltanschaulich nicht fest ist, könnte durch diesen Film zum Bolschewisten werden.’ Can the same be said of *Triumph des Willens*? Could anyone who has no firm political conviction become a Nazi after seeing this film? It would seem highly unlikely, thus to describe *Triumph des Willens* as a predominately propaganda film is unsatisfactory.

**Triumph des Willens as art.**

To cast Riefenstahl in the role of the individualist-artist, defying philistine bureaucrats and censorship by the patron state [...] should seem like nonsense to anyone who has seen *Triumph of the Will* – a film whose very conception negates the possibility of the filmmaker’s having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda.

*Art* is an abstract and highly subjective concept, take for example Tracy Emin’s sculpture, *My Bed*, shortlisted for the 1999 Turner prize. The sculpture, in the style of objet trouvé, is a bed as if someone had just got up and left it unmade. Some would find it ridiculous to call this art, but the piece demonstrated the fact that once something is pronounced art, it is in fact art. The question then becomes, is it good art? Again, the answer to this question is subjective, dependent to a large extent on the viewer’s personal taste. Although Sontag clearly rejects the notion that *Triumph des Willens* is anything other than propaganda, she utilises the term, aesthetic conception, which proves useful as an objective basis for assessing the artistic qualities of the film. An aesthetic conception is a key feature behind most artistic works that have entered into the domain of high-culture. Regardless of their medium, an artist who wishes to create something timeless has to present a new way of looking at the world, a new perspective or in other words, a new aesthetic. In examining the aesthetic conception, the aim is to discover whether the film transcends its historical context, thus denazifying it. Starkmann describes this process as, ‘appealing to the category of art-for-art’s sake’ in an effort to, ‘disavow the political content of her work.’

Thus far, *Triumph des Willens* has been simply described as a film. This generic term is an attempt to avoid its classification as documentary, since such a label could prejudice the perception of the film in relation to art and propaganda. The label documentary instinctively evokes the notions of truth and objectivity, which would instantly exclude any interpretation of the film as propaganda. Yet, the exploration of the aesthetic conception underlining the film requires a more precise definition, and an answer to the question of whether *Triumph des Willens* is a documentary.

Leni Riefenstahl has called *Triumph des Willens* a documentary in the genre of cinéma verité. She supports this claim by stating, ‘Not a single scene is staged […] everything is genuine. And there is no tendentious commentary for the simple reason that there is no commentary at all. It is history – pure history.’ Despite her lack of impartiality on the subject, as noted in the introduction, this term provides a helpful starting point in the search for an appropriate description. The emergence of cinéma verité can be traced back to the Russian revolution, to the work of Dziga Vertov, who edited the newsreel series called Kino-Pravada, literally ‘film truth.’ The French ethnographic documentarist, Jean Rouch, went on to develop the genre. His work in the early 1950s was received as an ‘objective’ filming of the native peoples of Francophone Africa and termed cinéma direct. As Hayward states ‘there was no staging, no mise-en-scène and no editing – so these
documentaries were as close to authentic as they could be.’ She continues by stating that this tradition was elaborated in the work of several French filmmakers of the 1960s, such as Joris Ivens and François Reichenbach, through breaking away from the purism of the cinéma direct by allowing limited editing and some intervention with the subject. Thus, cinéma vérité is defined as, largely ‘unstaged, non-dramatised [and] non-narrative’.

Riefenstahl’s claims seem to be an attempt to classify Triumph des Willens in a cinematic genre that was defined some thirty years after her film was made. Of the many labels attributed to Riefenstahl, the idea suggesting her as the pioneer of the cinéma vérité has never been forwarded. Following Hayward’s summary of the main factors that outline this genre, Triumph des Willens falls short of these criteria in several respects. As previously discussed, some critics such as Sontag, have claimed that the Parteitag was staged in order to be filmed. As if in direct response to Sontag’s remarks, Salkeld says that such an ‘assertion that the 1934 Parteitag was staged for the camera like some colossal Hollywood production’ is ‘patently false.’ However, she does go on to concede that the chronology of some events was altered in editing. Together with the further claim of Sontag that the footage of the speeches given by Streicher, Rosenberg, Hess and Frank were spoiled and subsequently refilmed in a Berlin studio detract from the argument that the film was completely ‘unstaged.’ That is not to say that the entire spectacle was staged, but rather that the detached relationship between subject and documentarist, as found in the cinéma vérité genre, was compromised and these specific scenes are to all intents and purposes staged specifically for the documentary.

Ostensibly, Riefenstahl’s statement that there is no ‘tendentious commentary’ with the implication that there is therefore no narrative is correct. There is no voice-over, a characteristic of contemporary documentary form, exemplified by Ray Müller’s Die Macht der Bilder (1993), which usually serves to direct the train of thought of the viewer, creating a seamless link between images. So should the assumption be made that in Triumph des Willens there is no narrative, and what is presented is a close to reality as was possible? The label of cinéma vérité is clearly inappropriate. Even without the aid of a voice-over commentary, the film succeeds in dictating to the spectators how they should view the subject matter and the conclusions they should reach, in other words through a clear aesthetic conception. To say that this unspoken commentary is not tendentious seems to demonstrate a lack of understanding of this concept. The film’s ability to provide a commentary through cinematic devices alone, is a characteristic that equally highlights the artistry of the film.

The aural power of the film does not lie in the speeches, but rather in the music.

A starting point to the understanding of how the film constructs a narrative without a voice-over commentary is found in an examination of the film’s music score. Herbert Windt, the composer, relies on the ‘audience’s familiarity with Wagner’, but still ‘creates a new heroic score which evokes the Wagnerian world without imitating it.’ Barsam continues by stating that contrary to what one might expect, the musical references of the score are not to Wagner’s operas of the Ring der Nibelungen, a particular favourite of Hitler, but rather Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Perhaps, because a score in the style of the Ring cycle, with its dramatic crescendos, might have overpowered the film’s images instead of complimenting the rhythm and momentum of the editing as the final score does. Emblematic of this complimentary style is in part II of the film. The scene is at night, outside Hitler’s hotel. The light from handheld flare provide the only movement on screen, but before artificial light is introduced there is a trumpet fanfare, as if to announce this first ‘mini’ and impromptu rally of the events. The heavy bass of kettledrums follows the shrill of the fanfare, mimicking the shot change and is the first point the viewer can distinguish what he or she is looking at. As uniformed soldiers carrying traditional torches become visible the bass of the drums
help evoke an almost primordial tempo, creating an association with the notion of German tribes. As Kelmann defines it, ‘Hitler has come from the sky to kindle ancient Nuremberg with primeval Teutonic fire, to liberate the energy and spirit of the German people through a dynamic new movement with roots in their racial consciousness.’ Together with the general theme reinforcing the *Führerprinzip* through the use of cinematic techniques, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is impossible to conclude that *Triumph des Willens* is devoid of commentary. Following Corliss’ observation, ‘she [Riefenstahl] needed no narration to tell you what to think or feel; her images and editing were persuasive enough.’

Yet, if it is accepted that there exists a commentary, does it then necessarily follow that the film is not a documentary? When defining the cinematic form of documentary, the concepts of ‘factual’, ‘objective’ and ‘informative’ are commonly forwarded. However, as Wells highlights, ‘these very terms must be subjected to close scrutiny, for under closer inspection they become relative and ambiguous in the production of most documentaries.’ He states that there are three major factors to take into consideration: technological factors, sociological dimensions and aesthetic concerns.

If high-culture is innovative in character, then in the technological domain, Riefenstahl demonstrates how adept she is at using cinematic tools in new ways. Although the resources at her disposal have been the subject of much speculation and have subsequently been exaggerated to mythical proportions, the most interesting effects are usually the simplest. A common feature of newsreels of that era was the static image, presumably as a result of the limitations concerning the mobility of the camera. Such camera work would have been highly monotonous for the events at Nuremberg that were essentially static. Instead, the film succeeds in infusing a sense of movement and kinetic energy into the rallies, which clearly ties into the notion of *Wiedergeburt*: a German nation on the move. Hitler’s address to the *Hitler Jugend* is an example of a sequence where dynamics are introduced into a basically static scene. The camera is apparently on a dolly that is placed on crescent shaped tracks situated in front of the podium and as Hitler makes his speech, the camera slowly tracks from one side to the other, constantly focused on the *Führer*. The result is that it almost seems as if the energy from Hitler’s powerful oration is transferred into the kinetic motion of the image. From a technical point of view such an effect was easily accomplished, but at times Riefenstahl resorted to novel and unconventional means. As Barsam elaborates, a variety of moving devices were employed, ‘including roller skates, airplanes, dirigibles, fire-truck ladders, automobiles, conventional camera dollies and an elevator.’ Therefore, the varied and innovative use of technology distinguishes it from other documentary forms of the time.

The sociological dimensions are of particular importance, for some contemporary critics seem to neglect this aspect in their consideration of *Triumph des Willens*, or perhaps more accurately, some perceive the only sociological dimension to be its propagandistic qualities. As Wells states, ‘in attempting to record certain aspects of "reality" in a particular time and space, the documentary implicitly and explicitly locates itself in the historical moment and focuses on the personal and cultural codes and conventions of that time.’ Sontag argued that, ‘*Triumph of the Will* [is] a film whose very conception negates the possibility of the filmmaker’s having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda.’ Having established the limitations of the propagandistic qualities of the film, it is more correct to say that the filmmaker does not have an aesthetic conception independent of a Nazi aesthetic. Also this statement must be qualified by the argument that artists working in the Third Reich had little choice as to whether they forwarded an Nazi aesthetic or not. Nazi Germany was a totalitarian regime, that sought a ‘total claim’ over its citizenry and its ideology was pervasive in nature. For example, even those wishing to dissent against the regime were forced to participate in the dominant ideological discourse of the Nazis and thus by doing so, inadvertently propagating it. As Bauer summarises:
Selbst die mutigsten, selbst die listigsten und beweglichsten Gegner des NS mußten sich dem gängigen Sprachgebrauch anpassen, mußten Mittel, Vorstellungen, Werke gebrauchen, die von der Übermacht ihres Gegners geprägt waren und die durch irren massenhaften Gebrauch diese Dominanz verstärkten.

Therefore, the ‘codes and conventions’ of Nazi Germany prohibit the presentation of an aesthetic that deviates from the National Socialist norm. Thus, the aesthetic themes that certain critics perceive to be uniquely propagandistic, such as the deification of Hitler, could equally be viewed as the only acceptable representation. In other words, if Riefenstahl wanted to make a successful ‘Dokumentar’ of the 1934 Parteitag that would be well received and widely distributed, she had no choice, but to operate within the given ideology and in doing so further the propagation of these ideals. She could hardly be expected to portray Hitler as the ‘weak dictator’ as some historians claim. As Rother states, ‘Aufgrund der Zeitumstände wäre es überraschend gewesen, hätte Triumph des Willens seine ideologischen Zwecke nicht erfüllt.’ If this principle is accepted, the conclusion must be that the contemporary understanding of ‘objectivity’ in relation to the documentary form is redundant when contemplating a Nazi documentary, since unbiased representation was impossible.

Rother makes the following assertion: ‘Selbstverständlich ist Triumph des Willens ein dokumentarischer Film, was an sich wenig besagt. He goes on to qualify this statement by saying: ‘Die eigentliche Frage besteht vielmehr darin, in welcher Hinsicht er dokumentarisch ist und was er dokumentiert.’ Riefenstahl’s claims that the film is a work in the genre of cinéma verité are unconvincing, and any attempt to categorise the film in the ‘traditional’ documentary form is problematic caused by its apparent ‘subjectivity’. It is possible, therefore, to forward the idea that Triumph des Willens was in fact an avant-garde film, creating the only acceptable documentary form in a totalitarian state. Gressieker, writing in a contemporary German film journal, Der deutsche Film, in 1936 commented that Riefenstahl has ‘indem sie den Rhythmus des realen Geschehens in einen filmischen Rhythmun übersetzte, das politische Erlebnis in Form eines künstlerischen Erlebnisses vermittelt. Sie hat damit eine neue Kunstgattung geschaffen.’ Rother goes on to postulate that this newly created genre should be called, ‘heroischer Reportagefilm’ ‘Reportage’ is recognition of ‘reality’ as the source of the material, whereas ‘heroisch’ describes the biased nature of the reporting and its militaristic leanings. Wells, in his conclusion of Triumph des Willens, describes the film thus:

_Actuality is not actual; the film record of the event is highly mediated; the material is not edited to reveal the "truth" but a set of symbolic relationships with specific political purposes, the rally in becoming an illusion of "reality" becomes "documentary myth"

If transcendent art lends itself to the process of decontextualisation, whereby the observer can appreciate its artistic value divorced from the circumstances of its creation, such as with Michelangelo’s ‘Creation’, then Triumph des Willens cannot easily be perceived as such. Whether or not it was Riefenstahl’s personal opinion, the film goes beyond empathy with the regime and offers the ‘perfect’ stylised representation of Nazi Germany, for the aesthetic conception underlying the film is firmly rooted in National Socialist ideology. As Rother observes of Riefenstahl’s documentary films, ‘sie dokumentieren aber mehr als den politischen Sinn des Parteitages, sie belegen seine emotionale, sogar seine Erotische Grundierung.’ Riefenstahl’s claim that, ‘whether she was filming vegetables or Nazis, […] was all the same to her’ is incongruous with the reality that her film is so tainted by Nazi ideology, that the film’s aesthetic and Nazi aesthetic are in effect indistinguishable. For example, Classicism has been recognised as a central aesthetic theme of German fascist art, as Hitler wrote in Mein Kampf, ‘Never was humanity closer to antiquity than today.’ In their developed abhorrence for Expressionism and other modernist art forms, as exemplified by the Munich art exhibition, Entartete Kunst, (1937) the Nazis turned their attention to the purism and
exacting form of Classicism. Although it has been stated that this resurgence was not unique to Germany at the time, the ideological appeal of Classicism and its easy assimilation into Nazi aesthetic were singular. Taylor states that, ‘Classicism was made to function as a vehicle of an expansionist, military demeanour, both heavily centralised and highly disciplined.’ These aesthetic projections are largely identifiable in *Triumph des Willens*, where even the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* members wear uniforms, carrying their spades like weapons in a militaristic fashion. The notion of discipline is highlighted in the numerous scenes of the regimented masses that appear as straight columns of innumerable soldiers. This transformation of people into geometric shapes is further evidence of the film’s classical tendencies.

It is impossible to dissociate the film’s aesthetics from those of the National Socialist regime. The following quote from Barsam brings to the fore the paradox of the films artistry:

> For Riefenstahl, the precision marching of the Nazi troops was an objective reality, although her subjective photography and editing added a menacing power to it.

Rather than merely objectively depicting the events of the rally, the symbolism of the parades is amplified and exaggerated through artistic cinematic devices, thus the ‘art’ of the film is in how well it depicts Nazi ideology. The artistic highs, such as Hitler’s arrival, simply follow and stem from the Nazis’ self-proclaimed image, and take them to new levels. In *Triumph des Willens*, it is difficult to find an aesthetic conception that cannot be associated with National Socialist ideology. Therefore, it can be concluded that the viewer is forced to acknowledge the context that gave rise to the film and it will ultimately always be labelled a National Socialist film.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence to ascertain whether *Triumph des Willens* can correctly be considered as transcendent art is reached by an examination of its reception by modern audiences. In a review entitled ‘Triumph of the Dull’ written for the film’s recent release on DVD by Synapse, Brian Winston delivers a scathing attack of the documentary, but unusually not because of its political content but rather because of its lack of cinematic professionalism. While many critics have pointed to the film’s editing as proof of Riefenstahl’s filmic mastery, Winston sees it as the film’s greatest weakness. As he states, ‘*Triumph of the Will*, with its tolerance of out-of-focus shots, has editing that borders on the absurd.’ He cites the example of windscreen on Hitler’s Mercedes that ‘jumps up and down like a contraption in an Aardman animation.’ This is not a unique phenomenon in the film, for example as the Nazi hierarchy addresses the crowds, the cutting and editing of their speeches is far from seamless, at one point cutting Goebbels off in mid-sentence. A possible reason for this is the age related deterioration of the print together with the rudimentary 1930s editing suites compared to the advanced digital technology available to contemporary film editors. However, mismatching of cuts is more likely inherent to the original version rather than the result of aging. The fact that Riefenstahl herself edited the sixty-one hours of footage produced by 30 cameras in five months could be seen as a reason for the sometimes poor result. As the director overseeing all the other major aspects of post-production such as music, sound synchronisation and publicity, it is understandable that the quality of the editing could have comprised by the lack of time. Nevertheless, Winston’s greatest attack is reserved for the film in its entirety. He sees its principal faults as ‘its length and lack of variety,’ with the result that the film is ‘interminable, self-indulgent, repetitive – in a word, turgid.’ Although some of these remarks are a matter for personal opinion, Winston does make two valid points. Firstly, it possible to question if anyone would be able to sustain interest for just under two hours unless they had a specific historical interest or neo-fascist longing. Secondly, even from a subjective point of view, the film is repetitive. Despite Riefenstahl’s efforts to inject vibrant energy and to vary camera angles, the reality is that the vast majority of scenes involve crowds, marching or speeches. As Sklar ironically summarises, ‘the full-length film is often dull and tiresome: its point, indeed, may be to stun viewers into somnambulistic adherence through a
predominant style of repetition and bombast.’

In conclusion, *Triumph des Willens* is a documentary with a firm aesthetic conception. However, as this aesthetic conception is deconstructed, it becomes evident that the concept of the documentary is near identical to the highly politicised aesthetic forwarded by the National Socialist movement. It is impossible to divorce the two aesthetics for two reasons. Firstly, *Triumph des Willens* is film record of the Nazi Parteitag that meant that the subject of her film already came with its own aesthetical projections, such as Hitler and the *Führerprinzip*, a factor over which the director had little control. Secondly, artistic restrictions of that epoch governed by the totalitarian state’s ‘total claim’ were so pervasive that even documentary subjectivity was compromised in order to co-exist with the party’s *weltanschauung* leading to the birth of ‘heroischer Reportage’ or ‘documentary myth.’ Although one can acknowledge the creative and innovative use of cinematic device, their ultimate aim is to portray Hitler and his followers in the most favourable light, thus propagating the pre-existing Nazi aesthetic. After over fifty years, *Triumph des Willens* still provokes considerable interest and debate, but is this evidence that it is transcendent art? Much of the controversy can arguably be attributed to the film’s subject matter rather than its awe-inspiring artistry, which remains very much connected to National Socialist regime.

**Conclusion**

In contemporary society the word Nazi is synonymous with death. The Holocaust is not a detail of history, but a fact to be remembered so to avoid repetition. As the horrific enduring legacy of the Nazi regime, the Holocaust stands as a bloody testament to the evilness of tyranny. In the study of any topic related to Nazism, the scale of the genocide committed cannot be forgotten. In the discussion of propaganda, it cannot be ignored that without the success of the Nazi anti-Semitic campaign, that convinced the German nation of the racial inferiority of the Jews, murder on such a scale would not have been possible. But to what extent should the Holocaust influence our judgement of artists who worked in the Third Reich and the work they produced? In the consideration of *Triumph des Willens*, what elements of the film can be perceived as contributing to the Holocaust?

If we compare Veit Harlan’s clearly anti-Semitic *Jud Süß* to *Triumph des Willens*, the former can be more easily linked to the atrocities of the Third Reich. As Rother describes, ‘Harlan benutzte die populäre Form des Melodram, um seine antisemitische Botschaft zu verbreiten, er überformte die Mechanik des Genres, um sie einem zweifellos ideologischen Zweck anzupassen – er erschuf diese Welt des propagandistischen Speilfilms.’ However, *Triumph des Willens* can be regarded as another side of the same process. Although Harlan’s production is ‘negative’ propaganda, in the sense that it is presenting a negative image of Jews, it only worked in juxtaposition to the ‘positive’ propaganda forwarded in *Triumph des Willens*. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two, whereby the racial inferiority of the Jews was convincing if Germans believed in the racial superiority of the Aryan race. As analysis has shown, the Aryan myth is not an explicit theme of the film, but by evoking the notion of *Wiedergeburt*, intrinsic to this process, was the ethnic cleansing of German *Lebensraum* of its Jewry, removing those who had supposedly caused the turmoil and shame of the Weimar era. In promoting national unity *Triumph des Willens* implicitly excludes those who were perceived to be enemies of the state. Furthermore, the attempt to promote the film as art, is in itself an anti-Semitic act, for as Gilman observes, ‘German high culture was seen as the least accessible sphere of society open to Jews.’ And perhaps its most direct link to the Holocaust, is the part it played in legitimising the regime and propagating the *Führerprinzip* enabling Hitler’s despotism; giving him the power to commit genocide.
However, such conclusions are only possible with hindsight. To some extent the Holocaust could be said to influence how modern audiences receive the film *Triumph des Willens*. As Soussloff and Nicolas describe our contemporary perspective: ‘subsequent events, too, are involved. Beyond the Führer and the masses under his spell lie the victims. The smoke from the torches recalls the smoke from the gas ovens.’ They judge the film to be a ‘shaming stimulus,’ which induces strong emotions of ‘horror, shock, revulsion, grief, indignation and outrage.’ This stimulus reminds us of the ‘moral shortcomings of the Germans first, but also of the Poles, of all non-Jews, and indeed of our common culture and its history.’ They continue by concluding, ‘the signs and symbols, actions and consequences of the Nazi past serve to shame us proleptically when we encounter them today in representation.’

It is agreed that *Triumph des Willens* did play a limited role in propagating the Führerprinzip and Nazi ideology in general, but it was only one part of a massive insidious pan-media campaign. Furthermore, its overtly biased Nazi style was not the preferred method for delivering propaganda in films. Goebbels advocated a more subliminal approach, which he would only have promoted, had he believed it was the most successful way to influence a cinema audience. While some point to the film’s mix of artistry and propaganda as a reason that makes it extraordinary, the artistry originates from turning the National Socialist Tendenz into a all consuming aesthetic conception; Nazi ideology becomes the film’s ideology. However this process is not unique. The work of many artists in the Third Reich became simply an outlet for Nazi ideology propagating a Nazi aesthetic, for example, Albert Speer, whose monolithic architectural design provided much of the scenery for *Triumph des Willens*. Those wishing to pass judgement on Riefenstahl must acknowledge the limitations of artists operating within National Socialist Germany. It could be argued that the only choice she has was to make the film the way she did, or not to make the film at all. I have concluded that the film does not lend itself to the process of decontextualisation from the Nazi era, but I would suggest there is reluctance amongst the film’s critics, such as Sontag, to contextualise it within the Third Reich. In an attempt to create a direct link between the film and the Holocaust, it must be conceded that the film was made in 1934, seven years before the secret Wannsee conference, where the Final Solution was decided. Of course aggressive anti-Semitism was commonplace from the start of the regime, particularly within the film industry. However, should Riefenstahl, or any artist supporting the regime, have foreseen such unimaginable horrors?

So why should we continue to be fascinated by Leni Riefenstahl and her film *Triumph des Willens*? It seems unlikely that it was particularly successful in converting the masses to Nazism and even the Reichministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda chose to classify it as ‘Staatspolitisch besonders wertvoll’ rather than ‘Staatspolitisch wertvoll und kunstlerisch besonders wertvoll,’ the highest possible classification. Thus, the film cannot be described as predominately as art or propaganda. I agree with Rother who suggests the most appropriate label for the film is ‘heroischer Reportage.’ If Hitler truly believed in the thousand year Reich, what better way to document for posterity his role as the founding father of the new order, than an appropriately stylised celluloid record demonstrating the depth of adoration from the German people for their God-like saviour. Thankfully, the thousand year Reich was never to be, but to an historian *Triumph des Willens* is a primary source which permits a greater understanding of the function and form of the National Socialist aesthetic. Although it is not the only film to survive from this era, it acts as a unique cinematic document as to the scale and grandeur of Nazi pageantry. It also demonstrates how, in a totalitarian state, the only permissible documentary form, was one that had been manipulated to present a more than sympathetic view of the regime. Further to this, *Triumph des Willens* contributes, to a large extent, to contemporary society’s image of Nazi Germany and fascism. Take the example of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940) that mimics the imagery of *Triumph des Willens*, or the front cover Ian Kershaw’s *The Nazi Dictatorship* that feature a still from the Nuremberg Rally. Winston goes as far to
suggest that George Lucas in his Star Wars film series, frequently parodies Riefenstahl by depicting the geometric columns of Storm-troopers of the ‘fascist’ Galactic Empire.

As we turn our attention back to Leni Riefenstahl, what does Triumph des Willens tell us about her? As demonstrated by her stylised representation of Nazi ideology, she clearly understood the basic tenets of Nazism – the Führerprinzip, Wiedergeburt and power of mass persuasion – and sought to give these notions visual form. It could be argued that she was only able to successfully express these fundamental principles cinematically because she believed and supported them. But, how does this make her different from any other artist who used their creative talent to further the Nazi cause? And why is she still considered a pariah by the film industry, while Veit Harlan started directing again in 1951 with Unsterbliche Geliebte. She was a director not an ideologue; whether she supported the ideas in her film or not, the ideology was not of her own creation. Goebbels said himself that the Führerprinzip was one of his greatest accomplishments. Therefore, if we wish to judge Riefenstahl for directing Triumph des Willens, the classification of Mitläuferin, as was the finding of her de-nazification trial, is in my opinion the most appropriate conclusion. It acknowledges her complicity, but recognises the fact that she was the ‘female Faust to Adolf Hitler’s Mephistopheles.’ However, Triumph des Willens was not the only film she directed. Also, it is not the only source of her notoriety or her single connection to Nazism. An example of another connection is the contentious claim made against Riefenstahl in Ray Müller’s documentary Die Macht der Bilder (1993) that she used Romany prisoners from a Concentration Camp as extras in the filming of Tiefland (1954). In this analysis, by focusing my attention on her film, I have avoided speculative discussion of Riefenstahl’s life. However, as I search for a reason for the continued contemporary fascination in her work, I would suggest that it originates more from an intrigue in her life and her actions, rather than from the extraordinariness of her work. It is not scholarly interest in her role as propagandist or artist that draws us to Riefenstahl, but rather it seems to be the lurid speculation as to whether or not she really was Hitler’s mistress.

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