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Leni Riefenstahl's "Olympia": Brilliant Cinematography or Nazi Propaganda?

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"Olympia," arguably one of the greatest sports films ever produced, may have also been an effective propaganda tool that promoted National Socialism as a model form of government. A sports documentary capturing the 1936 Summer Olympics "Olympia" was directed and produced by the renowned German motion picture producer Leni Riefenstahl.

On the surface, the film appears to be a very well made sports film, depicting outstanding athletic accomplishments by many individuals and teams from throughout the world. However, as Germany's intentions became clearer in the period before World War II, critics became more and more suspicious that the actual motive for producing "Olympia" was political promotion: Nazi propaganda. Kracauer (1947) stated, "To be sure, all Nazi films were more or less propaganda films—even the mere entertainment pictures which seem to be remote from politics" (p. 275). To date, no one has been able to uncover substantive evidence proving that the sole intention of producing "Olympia" was to create propaganda. There are, however, many hints that at least part of the German government's purpose in supporting "Olympia" was to promote the positive (as perceived by the Nazis) principles of National Socialism to the world.

There are two parts to the film. The first part begins with a history of the Olympic games, depicting the traditions of the ancient games in the city of Olympia and continuing with portrayal of many of the field events at the 1936 Berlin games. The second part features the track and field events of the Berlin Games. "Olympia" was considered a documentary, but in fact it incorporated two components generally unknown in documentaries typifying that time: editing and sound. Riefenstahl's skillful editing allowed the most exciting moments to be featured and produced smooth transition between the sports events. In a most sophisticated manner, Riefenstahl also incorporated sound within the film, in the form of background music and narration. She worked tirelessly to synchronize music by distinguished film composer Herbert Windt with the moving images in the film (Riefenstahl, 1993). In those days, to attach any sort of sound to a moving picture was always difficult and often impossible, but Riefenstahl accomplished it with a flawless precision that impressed audiences and critics in Germany and abroad. All of this, in combination with innovative filming techniques, won for the film very high acclaim from some of the most respected persons in the industry (Berg-Pan, 1980; Graham, 1986; Infield, 1976; Salkeld, 1996). And even today, viewing "Olympia" creates the impression that one is a living part of the 1936 games; Riefenstahl's work is a far cry from the boorish nature of pre-"Olympia" documentaries.

"Olympia" as Nazi Propaganda

As a result of the political climate developing before World War II, "Olympia" became increasingly scrutinized. Produced by the same Germany about to wreak frightful havoc on the world, "Olympia," it seemed, could be assumed to contain some expression of support for National Socialism. Was Riefenstahl so absorbed in her documentary work that the surrounding Nazi politics escaped her? Or was she much more politically astute than she claimed to be?

Certain facts make it difficult to believe Riefenstahl could have been naive about the way of life around her: (a) her professional instincts and insights were extraordinary; (b) her political skills were such that she was able to arrange personal meetings with Hitler; and (c) in order to attain her film production goals, she carefully worked the political structures of the German film industry and the Nazi Party (Graham, 1986; Riefenstahl, 1993). From a commonsense perspective, it is difficult to be convinced that the same Riefenstahl possessed of these impressive skills could remain unaware of the larger motive manifested by Hitler and the National Socialist Party in making the film. Furthermore, Riefenstahl had various ties to

international figures, meeting personally with Benito Mussolini on Hitler's behalf (Riefenstahl, 1993) and being invited to Moscow by Joseph Stalin following the release of "Olympia" (Hinton, 1978).

Still, it would be presumptuous to accuse Riefenstahl of familiarity with the agenda and inner workings of the Nazis: No empirical evidence supports the accusation. There is much room for debate about whether Riefenstahl's intelligence and savvy (and effective application of them in her many professional endeavors) preclude her misunderstanding the situation unfolding in Nazi Germany at the time. In the absence of any real proof that Riefenstahl was even aware, truly, of the planned evils of the Nazi Party, it is very difficult to prove she had a propagandistic intent in producing "Olympia."

However, the question of whether the Nazis put the film to use as propaganda is quite different. The German government certainly would not have released "Olympia" if it had not portrayed Germany in the way the Nazi party wished to be portrayed. Nevertheless, the kind of propaganda the documentary most clearly provided is what Graham (1986) called "soft" or "sociological" propaganda (p. 251). As propaganda, "Olympia" is less interested in blatantly indoctrinating viewers in the principles of National Socialism than in promoting a positive, even kind, image of Germany. The audience took in an exhilarating sports documentary featuring the successes of many countries' athletes. (In some cases, the film actually downplays victories of the German nation.) Viewers throughout the world were pleased to see favorite athletes featured in a positive light, and positive feeling about the film might extend by association to Germany and thus to the National Socialist Party.

While official documentation ascribes "Olympia" to a company named Leni Riefenstahl Productions, the film's finances were in fact controlled by Paul Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda (Berg-Pan, 1980). Furthermore, a frank assessment of Riefenstahl's possible complicity must not ignore her work for the National Socialist Party (prior to "Olympia") making a film titled "Triumph of the Will." In "Triumph of the Will," the power of the National Socialist Party is clearly exhibited, and everything the German government believed good about Nazism is on display.

"Olympia" as Documentary

One of the strongest arguments for the notion that "Olympia" was a propaganda piece (if only in terms of sociological propaganda) is also, strangely, one of the strongest arguments for the notion that it was not a propaganda film at all. That point is the film's perceived objectivity, its seemingly unbiased representation of the athletes, the nations, and the Games in general. Experts on filmmaking at the time, as well as other critics contemporary with Riefenstahl, found great merit in "Olympia." The documentary was actually voted the grand prize winner at the 1938 International Film Festival in Venice, defeating Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (Hinton, 1991).

Riefenstahl would later visit Hollywood, during which trip Disney received her openly, congratulating her on what he believed to be a masterful production. By the time of her visit, anti-German sentiment in the United States had grown so large that "Olympia" was being boycotted, although many who were so vigorously denouncing the film had not viewed it. Disney witnessed the boycott and was aware of the popular dislike of Germany. If he had considered "Olympia" to in some way comprise political propaganda, it is highly unlikely he would have received Riefenstahl publicly and with genuine praise.

The objectivity of "Olympia" perceived by so many of Riefenstahl's critics and audiences comes primarily from Riefenstahl's refusal to compromise when it came to the film's production. Her own standards trumped the wishes of others. She herself wielded control over all aspects of the film's creation (Hinton, 1991), despite frequent pressure from Goebbels—during filming and editing and production generally—to make modifications aligning the content with Nazi ideals. When Goebbels demanded, for example, that she acknowledge Hitler's resentment of the successful African-American athletes, Riefenstahl instead proceeded to feature gold medalists Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalf prominently (Hinton, 1978; Infield, 1976). Her defiance lends credence to her later claim that she, at least, saw no propaganda purpose for her documentary. Riefenstahl's uncompromising ways as a producer of "Olympia" furthermore led to Nazi officials' criticism of the film as too artistic (Berg-Pan, 1980).

Conclusion

After the war had ended in Germany's defeat, de-Nazification courts refused to label Riefenstahl a Nazi (Salkeld, 1996). That makes it more difficult to label her film Nazi propaganda. Some might argue that it simply is not fair to criticize Riefenstahl and Germany for succeeding at what our film companies today continue attempting: to produce a film that pleases the widest possible audience and wins high praise and supportive reviews from film industry professionals. Such a goal during such a time, however, is evidence leading the present authors to conclude that Riefenstahl's "Olympia" did contribute to the Nazi movement, even if in the subtlest of ways. What's more, the documentary's effect may ultimately have been less subtle thanks to Riefenstahl's brilliant cinematography.

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