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# *Triumph of the Will:* Document or Artifice?

*David B. Hinton*

There has lately been a renewed interest in the work of the German film maker Leni Riefenstahl, best known for her major works made during the Third Reich, *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*. Possibly some of this interest is attributable to the general surge of interest in the Third Reich and Hitler, or what the Germans refer to as the "Hitler Welle"; or perhaps it is because enough time has now elapsed between those times and these to allow the films to be studied with a minimum of emotionalism. Whatever the case, the mystical aura that so permeates the period likewise continues to cloud even the known historical facts about Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, continually perpetuating myths about the film.

Apart from the familiar political controversy over the degree of Riefenstahl's acceptance of Nazi ideas, historical misconceptions about *Triumph of the Will* generally fall into three areas. The first is confusion over the nature of certain historical events recorded in the film or occurring before it. The second area of confusion surrounds the making of the film, and is in part generated by conflicting statements made by Riefenstahl herself. Third, and most important, is the controversy over whether the film is carefully molded and rearranged by the director, or is a straight chronological documentary that does no more than record a historical event.

Regardless of whether *Triumph of the Will* is accepted as a mere historical recording of events or as carefully contrived propaganda, the film cannot be properly understood without full knowledge of historical events occurring before and during the film. Armed with this knowledge, certain sequences take on an added significance within the film, a significance that is not readily apparent to the viewer.

The Nuremberg party rally of September 4-10, 1934, of which *Triumph of the Will* is the official document, occurred at a momentous time in the history of the Nazi movement. The importance given this period by the Nazis themselves is emphasized in the opening of the film, with the only titles, and therefore the film's only explicit statement, to appear in the film: "September 4, 1934. 20 years after the outbreak of World War I, 16 years after German woe and sorrow began, 19 months after the beginning

of Germany's rebirth, Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg to review the columns of his faithful admirers."<sup>1</sup>

Only nineteen months since Hitler's ascent to power in Germany, his hold on that power was yet to be solidified. Two events occurring before the rally exert an important influence on the rally itself. First, Hitler recognized the necessity of making peace with the German military before his grasp of power could be complete. He was only too aware of what had happened before when he reached for power without the support of the military, ending in the disastrous suppression by the armed forces of his famous "Beer Hall Putsch" in Munich in 1923. Hitler's traditional distrust of the German military, grounded in his dislike of the old German aristocracy, was rivaled by the distrust of the military for the Nazi S.A.<sup>2</sup> It was well known that Ernst Röhm, the commander of the S.A., envisaged the S.A. as becoming the major military force in the land, replacing the Wehrmacht and the German High Command.

To consolidate his power, Hitler was not above striking a deal with the Wehrmacht at the expense of his old party comrades in the S.A. On April 11, 1934, five months before the party rally in Nuremberg, Hitler met with the leaders of the German armed forces on board the cruiser *Deutschland*. A pledge of support for Hitler was exchanged for a promise to eliminate Röhm, subordinate the S.A. to the army, and ensure the armed forces as the sole military force of the land.<sup>3</sup> The result of this agreement was the famous "Röhm purge" of June 30, 1934, only a little more than two months before the rally. Röhm and his top followers were assassinated in a wave of executions and arrests across the country, and a previously unknown figure, Viktor Lutze, was named to replace Röhm.

The second event to have a major influence on the September rally was the death of Reichspresident Otto von Hindenburg on August 2, 1934. Hindenburg's death allowed Hitler to consolidate the office of president, which had been held by Hindenburg, with that of chancellor, already held by Hitler. Because of his previous pact with the military, the consolidation of all executive power in Hitler's hands was not opposed by the military. Numerous shots of military figures present at the rally are inserted in *Triumph of the Will* to emphasize their presence and therefore their support of Hitler. In a hypocritical note, the rally itself was officially convened in the memory of the recently departed Hindenburg, who was never before favorably regarded by the Nazis. It was not his memory, but his death which

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<sup>1</sup> Museum of Modern Art film print, *Triumph of the Will*. All references to the film itself refer to this complete print.

<sup>2</sup> The S.A., or "Sturmabteilung," were the brownshirts of the Nazi Party. Besides being responsible for maintaining order at party rallies, they were the Nazis' street brawlers against rival political parties. They were in organization and purpose different from the S.S., or blackshirts.

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton T. Burden, *The Nuremberg Party Rallies: 1923-39* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 77.

the Nazis celebrated in their official eulogies, uttered by Rudolf Hess in the "Opening of the Party Congress" sequence early in the film.

With the army appeased and executive power now concentrated in Hitler's hands, the only possible threat to Hitler's power now lay within his own party. A purge on the scale of the Röhm purge could not help but have a major effect on morale, and no one knew what the results might be. With these events in mind, it is possible to understand the significance of the scenes in *Triumph of the Will* when Hitler addresses the assembled members of the S.A., his first appearance before the S.A. since the purge. Though it is not revealed in the film, the occasion was an extremely tense moment, and was adequately described by William L. Shirer, an eyewitness of the event:

Hitler faced his S.A. stormtroopers today [September 9, 1934] for the first time since the bloody purge. In a harangue to fifty thousand of them he "absolved" them from blame for the Röhm revolt. There was considerable tension in the stadium and I noticed that Hitler's own S.S. bodyguard was drawn up in front of him, separating him from the mass of brownshirts. We wondered if just one of those fifty thousand brownshirts wouldn't pull a revolver, but no one did. Viktor Lutze, Röhm's successor as chief of the S.A., also spoke. He has a shrill, unpleasant voice, and the S.A. boys received him coolly, I thought.<sup>4</sup>

Thus one of the film's most visually exciting sequences, containing the famous shots of the thousands of flags being paraded in front of Hitler, as well as the ascending elevator shots taken from behind Hitler's rostrum, becomes an emotionally charged sequence where Hitler's very life was believed to have been in danger from his own party members.

Shirer's observation that Lutze was coolly received is interesting to remember when viewing the evening rally sequence in *Triumph of the Will*, immediately preceding Hitler's address to the Hitler Youth. This sequence ends with Lutze being enthusiastically mobbed by S.A. men as he departs at the end of his speech. His automobile is barely able to make its way through the crowd. This sequence is especially important, since no other figure in *Triumph of the Will*, except for Hitler, receives the same filmic treatment that Lutze does in this sequence. This special treatment goes so far as to give Lutze the same dramatic shots reserved for Hitler himself, such as the shots of Lutze alone on the podium taken from a low angle. Considering in retrospect the historical insignificance of Lutze, this sequence was nevertheless of great importance for the film at the time of its release. Following the great loss of morale among members of the S.A. after the Röhm purge, it is seemingly an attempt to transfer cinematically the prestige and popularity of Hitler to the little-known Lutze. This fact is unfortunately neglected in most analyses of *Triumph of the Will*. Even in the

<sup>4</sup> William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary* (New York: Popular Library, 1940), pp. 20-21.

film's detailed sound and picture outline published by the Museum of Modern Art, Lutze is referred to only as "one stormtrooper officer" or as an "aide de camp."<sup>5</sup>

The second area in which commonly held misconceptions about the film abound is in the actual making of *Triumph of the Will* and what resources were employed during its production. The larger question of how much cooperation Riefenstahl received from the Nazi Party both before and during the rally, a vital point because of Siegfried Kracauer's contention that "the Convention itself had also been staged to produce *Triumph of the Will*, for the purpose of resurrecting the ecstasy of the people through it,"<sup>6</sup> must unfortunately remain unanswered by history. Recent correspondence by the author with Albert Speer, who as chief architect and designer for the rally would be in a position to know, has shed no light on the issue.

Several minor points can be cleared up, however, such as the dispute over the number of cameramen and workers at Riefenstahl's disposal. For example, Manvell and Fraenkel in *The German Cinema* assert that "Thirty cameramen and a large technical staff were assembled to make the film . . ."<sup>7</sup> In a 1965 interview, Riefenstahl stated that she had "only eighteen cameramen, not the larger figures often claimed."<sup>8</sup> To further complicate the issue, the 1935 book on the making of *Triumph of the Will*, a book which bears her name as the author and was published under the German title *Hinter den Kulissens des Reichsparteitagfilms*, states that sixteen cameramen were involved along with sixteen assistants, using a total of thirty cameras.<sup>9</sup> In what should probably be considered the definitive source, a German filmography of Leni Riefenstahl actually lists the names of the eighteen cameramen involved in the filming.<sup>10</sup> The confusion is most likely caused by a number of newsreel cameramen who were supplied on a supplemental basis during the filming.

At this point, it is necessary to remark on the source of most primary material used for references on *Triumph of the Will*, the above-mentioned book by Leni Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissens des Reichsparteitagfilms*. A recent and not widely noted development suggests the necessity of a reexamination of this book as a primary source. In an interview appearing in the August, 1972, issue of *Filmkritik*, a West German film journal, Riefenstahl

<sup>5</sup> "This Future Is Entirely Ours—The Sound and Picture Outline for Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*," *Film Comment*, III (Winter, 1965), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 301. In his *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975) Richard Meran Barsam takes the contrary view.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The German Cinema* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Hitchens, "An Interview with a Legend," *Film Comment*, III (Winter, 1965), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Erwin Leiser, *Deutschland Erwache! Propaganda im Film des Dritten Reiches* (Hamburg, Germany: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1968), p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> "Filmografie," *Filmkritik* (August, 1972), p. 438.

is asked about her book. She interjects that it is not a book, but a brochure or an expanded program of the film. She then makes what seems to be a hitherto unreported statement: "I did not write a word of it . . ." <sup>11</sup> Later, she also reveals that the main reason the book was written was because there were eighteen cameramen involved in the filming of *Triumph of the Will*, and her inability to remember the names of but three or four of them convinced her of the need for a program that would recognize all involved. Since she didn't have the time to do the writing personally, she delegated the task to Ernst Jäger, the chief editor of *Filmkurier*. Jäger then provided the text and selected the pictures.

## 2

Writing in the Spring, 1973, issue of *Film Culture*, Ken Kelman states: "*Triumph of the Will* is structured straightforwardly enough, in the most literal documentary narrative tradition, events proceeding according to strict chronological order, starting with Hitler's arrival in Nuremberg, continuing through processions, rallies, and speeches in the order they happened, and ending with the Führer's final address." <sup>12</sup> By breaking the film down into its logical component sequences and then comparing these sequences to the actual chronological agenda of the 1934 rally, this statement and the assumptions that go along with it can be proved incorrect.

*Triumph of the Will* can be broken down into thirteen sequences, with each sequence involving at least one particular event of the rally. This breakdown of sequences is not an arbitrary one; it is the manner in which the film divides itself, with the transition between sequences being clearly indicated, in most cases, by the normal cinematic devices of fades or dissolves.

By using source material available on the Nuremberg rallies, it is possible to compare the construction of the film's events with their exact chronological order during the rally. The table (p. 56) shows the relationship of sequence to chronology. A chronological program of the 1934 rally is given at the conclusion of this article. <sup>13</sup>

The table immediately reveals that *Triumph of the Will* is not "in the most literal documentary narrative tradition" and in fact, almost totally disregards chronological order in its structure. The thirteen individual sequences are as follows:

### I. Hitler's Arrival

Hitler, accompanied by Goebbels, arrives at the Nuremberg airport

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<sup>11</sup> Herman Weigel, "Interview mit Leni Riefenstahl," *Filmkritik* (August, 1972), p. 400.

<sup>12</sup> Ken Kelman, "Propaganda as Vision—*Triumph of the Will*," *Film Culture* (Spring, 1973), p. 163.

<sup>13</sup> Burden, *op. cit.*, provides this information on various pages. The outline program offered here is the author's own summary of this data, in part based on *New York Times* reports which reflected changes in the official agenda, reprinted on pp. 175-176.

where he is enthusiastically received by a waiting crowd. Motorcade into the city, and arrival at the Hotel Deutscher Hof.

## II. Hitler's Serenade

On the evening of Hitler's arrival in Nuremberg, crowds assemble outside his hotel in hopes of seeing their Führer. A military band plays marches outside Hitler's window, and torches are held.

## III. The City Awakening

An attempt to conjure the mood of a city in the morning. Scenes include the open morning shower in the tent city and the preparation of breakfast.

The actual date of this sequence cannot be conclusively determined. It is possible that it was shot all on one day, or on several days. However, since much of the sequence involves members of the Hitler Youth and their activities at the tent city, it can be concluded that the sequence was filmed no earlier than September 7, 1934, since the Hitler Youth contingent (numbering 30,000) did not arrive in Nuremberg until that day. A look at the chronological program would suggest that the most probable date was September 8, and that the Hitler Youth were filmed early in the morning as they prepared for their rally, which forms Sequence VIII.

## IV. The Folk Parade

A folk parade with native costumes, inspection of flag-bearers by Hitler, and an exit by Hitler and other Nazi leaders in chauffeured limousines. Besides Hitler, those shown are Hess, Lutze, Goebbels, and Baldur von Schirach, the Hitler Youth leader. A close analysis of the crowds and the locations of each of the shots of the departing limousines leads the author to believe that the shots of Hess and the others departing were not taken at the same time or place, but were simply edited into this sequence, evidencing temporal discontinuity even within a sequence.

## V. Opening of the Party Congress

Opening remarks by Rudolf Hess, and speech excerpts of other Nazi leaders.

This sequence is particularly revealing. Following the opening remarks by Rudolf Hess and the reading of Hitler's proclamation by Adolf Wagner, Gauleiter of Bavaria, there is a series of brief excerpts from speeches given by other party leaders, with their names appearing written on the screen before their images are introduced. The appearance is that all were speaking from the same podium at the same event, following the remarks by Hess and Wagner, but in actuality this was not the case. It is instead a collection of brief excerpts taken from speeches made on five different days at three different locations.<sup>14</sup> The order in which these speakers appear, and the

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<sup>14</sup> In his book, *Film in the Third Reich*, David Stewart Hull suggests that one of the purposes of *Triumph of the Will* was to introduce the new leaders of the country to

actual date and location of their remarks, is as follows:

1. Alfred Rosenberg—September 5, afternoon, Apollo Theater.
2. Otto Dietrich—September 4, Kulturvereinhaus.
3. Dr. Fritz Todt, Inspector General for Roads—September 7, Luitpold Hall.
4. Fritz Reinhardt—date unknown.
5. Walther Darre, Minister of Agriculture—September 7, Luitpold Hall.
6. Julius Streicher (along with Hess and Wagner)—September 5, Luitpold Hall.
7. Robert Ley—September 6, Luitpold Hall.
8. Hans Frank, Minister of Justice—date unknown.
9. Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda—September 6, Luitpold Hall.
10. Konstantin Hierl, Chief of the Labor Corps—September 8, Kulturvereinhaus.

#### VI. The Labor Corps

A flag ceremony in memory of the dead of World War I, and Hitler's speech to the Labor Corps, which is making its first appearance at a Nazi rally.

#### VII. Lutze Addresses the S.A.

#### VIII. The Hitler Youth

Introduced by the leader of the Hitler Youth, Baldur von Schirach, Hitler addresses a large open-air rally of the Hitler Youth.

#### IX. Review of the Army

Hitler and Göring review military maneuvers. This sequence foreshadows the short film Riefenstahl made at the following party rally of 1935, *Tag der Freiheit (Day of Freedom)*, which has only recently been rediscovered after its disappearance at the end of World War II.

#### X. The Evening Rally

Includes the approach of the spotlight flags (described by Albert Speer in his memoirs, *Inside the Third Reich*<sup>15</sup>) and an address by Hitler.

#### XI. Hitler and the S.A.

This sequence contains four important events. The first is the wreath ceremony, with Hitler, Himmler, and Lutze participating in a ceremony which, in previous rallies, had included only Hitler and Röhm. The second is the advance of the flags, followed by Hitler's speech. The final event is the consecration of the flags, which Hitler performs by pressing the Nazi "blood flag" (the flag carried in Hitler's abortive Beer Hall Putsch) against

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a pre-television society. This would seem to be a valid explanation for the treatment of this sequence.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), pp. 58-59.



other flags. The tone of this ceremony is very solemn, since it has become one of the rituals of the Nazi "religion."

It is this sequence that was described earlier, with the observation made by William Shirer.

## XII. The Parade

Hitler reviews a parade, in one of the longest and probably least important sequences of the film. The length of the parade, lasting more than five hours, is as tedious in the film as it must have been at the time. The real importance of the sequence is in the fact that it is the only event in the film that so emphatically presents all factions of the party (S.A., S.S., Labor Corps) demonstrating their loyalty to Hitler, particularly important at this moment in history.

## XIII. The Rally Closing

The entry of the party standards and Hitler's closing speech.

If actual documentary chronology was not Riefenstahl's guide, then what were her motivating guidelines in constructing the film? Her own remarks, made in an interview with Michel Delahaye which appeared in *Cahiers du Cinema*, provide the best answer:

If you ask me today what is most important in a documentary film, what makes one see and feel, I believe I can say that there are two things. The first is the skeleton, the construction, briefly: the architecture. The architecture should have a very exact form . . . The second is the sense of rhythm . . . In *Triumph of the Will*, for example, I wanted to bring certain elements into the foreground and put others into the background. If all things are at the same level (because one has not known how to establish a hierarchy or chronology of forms) the film is doomed to failure from the start. There must be movement. Controlled movement of successive highlight and retreat, in both the architecture of the things filmed and in that of the film.<sup>16</sup>

And in further discussing her work on *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*, Riefenstahl gets more specific:

I made everything work together in the rhythm. . . . I was able to establish that with the same material, edited differently, the film wouldn't have worked at all. If the slightest thing were changed, inverted, the effect would be lost. . . . There is first of all the plan (which is somehow the abstract, the precis of the construction); the rest is the melody. There are valleys, there are peaks. Some things have to be sunk down, some have to soar.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Delahaye, "Leni and the Wolf: Interview with Leni Riefenstahl," *Cahiers du Cinema in English*, No. 5, pp. 51-52.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

The key to the film is a deliberately conceived sense of rhythm, which Riefenstahl achieves through editing. The chronological study shows that the actual order of events was of little significance to Riefenstahl; they were pieced together in the film in a plan much more elaborately conceived than a mere progression of events. The concept of highlight and retreat, peaks and valleys, can be applied perfectly to *Triumph of the Will*. The film both begins and ends with peaks, sequences of pronounced emotional excitement; "highlights and retreats" can be observed throughout the film. Though the distinctions were deliberate, identifying them can only be subjective.

The first and last sequences can be paralleled in several different ways, all of which provide a sense of unity to the film. Because of the editing employed, the subject matter, and the complete domination of both sequences by Hitler, they are the strongest emotional and visual sequences of the film, forming the twin peaks of the film. Both sequences strike a strong mystical note: the descent of Hitler from the clouds in the first and the S.A. marching against a background of clouds in the last suggest a super-worldly aura. Between these twin peaks, the clouds become the unifying factor. The first sequence looks from the clouds at the earth, while the last sequence looks from the earth to the clouds. The film has thus gone full circle.

#### RELATIONSHIP OF FILM SEQUENCE TO RALLY CHRONOLOGY

<i>Sequence Number</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Actual Date of Event</i>
I.	Hitler's arrival	September 4—afternoon
II.	Hitler's serenade	September 4—evening
III.	City awakening	September 7 or later
IV.	Folk parade	Date unknown
V.	Congress opening	September 5—morning (also: Sept. 4, 5 (afternoon), 6, 7, and 8)
VI.	The Labor Corps rally	September 6—morning
VII.	Lutze addresses the S.A.	Date unknown
VIII.	Hitler Youth rally	September 8—afternoon
IX.	Review of the army	September 10—afternoon
X.	Evening rally	September 7—evening
XI.	Hitler addresses the S.A.	September 9—morning
XII.	The parade	September 9—late morning
XIII.	The closing rally	September 10—exact time unknown, either in the morning or early evening

#### PROGRAM FOR THE PARTY RALLY OF 1934

**Tuesday, September 4 (The Day of Welcome).**

Reception for the international press in the Germanic museum. Speaker: Hanfstaengl.

Press reception in the Kulturvereinhaus. Speaker: Dietrich.

Afternoon:

Arrival of Hitler by plane from Berchtesgaden.

Reception for Hitler at the Town Hall. Speakers: Liebel, Hitler.

**Wednesday, September 5 (The Day of the Opening of the Congress).**

Morning:

Congress meeting in the Luitpold Hall. Speakers: Hess, Wagner, Streicher. Reading of Hitler's proclamation.

Afternoon:

Meeting on cultural problems in the Apollo Theater. Speakers: Rosenberg, Hitler.

**Thursday, September 6 (The Day of the Labor Corps).**

Morning:

Review of the Labor Corps on the Zeppelinwiese. Speakers: Hierl, Hitler.

Noon:

Labor Corps marches into Nuremberg.

Afternoon:

Congress meeting in the Luitpold Hall. Speakers: Ley, Goebbels, Wagner.

**Friday, September 7 (The Day of the Political Organizations).**

Morning and daytime:

Arrival of 30,000 members of the Hitler Youth.

Congress meeting in the Luitpold Hall. Speakers: Darre, Todt.

Meeting of the Association for Aid to War Victims (NSKOV) at the Kulturvereinhaus. Speaker: Oberlindober.

Evening:

Review of the political organizations on the Zeppelinwiese. Speakers: Hitler, Ley.

**Saturday, September 8 (The Day of the Hitler Youth).**

Morning:

Meeting of the Women's Association in the Luitpold Hall. Speaker: Hitler.

Meeting of the Labor Corps leaders in the Kulturvereinhaus. Speaker: Hierl.

Afternoon:

Review of the Hitler Youth in the Youth Stadium. Speakers: von Schirach, Hitler.

**Sunday, September 9 (The Day of the S.A. and the S.S.).**

Morning:

Review of the S.A. and the S.S. in the Luitpold Arena. Speakers: Hitler, Lutze.

11:00 a.m.:

Start of the parade.

**Monday, September 10 (The Day of the Army).**

Review of the army. Congress meeting in the Luitpold Hall. Speaker: Hitler.