



## Triumph of the Will: A memorial in film

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### ABSTRACT

Despite Hitler's efforts to transform Berlin into Germania, the capital of the new world he envisioned and which he believed would bear comparison with Ancient Egypt, Babylon, and Rome, there is little in the way of monumental architecture to bear witness to that ambition. Though there is only limited public evidence of Hitler's architectural hubris present either in stone or steel, the same cannot be said of film. Leni Riefenstahl's masterpiece *Triumph of the Will* (1935) (German: *Triumph des Willens*) is the most famous propaganda film of all time and a staple of university film schools and secondary schools across the world. At the time of its creation, celluloid motion picture film was a relatively new technology and the documentary format a nascent art form. Nevertheless, it was lauded almost immediately as a visually stunning imagining of the new regime and its leader. Though the film maker was subsequently reviled for her Nazi associations, as an art work her film has retained an almost miasmic aura that justifies continued re-assessment of its standing as a monument to the Nazi regime and the horrors perpetrated in its name.

### KEYWORDS

Authenticity, Documentary film, German history, Realism, Leni Riefenstahl, Nazi Germany, Propaganda.

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## Introduction

Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and later Minister of Armaments and War Production, saw in the preparations for the now notorious Nuremberg rallies a hint of what lay in store for Nazi Germany. When he was driven past the site, the Nuremberg street-cart depot had only just been demolished to make way for redevelopment. Already, however, the iron re-enforcements protruding from the concrete were starting to rust. Speer later claimed to have had a premonition that for all its hubris, National Socialism and the monumental buildings designed to celebrate it would also be subject to the degradation of time. Sadly, he drew architectural rather than political inspiration. From this insight he championed an approach to architecture that he characterised as 'the theory of Ruin Value' (German: Ruinenwerttheorie). Speer (1971) argued that by using "special materials and by applying certain principles of statics" it was possible "to build structures which even in a state of decay after hundreds or thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models" (p. 97). This was consistent with Hitler's understanding of the role of architecture in promoting a national consciousness:

Hitler liked to say that the purpose of his building was to transmit his time and its spirit to posterity. Ultimately, all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture, he remarked. What then remained of the emperors of the Roman Empire? What would still give evidence of them today, if not their buildings ... Our buildings must also speak to the conscience of future generations of Germans. (Speer, 1971, pp. 96-97)

The now crumbling remains of the Nuremberg complex still transmit Hitler's time and spirit but not in the manner he intended. Instead, the ruins are "tangible proof" of a "poisoned heritage" and a "collective place of memory for the Germans as a nation" (Manka, 2008, p. 115). It is not the only structure in Germany that engages with this heritage, with numerous counter memorials and monuments being constructed from the 1980s onwards, with Berlin's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (2005) being the most aesthetically remarkable example. At least one critic dismissed it as being little more than "a symbol of a symbol" (Brody, 2012, para. 10), while the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder saw its use of abstraction as a barrier to understanding. He noted that despite the horrors that it commemorates, it is a "memorial which one enjoys visiting" (Mueller, 2010). Robert Musil went even further when he argued that there is "nothing in the world as invisible as a monument" (Almeida, 2014, p. 28). The tendency of traditional memorials to "seal memory off from awareness" (Trainin, 1944, in Silberman & Vatan, 2013, p. 4) has seen the designers of counter monuments such as the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* privileging "voids, absence, invisibility, or vanishing monuments as a way to suggest loss, challenge the monumental taste of authoritarian regimes and keep the work of memory alive" (Silberman & Vatan, 2013, p. 4).

Yet in the case of the Nuremberg rallies, its monument still exists in its original form, exactly as it was conceived by the Nazis. This article will explore the documentary film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) (German: *Triumph des Willens*) and position it in both conception and execution as a deliberate attempt by its director, Leni Riefenstahl and her patron Adolf Hitler, to create a monument to Nazi Germany using a new medium accessible to millions. Unlike other monuments of the period, the film has not subsequently been destroyed by foreign occupation or rendered irrelevant by the passage of time. It remains the most famous propaganda film of all time and a staple of university film schools and secondary schools across the world. On its release, it was lauded almost immediately as a visually stunning imagining of the new regime and its leader. Though the film maker was subsequently reviled as a Nazi, as an art work the film has retained an almost miasmatic aura that justifies continued re-assessment as a monument to the regime and the horrors perpetrated in its name.

## Leni Riefenstahl – Hitler’s filmmaker

Born in Berlin in 1904, Leni Riefenstahl’s childhood love of the arts ran counter to her father’s hopes for a more dignified career. Nevertheless, she dreamt of becoming a famous dancer, and in fact achieved moderate success by performing in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland. A series of injuries and an operation on her knee saw her focus shift from the stage to film. During her recovery she began performing in films, beginning with her first role as a dancer in the 1925 film *Ways to Strength and Beauty* (Kaufmann & Prager, 1925) (German: *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*). Riefenstahl went on to act in nine films, six of them directed by Arnold Fanck, owing much of her initial success to the German film genre of Mountain Films (German: *Bergfilme*). These films, much like the American Westerns, pitted man or woman against nature. In Riefenstahl’s case, she was usually cast as a young, athletic heroine, trapped in the frozen reaches of the Alps. The genre appealed to German audiences for its nationalistic sentiments and romantic idealisation of the solitary hero, ideas that Riefenstahl would later employ for Hitler (Bach, 2008). Though they probably appeared apolitical to audiences at the time, Susan Sontag (1975) dismissed the films directed by Fanck and starring Riefenstahl as “pop-Wagnerian vehicles”, further noting that the film theorist Siegfried Kracauer considered them an “anthology of proto-Nazi sentiments” (para. 5).

Filmmaking during the 1920s was ripe for technological innovation. The first complete sound films were not seen by cinema audiences until 1928, and then only in the United States. The first all-talking German language films were not produced until 1930. This was a period marked by advances in film technology and filmmaking practice, and like many other performers of the time, Riefenstahl was nervous about her future. She pursued some voice training but her Berlin accent and her pitch “irritated many of the movie going public, who felt these qualities didn’t belong to the world of Mountain Film or to the image of the mythical female that audiences had assigned to the young actress” (Trimborn & McCown, 2008, p. 33). Riefenstahl still possessed an appetite for professional success however, and continued her career in film, but as a director. Her first feature film *The Blue Light* (1932) (German: *Das Blaue Licht*) saw her immersed in the same new technology which had ended her aspiration for acting success only the previous year. *The Blue Light* was one of Germany’s early sound films and one of the first to be filmed entirely on location as opposed to a studio, which was a much more difficult undertaking. It is a fictional story loosely based on a Brothers Grimm fairy tale of the same name published in 1810. Despite meticulous planning, Riefenstahl was unable to attract financing so self-funded the project and starred as its female lead. The film divided critics in Germany, even though Hitler reportedly adored it, calling it “the finest thing I have ever seen on film” (Knopp, 2003, p. 112). It was critically acclaimed internationally with several American publications, including the *New York Times*, remarking on its pictorial beauty and remarkable camerawork (Bach, 2008).

In the same year *The Blue Light* was released, Riefenstahl attended a Nazi Party rally “on the spur of the moment” (Riefenstahl, 1995, p. 101). Her claim to being apolitical, “that no one would ever believe”, would come to define her long post-war life (Kennicott, 2005, para. 3). Riefenstahl’s recall of the event is interesting: “I had an almost apocalyptic vision that I was never able to forget. It seemed as if the Earth’s surface were spreading out in front of me, like a hemisphere that suddenly splits apart in the middle, spewing out an enormous jet of water, so powerful that it touched the sky and shook the earth” (Brockmann, 2010, p. 153). She wrote to Hitler who responded almost immediately and the two met for the first time in May 1932 in a private audience. Until that point, Riefenstahl had never made a documentary film. She had, in fact, only directed one feature film. Francine Prose (2018) suggests that despite Riefenstahl’s claims of the profound effect of Hitler’s speeches, she was driven by “neither fascist ideology nor German nationalism, but an almost demonic personal and professional ambition” (p. 40). The German documentary film, *Hitler’s Frauen* (2001), suggests a more symbiotic relationship between the pair, noting that after Hitler became Chancellor “Leni sought proximity to Hitler and he to her. It was the beginning of a fateful friendship” (Brauburger et al., 2001). Riefenstahl’s background to this point marks her as a creative talent, but she was far from being a natural choice as the Third

Reich's premier documentary film maker. It was her experience on stage and in film presenting fictional narratives, her eye for innovation, and her connection with Hitler that would see her become one of the most notorious filmmakers in history.

## Nuremberg and the Rallies

The city of Nuremberg in the German state of Bavaria has become synonymous with the 1935 laws that institutionalised Nazi racial theories. The Nuremberg Laws were a defining moment in history, one memorably characterised by Richard Heideman (2017) as "the embodiment of state-sponsored, sanctioned and enforced hate" (p. 5). The religious discrimination, economic boycotts, and persecution of Jews that it enshrined in law were a significant step in a process that culminated in the Holocaust. The fact that thirteen war crimes trials were held in the city between 1945 and 1949 only adds to the perception, flawed though it is, that the Holocaust both began and ended in the city. As if these historical bookends were not enough to see the city forever identified with National Socialism, in 1927 and 1929 and then annually from 1933 through to 1938, it was also the site of the Reich Party Conventions (German: Reichsparteitag). To the world at large, though, they are demonised as the Nuremberg Rallies.

The crumbling physical remains of the site where the rallies were held are now part of a broader ethical and aesthetic discussion of how to best commemorate trauma and genocide. This is particularly relevant when considering *Triumph of the Will* (1935), for contemporary artists often stress the "collective dimension of memory making [which] invade[s] public and everyday spaces, hand over authorship, involve the audience, and turn viewers into committed participants" (Silberman & Vatan, 2013, p. 5). Though the discussion and planning of what to do with the grounds is a complex process, the remains of the Zeppelinfeld (Nazi party rally grounds) are far less problematic than a documentary film which is easily accessible online to an audience exponentially larger than might ever visit the physical location. In 2019 Nuremberg's governing body decided not to rebuild or restore the grounds, but instead conserve them "in part because they did not want to erase this difficult chapter of the city's history, and in part, because they did not want to be forced to close off large portions of the site" (Katz, 2019, para. 8). The very passivity of the term 'conserve' is an attempt to avoid the issues inherent in the more active process of restoration. Julia Lehner, Nuremberg's chief culture official, is cognisant of the danger of the site becoming a rallying point for extremists. She is adamant that returning the grounds to their pre-war state is not a consideration:

We won't rebuild, we won't restore, but we will conserve ... We want people to be able to move around freely on the site. It is an important witness to an era - it allows us to see how dictatorial regimes stage-manage themselves. That has educational value today. (Katz, 2019, para. 10)

Though it is the best remembered documentary film to emerge from the Nuremberg rallies, *Triumph of the Will* (1935) was not the first; it was preceded by three others. The first, *A Symphony of the Will to Fight* (Lippert, 1927) (German: Eine Symphonie des Kampfwillens), a twenty-minute silent film, was shot during the Nazi Party's third annual congress, ominously titled the Day of Awakening. It was filmed shortly after the establishment of the Nazi Party film office but in ambition and quality was far removed from later efforts. Riefenstahl's first attempt was the hour long *The Victory of Faith* (1933) (German: Der Sieg des Glaubens) which though possessing considerable artistic merit, was ordered destroyed by Hitler. This was due to his image being captured alongside Ernst Röhm, the leader of the Nazi paramilitary wing the Storm Detachment (German: Sturmabteilung), or SA, whose murder he had ordered during the Night of the Long Knives on June 30, 1934. In addition, both Hitler and Riefenstahl looked far too mortal for political and cinematic comfort (Saunders, 2016, p. 29). However, a copy did survive, turning up in East Germany in the 1980s. When viewed side by side it is clear that *Triumph of the Will* follows a similar structure to its predecessor. The camera angles and editing that made Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* a ground-breaking film are already demonstrated in *The Victory*

of *Faith*. Riefenstahl (quoted in Saunders, 2016) later dismissed her first effort as “some exposed film stock.” The response at the time was far more complimentary; it was “warmly greeted by the party and many commentators, who waxed enthusiastic about the access to the experience of the Nuremberg rally and to Hitler himself.” The implication that the film allowed the viewer to see more than any individual spectator, Hitler included, was particularly appealing to the Nazis “because the Nuremberg rallies constituted for them the apex of the party’s self-understanding and self-representation” (Brockmann, 2010, p. 155). This sense of access to the truth of the event struck at the core of Fascism’s aestheticisation of politics:

Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life ... Mankind, which in Homer’s time was a spectacle for the Olympian gods, has become one for itself. (Benjamin, 1969, [1935], p. 19)

The viewers, “soaring with Riefenstahl’s camera” enjoyed the illusion that they possessed an “almost superhuman gaze” (Schulte\_Sasse, 1996, p. 293; Brockmann, 2010, p. 155) and were able to view themselves. Despite her attempts to belittle the film, which must be considered in the light of her post-war attempts to rehabilitate her image, the film does exhibit key elements of her aesthetic, but it was not this early effort that led *The Economist* to anoint Riefenstahl “the greatest female filmmaker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (“Hand-held history,” 2003, para. 1).

## Cinema Verité

Many decades after making the film, Riefenstahl claimed that *Triumph of the Will* was cinema verité (French: literally ‘truth cinema’, though it was not a term used at the time) and denied any political intentions or propagandist influence. However, it is clear the three-day congress and the film were planned simultaneously (Hoberman, 2016). Indeed, the film was more important to the Nazi party than the congress itself and certainly more significant historically. Hitler and his minister for propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, saw in Riefenstahl the opportunity to create an operatic image of an omnipotent Germany imbued with an order and beauty that matched their own vision (MoMA, 2021). Riefenstahl was given unprecedented facilities and generous state funding to realise her vision: at least one-hundred and seventy people were directly involved in the filming including eighteen film cinematographers and sixteen assistants with thirty cameras, sixteen newsreel camera operators, four sound trucks and twenty-two chauffeur-driven cars. She was able to work with the Nazi party to choreograph the congress so that the event was optimised for her cameras before any other consideration (Sennett, 2014). She was even allowed to construct elaborate bridges, towers, and tracks for her cameras in order to achieve the best angles and the smoothest and most intricate movements available at the time (MoMA, 2021). In total, she shot sixty-one hours of film, which was cut down to just under two hours during five months of intensive editing (Sennett, 2014). The film won the Gold Medal at the Venice Film Festival in 1935 and the Grand Prix at the Paris Film Festival two years later. These awards from the European artistic community were something Riefenstahl would later cite as evidence that her film was art and not propaganda (Sennett, 2014).

Despite Riefenstahl’s claims of truthfulness, “the film achieved a radical transformation of reality during which an historical event was transformed into a film set and presented as an “authentic documentary” (Sontag, 1975, para. 14). Indeed, when discussing *The Victory of Faith* in 1933, she made it clear that it was “artistic structuring”, not newsreel reportage that shaped her vision: “My job in Nuremberg was to collect, from the huge number of powerful occurrences, the best possible filmic effects: to choose from the masses in the audience, the marching SA, and from the course of the imposing events the ones appropriate for the camera” (“Imposante



Wochenschauberichte”, 1933, in Brockmann, 2010, p. 156). Riefenstahl called this the ‘experience of Nuremberg’, as the opening scenes of *Triumph of the Will* attest. In its opening moments, Hitler descends from the clouds in an aircraft like a god from Greek mythology:

Hitler’s plane casts a shadow over the medieval city indicating that Germany has now been released from the torment of the post-Versailles years. Hitler’s plane literally as well as metaphorically carries the Nazi message that Germany is “awakening” to carry out its historic mission. The symbolism could hardly be more explicit. Hitler descends from the skies like a god attending a festival in his honour. (Sennett, 2014, p. 51)

At first, the viewer does not see Hitler, for the camera is positioned in such a way that they see through Hitler’s eyes and witness “the sheer subjugation of will as untold thousands relinquish minds and individuality to a single, mesmerizing fanatic” (Salkeld, 1996, p. 140). Riefenstahl eschews the explicit imagery employed in many documentary films and newsreels of the time. Instead, she conflates the images of the eagle, the swastika and finally the Fuhrer to communicate a single, unified emblematic statement of the new Germany. Hitler then greets his near hysterical followers as he rides past them, high in an open-top car, waving and giving the Nazi salute. Thematically there are clear links with her films in which the mountain is simultaneously represented as “both supremely beautiful and dangerous, that majestic force which invites the ultimate affirmation of and escape from the self—into the brotherhood of courage and into death” (Sontag, 1975, para. 6). For much of the film, Hitler is presented as just such a majestic force; depicted in isolation with his stature enhanced through low-angle shots (Figure 1). In contrast, his followers are filmed from above, emphasising their smallness. He is juxtaposed with the symmetry of a unified military (Figure 2); he walks through them as if he has “parted them with the magical presence of his body and his will” (Brockmann, 2010, p. 159).



Figure 1. This screen-grab from Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) shows Adolf Hitler portrayed as a towering, God-like figure through Riefenstahl’s very low-angle composition.

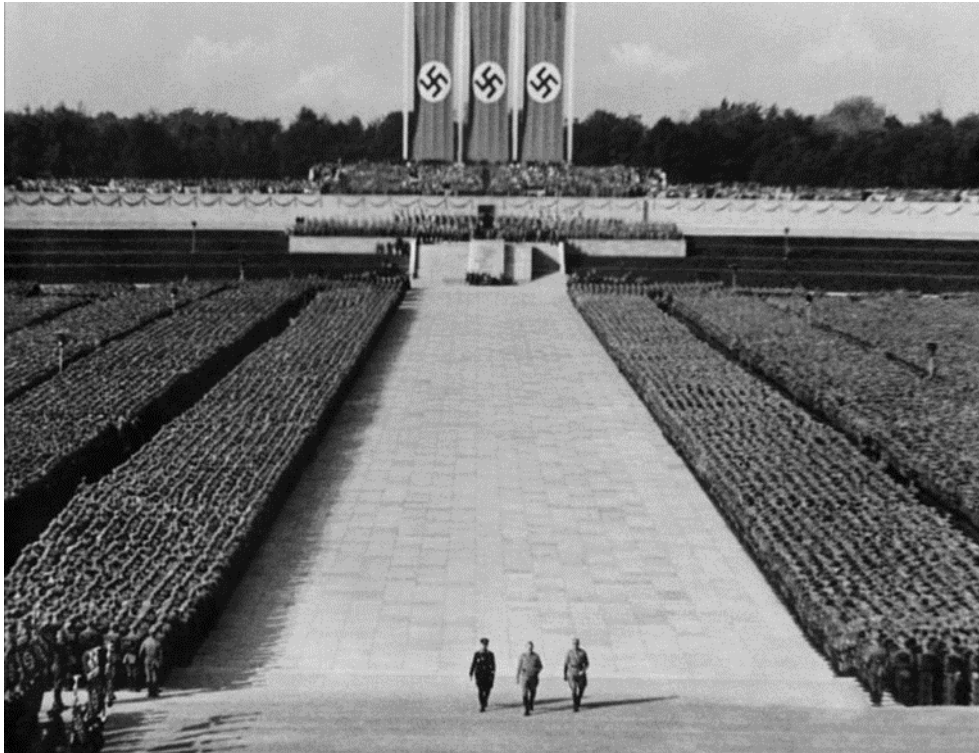


Figure 2. This screen-grab from Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) shows Adolf Hitler alongside Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, and Viktor Lutz, the new head of the SA. They walk past a uniform body of over 108,000 faceless troops.



Figure 3. This behind-the-scenes photograph of Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) shows camera-crews and large lighting fixtures built into the structural design of the rally grounds and buildings by architect Albert Speer at the 1934 Nuremberg Nazi Party Congress (*Nuremberg Rally*, 1934).

This cinematographic language was enabled through the efforts of Albert Speer, who designed spaces for Riefenstahl's cameras (Figure 3) so she could achieve her dramatic low-angle shots, overhead angles and strategic dolly shots (Hoberman, 2016). She regularly made use of symmetry, scale, low-angles, suspense and mystery to aggrandize her subjects (Cousins, 2011, p. 154). Nothing, it would seem, was left to chance, for the rally itself was staged for the film first and the theatre of the event second. Indeed, when footage of some of the party's leaders at the speaker's rostrum was spoiled, the shots were then refilmed weeks later. Rosenberg, Hess, and Frank re-pledged their fealty to the Führer, without Hitler and without an audience, on a studio-set built by Speer to match the rally grounds. Speer's collaboration with Riefenstahl reached its apogee in the Cathedral of Light (Figure 4). Speer placed one-hundred and fifty-two anti-aircraft searchlights at intervals of twelve metres, aimed skyward to create a series of vertical bars surrounding the crowd. Although the lights were originally planned as a temporary solution to the incomplete rally grounds, they continued to be used at subsequent Nazi party rallies. The searchlights were borrowed from the Luftwaffe and represented most of Germany's strategic reserve. Hermann Göring, the Luftwaffe commander, opposed their use but Hitler overruled him suggesting that their inclusion in the film was a valuable piece of disinformation. Hitler purportedly said to Göring "if we use them in such large numbers for a thing like this, other countries will think we're swimming in searchlights" (Speer, 1970). Though Speer had been earmarked to rebuild Berlin as the capital of a world empire, it would be the ephemeral cathedral of light which is widely considered to be among his most important works; certainly, it is the most enduring.



Figure 4. The Cathedral of Light designed by architect Albert Speer and captured in dramatic fashion by Leni Riefenstahl as shown in this screen grab from *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

The Cathedral of Light shows Hitler and, by extension, Riefenstahl's ambitions for the film; a piece of powerful propaganda aimed not at the German nation itself but at the outside world. It is high-budget cinema, a monument in film, masquerading as a documentary newsreel. The exactitude presented in the film was achieved through rehearsals, expert editing and post-production sound dubbing (mixing sound from one location with vision from another). These were all techniques Riefenstahl perfected during her time as an actress and director of mountain films. Indeed, Riefenstahl went on to refine her filmmaking and explore these themes further, and with astounding results in *Olympia* (1938) which documented the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The



same techniques and themes are evident in her photographic books such as *The Last of the Nuba* (Riefenstahl, 1976), where she focuses her lens on the celebration of the athletic human body much as she did for *Olympia* (1938).

For all Riefenstahl's talent *Triumph of the Will* (1935) is hardly subtle. Scene after scene hammers home her central themes through shots of rallies, speeches by Hitler and other key Nazi Party leaders, masses of workers and soldiers standing to attention or marching past Hitler, and crowds of adoring Germans, all of them staged for the camera. Riefenstahl made crowds appear bigger, spaces seem vaster and more complex, and time itself feel alternately elongated or compressed. Extreme low-angle shots (where the camera is set low on the ground looking up) of Hitler delivering his histrionic speeches position him as master of a world of impeccably ordered subjects (MoMA, 2021). The geometrical shapes of the marching Nazis, their flags, their Swastikas, their iconography, show the nation as a single unit, with one agreed purpose: the rebuilding of Germany as a great power (Sennett, 2014). Political considerations aside, the genius of Riefenstahl is her combination of narrative, documentary, and expressionist techniques in this film. It is likely Riefenstahl understood, epistemologically, that cinematic reality is in fact a construction designed by the director (Williams, 2011). Her understanding of the contested format of documentary film and the nature of the tension between fiction and 'truth' is at odds with her claim to being apolitical. Renov (1993) characterises this dilemma as a question: "is the referent a piece of the world, drawn from the domain of lived experience, or, instead, do the people and objects placed before the camera yield to the demands of creative vision" (p. 2). As is implied in this observation, what constitutes the control of those in front of the camera by the filmmakers? It is a straightforward task to prove Riefenstahl's control of the objects and subjects within her frames but what documentary filmmaker can claim not to have 'controlled' those elements in front of their lens so as to better articulate the story they want to portray? Riefenstahl's aim was not to state the objective facts of the rally. Hitler's Germany was operatic. Riefenstahl used dramatic techniques to capture that opera.

The concern about the blurred distinction between narrative-cinema and documentary was not one shared by early documentary makers. Riefenstahl's approach was the norm rather than the exception in the period during which she worked for the Nazis. Indeed, *Triumph of the Will* was made less than thirty years after the earliest example of narrative filmmaking (Beattie & Maddock, 2016), and only twenty years after the earliest example of montage editing as theorised by Lev Kuleshov (juxtaposing shots occurring at different times in reality but making them appear as if they are happening at either the same time or shortly following one another) (Cook, 2016). Nevertheless, the filmic, or photographic representation is itself not the real object and is therefore an interpretation of the reality. The framework of ethical principles for documentary filmmaking created by the Center for Media and Social Impact at the American University highlights how differently documentary film is viewed in a modern context. The documentary maker, in their view, should create work that is a reflection of what they understand to be true and real, but which would withstand critical scrutiny if they told their viewers where and how they got their images (Aufderheide et al., 2009). Such a requirement demands that the documentary maker and the viewer should agree that the same thing occurred in spite of the fact that the former was present at the real event and the latter only experiences a mediated version of it. How far the documentary maker is prepared to go in this mediation is a complex issue. Jill Godmilow (1999) an American documentary filmmaker, takes one extreme, suggesting that eschewing emotive filmmaking for a strategy of "under-representation and Brechtian reconstruction" leads to a raw truth, "cold facts and hard reality." In contrast, Werner Herzog (2021) suggested the 'fly-on-the-wall' approach should be discarded in favour of shaping the "ecstatic truth to tell a beautiful and brilliant story." Riefenstahl's own claim of cinema vérité (a fly-on-the-wall style of 'capturing' an event rather than orchestrating it) should nevertheless be treated with caution, if not outright contempt. In an interview she gave to Cahiers du Cinéma in September 1965 she denied that any of her work was propaganda. "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" (Riefenstahl quoted in Sontag, 1975, para. 16). This claim does not survive even the most rudimentary scrutiny.

## Conclusion: Riefenstahl's legacy

Though the Thousand Year Reich lasted only twelve years, Riefenstahl's film which sought to monumentalise it, has retained its reputation as a landmark moment in cinematic history. Thirty years after Germany's defeat, Susan Sontag (1975) opined that the film would eventually supersede the event and the reality which occurred on the day, thereby becoming history in itself. The renowned film critic Roger Ebert (2008) considered its reputation separately from its quality when he noted that "it is not a great movie, but it is great in the reputation it has and the shadow it casts" (para. 2). It is regularly referenced in modern cinema, including such noteworthy productions as *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977), *The Lion King* (Allers & Minkoff, 1994), *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Jackson, 2002), and *TRON: Legacy* (Kosinski, 2010). It is regularly shown in museums such as New York's Museum of Modern Art where it was first shown in 1941 after being re-cut by Edward Kerns (Hoberman, 2016). The famous surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel liked MoMA's version so much he claimed to have re-edited it himself suggesting he made a new film which was far better than Riefenstahl's original (Hoberman, 2016). Despite YouTube removing all versions of *Triumph of the Will* from its site in 2016 after reviewing its standards around hate speech citing it under the prohibition of "videos that promote or glorify Nazi ideology, which is inherently discriminatory" (Kohn, 2019, para. 2), it can still be found there today. Apart from the many video essays exploring elements of *Triumph of the Will* on YouTube (alongside a variety of versions), the film is also readily accessible on sites like the Internet Archive (archive.org) and easily purchased in 'Special Edition' from Amazon, remastered in high-definition for Blu-ray.

Historian Nicholas Reeves (2004) suggests the Nazi Party's legacy is also the film's legacy, observing that "many of the most enduring images of the [Nazi] regime and its leader derive from Riefenstahl's film" (p. 107). Portions of the film are shown and re-shown in part in numerous television documentaries about World War Two, Nazi Germany, and Hitler himself. Riefenstahl's film, even if only in part, is still regularly viewed today more than eighty-six years after its creation. Far more than the rally grounds in Nuremburg, this film has achieved an immortality denied the Nazi regime, and even of Riefenstahl herself. She produced little work of note other than during the six-year period beginning with her first film *The Blue Light* in 1932 and ending with her last film *Olympia* in 1938. Nevertheless, the critic John Simon called her "one of the supreme artists of the cinema" (1993) while *Triumph of the Will* was included in Anthology Film Archives' canon of essential cinema (Hoberman, 2016).

*Triumph of the Will* remains one of the most famous propaganda works in history and one of the most pervasive and long-lasting monuments to Nazi Germany and its victims. Statues and monuments to discredited ideologies and defeated regimes are often destroyed by liberators. In many ways the opposite is true of *Triumph of the Will*, which has now proliferated online and is used widely in schools, universities and museums as an educational resource. As Roland Barthes (1981) observed, there is "that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead" (p. 92). The same is perhaps even truer of the documentary, but in the case of Riefenstahl's opus, the dead are present but invisible, for it is the millions of victims of National Socialism that now dominate any viewing. As Linda Deutschmann notes, *Triumph of the Will* is:

unlikely to stimulate political fascism among intelligent modern viewers, if only because the falseness of its prophecy is so well known. The viewer contrasts the powerful, joyous images of the Party with the indelible images of concentration camps and war. It stands as a warning against letting aesthetically pleasing propaganda numb the rational mind. (Deutschmann, 1991, p. 11)

Nevertheless, the film both glorified Nazi pageantry and deified Hitler in a manner that at the time was both innovative and visually eloquent. It earned Riefenstahl a place in film history. It also made her a post-war pariah (Falcon, 2003). Post-war assessments of *Triumph of the Will* and of Riefenstahl's legal and ethical culpability acknowledge that the film is one of the most effective and enduring ideological statements of the entire Nazi era. The thunderous cries of "Ein Volk! Ein Reich! Ein Führer!" (trans. One People! One Empire! One Leader!) have their monument in film and have not been lost to history (Hoberman, 2016, para. 6). As Brockmann (2010) observes, *Triumph of the Will* is still disturbing "not because it is fictional but because, it is, for the most part, real" (p. 165).

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## **About the Author**

Dr Daniel Maddock has a background in internationally award-winning media production and a particular interest in visual and digital literacies and the use of media in pedagogical practice. Daniel is the Australian representative on the editorial panel for the world's first academic journal about cinematography - *Cinematography in Progress*. His PhD thesis on the practice of cinematography was nominated for the Chancellor's Medal for Excellence in PhD Research at Griffith University. Daniel's research focuses on the form of film and creative media and how it is constructed for meaning in addition to and in support of the media's content. Daniel sees visual literacy and linguistic literacy as elements of a whole literacy and therefore advocates for a deeper understanding of non-literary forms of communication and expression. Daniel has also published internationally broadcast and award-winning television drama, internationally award-winning short-films, and nationally broadcast documentaries.

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