Title: Cinema, Nazism and Solidarity: How and why did the notion of unity contribute to the appeal of Leni Riefenstahl’s film “Triumph of the Will” within Nazi Germany
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Introduction

Cinematographically dazzling and ideologically vicious, Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary film *Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens)* eloquently succeeded in fusing politics with art. Depicting the Nazi Party’s second rally at Nuremberg following Adolf Hitler’s inauguration as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, *Triumph of the Will* premiered in Berlin on March 28, 1935.¹ Riefenstahl’s film was a huge success within Nazi Germany—winning the National Film Prize that year—and was accredited internationally for its contemporary aesthetic quality. However, the film’s positive portrayal of Nazism and the Führer is controversial to say the least, especially when considering the horrendous crimes committed by the Nazi regime up until its collapse in May 1945. Thus, although Riefenstahl has called *Triumph of the Will* a ‘film-vérité’² and denied her direct association with National Socialism, her documentary was indisputably an effective piece of Nazi propaganda.

The notion of unity, which acted as a prevalent theme in *Triumph of the Will*, largely contributed to the film’s popular appeal as well as propagandistic efficacy. Considering the complexity of the matter, this paper first examines how the notion of unity is portrayed in the Riefenstahl’s film; then, how this theme coincides with Nazi ideology and propaganda; and finally, in what ways political and economic factors played a role in cementing solidarity as an appealing concept amongst such a large stratum of German society. In essence, *Triumph of the Will* represents an aesthetic portrayal of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, and the notion of unity expressed in the film effectively blankets Nazi ideology, making it attractive to the broader masses. What is more, this

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attraction to solidarity rests predominantly on the political and economic induced disillusionment felt by the majority of Germans in the early 1930s.

**Un Film Vérité**

Leni Riefenstahl was awarded the German National Film Prize for *Triumph of the Will* in May 1935. Upon presenting Riefenstahl with the award, Joseph Goebbels (Nazi Minister of Propaganda) is recorded to have said that *Triumph of the Will* had “lifted up the harsh rhythm of our great epoch to eminent heights of artistic achievement.”

In the same light, Hitler praised the film as being an "incomparable glorification of the power and beauty of our movement." Riefenstahl’s little under two-hour long film was warmly embraced by the German people. As Albert Speer wrote in his memoirs while in prison following the collapse of the Third Reich:

> “*Triumph of the Will* seduced many wise men and women, persuaded them to admire rather than to despise, and undoubtedly won the Nazis friends and allies all over the world.”

By depicting crowds of women and children enthusiastically waving, and columns of clean-shaven men in SA, SS, and military uniforms saluting, the film conveys Nazism as an orderly, positive, and unifying mass movement—signifying a rebirth of the German nation.

In her 1932 feature film *The Blue Light (Das Blaue Licht)*, Adolf Hitler recognized Riefenstahl’s talent to transfer an abstract ideal to the screen and, simultaneously, to infuse it with dramatic realism. Upon his accession to power as Germany’s Chancellor in January 1933, Hitler asked Riefenstahl to make a film recording the proceedings of the Nazi Party’s Nuremberg Rally of

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6 Barsam, 17.
that same year. Due to insufficient hours of film, however, which was largely the result of interference from Goebbels, the film that emerged, *Victory of Faith (Sieg des Glaubens)*, was cinematographically mediocre. Nevertheless, Hitler was convinced of Riefenstahl’s potential and asked her to make yet another film, this time of the Nuremberg Rally of 1934. When she told him that she had no conception of how to film parades and speeches, he responded that he had chosen her because she was an artist capable of the task. She protested that she did not know who or what was politically important, and quotes Hitler as responding: “It is not important who is in the film. It is important that the film has atmosphere.” Riefenstahl’s remarkable achievement in *Triumph of the Will* was to do exactly this.

**Das Volk**

The Nuremberg rally of 1934 was called the ‘Party Day of Unity’ and a stunning 700,000 visitors attended the proceedings. The atmosphere of the rally, as seen through *Triumph of the Will*, very much reflected the title—one of unity. Two scenes in the film are particularly successful in conveying this atmosphere. The first shows the dynamic of the Hitler Youth: washing, eating, singing, fighting, laughing, and working together. The fact that these boys come from different backgrounds and classes plays no part in the esprit-de-corps which is so very present in these shots. In a speech to the Hitler Youth in a later scene, Hitler says that: “In the future, we do not wish to see classes and cliques....We want to be a united nation.” The second scene which conveys a particularly strong sense of unity is the one in which Hitler addresses 52,000 labourers. As a group, they went through their maneuvers and spoke their lines in absolute unison. And in Hitler’s speech to these men, he proclaims that: “The concept of labour

7 Barsam, 14.
8 Barsam, 67.
9 Barsam, 48.
will no longer be a dividing one but a uniting one.”

Hence, both scenes buttress the view that what ultimately unites all German men, women, and children is their common citizenship as Germans—that is of course, excluding Jews, political dissidents, Gypsies, and homosexuals.

Riefenstahl’s cinematographic techniques reinforce the sense of unity that was inherent to the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. H. Hoffmann suggests in his book *The Triumph of Propaganda* that: “Themes are stated and restated, motifs are introduced and repeated, and all the individual elements of the film are subordinate to an overall structure which expresses and embodies Riefenstahl’s particular vision.”

This very much reflects Hitler’s personal view on propaganda. “The most brilliant propagandist technique will yield no success unless one fundamental principle is borne in mind constantly and with unflagging attention. It must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over.” This is what Riefenstahl achieves in *Triumph of the Will* concerning the notion of unity. Thematically, the numerous parade sequences in the film confirm the idea that Nazi Germany is a massed, marching column of men. Furthermore, the ocean of flags—being one of Riefenstahl’s most persistent and effective motifs—creates uniformity to the landscape while signifying a common identity. Consequently, the notion of unity may well have been more evident to the audience of *Triumph of the Will* than to those who attended the Nuremberg Rally, since the film effectively uses cinematographic techniques to pervasively direct the audience’s attention to the theme of solidarity.

Being a documentary film, *Triumph of the Will* should in actuality be true to the reality of that rally, however dishonest and misleading that meeting may have been. But that is not entirely the

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10 Barsam, 44.
11 Hoffman, 150.
12 Hoffmann, 140.
13 Barsam, 34.
case because, ultimately, every decision about what the cameras should or should not record, about the nature of a take, the editing, and the music, inevitably implies a particular perspective on the event in the film. For example, images of cheering crowds and massed formations take precedence over images of chief party officials, and even of Hitler himself. And while speeches only comprise a fraction of the film, as much emphasis is given to the audience as to the speaker himself. Riefenstahl wished to focus on the ‘movement’ rather than the Führer, on the German people rather than Hitler’s obedient servants.\(^{14}\) Thus, what Riefenstahl achieved in *Triumph of the Will* was to encapsulate an extra-aesthetic reality with aesthetic means in such a way that the people who lived in this reality recognized themselves in it: as parts of a crowd.\(^{15}\) By doing so, the targeted audience of the film—broadly all Germans—felt a greater attachment to the events on the screen, becoming more susceptible to its messages: in particular the message of unity.

**Cinema and Indoctrination**

The Nazi regime monopolized all forms of media with the purpose of indoctrinating the German people into subordinately following their ideology. Cinema in the 1930s represented a new front of opportunities—a modern medium—for the comprehensive Nazi propaganda machine.\(^{16}\) *Triumph of the Will* was a private production by Riefenstahl herself and not by the Nazi Party, as *Victory of Faith* had been, but it was nevertheless a powerful act of propaganda. The film glorified Nazism by depicting it as a movement of progress which advocated German unity. Moreover, *Triumph of the Will* is purposely free of any reference to the evils which we today associate with the Nazi dogma. The speeches, for example, have been edited to the most general

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\(^{15}\) Hoffmann, 150.

statements about growth and solidarity.17 There are no disturbing ideas, no reactionary proposals, and certainly no indication of the evil that was to come as a result of party policies, i.e. the extermination of the Jews and the attempted hegemony of the world. The Nuremberg Rally of 1934 inspired a rosy view of the Nazi movement, with Riefenstahl using cinema to aesthetically reinforce this view for the eyes of the entire nation to see.

By evoking unity, the Nazi Party could successfully appeal to the broader masses and “conquer the souls of the ordinary people.”18 Moreover, Hitler believed it very important to project an image of solidarity due to the recent purging of the S.A. (Hitler’s paramilitary), including the execution of S.A. leader Ernst Rohm shortly after June 30, 1934, which became known as the ‘Night of Long Knives’.19 In his early years as Chancellor and then as Führer, following President Hindenburg’s death in August 1934, Hitler was still consolidating his power. Therefore, Nazi propaganda during this period aimed to solidify his leadership. Considering this, the notion of unity seen in the 1934 Nuremberg Rally has a specific purpose: to reduce the individual to the status of a purely numerical element within the larger ‘Volksgemeinschaft,’ in order to single out Hitler as their leader.20 And with the entire German media censored, or directly under Party control, such propaganda proved very effective. In the first volume of the Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, W.L. Shirer writes, “No one who has not lived for years in a totalitarian land can possibly conceive how difficult it is to escape the dread consequences of a regime’s calculated and incessant propaganda.”21 Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will

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17 Barsam, 17.
18 Barsam, 17.
20 Hoffmann, 142.
complemented the Nazi propaganda effort to convey an image of German unity, and therefore, the film’s appeal was drilled into the conscience of its audience—a very large audience indeed.

**Yearning for Unity**

The organization of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, the aesthetic value of *Triumph of the Will*, and the existence of a comprehensive propaganda apparatus, all explain how the notion of unity contributed to the appeal of *Triumph of the Will*. To understand why this notion was so appealing within Nazi Germany, an exploration of political and economic factors is necessary. To be clear, the appeal is largely, but not exclusively, connected to the appeal of the Nazi Party. The Weimar Republic, which emerged in 1919 from the chaos that followed World War One, was never able to liberate itself from the legacy of political turmoil of its early years. Between 1919 and 1923 there existed nine different Chancellors, a statistic that shows all too clearly the instability that the young democracy faced. Radicals of both ends of the spectrum tried on several occasions to overthrow the government, the most notable attempts having been the Spartacist Uprising (1919), the Kapp Putsch (1920), and the Beer Hall Putsch (1924). The economic downturn of the early 1930s and the failure of the government to deal with the crises – or even to exacerbate them by implementing deflationary policies – caused further disillusionment for democracy, disillusionment that Hitler cleverly used for his political benefit. With democracy popularly believed to be systemically weak and fragmented, many Germans found it is rather easy to turn to a dictatorship: especially if that dictatorship provided order and employment.

Economically, post-World War One Germany tragically fell victim to the curses of inflation and unemployment. The hyperinflation of 1922 and 1923 largely liquidated the hard-earned savings

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22 Shirer, 55.
23 Shirer, 109.
24 Haffner, 125.
of most middle-income Germans.\textsuperscript{25} And while the Dawes Plan of 1924 allowed Weimar Germany to experience a period of economic growth, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 made evident how precarious the foundations of this recovery had been.\textsuperscript{26} The cornerstone of the short-lived era of prosperity had been loans from abroad, principally from the United States, and world trade. When the flow of loans dried up and repayment on the old ones became due, the German financial structure was unable to stand the strain. With tumbling exports, German industry could not keep its plants running, and production fell by almost half from 1929 to 1932.\textsuperscript{27} The Nazi rise to power came as the lights of hope dimmed over Germany.

In the darkest days of that period, when the factories were silent, when the registered unemployed numbered over six million, and bread lines stretched for blocks in every city in the land, Hitler wrote: “Never in my life have I been so well disposed and inwardly contented as in these days. For hard reality has opened the eyes of millions of Germans…”\textsuperscript{28} Hitler’s rather cold-blooded analysis, however, had foundation. In 1928, before the depression, the Nazi Party won just 12 seats in the Reichstag. That number soared to a remarkable 107 seats in 1930: the Nazis jumped almost overnight from being the ninth smallest political party in parliament to the second largest. And then in 1932, at the height of the depression, the Nazis received 230 seats, becoming the largest German party.\textsuperscript{29} History has proven time and time again that economic despair creates a radicalization of politics as voters become disillusioned with the status-quo.

The popularity of the Nazi movement increased further when Hitler became Chancellor of the Reich. The German economy got back onto its feet; in particular, the Nazi rearmament and

\textsuperscript{25} Merriman, 985
\textsuperscript{27} Shirer, 137.
\textsuperscript{28} Shirer, 136.
\textsuperscript{29} Shirer, 166.
public works programs nearly eliminated unemployment, which fell from six million in 1932, to less than one million four years later. These remarkable economic achievements were already felt by the spring of 1935, when Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* was released. However, *Triumph of the Will* did not only appeal to those who became convinced supporters of the Nazi Party, but also to more moderate Germans. This can also be understood in the light of the political fragmentation and economic bitterness all Germans had experienced. Fore since the defeat in the First World War, German society saw sharp political divisions, e.g. between communists, socialists, rightists, etc. Moreover, the dual monetary crises caused the upheaval of Germany’s rigid class structure as savings disappeared. Thus, Hitler’s calls at the 1934 Nuremberg Rally for the elimination of “classes and cliques” had already been precipitated on economic grounds and was now yearned for politically.

**Conclusion**

Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* documents more than just the political significance of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally: it testifies to the movement’s emotional, even erotic basis. Her documentary aesthetically reinforces the rosy view of Nazism that the 1934 Nuremberg Rally portrayed, and the modern medium of cinema enabled this view to reach out to the eyes of a desperate nation. Be it a film vérité or not, *Triumph of the Will* encapsulated a romanticized reality in such a way that the people who lived in this reality were able to recognize themselves in it, as part of the crowd. The audience consequently becomes the ‘ideal spectator’, and thereby, more susceptible to the film’s powerful images and messages. The economic crises of the early 1920s and early 1930s had material as well as psychological impacts on German society, e.g. the

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30 Shirer, 258.
31 Barsam, 48.
32 Rother, 64.
liquidation of income classes. What is more, the sharp political divisions and naked fragility that was the Weimar Republic created a yearning among Germans for stability and national solidarity. In Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* the 1934 Nuremberg Rally is aesthetically documented such that the notion of unity effectively blankets Nazi ideology, thereby making it attractive to a wide spectrum of a German society scarred by economic crises and political fragmentation.
**Bibliography**


