

Triumph of the will, olympia, and labour camps essay



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The visual “ texts” I have chosen for this study vary both in their production standards, target audience, resources, both in human effort and money spent, and in their presentation.

What ties them all together however, is that they are all, in one form or another, an attempt by the Nazi authorities to influence the hearts and minds of the German, and foreign public. That is to say they are all works of Nazi propaganda. The most famous is undoubtedly Triumph of the Will, a visual catalogue of the 1934 Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg. This work, directed by Leni Riefenstahl has been acclaimed as a wonderfully directed and produced piece of art, and at the same time revered as disgusting Nazi Propaganda.

The other works I have chosen are Olympia, also by Leni Riefenstahl, and Labour Camps, and extract from a series of films shown to German primary and secondary school children. Olympia is another stunning piece of visual imagery, from the 1936 Olympic Games in Munich, and is not unlike what we would see on television during modern Olympic games, but does incorporate the Nazi message. Labour Camps is a short extract, aimed at the young, attempting to teach them the Nazi message of physical fitness, hard work and arms training. It is virtually no-budget when compared to the spectacular Triumph of the Will and Olympia, but nevertheless would have been just as important as part of the Nazi propaganda machine. “ Labour Camps” is a silent piece of film, first shown in German schools in 1937. As the preceding writing tells us, it is made for the “ Creation of military tradition amongst boys, an insight in the birth of the concentration camp system.

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It is reasonable to assume that this film would have been made by the Nazi Propaganda ministry. The film itself is of a reasonable quality, clearly visible and not grainy, however Olympia and Triumph of the Will are markedly better. This is because the same investment would not be made on this type of film. We are also informed that this film is silent because it was state policy that only silent films were shown in German schools at this time. This too was probably for economic reasons. The film shows us young adults, possibly in their late teens, marching in two lines and collecting their shovels and spades and going to work the land.

They carry their tools and march in military fashion. They all appear to be happy at their work, and the impression is given that they are working for each other, and also for the Reich. The works commander is in military uniform, and the workers begin and finish on his command. They work in unison, with military precision, and this theme is carried on through the film.

This would have a powerful effect on adolescents, who would undoubtedly be attracted to the comradeship and order. The film goes on to show other aspects of military training that young people could expect at these labour camps. They perform rifle drill with their tools, and even have a ceremonial guard. The Nazi salute is shown many times in the film, and shows us that obedience to Hitler is unquestioned, by both the trainees and the senior officers.

The end of the film shows what looks like a passing out parade, and the men receive awards and medals for their service to Germany. The young men stand tall, and look proud to have served. I suspect they will now go on for

full military training. This film would have been used as a recruitment tool in German schools, and would have been very successful. Children would be attracted to the uniforms and the medals. For the historian, this piece shows us many things about National Socialist propaganda.

Firstly, although this film was low-budget, and did not contain sound, it was of a high technological standard. It would have been viewed by its creators as a cheap, yet effective method of presenting the Aryan ideal. Secondly, as its title suggests, it is preparation for young men to enter military service. This shows us that the German society at this time was fixated with military prowess, and we can see that the propaganda was in some part responsible for this.

“Olympia” was the second major work of propaganda directed by Leni Riefenstahl. Undoubtedly she was commissioned for this work as a result of the success of *Triumph of the Will*. The film includes sound, and is technologically advanced for its time. It is a work released in 1936, depicting the XI Olympic Games held in Munich in the same year. The opening scenes of *Olympia* is regarded as one of the greatest pieces of work filmed at this time.

We are shown the ruins of ancient Greece, and the places where the ancient Games were held. Part of the ruins depict sculptures of ancient Greek Gods. Then we are presented with athletes, very physically fit people, in ancient Greek attire, demonstrating the different events that take place at the games. The scene then cuts to the Olympic Stadium in Munich, which is packed to capacity with spectators. This is an attempt to put the German

games on a parallel with the ancient games by presenting them directly after the pictures of the Greek stadia. We can clearly see the stadium has been decked out in Nazi regalia, and the crowd are engaging enthusiastically with the Nazi salute.

Next we see Hitler proclaiming the Games officially open. Two things are to be noted here. Hitler is clearly pleased with this spectacle, and the crowd warm to him, listening intently to every word, and responding with the Nazi salute and loud cheers, but we can also note the similarity in position of filming to that of the Greek Gods in the ancient stadium. Both are filmed from below, in essence placing them on a pedestal above everyone else in the stadium. Was this an attempt by the director to present Hitler in a God like persona? Certainly the crowd are shown to respond to him in this manner. This is reinforced when we see the contingents from the competing nations enter and circle the stadium.

The applause each nation receives is quite obviously linked to whether or not they offer the Nazi salute to Germany. The commentary on the recording studied (added afterwards, not actually part of "Olympia") ironically points out that in 1936 the French had no problem giving the Nazi salute in honour of Hitler. The filming of the events themselves must have caused the director some significant problems, mainly due to the fact that Germany was not as successful at the Games as they would have hoped. Perversely, for the Nazi regime, the most successful athlete was an African-American, but little was made of this in Olympia. Instead it tended to focus on the German athletes, and made most of German successes. Without doubt, it was an attempt to show the world German superiority, both on and off the sporting field.

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The organisation, and presentation of the Games was impeccable, and this was highlighted in Olympia. As historians we can see the effort that the German propagandists put in to showing the viability and success of National Socialism. Media students can also appreciate the talent of Leni Riefenstahl as a director, in presenting Munich in parallel with ancient Greece, and Hitler in parallel with the Gods. It gives us an invaluable insight into how the German public, and the German media respected and portrayed their leader. "Triumph of the Will" is without doubt the most famous piece of National Socialist propaganda.

Accepted almost without exception as a masterpiece of media art, it has also been vilified as disgusting Nazi apologist propaganda. "It is probably one of the most powerful and at the same time repulsive films ever made" 1 said one commentator. Released in Germany in 1935, it shows the 1934 Nuremberg rally in all its glory and splendour. It has been described as an "incomparable beautification of the Reich" 2 Directed by Leni Riefenstahl, "Triumph of the Will" was at the time the most expensive film ever made and utilised the most modern photographic, camera and sound equipment available. Lasting over 60 minutes, we are shown varying aspects of the Nazi party machine, from the leadership, right down to the Hitler Youth. Each and every scene has been meticulously choreographed by Albert Speer, and the director.

This is not simply a cinematographic diary of the events in Nuremberg, it is quite clearly designed to present to the people of Germany, and those abroad the National Socialist message.