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I am Fascinated by What is Beautiful, Strong, Healthy” Leni Riefenstahl, Gender, and Absolved Guilt

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‘I am Fascinated by What is Beautiful, Strong, Healthy’”

Leni Riefenstahl, Gender, and Absolved Guilt

Introduction

The German Nazi movement is often conjured or imagined through a variety of symbols and emblems: The Swastika, being the most notorious, comes to mind first; but this list might include images of marching, soldiers, tanks, uniforms; more subtly, one can add synchronization, militarism, and the normative masculinity that militarism signifies. Fascism is defined and perpetuated by an imagery intended to evoke certain emotions and convey subtle messages—words fail their purpose to relay complicated ideas and instead incite anger purely on mouthfeel, while images, even more dangerously, communicate to their viewer through composition a narrative they may be unwittingly consuming. The fascist ideology is communicated through emotive images—an ideology of sight that construes physical “perfection” into national policies on gender, sex, race, and ability.

This is especially clear in Leni Riefenstahl’s film, *Olympia: Festival of Nations*.¹ While *Triumph of the Will*, her most famous work, is denounced as Nazi propaganda, *Olympia* remains controversial in its doctrine according to some, Riefenstahl has avoided much of the scrutiny others involved with the Nazi Party. That is, after the war, she was tried as a *Mitläufer*, (fellow traveler) a term used to identify sympathizers to the Nazi Party after the war who were otherwise absolved of legal guilt for their involvement during WWII. She is doubly lauded for her innovative work in film, and *Olympia* is still often shown in classrooms, subtly (or overtly) divorcing the artist’s politics from their works. Though Riefenstahl’s affiliation with the Nazi

¹ *Olympia* was divided into two parts: *Festival of Nations* (Part 1) and *Festival of Beauty* (Part 2). While *Festival of Beauty* is related to this topic, the focus of this essay will be on *Festival of Nations*, which will be simply referred to as *Olympia*.

Party remains somewhat unclear—during her life after the war, she adamantly insisted she was no true Nazi, but rather a misunderstood artist—her work speaks more clearly of her involvement in the fascist movement than she ever could. *Olympia* (a three-and-a-half-hour art documentary about the 1936 Berlin Olympics), has, for some, the “ability” to define her as a sympathetic artist rather than a culpable propagandist. These perspectives have caused many to see Riefenstahl as an artist circumstantially in the Nazi Regime rather than as a perpetrator, and to ignore the enormous, long-lasting damage her work has caused through the perpetuation of Nazi ideology through her filmic images. Riefenstahl employs ideology through image in a pattern known as the fascist aesthetic. The aesthetic is dependent on the visual connection between bodies and political ideology, as a reflection of “the social characteristics of the society in which they are embedded” (Weber and Black 62). Likewise, “the portrayal of the body as ideologically neutral is in itself a political construction” (62). Moreover, the Nazis used bodies as politically charged entities in order to further their policies of physical ability, uniformity, and genocide. The consensus, however, does not always include Riefenstahl as a perpetrator through her use of the fascist aesthetic; it is largely contested. In Michael Mackenzie’s 2003 article “From Athens to Berlin: The 1936 Olympics and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*,” he argues that the film does not portray a fascist aesthetic because Riefenstahl was not interested in the specifics of National Socialism:

It is far-fetched to imagine that this filmmaker, who was uninterested in National Socialist ideology and unread and unschooled in its written expressions, intuitively formulated, over the course of three and a half hours of film shot on location under arduous circumstances and without the possibility of directing her actors, with black and

Asian as well as white athletes, a visual equivalent for the convoluted, vague, and illogical racial theories of National Socialism. (313)

Mackenzie suggests that, since Leni Riefenstahl was more absorbed in her art than politics, *Olympia*'s cannot replicate the ideology of National Socialism; the artist must be aware of the doctrine in order to replicate it. And yet, National Socialism is, as Mackenzie describes it, “illogical.” It feeds off of strong emotions like pride, hatred, and anger, something anyone can replicate, both personally and artistically. Mackenzie also argues that so much of the production was out of Riefenstahl's control, as she could not direct athletes as she might with actors; and control is a crucial part of National Socialism. This is where Mackenzie is especially wrong: through the process of editing her film, Riefenstahl gains complete control over the narrative, images, and ideology each viewer consumes. *Olympia* is a film composed entirely of emotionally-charged images. Image, sound, and editing support fascist concepts of body and gender and dangerous narratives of predestined victory, encapsulating the highly emotional, fascist power of *Olympia*.

The Prologue: Gendering Fascist Imagery

While Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* is universally accepted as fascist propaganda for the Nazi regime, *Olympia* has not been subjugated to the same criticism as the former, though its message is largely the same. *Triumph of the Will* is, of course, a film designed through its visuals and its content to idolize Hitler and the Nazi Party. *Olympia* is not exactly comparable to *Triumph of the Will*: though, as I will argue, both films speak in support of fascist ideology, the subtlety of *Olympia* allows it to pass for an artistic marvel in ways that *Triumph of the Will* cannot, due to its clear political affiliations. This has rendered *Olympia*—and Riefenstahl—largely controversial. If not specifically political, but rather a technological and artistic marvel,

can we truly condemn Riefenstahl as a perpetrator? It is tempting for many to praise Riefenstahl's innovative techniques (an entire sequence of the documentary is filmed underwater) as well as the dedicated production process, but *Olympia* serves the very same purpose and supports the same dangerous ideological agenda as *Triumph of the Will*; though Riefenstahl claimed throughout her life that neither she nor her films supported any kind of fascist agenda, the aesthetics of *Olympia* suggest otherwise, obsessing over the physicality of bodies with a sexist gaze.

The promotion of the fascist aesthetic, which translates into the enthusiastic acceptance of fascist policy, begins with the very first, neoclassical images of *Olympia*. The film opens with a seven-minute montage of the Parthenon: among the visuals we see are crumbled rocks and broken columns. The location is deserted, the music forlorn. Soon statues appear, the stony figures of “perfectly” proportioned Greek men frozen mid-speech and mid-action, the women posing sensually. The message is clear: The Classical Era is dead, their virtues, gone. The Nazis were particular in their admiration of Greek and Roman visuals: according to Constantina Katsari in “Inter-War Ideology Nelly’s Nudes: Nationalism, Fascism, and the Classical Tradition, (2013)” neoclassicism was a specific artistic style supported by Nazi Germany, indicating their “aspirations to be associated with the ancient Greek and Roman worlds” (2). The Nazi Party depended on the revival of classical imagery to promote their message of racial purity and especially gendered physicality. In *Olympia*, the visuals work especially hard to communicate this message. The camera fixates on the statues of Greek men as it does the architecture: with submission and reverence. The camera pans across the muscles of men in the midst of movement. Another shot features a man orating to a crowd, representing conceptions about intellectual growth during the Classical Era. Riefenstahl tells us through low-angled shots

of these men that they represent supremacy; that is, the camera, representing the eyes and identity of the viewer, looks upward in submission at the statues, as if they signify the perfection to which the viewer should—according to the Nazis—strive to replicate (00:04:58—00:05:18). During this sequence, Riefenstahl reveres Classical women equally, but differently than men.

While the statues of men are frozen in moments of speech and movement, Riefenstahl highlights images of women in passive stances. The camera’s gaze implicates women in a state of inactivity: rather than fixating on muscles mid-flex or words mid-speech, the angle at which the women are observed implies the action is being done behind the camera. They are engaged in the passive activity of being actively perceived. This phenomenon is elaborated upon by feminist scholar Laura Mulvey in her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey’s work, which has largely defined the scope of feminist film studies in the late 20th and early 21st century, explains particular way in which film as a medium is exploitive of women: in phallogentric cinema (which is most cinema, particularly during the early 20th century), “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (442). Against her will, the body of a woman becomes an object for scopophilia, or the act of deriving pleasure from perceiving. The camera’s lens doubles as the eyes of the phallogentric viewer; he is “the barer of the look of the spectator” (Mulvey 443). Thus, Riefenstahl’s work elucidates this: in *Olympia*, the statues of women look down, to the side, and in directions that face away from the camera. An interaction is occurring, but it is one-sided: while the women may not look at the camera, the camera and the eyes of men are given full reign of her body. They are the objects of this male gaze, cementing a visual dichotomy of aggressive male/passive female that was utterly crucial to Nazi ideology and policies that rendered women in every way an object of physicality; a body

used for reproduction and men's pleasure. Riefenstahl's *Olympia* ensures the transmission of this message. The statues are framed in a passive state of perfection, "whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look" (Mulvey 445).

It is important to note, however, that Mulvey's work on the male gaze is a response to the sexualized images of women in Hollywood, including movie stars like Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn that the Nazis would have altogether rejected. While Nazi policy demanded a return to "traditional" roles women that were marked by modesty and traditional dress, I believe Mulvey's work nonetheless still applies to Riefenstahl's fascist representation of women in cinema. The bodies of women, whether Greek statues or "Aryan" German women, remain defined by their perceiver: the man. During the opening sequence of *Olympia*, the camera's lens, identified subliminally as male, reveres men in moments of action and delights in perceiving women without their consent.

The dichotomy of the supposed gender binary was a facet of the Nazi movement that cannot be understated, and it is one Riefenstahl wholeheartedly supports by use of her camera in the first seven minutes and beyond. In combination with other aspects of film production like slow camera movements, double exposure editing techniques, and majestic music, Riefenstahl treats Ancient Greece like a mythical, lost civilization, frozen by stone in the midst of their prime. Riefenstahl promises her viewers, however, that all is not lost: the final shot of the Ancient Greek montage displays a statue—frozen in an athletic stance—transforming into the body of a German man throwing a discus. The music swells as he throws the discus, the javelin, and shotput. For a sequence, the camera fixates on the movement of his arms as he tosses the shot put from hand to hand, idolizing his muscles just as it did to the Ancient Greek statues of the

previous sequence (00:08:16 –00:08:32). The transformation from statue to man acts as a visual plot-twist: the Ancient Greek tradition is not gone, it has been, according to Riefenstahl, reborn in the form of “Aryan” Germans. The Nazis trace an appropriated cultural lineage to Classical Civilization in the form of physicality and the division of gender roles. Ancient Greece is marked in popular, non-scholastic realms by the distinct roles given to men and women, and especially the exclusion of women from places like sporting events and government. Riefenstahl suggests Nazi Germany and Ancient Greece are one in the same ideologically, a rebirth, according to her, long since overdue.

The gender division, as it is integral to Nazi ideology, exists in this sequence as well: men and women are never featured in the same shot. While men are featured completing easily identifiable sports, it soon fades into the women’s segment, which resembles rhythmic dancing far more than it does anything remotely athletic. While the masculine body is treated as its own athletic entity, featured on his own or with one other man, the woman’s is featured in a group as a collective, further distancing women from any semblance of individuality. The one woman who is featured on her own performs lithe stretches while the camera appraises her body and the music changes from dramatic to something considerably softer. The remaining women, moving together in a group, wave their arms rhythmically in the air together, press their hands against one another, kneel together as if in prayer, and raise their arms into the sky, entirely in sync (00:09:10—00:10:50). The movements are cult-like and entirely distinct from the athletics allowed to the men, reinforcing a submissive role for women in Nazi Germany, both physically and ideologically.

The opening sequence makes one thing especially clear: those performing these movements are not people, they are bodies. Indeed, the lighting works in such a way that the

identifying facial features of the performers are engulfed in shadow, directing the gaze away from their any humanizing traits (like eyes, face structure, mouth, etc) and towards their torso and legs. The performers are also almost entirely in the nude, drawing obvious attention to the body and masking any chance of individuality. This is a paramount aspect of fascism: the individual must be erased in exchange for the masses, the brain and heart for the body—and *Olympia* expresses this through Riefenstahl's camera. Though Riefenstahl objectifies both men and women, she does so in fundamentally different ways, and, when coupled with narratives of physical perfection and victory, ultimately renders *Olympia* a fascist text, even when it may seem most objective.

Implications of Victory Narratives

Footage of the Parade of Nations during the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics marks the first “documentary” footage of the games, and by no means are Riefenstahl's directorial efforts objective. The clips paint a narrative of racial superiority and reveal an obsession with nationalistic fervor, even for countries distinct from the Third Reich. The Parade of Nations is commemorated by a march of athletes organized by nation, carrying the name of their country and their flag. These markers are crucial: the inclusion or exclusion of the name or flag indicates Riefenstahl's filmic (and perhaps personal) sentiments towards other nations who do not otherwise represent her fascist aesthetic. For Riefenstahl, who turns an international event into a victory narrative, this is her cast of characters, heroes and villains included. Greece, of course, enters, acknowledged with the Nazi salute and a shot of the flag and a sign bearing the country's name: this aligns with the ideology of *Olympia's* prologue, that Greece—although primarily Ancient Greece, who originated the games—plays an important part in the appropriated cultural

lineage of the Nazi Party and their fascist aesthetic. They are followed by Sweden, a country which was “generally seen as the heartland and the cradle of the Nordic Race,” a pseudo-scientific term used to label people with “blond hair, blue eyes, a tall stature, and an elongated head shape” (Kyllingstad *xii*). It is no wonder, then, Riefenstahl fixes her camera on a shot of the Swedish flag and the seemingly endless number of Nazi salutes they receive from the spectators (00:16:36—00:16:41). The music which, up until now, becomes something reminiscent of a British march when the athletes from the United Kingdom enter the shot. They, along with the athletes of the United States, Italy, and France who are featured a few minutes later, are given gratuitous camera time and recognition. The Italians and French do the Nazi salute, the camera thanking them for it with visual acknowledgement. The United States and the United Kingdom, neither of whom do the Nazi salute, nonetheless receive attention from Riefenstahl because they nonetheless, to Riefenstahl, emblemize with their predominantly white selection of athletes, the physicality of “perfection” that she so clearly idolizes in her filming techniques.

However, Riefenstahl specifically punishes other nations who do not uphold these so-called standards with incomplete coverage. Japan, recognized by their flag only half within the frame of the camera, receives a mere seven seconds of footage, with no written recognition (00:17:03—00:17:10). The racial politics Riefenstahl has introduced to us thus far indicate that physical traits like skin color and build should be enough to identify the Japanese. This is even more obvious in the country immediately following the United Kingdom: the men, dressed in a traditional garb that includes a turban, march behind a flag that is so far out of the frame that it is indiscernible. According to Riefenstahl, the only conclusions we should draw from their depiction is that they are a racial “other,” afforded extremely different and lesser privileges than their “Germanic/Nordic” counterparts.

The procession of Nazi Germany is saved for last, the music shifting to a traditional German march. The thirty second segment features wide shots of thousands of spectators performing the Nazi salute. The Swastika is featured prominently, and several shots of Hitler smiling approvingly are included (00:18:43—00:19:13). What Riefenstahl has depicted is not an objective documentary, but a cohesive—but fascist—narrative: all roads, all people, lead to Germany, who she has framed as the “victors” even before the games have started. Her editing process, which lasted until 1938, two years after the games were over, would have allowed her the knowledge that Nazi Germany did in fact win the most medals out of all competing countries. Thus, the film is edited in a way that extends the concept of victory beyond the scope of the arena: Nazi Germany remained ideological and physical “victors” before, during, and after the games, predicated on the level of nationalism (indicated by the “higher” number of people performing the salute) and the level of physical “perfection” (demonstrated by Riefenstahl’s omission of predominantly non-white nations). The Opening Ceremony ends with a shot of the sun beaming over the Olympic Flame while a choir sings a stately piece in the background.

The Olympics are naturally an event of which victory and physical fitness are important, if not crucial aspects. Many, therefore, seek to absolve Riefenstahl of a fascist affiliation through *Olympia*. It is natural, perhaps, to root for a particular athlete or team, or to feel frustrated when an opposing player wins. Being a spectator, whether in watching on television or live in a stadium, transforms a match or a race into a personalized narrative where no such story truly exists. After all, “the movement of the athletic bodies on display does not amount to anything without such signification, reception, and retelling” (Cohan 3). That is, in a Western story-telling context, in which competition is the conflict and victory is the desired result, “sports narratives and personal identity are inextricably intertwined” (Cohan 4). Moreover, sporting events advance

national narratives of storytelling in an entertainment situation. Sports are meaningless unless someone wins; an act that implies superiority and inferiority based on physical prowess. Sporting events and spectatorship are not necessarily intrinsically fascist, however. The connection to fascism is completed by Riefenstahl’s filmic practices. When Riefenstahl depicts very clear winners and losers through her extremely particular portrayal of each individual nation, she is telling the viewers the Germans are already the victors, the bodies to be admired and the country with whom a spectator should identify. The personalized experience of sport spectatorship, in which viewers are encouraged to have a favorite athlete or favorite team, is erased. As with the faceless athletes in the prologue, fascism is dependent on an erasure of the personal narrative and a dedication to the mass ideology.

While Riefenstahl has structured her documentary that, from the very first images, privileges physical ability, appearance, uniformity, and victory over those who are “lesser,” many have taken the inclusion of black athletes like Jesse Owens to absolve Riefenstahl from any fascist association her film might have. If the film is wholeheartedly fascist, they argue, then why would she include Owens’ world record 100-meter dash? It is by no means an objective filming, either: we are given close-ups of Owens’ face and the crowd cheering his name. In fact, film critic Richard Corliss wrote in *Time* that “Riefenstahl gave the same heroic treatment to Jesse Owens” in *Olympia* as she did to Hitler in *Triumph of the Will* (“All-Time 100 Movies”). This statement ignores the vastly different ways Hitler and Owens are treated by the camera. The editing depicts Hitler as an individual and a leader, someone who has thoughts and opinions, unlike the people of Nazi Germany whose supposed traits included obedience and submission to the government. Returning to the Parade of Nations, for example, a close-up of Hitler is included immediately after the procession of France (00:17:30—00:17:33). This sequence implies Hitler

has an opinion about France; opinions are not afforded to any athletes on the field, Jesse Owens included. Though we are given close up shots of both Hitler and Owens, Owens' "narrative," as decided by Riefenstahl, is to complete a task using his body. The emotional story comes from the images of spectators hugging one another with joy, cheering with anticipation: a glimpse into the emotional state of the spectators is a way through which Riefenstahl is imploring viewers to follow and identify with a predetermined, fascist narrative (00:59:36—00:59:43). Riefenstahl allots a confined visual space in which spectators are allowed to feel positive emotions towards a black athlete. It is a particularly dehumanizing space for Riefenstahl to choose: she and her film maintain that it is only in the form of an athlete that one can celebrate African Americans, whose identity (both mid-century and even today) is often shaped by stereotypes and gross misconceptions regarding their bodies, as well as centuries of enslavement that reduced them to commodities. "Aryans," whether German or Ancient Greek statues, can be celebrated anytime.

Conclusion

The controversial relationship between Riefenstahl and fascism speaks volumes to the long-lasting damage perpetuated by works like *Olympia*; though films like *Triumph of the Will* are easily identified as fascist, perhaps an equal amount of danger is harbored in sentiments that are disguised as something else. *Olympia: Festival of Nations* is a film expertly crafted to elicit extremely specific emotions from a viewer. It is extremely difficult to watch it—even with academic intentions—without feeling excitement, reverence, awe, and even pride. There is no doubt that Leni Riefenstahl was truly a genius, but this does not mean she should be exonerated for the exceptionally harmful ideas she presents about gender roles, physicality, nationalism, and race. Additionally, as a woman creating powerful works during the Third Reich, Riefenstahl holds a unique position, in that many have found her more "heroic" than culpable for obtaining

success in the male-dominated world of fascism. The feminist magazine *Emma* described any attempt to associate Riefenstahl with fascism a “witch-hunt,” while *Times* listed *Olympia* in their 2005 list of the “All-Time Greatest Films” (Schwarzer, cited in Bach 44). Her technical skill is astounding, and her creative use of editing and camera work redefined film forever. I do not contest these statements. However, the magnitude of her skill has little to do with the fascist ideologies her work upholds. Riefenstahl insisted her entire life that she was in no way a supporter of the Nazis; and while *Triumph of the Will* was commissioned by the Nazi Party, *Olympia*, she maintained, was instead commissioned by The Olympic Committee. Being financially independent of the regime supposedly indicates an ideological separation that denies her work the baggage of context.

And yet, no author nor work is exempt from the influence of historical and cultural context. *Olympia*, like any work, exists in a sphere of culture and cultural influences. “The text is a tissue of citations,” Roland Barthes tells us in “The Death of the Author,” “resulting from the thousand sources of culture” (4). The culture, in the case of *Olympia*, is in every respect fascist. Thus, even if we were to exonerate Riefenstahl as a “dead” author, there is no way to watch the fascination with white, abled bodies, intimate close-ups of Hitler, and thousands of arms saluting the Reich without acknowledging the fascist implications of such a text. Any desire to read *Olympia* as an apolitical, artistic work may come from an anxiety that fascism is a path one can descend upon rather quickly, oftentimes without knowing it. *Olympia* stirs within us the same emotions we might feel while watching sports, singing a national anthem, or even listening to an impassioned speaker. It risks far less of our own cultural identity and traditions (in the patriotic American sense) to absorb Riefenstahl into a canon of talented artists living in unfortunate times. In identifying the fascist tactics *Olympia* employs, we are forced to acknowledge the inherent

danger in some of our most beloved activities that, if left unchecked, can become powerful weapons used against vast numbers of people.

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