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Randee BANNISTER

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE - AUTHOR OF THESIS

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D. Dumas

DIRECTEUR DE LA THÈSE - THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR DE LA THÈSE - THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

EXAMINATEURS DE LA THÈSE - THESIS EXAMINERS

D. Tanguay

A. Scwartz

J.-M. De Koninck, Ph.D.

LE DOYEN DE LA FACULTÉ DES ÉTUDES
SUPÉRIEURES ET POSTDOCTORALES

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Randee Bannister

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The Example of Triumph of the Will*

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Director:
Professor Denis Dumas

Committee Members:
Professor Agatha Schwartz
Professor Daniel Tanguay

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Summary

The question that we are considering is how to appreciate artworks that have not only an aesthetic presence but a political side as well. We feel that this question is necessary to consider because in order to have a full appreciation of an artwork it is important to consider all facets of the work, but also refrain from including considerations that are not necessary to include. In order to explain why this question is important and also to show a potential response, we use the example of Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will*. This film is a perfect example of how the aesthetic and political can combine in art. Other suggestions of how to have a complete appreciation of this film, as we try to show, are insufficient as an answer to our question and so we propose our own theory of the appreciation of not just political artworks but all artworks, that being partial autonomy.

Many people have contributed, all in their own way, to the realisation of this thesis. I wish to thank, first, my supervisor, Professor Denis Dumas for having believed, from the start, in this non-traditional thesis topic. The discussions that we had on art, his advice and his comments have contributed to the completion of this work. I would also like to thank both Professor Agatha Schwartz and Professor Daniel Tanguay for their guidance and support.

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Introduction

There has always been much controversy over how to properly appreciate works of art that openly promote negative political ideologies. This controversy could not be clearer than in the case of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally film, about the Nazi Party, *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*), directed by Leni Riefenstahl. This film, which will be discussed in detail, has always been and continues, to this day, to inspire heated discussions and strong disagreements. Because it depicts Adolph Hitler in an overwhelming light and promotes him as a sort of savior to the German people, while doing so in an innovative style of filmmaking exhibiting genius and claiming to be a documentary, *Triumph of the Will* cannot be regarded like any typical film. It is for this reason that this documentary will be at the basis of our discussion on whether or not the aesthetic qualities of an artwork are a sufficient condition in said artworks appreciation and, if not, what other considerations should be included. It is important, before seeing how we will proceed to answer this question, to see how significantly the film *Triumph of the Will* remains a part of the collective conscious of people today. It is still regarded as a great documentary film, in some circles, and a repugnant piece of propaganda in others. We will look now at how, even recently, this film has played a role in the discussion of art, and the role of art in our world.

Triumph of the Will, as we will see, is a film that, for some reason or another, has been in the news since its creation. Our goal presently is to show just how much it still plays a part in so many discussions about film and about art. The death of its director, Leni Riefenstahl, on September 8th, 2003, raised a very difficult issue for the media. Clearly they would have to report on her death, but how should one refer to her? Most newspaper and magazine articles did not feel it necessary to remain objective and took the opportunity to openly criticize Riefenstahl and her creation of the film. The BBC News website (UK Edition) ran an article about the death of Riefenstahl, entitled: "Leni

Riefenstahl the Devil's Diva.”¹ This article contains quotations from numerous sources, which say things such as: “She was the muse of the Nazis...”² and that Riefenstahl was: “Hitler's Queen of the Amazons.”³ The article does mention the fact that many people also saw her as an innovative film director that did great things for the world of documentary cinema, but the connection to the Nazis shown in *Triumph of the Will* is always mentioned. An article from Germany has a title that is less negative: “Controversial Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl Dead at 101”⁴ and the tone of the article is slightly less accusatory, taking a more biographical stance. About the film, the article quotes Riefenstahl who says: “I cannot apologize for example, for having made the film *Triumph of the Will* – it won the top prize. All my films won prizes.”⁵ In using this quotation of Riefenstahl it is easy to see how Riefenstahl herself did not appreciate the severity of the conflict over her film. This article, from a German source, was one of the least harsh articles written about Riefenstahl and the film.

There were many derogatory comments made about *Triumph of the Will* at the time of Riefenstahl's death, in all types of magazines and newspapers all around the world. From ABC online in Australia the film was described as such: “By any definition, it was a brilliant piece of filmmaking, but outside Germany, it was seen as the glorification of evil.”⁶ This quotation shows how clearly people wish to dissociate themselves from this film but it does not fully represent the truth, which is that the film was highly regarded around the world, until after World War II.⁷ At the “World Socialist Website”⁸ there is a quotation from writer Lutz Kinkel which describes the film as follows: “Few filmmakers understood that this picture was a get-up, a ‘beautiful sham,’ with which the Nazis and their helper Riefenstahl tried to delude the public.”⁹ This

¹ BBC Monitoring. “Leni Riefenstahl the Devil's Diva.” BBC News. September 10, 2003. Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/entertainment/film/3097018.stm>.

² BBC Monitoring. September 10, 2003.

³ BBC Monitoring. September 10, 2003.

⁴ Deutsche Welle. “Controversial Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl Dead at 101.” September 9, 2003. Online: http://www.dw-world.de/english/0,3367,1441_A_966560_1_A,00.html.

⁵ Deutsche Welle. September 9, 2003.

⁶ ABC Online Home. “Leni Riefenstahl dies aged 101.” September 10, 2003. Online: <http://www.Abc.net.au/am/content/2003/s942804.htm>.

⁷ This claim will be explained further and justified in the first chapter.

⁸ wsws.org.

⁹ World Socialist Website. “Leni Riefenstahl – propagandist for the Third Reich.” September 15, 2003. Online: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/sep2003/rief-s15.shtml>.

accusation is one at which we will look in the first chapter when discussing the creation of the film, as well as of what we are certain and of what we will never be certain. Similar accusations came about in articles from articles in nearly every country¹⁰. The death of Leni Riefenstahl, however, did not cause new accusation of this sort to come about; in fact, her death led only to comments already made for the many years since the end of the war. The controversy of *Triumph of the Will* has existed for years now and although Riefenstahl's death brought it back to the forefront of the discussion about the role of film in politics, the film has never strayed far from the headlines.

Since Riefenstahl's death there have been two other occasions in which the film has become headline news, that were related to her death and one more that has nothing to do with Riefenstahl's passing in any way. The first occasion was at the end of year. As is common practice, all types of magazine, newspaper and journals feel it necessary to end the year with a retrospective of the most important events, and more specifically deaths of the previous year. The question came up this year of whether or not to mention Riefenstahl in the lists of important people who died, and then if she was included, how she should be described. Most articles that are focused on film did choose to include her in the mentions but the way in which she was included varied greatly, both in length and in manner. Many choose to keep the reference short and direct, like the description given in an article at Iafrika: "Director, writer and actress, died on September 8 aged 101. She will be infamously remembered as the one hired by Adolph Hitler to make Nazi propaganda films."¹¹ Some descriptions pushed the controversial aspects a bit more, such as in the *San Diego Tribune*: "Leni Riefenstahl, 101, finally left in her usual cloud of controversy."¹² Certain articles seemed more sympathetic to Riefenstahl, as was the case with *The Boston Globe* which printed the following: "Few figures in filmmaking history stirred stronger passions than Leni Riefenstahl, who made movies of enormous technical

¹⁰ From Germany there was: "Leni Riefenstahl.. Die Traumtänzerin „, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 9, 2003 (From: <http://www.faz.net/s/RubF7538E273FAA4006925CC36BB8AFE338/Doc~E77B704529053483CAC8EE28EF97801B6~ATpl~Ecommon~Spezial.html>); „Triumph des Willens über das Gewissen“, *Die Zeit*, 2003/38 (From: <http://www.zeit.de/2003/38/Riefenstahl>); „Nachruf auf eine Hitler-Freundin. Zum Tod von Leni Riefenstahl“, *Deutschland Radio*, Sept. 9, 2003 (From: <http://www.dradio.de/cgi-bin/es/neu-kulturheute/1858.html>).

¹¹ Iafrika South African News. "So long, farewell..." December 11, 2003. Online: <http://iafrica.com/news/features/291239.htm>.

¹² Elliott, David. "Film biz needed a stronger master and commander." December 28, 2003. Online: http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/features/20031228-9999_m1a28movies.html.

skill and beauty, yet helped to glorify Adolf Hitler, too.”¹³ Others, still, devoted entire articles to Riefenstahl and the 1934 Nuremberg Rally film.

The second event related to Leni Riefenstahl’s death that created controversy for the film was the 76th Academy Awards ceremony, which included a reference to Riefenstahl in the list of recently deceased movie industry figures. Many people came out against this inclusion, counting the Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies whose director, Dr. Rafael Medoff said:

Leni Riefenstahl was Hitler's hand-picked filmmaker, and she played a leading role in making propaganda for the most evil regime in human history. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences should not have included her alongside legitimate artists who recently passed away, such as Gregory Peck and Elia Kazan, but rather should have explained that she was an example of how art can be perverted to promote fascism, racism, and genocide.¹⁴

This quotation, although strong in its wording, represents the general feelings of those opposed to including Riefenstahl in the tribute. Unlike the previous two cases where Riefenstahl and *Triumph of the Will* were in the news, this time people seemed unconcerned with remaining objective and directly attacked the character of both Riefenstahl and her film. On the World Net Daily, Joseph Farah writes an article about the event entitled: “Hollywood honours a Nazi.”¹⁵ The article includes general disgust towards Hollywood and the Academy Awards; not only for including Riefenstahl but also for not apologizing after it was made clear that people were offended by such an inclusion. This event, however, was not the only event so far in 2004 that has caused *Triumph of the Will* to be brought back into the headlines.

The final event that we will look at in order to show that *Triumph of the Will* still remains on the minds of those concerned with film is the release of another film that sparked controversy. When Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ*¹⁶ critics could

¹³ Kahn, Joseph P. “A toast to many who departed in ‘03.” January 1, 2004. Online: http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2004/01/01/a_toast_to_many_who_departed_in_03.

¹⁴ U.S. Newswire. “Holocaust Institute Criticises Academy Awards for Tribute to Nazi Propagandist.” March 1, 2004. Online: <http://releases.usnewswire.com/GetRelease.asp?id=112-03012004>.

¹⁵ Farah, Joseph. “Hollywood honours a Nazi.” World Net Daily. March 8, 2004. Online: http://worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=37474.

¹⁶ Gibson, Mel. *The Passion of the Christ*. Equinoxe Films. February, 2004 (released in theatres). This film was created as a representation of the last hours of the life of Jesus. Mel Gibson claims to have made the film as close to the events described in the Bible as possible.

not refrain from making comparisons to Leni Riefenstahl's film. The comparison is made clear by Lou Lumenick in an article for the New York Post, where he says: "...Gibson's wilful blindness to the larger implications of his work is somewhat reminiscent of Leni Riefenstahl - the brilliant German director who never saw anything wrong that her masterpiece, *The Triumph of the Will*, was a celebration of Adolf Hitler."¹⁷ Many comparisons have been made between the films, from the similarity between the asserted intentions of the directors (both Gibson and Riefenstahl claimed to have had intentions other than what the public was criticizing them for) to the discussion of the level of anti-Semitism implied in both films. What is fascinating is not so much in how the films are compared but that the films are compared at all. The differences between the films are much stronger than the comparisons: *Triumph of the Will* is a documentary that was used directly for propaganda, made in 1934 (released in 1935) about a political rally; *The Passion of the Christ* is a fictional film¹⁸, made in 2003 (released in 2004) about an event that is controversial in itself for many reasons. Of course there are similarities, as have been pointed out, but the interesting part is that when someone wishes to criticize a film for being propagandistic, in any manner, it is automatic to compare it to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*.

This film has become the standard; the standard example of what propaganda can lead to if we allow it; the standard of what an artist can achieve when given funding and freedom; and the standard of what art should avoid becoming, at all costs. In showing how this film still plagues our newspapers and film reviews, we hope to show just how much it has entered the collective consciousness of film critics and the general public alike. It is clear, at this point, that in using the example of *Triumph of the Will* we are using an example that is not contemporary but is contemporarily, still, a problem and that is why it is a worthy example to use in the discussion of art appreciation that we will consider.

¹⁷ Lumenick, Lou. "The Goriest Story Ever Told." New York Post Online Edition. February 24, 2004. Online: <http://www.nypost.com/movies/18807.htm>.

¹⁸ There is some controversy to referring to this film as fictional but in calling it a fictional film, it is only to say that it could not be considered in the category of non-fiction film, which is the category of documentary film.

The question of *how to properly appreciate a work of art* is one upon which there is much disagreement. There is even less of a consensus when the work of art includes a comment on a political discussion, especially if it is not the generally accepted point of view. How can one properly appreciate a work of art, specifically a work that depicts a situation or promotes something that is seen as morally disagreeable? Can this type of work be appreciated, should it be appreciated at all? These are all very important questions that lead us to the bigger question of whether or not an appreciation of any work of art can be autonomous from considerations outside that of aesthetic qualities. The *question of the autonomy of artworks* has been posed time and time again, with differing emphases on the aesthetic experience, on the artist's intention, on censorship and so on. The concern that will be raised here is not simply the question of whether or not an artwork can be autonomous: it is a reflection on artworks that make political statements and how best these works can be appreciated. The issue is to determine when a negative appreciation of an artwork is appropriate, when it is based on more than just opinion. The question we ask is, are the aesthetic qualities of artworks a sufficient condition in appreciating their value?

As mentioned already, in order to try to answer this question, we will start by looking at the example of *Triumph of the Will*. What is first interesting about this film is the time in which it was created. The timing is interesting by way of what was going on in the world, and specifically in Germany, in 1934. The historical context is interesting also because of the advancements film had recently made and what other development Riefenstahl was able to make. From the point of view of film history, *Triumph of the Will* is essential in understanding how the contemporary techniques in film have arisen, who are the influences of the directors of today, and why film is in the form that it presently is. From a political point of view, however, the value of this film is significantly less clear. It seems wrong to champion a film that makes a hero out of Hitler, a film that promotes a political ideal long since regarded as condemnable. The pertinence of this example is even clearer now, as we have seen, with the recent death of Riefenstahl. The fact that the articles written about her have all included the question of how to approach *Triumph of the Will* shows that this example is a relevant one.

How can this film be appreciated aesthetically if it is despised morally? This is the very difficult question that I will attempt to answer by bringing it to the more general philosophical question of whether or not artworks can be appreciated based on their aesthetic qualities only.

It is important to note that in asking this question, we intend in no way whatsoever to show agreement or to sympathize with the political ideals that are promoted in this film. This example has been chosen because of the history of the film only. There is no intention of indirectly or ambiguously legitimizing the ideology promoted in the film; nor in presenting a revisionist view of the Nazi ideology. This film has been chosen because it is a clear example of a work of art that was used to promote an ideology that is now considered unacceptable. We will not consider the actual value of the Nazi ideology in any manner, but will only comment on how that ideology is shown in a work of documentary film.

The case that we will explore shows that certain works of art contain more than an aesthetic value. As easy and clear as this judgment of *Triumph of the Will* might seem, it is not nearly so simple. Leni Riefenstahl has claimed that her film is a documentary, only representing the facts of an event; that its only merit is due to the technical achievement that the film is. She holds that it is a great film, not because it manipulates human emotions, but because she developed a new editing approach, because she made a film that other directors were not capable of making at that time, because it is aesthetically beautiful. Riefenstahl defends herself by claiming that the film would have been equally as beautiful, equally as motivating with any subject matter, and that the fact that the subject matter happened to be a political rally altered little. She claims to be unaware of politics, that if she is to blame for anything, it is ignorance, but nothing worse. However, Riefenstahl spent time in prison after World War II and was banned from making further films, so clearly her defence of the film was not enough to convince the public that there was nothing important to the film beyond its aesthetic value. Our question is not, however, one of blame. Riefenstahl's intentions, although fascinating, are of little interest to the question posed. What is important to see is how this film incites, to this day, fierce reactions and emotions when discussed. Clearly this passion is a result of the content of the film, at least in large part, and so this film cannot be appreciated solely on the basis of

its aesthetic qualities. It is important to note, at this point, that, unlike the majority of the texts published on Riefenstahl and on this film, we are attempting to ask and respond to a philosophical question. We will look at the historical context of the film and a little bit about Leni Riefenstahl, herself, but this will be done only in order to give a basis to the philosophical question we are raising.

The first chapter will be focused on explicating the empirical facts surrounding the creation of the film. This will be done by looking at the accounts of the events leading up to its being made and the aftermath of the film's release.

In order to better understand how this particular film should be appreciated, we will then look at the writings of various authors on *Triumph of the Will*. One of particular interest is an article by Mary Devereaux called "Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*"¹⁹. This article, although admitting to the technical merit of the film, underestimates the value of the technical merit. Devereaux looks at this film in a manner of trying to understand how beauty and evil can be represented and claims that it is due to the combination of these two factors that the audience is unnerved when watching the film. Devereaux's view is important because it shows us just how different the appreciations of this film are. Riefenstahl holds that it can be appreciated solely on the basis of its aesthetic qualities, while Devereaux argues that the aesthetic qualities are of minimal value when looking at this film. Through the consideration of these two views and the views of a few other authors, it will be apparent that there is no consensus on how to appreciate a film, or work of art in general, when the subject matter is morally disagreeable, and it is our intention to arrive at an understanding of how this type of appreciation can be done.

We will also, in the second chapter, look at other authors who have other positions on how to appreciate this film, or political works of art in general. We will consider the points of view of Siegfried Kracauer, David Stewart Hull and Richard Meran Barsam, among others. The writings of these authors will help us to arrive at our final chapter, which is a discussion of the autonomy of art. We will discuss autonomy of art as

¹⁹ Devereaux, Mary. "Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*." *Aesthetics and Ethics*. Ed: Levinson, Jerrold. Cambridge University Press: New York. 1998. pps. 227 – 256.

a possible solution to the question of how to appreciate political artworks. In order to do this, we will consider various versions of the autonomy thesis in the attempt to find one that will allow us to appreciate not only *Triumph of the Will*, but political works of art in general. We will then arrive at a suggestion of a theory of partial autonomy that will be clarified in the third chapter.

The question of how to best appreciate an artwork is not one that is easy to answer. If we were to say that artworks should be autonomous, completely autonomous with no consideration beyond that of the aesthetic, then the answer is easy. In this case, every work's value can be determined by the aesthetic qualities imparted in that work. However, it becomes clear by using one example, that not every artwork can be correctly appreciated through considering only aesthetic qualities. If we were to say that every artwork should be looked at through the lens of morality, to ensure that morally disagreeable works are not used for persuasion, then too, the answer would be easy. With this, however, it is too easy to fall into the path of excessive suppression and censorship of artworks. There must be a middle ground, where strictly aesthetic works are seen as such and where works that choose to promote ideologies can be explained as doing just that. This middle ground may provide a solution to the question that we have posed. We ask the question of whether or not aesthetic qualities are a sufficient condition for appreciating the value of artworks. Through the next three chapters, we seek to find an answer to this question and to the question of how to appreciate artworks that cross this line and no longer have strictly aesthetic qualities.

The manner in which we hope to look at this question, as is likely clear by this point, is by first considering one case, one example, and from this we will attempt to elaborate a general theory. It is important to know, however, that the focus of this thesis is not *Triumph of the Will* but the theoretical question of how to have an appreciation of artworks that cross the line between aesthetics and politics. We will not attempt to have a complete look at all of the relevant research done on this topic and the reasons for that are twofold. First and foremost, the quantity of materials is too high²⁰. There has been so much written on this film, on this director, and on the appreciation of art that attempting

²⁰ In Jürgen Trimborn's book *Riefenstahl. Eine deutsche Karriere. Biographie*, he claims that there have already been more than 100 doctorate theses written on Riefenstahl.

to consider it all would largely exceed the scope of this thesis. The second reason that not all materials will be considered is due to my lack of reading knowledge of the German language. With the help of my supervisor, Denis Dumas, we believe to have looked the most significant German texts, on this topic, but clearly we do not have the time or the space in this work to cover these texts in an exhaustive manner. We have made an educated selection among the vast literature that exists in the hope to represent as many of the positions on this topic that exist as possible. Although we are unable to cover the entire literature on the topic, we hope that through our approach we are still able to present something original that might offer a contribution to the contemporary research in the field.

Chapter 1

An Empirical Analysis of *Triumph of the Will*

There has been much discussion as to the situation surrounding the creation of *Triumph of the Will*. In this chapter we will attempt to dig through the various accounts of the making of the film in order to see the real circumstances that led to the making of *Triumph of the Will*. It is necessary for us to look closely at the formation of the film because this will establish why it is so important, both regarding film theories and also regarding philosophical theories of the appreciation of political works of art. We will, in section 1.1, begin by looking at the historical context, first in Germany, Europe and the rest of the world, and then that of film and of propaganda. These facts are important to note because this film refers to a very specific period in history and so it will be necessary to see how the state of the world shaped it. Also, as *Triumph of the Will* is credited with helping the technological advancement of film, we must first know in what ways the film is a progression from what was already being produced. After looking at the historical context, we will, in section 1.2, look more specifically at the details of the movie. We will start with Leni Riefenstahl and her explanation as to why she decided to make the film. We will continue with Riefenstahl and her account of how the film came together, including details such as how many people were entailed, the timeline involved and other factors. These facts have been disputed to a certain degree and so we will try to give the most accurate understanding possible by looking at the various descriptions and determining which seems to be the most reasonable. From there, section 1.3 will look at why *Triumph of the Will* is so important cinematically, what specifically about the film stands out. The final section, 1.4, will be about the reaction to the film. We will begin with the immediate reaction first in Germany and then in the rest of the world, paying special attention to the acclaim it was given. Then we will see how the reaction to the

film changes from when it was released in 1935 up to the present day, becoming less and less positive to the point of attacking the film and its creator. This discussion is essential to see that the reception of *Triumph of the Will* has not remained steady and so that is partly why it makes such a good example for looking at how to appreciate a work of art like this.

If the question of how to appreciate political works of art were easily answered there would be a consensus on the value of *Triumph of the Will*. However, through the last part of Chapter One, we will see clearly that no such consensus presently exists, nor has it ever existed. The point of Chapter One is to gain a clear understanding of the film, the historical context, the circumstances surrounding its creation, and its reception, which will go to prove that *Triumph of the Will* shows why the question of how to appreciate political works of art is an important one.

1.1 The Historical Context of *Triumph of the Will*

We will not attempt to explain all of the events in German history leading to the 1934 Nuremberg rally, as it would take too much time and is not directly important to our interests. Our look at where Germany was, in regard to the Nazis, at the time that *Triumph of the Will* was made, will start at the point when Hitler took power in Germany. Although the information included in this section could be taken from a large number of sources, the source primarily used is a book called: *Nazi Germany and World War II*, by Donald D. Wall²¹. Hitler, with his Nazi party, came to power in Germany on January 30th, 1933, not through an election but by taking over as Chancellor when Schleicher was dismissed from his leadership role. At this point Hitler's popularity was due to his promises of ending the economic crisis that had overwhelmed Germany, which he said he could do by helping create more jobs and lessening the political violence, amongst other things. In order to legitimate his rule, Hitler called an election for the first week of March. Over the two-month period of his reign, Hitler had already shown himself to be resourceful but merciless. The following quotation explains this well: "Throughout February, Hitler and his lieutenants conducted the campaign with elaborate showmanship

²¹ Wall, Donald D. *Nazi Germany and World War II*. 2nd ed. Thomson Wadsworth: Toronto. 2003.

and unprecedented violence. An estimated two hundred persons, mostly Communists, were killed in Berlin alone.”²² This all occurred before the election because Hitler felt it necessary to show that he was serious about what he had promised to do.

On February 27th there was a fire at the Reichstag in Berlin (the Parliament building) and due to this event, Hitler suspended the civil liberties of citizens under the Presidential Law for the Protection of State and Property decree. This decree was never lifted during Hitler’s rule. The election was held on March 5th and the Nazis achieved a majority government. The new Reichstag opened on March 23 to a fantastic ceremony arranged by Joseph Goebbels.²³ Just two days later Hitler passed the Enabling Act, which allowed him to create and pass laws without requiring approval. Then on April 7th he passed the Law for Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, which eliminated many legal safeguards such as the right of appeal among others. All labour unions were abolished on May 1st. On May 6th, the German Labour Front was formed, which all workers were required to join and to which they had to pay dues. It also forbade collective bargaining and strikes. By July 14th, the National Socialist German Workers Party was declared as the only political party.

Hitler spent his first few months in power replacing non-Nazi members of the government with people from his party. This replacement was complete by January 1934; the federal principle was changed for a supreme central authority. In 1934 one of the main concerns of Hitler was still the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) as they were not under his control. Röhm, an authority figure within the SA, strongly felt that Hitler did not see the value of the SA. Hitler made a promise to the German army, in April, that the SA would be purged. On June 4th, he ordered the SA to take a month’s leave, and then gave the order to purge on June 29th. Hitler claims that 77 people were killed in the purge, although the number was likely higher. Although this was a very violent action, the public, from what we can know now, seems to have felt it was necessary and this event did not affect Hitler’s popularity negatively.

²² Wall, Donald D. 2003. p. 67.

²³ Goebbels was appointed to head the Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment. All films to be made in Germany during Hitler’s rule had to be approved by Goebbels and his ministry who had say over the final cut. *Triumph of the Will* is the only film known not to be censored by the Ministry or Goebbels, although according to Riefenstahl, it was not due to lack of trying.

President Hindenburg died in August, and Hitler used this opportunity to merge the offices of Chancellor and President, giving himself supreme rule over Germany. From the time that Hitler had taken power in 1933 until the time of the 1934 Nuremberg rally, he had purged the SA, gotten rid of any real political challenge and given himself supra-legal authority. These are the major events, although clearly not all of them, which happened before the creation of *Triumph of the Will*. It is important to see that although Hitler was clearly an authoritarian leader and unafraid to use violence against those that disagreed with him, his anti-Semitic laws had yet to be put into place²⁴ (which is not to say that until this point he had been fair to the Jewish people as there were already clear signs of Hitler's feelings towards them²⁵) and his popularity was still growing. This is in no way to excuse Leni Riefenstahl making *Triumph of the Will*, but just to give an understanding of where the German people stood at the time of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. Much of Hitler's growing popularity was due to the propaganda that Goebbels' Ministry had so intensely distributed. The rallies (there was one each year from 1933 – 1938) themselves, even without the documenting of them, convinced people that Hitler would save their country. Wall quotes French ambassador François-Poincet, who observed the 1936 rally and said: "Many visitors, dazzled by the Nazi display, were infected by the virus of Nazism. They returned home convinced by the doctrine and filled with admiration for the performance."²⁶ The Nazi regime exemplified how propaganda, when used well, can be the biggest aid for any government. Now that we see the historical context of Germany in the time when *Triumph of the Will* was made, it is important to also see the historical context of film and propaganda. Part of the reason that this film is as controversial as it is, is that it was so innovative both as a film and as propaganda. To see the influence that *Triumph of the Will* has had in both aspects we will take a quick look at what in film and propaganda, this film changed.

²⁴ Wall explains: "Germany's Jews were the target of his wrath in 1935 [the Nuremberg rally of the following year], as he proclaimed the first of the Nuremberg laws, which stripped Jews of their citizenship." Wall, Donald D. 2003. p. 96.

²⁵ Wall says that: "From the party's earliest days, Hitler and Nazi propaganda branded the Jews as 'alien to the community.'...In the first years after 1933...[the] persecution was unsystematic and sporadic." Wall, Donald D. 2003. p. 113.

²⁶ Wall, Donald D. 2003. p. 96.

1.2 The Making of *Triumph of the Will*

When considering what this film changed by way of film and of propaganda there is one thing that we need to determine first. That is, whether or not this film can be categorised as propaganda. We have assumed, to this point, that it is propaganda, but Leni Riefenstahl affirms that the film is nothing more than a documentary.²⁷ The point that we will make is that documentary cinema is not mutually exclusive from propaganda, that a work of art can take both forms, at the same time. We will give a detailed definition of propaganda and show that *Triumph of the Will* very clearly fits into this category. The definition of propaganda that we will use is the one established by Richard Taylor in his book *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*. The reason that we will use this definition, as opposed to other, numerous definitions²⁸, is because Taylor takes great efforts to include as many of the pre-existing understandings of propaganda as possible and shows why they are valid, and so become part of his definition, or why these understandings do not apply to propaganda in actuality. He considers various criteria in making his definition and we will have a quick look at how

²⁷ Riefenstahl makes this claim in nearly every interview done with her where she speaks of *Triumph of the Will*. Riefenstahl says, of the film: "Everything is real. And there is no tendentious commentary for the simple reason that the film has no commentary at all. It is history. A purely historical film." Taylor, Richard. 1998. p. 173. In her own memoirs she says of the awards given to *Triumph of the Will*: "A documentary was being honoured, not in any way a propaganda film." Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 209. In *Interviews with Film Directors* she says: "But my film is only a documentary. I showed what everyone was witness to or had heard about." Delahaye, Michel. 1969. p. 458. This argument of Riefenstahl's is repeated whenever she is questioned about the film.

²⁸ It is interesting here to consider two other quick understandings of the nature that propaganda should have. These two understandings come from Jürgen Trimborn's book, *Riefenstahl. Eine deutsche Karriere. Biographie*, and come from the opinions of Goebbels and Hitler. Goebbels says of propaganda: „Das Wesen jeder Propaganda besteht darin, Menschen für eine Idee zu gewinnen, so innerlich, so lebendig, daß sie am Ende ihr verfallen sind und nicht mehr davon loskommen.“ This is to say that for Goebbels, propaganda consists of winning people over on an idea in an internal and lively way, so that they will succumb and not detach themselves from it. (Joseph Goebbels, discourse of the 8. 5. 1933, taken from: Erwin Leiser, »*Deutschland erwache!*« *Propaganda im Film des Dritten Reiches*, (new augmented edition), Reinbek, 1978, p.46. cited by Jürgen Trimborn, p. 160 – 161). Hitler, has a very different stance as he says: „Gewiß, ich will den Film auf der einen Seite voll und ganz als Propagandamittel ausnützen, aber so, daß jeder Besucher weiß: heute gehe ich in einen politischen Film. Genau so wie er im Sportpalast auch nicht Politik und Kunst gemischt zu hören bekommt. Mir ist es zum Ekel, wenn zum Vorwand der Kunst Politik getrieben wird. Entweder Kunst oder Politik!“ In essence, Hitler is saying that propaganda needs to be apparent, that a work should be created as propaganda and the line between propaganda and art should not be confused. He claims that it is necessary to either make art or make politics. (Adolph Hitler, from Paul Werner, *Skandalchronik des deutschen Films von 1900—1945*, Frankfurt a. M., 1990, p.218, cited by Jürgen Trimborn, p. 160 – 161).

he arrives at the definition he does, what his definition is and then why Leni Riefenstahl's film fits into the category of propaganda.

The essential starting point for Taylor is that "'Propaganda' is concerned with the transmission of ideas and/or values from one person, or group of persons, to another."²⁹ This is the basic aim of any form of propaganda and so must be included in the definition. The next thing that Taylor determines is that if all propaganda has a purpose, namely, to transmit ideas, then it must include a connection between the propagandist and the audience. Here, he asks the question of who the propagandist is; is it the creator or the government that uses it? His answer may seem surprising: he contends that the artist is only the propagandist in the way that he or she knows the work may be put to an audience and used for persuasion. The true propagandists are the political powers that decided to use work for persuasion. A key to Taylor's understanding of propaganda is that a work is only potential propaganda (in fact, almost any work of art can be considered as such) until the government or any other authority figures use the work for influence, which makes it actual propaganda. It is the organiser that takes the work and uses it for very narrow purposes, and this is what makes the work propagandistic. Taylor goes on to say that part of the goal of propaganda is to spread controversial ideas but in a manner that makes them seem uncontroversial. He claims that the most effective propaganda is in the truth; a work of propaganda will be more effective if it is taken from reality (though presented outside of reality), as is the case with a documentary. Propaganda has to be aimed toward the masses; it is the spreading of ideas about the masses that affects the masses and so, is best received in a mass setting.

Taylor's definition of propaganda, which is the one that we will adopt, thus becomes:

Propaganda is the attempt to influence the public opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values. The use of the word 'attempt' implies both that the purpose of the activity *is* important and that the result is *not*. Propaganda can fail, and be seen to have failed. The verb 'influence' is employed in preference to 'control' because the latter is too total in its implications...³⁰

²⁹ Taylor, Richard. *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*. I.B. Tauris Publishers: New York. 1998. p. 7.

³⁰ Taylor, Richard. 1998. p. 15.

Taylor's definition does go on to limit propaganda a bit more but this excerpt brings to light what is most important for our understanding of propaganda. The key part of the definition for us is that it is the activity and not the result that is important. This goes back to what was explained previously, that the authorities who attempt to use a work of art, or a newsreel, or anything else to influence people are the primary propagandists and not the artists (this is not to say, of course, that the artists are free from blame). Why is this important for us? It is important because it allows us to escape asking the question of what precisely Leni Riefenstahl is guilty and to what degree. This question is most typically the question that arises with any discussion of *Triumph of the Will* but is not the question that we are concerned with. We are now able to see that the film is propaganda, its goal being to transmit ideas to the masses, to influence their opinions, to make controversial proposals seem reasonable, but we do not have to follow this with a discussion of what that means for Leni Riefenstahl and her guilt or innocence. Now that we have established that *Triumph of the Will* was a work of propaganda (which is decided by its use, not as much the intentions of the artist or of the people that commissioned the work when it was in the process of being created, unless it is the people who commissioned the work that determine its use) we can look at how it compares to other films of the time, both as a work of propaganda and as a film overall.

Something that should be clarified at this point is that Taylor's definition of propaganda, which we have decided to accept, works well but could create some confusion regarding our specific case. The main concern with his definition is that it allows any artwork to be a work of propaganda but this is not an accidental feature of his definition because Taylor does believe that any work of art can be used as propaganda and so is potential propaganda. He brings up an example from the First World War where "inspirational" quotations were dropped on the British soldiers in the trenches. These quotations came from many sources including Wordsworth, Dickens, Shelley and Shakespeare. Of this act Taylor says: "For obvious reasons of chronology none of these authors can have had the opportunity to develop an attitude towards the First World War or to play an active 'propagandist' role in it. Nevertheless their work was deemed to have some relevance to the war and it was used *by someone else* for a purpose specifically

connected with it.”³¹ The fact that the artists were unaware that their work would be used as propaganda does not make the work any less propagandistic. It is reasonable to agree with Taylor on this point.

There is a second interesting point to remember when using Taylor’s definition of propaganda and that is that even a political work with a positive message can be considered propaganda³². Presently the term propaganda has a negative connotation but that is a recent understanding of the term (likely in part due to the use made of it by the Nazis). Propaganda is, according to Taylor, the attempt to spread a certain ideology and this can include a positive ideology. We are not willing to disagree with Taylor on either this point or the previous one but it is important to note that these two facets of his definition of propaganda are not facets of *Triumph of the Will*. This film was not simply created as a documentary and then used as propaganda; the very creation of the film included the vision of the propagandistic role it would play. Also, the fact that the term propaganda can be applied to artworks that promote generally accepted ideologies does not imply that this specific work of art promotes an acceptable ideology, as it clearly does not. These two areas of Taylor’s definition need to remain as part of the definition of propaganda because without them we would not be able to include works of art that were not originally created for propagandistic purposes as propaganda, nor would we be able to include works that represent what was once seen as an acceptable ideology but is later found to be unacceptable. We must accept these two aspects of Taylor’s definition of propaganda but also be clear that they do not change the fact that *Triumph of the Will* was created for propaganda and that it promotes a horrific political ideology, two things that should be present in our appreciation of the film. Taylor presents the idea that an artwork is propaganda depending on its use, which we will accept but not in the strictness that Taylor presents it to us as we can see something more, something in the intrinsic

³¹ Taylor, Richard. 1998. p. 9.

³² It is interesting here to consider that the original understanding of propaganda was not a negative understanding but a positive one. The term propaganda was first used with the notion of “propagating the Christian faith”. Clearly this term did not have the negative connotation even at the time of the Nazi Regime that it does now because Goebbels was named the Minister of “Propaganda and Enlightenment.” The underhanded and deceitful reputation that propaganda now has is a relatively new understanding of the term and likely due, at least in part, to how it was used for the promotion of Hitler and his government.

characteristics of this film, as well as in its use, that leads us to conclude that *Triumph of the Will* is propaganda.

At the time that *Triumph of the Will* was made (1934), the world of propaganda had just been entirely reinvented and this was due to the creation of motion pictures. Never before had there been a medium that had the ability to reach the number of people in the manner that cinema did. To explain the potential influential power behind cinema, we should consider the following quotations that Taylor mentions; “Lenin remarked that ‘of all the arts, for us cinema is the most important.’ Stalin described it as ‘the greatest means of mass agitation’ and Trotsky called it ‘the best instrument for propaganda’.”³³ Film, as a form of communication, worked and continues to work well, because it is not as demanding as listening to a speech, reading a book, or even listening to the radio. When watching a film, we can be as uninvolved as we would like, exerting practically no intellectual effort, and still be affected by the images, often to an extent of which we are not aware. Propaganda, as we mentioned earlier, is about mass communication, and film is a form of mass communication that appeals to a mass audience. The individual experienced the film, at this point, as a member of a large group, this making the propaganda all the more effective. This is in contrast to the radio, which reached a large number of people, but within their own homes where they had the opportunity to turn it off or to walk away without having to see other people’s opinions on the topic. Film was also influential because it was a technological advancement that fascinated people. The audience marvelled at the sheer genius of film and so the subject matter became all the more appealing. Another factor that helped cinema was that it very soon became reproducible³⁴. People were able to see the images and hear the words over and over, they could return to the theatre as many times as they liked and the message of each particular film would remain as it was initially, without any wavering, without any possibility of uncertainty. All the theatres in a country could show the same films, all the people, then, exposed to the same information. Film allowed people to come together through what seemed to be solely entertainment. Cinema has always been referred to as the art of the

³³ Taylor, Richard. 1998. p. 15.

³⁴ This is a notion that it is not necessary for us to explain further but is discussed in detail by Walter Benjamin in: Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Lowe & Brydone Ltd; London. pps. 219 – 254.

masses and that is exactly why it became so useful for the propagandists. Taylor refers to cinema as "...the ideal propaganda weapon for the second quarter of the twentieth century"³⁵ and it would be difficult to see it otherwise. It is important to be clear on the fact, however, that claiming that a work of art is propaganda, does not exclude it from being part of a film genre. *Triumph of the Will* is a work of propaganda but is also a documentary, and we will refer to it as such throughout this work.³⁶

We have now shown that *Triumph of the Will* was a tool of propaganda and that it was a tool of the best possible form. The fact that it was a film gave it the distribution that other forms of propaganda did not have; the fact that it was aesthetically undeniably great gave it the influence that it is credited with having. At this point it is interesting to consider why Leni Riefenstahl made the film at all. She claims that she did not want to make the film, and yet she did make it, and she did an amazing job of it. Often, her doing such a good job on *Triumph of the Will* has lead people to believe that Riefenstahl did, in fact, support the Nazi ideologies. She claims this is not true, that she did not have a choice in whether or not she made the film. Riefenstahl says of Hitler asking her to take on this film³⁷: "One hour later I was in my car, speeding to Nuremberg, with only one thought in mind: to free myself from this project."³⁸ Then, after a discussion with Hitler she says: "I realised that I could not break Hitler's resolve. Now at least I had to try and obtain the best possible working conditions."³⁹ She did not want to ruin her reputation as a respectable actress and director⁴⁰ by making a bad movie and so she did the best work

³⁵ Taylor, Richard. 1998. p. 17.

³⁶ Lutz Kinkel claims the following: „Da Riefenstahl mit Dokumentarmaterial arbeitete und nicht, wie zum Beispiel Veit Harlan (*Jud Süß*, 1940), die politische Aussage in durchinszenierten Spielfilmen vermittelte, ist es in ihrem Fall angemessen, von dokumentarischen Propagandafilmen zu sprechen.“ – This is to say that including intrinsic properties of the work into the definition of propaganda, there is a difference between propaganda like *Jud Süß* (pure fiction) and Riefenstahl's „dokumentarischer Propagandafilm“, i.e. „documentary propaganda“. Kinkel, Lutz. *Die Scheinwerferin. Leni Riefenstahl und das « Dritte Reich »*, Hamburg / Wien, Europa Verlag, 2002, p.97.

³⁷ It seems that Hitler asked her to make this film because he had seen her performance in the film *The Blue Light* and was very much impressed by it.

³⁸ Riefenstahl, Leni. *A Memoir*. Picador USA: New York. 1992 p. 157.

³⁹ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 158.

⁴⁰ Riefenstahl claims, in her Memoirs, to have been a respected dancer, actress, and director long before Hitler approached her to make films for him. Many authors question to what level she was actually respected before she started making films for the Third Reich. In the works by Trimborn, Kinkel and Rother there is the same suggestion that she was not seen as an artistic genius before *Triumph of the Will* and that perhaps she did have a motivation to work with Hitler, that motivation being her personal,

she could. Riefenstahl felt that since she was making the film, the end product would be a reflection of her capabilities. In defending her making of the film, Riefenstahl claims that she did not have a choice as to whether or not she would make this film and since she did not want to risk her standing in the film business, she did the best possible job that she could do.

While the facts surrounding the making of the film are somewhat disputed, the number of people involved and the budget being inflated as years went on, there are some details that are significant and so should be noted. The first is that this was the second film that Riefenstahl did for Hitler. She made a propagandistic documentary short film for the previous year's rally (1933) called *Victory of the Faith (Sieg des Glaubens)*, which, according to Riefenstahl she had a very difficult time making, due to the resistance of Goebbels and his men, which was what made her not want to do the second film. The next point is that Leni Riefenstahl, between the time when she accepted the project, and the time when the rally began, had just over two weeks to prepare for the filming⁴¹. Her agreement to make the film was done on three conditions, these being: i) that she, herself would finance the film, not the party; ii) that she would have complete creative control over the film⁴²; and iii) that she would be relieved of ever having to do another picture for Hitler again. Some other important facets are brought out in Mary Devereaux's article "Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" when she says; "Riefenstahl's crew consisted of 172 persons: 36 cameraman and assistants, 9 aerial photographers, 17 newsreel men, 17 lighting technicians, and so on.... Riefenstahl held daily directorial meetings at which each member of the camera crew received instructions for the next day."⁴³ This quotation is interesting because it explains

potential success. This discussion is made clear on page 56 of Trimborn's *Riefenstahl. Eine deutsche Karriere. Biographie*.

⁴¹ This fact, like so many others, has been disputed as well. Trimborn refers to a section of Goebbels' journals where Goebbels claims that Riefenstahl only pretended that she had very little time to prepare. (This is stated on page 176 of Trimborn's book).

⁴² There is some discussion in Trimborn's book (*Riefenstahl. Eine deutsche Karriere. Biographie*) that Hitler had at least some influence over the creation of the film, although Riefenstahl denies this entirely. On pages 206 and 207 it is suggested that Hitler did make at least one intervention on *Triumph of the Will*, that being Hitler's decision to not include Ruttmann's (another documentary filmmaker in Germany at the time) prologue to the film that would explain the history of the party. This is not how Riefenstahl claims that the events unfolded but regardless there is some question as to whether or not she had complete creative control over the film.

⁴³ Devereaux, Mary. "Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*." *Aesthetics and*

both the magnitude of the project, (this was a very large crew for the type of film and the time,⁴⁴) and it also shows that Riefenstahl had complete control of the project. One final fact that is interesting to keep in mind is that the rally itself involved more than 500 000 spectators, making total involvement in the rally at more than 750 000 people. The magnitude of this rally itself was propagandistic, a fact that we will return to, with or without Riefenstahl's cameras exploiting the event.

The technical achievements of *Triumph of the Will* are large in number and due primarily to the hard work and determination of Leni Riefenstahl. One thing that Riefenstahl insisted on, which had not been used in documentary film before, was the idea of moving the camera, which made the film appear fluid when screened. This was a technique used in fictional film, but not in documentary or propaganda up until this point. She achieved this movement by getting her cameramen to film while on roller-skates. She also used another technique, which became an advancement used in film from this point on. Riefenstahl explains: "... I built rails and tracks wherever I could at the rally site. I even wanted to install a tiny lift on a 140-foot flagpole in order to achieve intensely visual effects. At first the city fathers refused to grant me permission; but with Albert Speer's help it was finally installed on the flagpole."⁴⁵ Devereaux explains why this technique was useful for the documentary: "These devices enabled Riefenstahl to infuse shots of her frequently stationary subjects with action and motion."⁴⁶ It is the combination of motion with stability that is revolutionary in *Triumph of the Will*; Riefenstahl is able to make a very static event seem exciting, stimulating and even inspiring. Most of this was done through the intensive editing technique that Riefenstahl used. This technique demanded that Riefenstahl work anywhere from twelve to eighteen hours a day for a period of five months in order to complete the film. She had taken sixty hours of film down to two hours of expert documentary⁴⁷ that soon became the measure for all propaganda.

ethics: Essays at the intersection. Jerrold Levinson ed. Cambridge University Press: New York. 1998. p. 228.

⁴⁴ The exact numbers for the crew are not particularly clear, however they do not vary too much from what Devereaux claims and by all accounts it was a large crew.

⁴⁵ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 159.

⁴⁶ Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 228.

⁴⁷ Riefenstahl's mastery of the documentary can also be seen clearly in her *Olympia* films.

Many authors have written on the topic of the value of *Triumph of the Will* but not all of them will be included in the following discussion.⁴⁸ The authors that we have chosen to look at each offer something specific to our question and that is why they have been chosen. Devereaux is interesting for us because her question, which will be looked at in more detail in the second chapter, is most obviously similar to ours. We will also look at Barsam because he has done an extensive examination of the film, has spoken with both Riefenstahl and her critics and presents a, rarely seen, more moderate stance on both the making of and the importance of the film. In this first chapter we will also look at Kracauer's stance on the making of the film because it is a stance that is strong and quite influential. Different authors and opinions will be considered when looking specifically at the value of the film, but these three authors, along with Riefenstahl's account, give us a solid understanding of the creation of the film, and the different views on said creation.

1.3 The Cinematic Importance of *Triumph of the Will*

The exact cinematic importance of this film is clearly debatable. Most authors agree, at least, that there is a value to watching and studying *Triumph of the Will*. Mary Devereaux sees at least two reasons for studying the film, one historical, and the other artistic. She says:

We had to look at the historical specificities of the film because, as a documentary and as a work whose subject is a particular historical event, *Triumph of the Will* is a historically specific work. We had also to look at the artistic details of the film in order to see how *Triumph of the Will* poses issues that give rise to the more general philosophical problem of beauty and evil.⁴⁹

The value, for Devereaux, of this film is in the fact that it gives us a glimpse of an important historical event, a pseudo-objective look into the past and that it helps us to understand how to approach works of art that combine the beautiful with the evil. Essentially, Devereaux is saying, from an artistic perspective, that the value of the film is to show people what we should be careful of, to guide the average viewer away from

⁴⁸ Such books include the following: *Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will* by David Culbert, *Leni Riefenstahl* by Charles Ford, *Leni Riefenstahl: the Seduction of Genius* by Rainer Rother and a number of others.

⁴⁹ Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 251 – 252.

being persuaded by that which is beautiful and being unaware of the influence that the work has on them. Taylor argues that if one is to study Nazi film, this film must be included. He says: "...it would be impossible to discuss Nazi cinema without discussing *Triumph of the Will*; it is the Nazi film that everyone has heard of. At the same time it is a superb example of documentary cinema art, and a masterpiece of film propaganda."⁵⁰ Taylor claims that since everyone is already aware of the film, it is a good place to start when speaking of Nazi propaganda. He also, however, refers to it as a 'superb example of documentary cinema' and it is this opinion that interests us.

The question of why *Triumph of the Will* stands out cinematically has already been answered to a certain extent. The technical achievements of this film are numerous and so that already puts it on a heightened scale of judgement. Even disregarding the technical side of the film, it is argued to be a great work of art. Why is this? Part of the reason is in its very effectiveness. Rarely has any work of propaganda achieved so well what it has set out to do. Richard Meran Barsam in his *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will* states:

Riefenstahl's art is to perceive the essence of a real situation and to transfer the form, content, and meaning of that essential moment to the screen. In short, she is a poet. Through her handling of myth, she extends the meaning of the immediate moment by enriching its cultural significance. In the history of world cinema *Triumph of the Will* stands as Riefenstahl's brilliant fusion of prosaic film footage with her mythic vision of reality.⁵¹

Barsam is able to bring out what it is in this documentary that makes it so amazing. Riefenstahl, through real events, creates myth, and makes that myth seem like reality. It is the manner in which this film feels real through the use of illusory and fantastic film techniques that make it stand out amongst so many other films. The cinematic value of *Triumph of the Will* is a topic to which we will come back, when looking at the views of each of the authors on the film, in Chapter II. We will also look at other authors and their opinions on why *Triumph of the Will* as a film, has an important place in the study of the history of film. We have arrived at the conclusion that studying it does have a merit, both historically and cinematically, and we will continue to develop on this conclusion as time

⁵⁰ Taylor, Richard. 1998. p. 162.

⁵¹ Barsam, Richard Meran. *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington. 1975. p. 70 – 71.

goes on. Before we move on to the next step, which is looking at the reception of the film throughout its existence and throughout various countries, we will clear up a few of the untruths that surround the film.

It is necessary to clear up some of the falsehoods around the film to ensure that our study of the film is not biased (either positively or negatively) by fabrications. Many of these misunderstandings, and lies, have become so common that they are the better-known interpretations. We want to avoid creating an unusable theory on how to appreciate political works of art by perpetuating misconceptions surrounding our example. The first falsehood is that the 1934 Nuremberg Nazi party rally was set up with the idea of the filming in mind. Siegfried Kracauer obviously believed this myth as is clear with the following quotation:

It was Hitler himself who commissioned Leni Riefenstahl to produce an artistically shaped film of the Party Convention. In her book on this film, she incidentally remarks: 'The preparations for the Party Convention were made in concert with the preparations for the camera work.' This illuminating statement reveals that the Convention was planned not only as a spectacular mass meeting, but also as spectacular film propaganda.⁵²

Kracauer actually mentions the second untruth surrounding the film that we will also discuss, but for now we will focus on the first one. It is not possible for the rally to have been set up with Riefenstahl's film in mind because Riefenstahl had not agreed to make the film until just a couple of weeks before the rally began. Preparations for the rally had begun months in advance. This is not to say that the rally was not set up with the notion of having cameras around in mind: Hitler did want a documentary made about the rally since the very beginning. The difference is that Riefenstahl had almost no say in these preparations. Kracauer is not the only author to hold this idea, and in fact many of the authors that believe that Riefenstahl designed the rally, do so because of Kracauer. Barsam explains: "...best exemplified by Siegfried Kracauer, whose evaluation of the film has had great influence, especially on more recent critics such as David Gunston and David Stewart Hull. One part of Kracauer's argument against *Triumph of the Will* rests on the assumption that the rally was staged for the film...this is inaccurate."⁵³ Kracauer's

⁵² Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler; A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton University Press: Princeton. 1970. p. 301.

⁵³ Barsam, Richard Meran. 1975. p. 68.

theory, although inexact in all of its details, is still of interest to us but it is necessary to see first where his facts are wrong, so as not to be influenced by them.

The level to which Riefenstahl was involved in the determining factors of the rally can be deduced by considering the time in which she had to prepare for filming which seems to be undisputed and so if we grant that she only had a couple of weeks to get the film ready then it is reasonable to accept that she could not have had a direct influence on the planning of the rally. Again, this is not to say that the rally was not set up with the notion of it being made into a propagandistic film because, of course, Hitler had always planned to have the rally filmed and to use said film as propaganda. Riefenstahl's involvement in the decisions of the rally is, at best, limited. Barsam, as we have seen, who has done extensive research on *Triumph of the Will*, says that the claim that the rally was staged, in part by Riefenstahl, is "inaccurate."⁵⁴ We can realistically conclude then that Riefenstahl was not the mastermind behind the set up of the 1934 Nuremberg rally.

The question now becomes why people believed that it was the case that Riefenstahl designed the rally. If we look again at the Kracauer quotation above, we will see a quotation by Riefenstahl that seems to suggest that she wrote a book about *Triumph of the Will* and in it claims that filming preparations were done at the same time as rally preparations. This brings us to the second potential myth about the film. The book that is being used, as a reference is *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitagsfilms (Behind the Scenes of the Reich Party Rally Film)*⁵⁵. It was less a book than it was a pamphlet that came out with the public release of *Triumph of the Will* in 1935. The book had Leni Riefenstahl's name on the front cover and so she was credited with having written it. She claims that her press chief, Ernst Jäger, in fact, wrote it. Riefenstahl explains: "Before the shooting began I hired Ernst Jäger, former editor-in-chief of *Film-Kurier*, as my press chief...my firm commissioned him to write a brochure on the work involved in *Triumph of the Will* for UFA's publicity department."⁵⁶ She then goes on to say:

⁵⁴ Barsam, Richard Meran. 1975. p. 68.

⁵⁵ A picture of the pamphlet can be seen at: <http://www.riefenstahl.org/resources/books-vintage.html> at the bottom of the page (accessed April 3, 2004).

⁵⁶ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 190.

Jäger, otherwise and excellent journalist, wrote a ludicrously overblown text, perhaps hoping that it would get him re-admitted to the Reich Literature Chamber, and unfortunately, because of all my work, I didn't read his brochure before its publication. Jäger had put it together with the UFA's publicity department, which brought it out under my name.⁵⁷

Now, given that the only information on this pamphlet is either from people who claim Riefenstahl wrote it or from people who take their information from Riefenstahl's memoirs, it is difficult to know for sure who wrote the pamphlet. There does not seem to be any availability for this pamphlet now and so all claims about it are secondary. Whether or not Riefenstahl wrote this pamphlet and whether or not it represents the truth about the creation of the film seems to be one myth that cannot easily be reconciled. We should still keep ourselves aware of the controversy about the facts of the film so that we can be careful not to assume more than we actually know to be true.

Of course, as with any piece of history that is so avidly disagreed upon, there are numerous other false stories surrounding this film. Most of these are about the true nature of Riefenstahl's relationship with Hitler, about the budget of the film and about how many people were involved in its creation. These facts are not very important to our discussion and so we will not attempt to find the definitive answers to them. It is important for us to know, however, that Riefenstahl was not involved in the preparations for the rally and that she did not write the brochure about the film because these types of myths are the basis of bad theories. If we are to compare theories of appreciation of this film and political works of art in general we need to know whether the facts that the theories are based on are true or not, and now we will be able to do that. At this point, now that we have seen the important points regarding the creation of the film, we can look at how the film was received, over various generations and in various places.

1.4 The Reaction to *Triumph of the Will*

As mentioned earlier, between the time of the rally, November 1934, and the time of the first public viewing of *Triumph of the Will*, five months had passed. Riefenstahl spent this entire time editing, spending at least twelve hours a day working, seven days of

⁵⁷ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 190.

the week. Most of her staff had left by the time the film was completed, many because they were ill due to their attempt to keep up with the pace that Riefenstahl set, others because they simply could not handle the demands that she put on them. Often Riefenstahl would completely re-do work that was done by one of her staff members, openly criticizing the lack of vision of her staff. It seems, though, that the finished product was worth it. Riefenstahl finished the film in the early afternoon hours of March 28, 1935, just a few hours before it was to premiere. The completed film was taken directly to the theatre where it was to be shown. The fascinating part in this is that the censors did not have an opportunity to view the film before it would be shown to the public. At this point in Germany, all films that were to be shown to the public had to be passed by the censorship board. Riefenstahl, after finishing the film, dressed quickly and went to the UFA Palace with her parents, arriving much later than she was supposed to get there. Riefenstahl says of this time: "It was rather embarrassing, since Hitler and all the guests of honour, including the diplomats, were already sitting in their boxes."⁵⁸ During the screening, Riefenstahl claims she kept her eyes closed for most of it, but the crowd loved it. She describes the end of the evening with a true sense of relief: "Holding my eyes shut most of the time, I kept hearing more and more clapping. The end of the film was greeted by long, indeed almost endless, applause. At that moment my strength ran out altogether. When Hitler thanked me and handed me a lilac bouquet I felt faint – and then lost consciousness."⁵⁹ This was only the beginning of the acclaim that Riefenstahl would receive for this film. The praise started within Germany.

Probably the most interesting reaction to the film was that of Goebbels. He had been opposed to allowing Leni Riefenstahl, who was not a member of the Nazi party, to make a film that was supposed to represent the party. He felt that he had much more qualified men that could do a much better job and as a result, made Riefenstahl's life very difficult during the filming of the rally. He often denied access to her cameramen and had his men stop shooting that was already in progress. Goebbels and Riefenstahl disliked each other before this period, for reasons that are still disputed, but Goebbels' actions towards Riefenstahl during the rally sent her to Hitler asking for his help with Goebbels.

⁵⁸ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 166.

⁵⁹ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 166.

Hitler said that he would speak with Goebbels but this seemed to make things even worse. Goebbels showed clear disdain for the entire project but even he admired the finished product. Barsam explains Goebbels' feelings: "As we have seen, Goebbels did not approve of Riefenstahl's production methods, but he was impressed by her creative genius and by her film portrait of Hitler and he extolled the artist for creating masterful cinema and powerful propaganda."⁶⁰ For Goebbels to openly admire a film that he had so overtly disagreed with from the outset of its creation meant that this film was something special: a belief that the German and international film world would reinforce.

The first official award that *Triumph of the Will* received was the National Film Prize in Germany. None other than Joseph Goebbels presented this award to Leni Riefenstahl in May of 1935. When presenting the award, Goebbels said: "This film marks a very great achievement amongst the total film production for the year.... This film has successfully avoided the pitfall of being merely a politically slanted film. It has translated the powerful rhythm of this great epoch into something outstandingly artistic...fired by a passionate artistry."⁶¹ This quotation shows the exact reason why *Triumph of the Will* has been able to fascinate people for as long as it has. The film is not only propaganda, not only documentary, but a combination of the two, with perhaps even some elements of fiction put together like the most delicate jig-saw puzzle. The finished product was celebrated and for good reason. It went on to win awards in other countries as well.

Triumph of the Will won a gold medal for best documentary at the Venice Biennale in 1935. The film also received a very strong response in France. At the Paris World Exhibition of 1937 Leni Riefenstahl was asked to screen three of her films including *Triumph of the Will*. At this time there were countless rumours about Riefenstahl, specifically speculating on her relationship with Hitler. She was unsure if she wanted to attend and when arriving at the screenings she was greeted with some applause and some hisses. During the movie, however, the response became much more uniform: "A short while after it [the film] began, there was a burst of applause, and the applause was repeated many times. At the end it was louder than any I had ever heard. The audience went wild. The French lifted me to their shoulders, hugged and kissed me, and

⁶⁰ Barsam, Richard Meran. 1975. p. 67.

⁶¹ Taylor, Richard. 1998. p. 173.

tore at my clothes.”⁶² The audience at the World Exhibition went from sceptical and angry to one with true admiration for Riefenstahl. The very next day *Triumph of the Will* was awarded the gold medal, given to Riefenstahl by Edouard Daladier, the then Prime Minister of France. Riefenstahl has since argued that if her film were propaganda then it would not have won such an award in France in 1937. Whether or not this is a valid argument in her defence is not as important as the simple fact that the film was celebrated, within the borders of Germany and Nazi support and abroad where it won prizes for “films” and not for propaganda.

The celebration did not last. Riefenstahl did go on to more acclaim with her *Olympia*⁶³ films but making films became more and more difficult during the years of the war and once the war was over she was put under question for her associations with Hitler and the Nazi Party. Riefenstahl spent quite a few years in and out of prisons, sometimes ran by the French, sometimes by the Americans. The entire time she argued that she was not a Nazi, was not guilty of anything. On December 1, 1948 Riefenstahl sat through her first denazification trial. It was decided that she had no political affiliation with the National Socialists Workers’ party and so she was not a Nazi. The French military government appealed this decision and she was sent to trial again on July 6, 1949. This time, Riefenstahl was unanimously denazified, again to the protest of the French. There was one further trial, six months later, which Riefenstahl was not even required to attend, with the same final result. Things were not all in the clear for Riefenstahl, even with this ruling. In November of 1949 an article published in *Revue*⁶⁴ accused her of having used gypsies from the concentration camps to play the gypsies in her film *Tiefland*. Riefenstahl sued the publication in a trial that began in November of 1949. The magazine was found to have published false information after much witness testimony and the following details were brought to light: “The court found that the German government’s systematic persecution of the Gypsies did not begin until March 1943: the *Tiefland* shooting had taken place earlier, between 1940 and 1941.”⁶⁵ The key

⁶² Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 209.

⁶³ This was a documentary, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, which was about the 1936 Berlin Olympics and was released as two films in April of 1938.

⁶⁴ It is referred to as an illustrated magazine from Munich.

⁶⁵ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 358.

word in the previous quotation is “systematic” as many records show gypsies being executed long before this date.⁶⁶ The courts, however, did not recognise Riefenstahl’s direct involvement in the persecution of any gypsies because of the determination that gypsies were only systematically persecuted after March 1, 1943. Although Riefenstahl had won her various cases regarding the extermination of the gypsies she was not ever fully seen as innocent⁶⁷ and the same charges were pressed against Riefenstahl in 1983 and again in 2001. The first time resulted in the charges being dismissed and the most recent charges were dropped before they could get to trial⁶⁸.

After the war, *Triumph of the Will* was not really discussed, except in the cases of Riefenstahl’s trials. The original reels that held the film were passed among many different hands, confiscated when Riefenstahl was arrested, but they did end up back in her possession, unlike most of her other films. Riefenstahl spent much of this time in the courtroom, suing those who she believed misrepresented her in the media, and defending herself from accusations of affiliations with the Nazis. In 1973 there seemed to be a sort of change in mood towards Riefenstahl. She had not released any films since *Tiefland* (which was shot during the war but not released until 1952) and there still existed a certain respect for her films. A couple of well-noted film journals, *Film Culture* and *Film Comment* ran retrospective pieces on her works in 1973. They included articles by many different authors that either supported her in her attempt to continue to work as a director or criticized her and accused her of being a Nazi. Richard Meran Barsam wrote a retrospective piece on Riefenstahl’s career to this point showing how she was attempting to continue her career even with the accusations that had followed her since the war. Barsam says: “Today, still a celebrity – to some, unjustifiably so – she is completing the final editing of what may be her last film, and indeed, an important contribution to cinema and to anthropology: a feature-length colour documentary of the Nuba tribe of the

⁶⁶ See: <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/recognition.htm> (accessed April 3, 2004)

⁶⁷ The following quotation exemplifies what the life that Riefenstahl led after her various trials: “Riefenstahl won her legal battle but lost the public one.” from: http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/2002/10/01/leni_riefenstahl/

⁶⁸ It has been suggested that the charges were only dropped after Riefenstahl promised to never say again that she had seen all of the gypsy participants in *Tiefland*, alive and healthy, after the film was finished. This information can be found at: <http://www.faz.net/s/RubCC21B04EE95145B3AC877C874FB1B611/Doc~E17AB56C2D27B406C9012B0EEB01D87E1~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>

Sudan in Africa.”⁶⁹ Barsam speaks of Riefenstahl’s documentary on the Nuba tribe that was never finished, or never released, depending on which story we believe. At this time Riefenstahl was also being invited to film festivals again, in Germany, but most of her attendances were protested. She spent more and more time in Africa and working on the photography books that followed these trips. It was in the early eighties when Riefenstahl finally saw that people were not going to forget *Triumph of the Will* and so she decided that it was time to tell her side of the story.

Leni Riefenstahl’s *A Memoir* took nearly four years to write. She started in 1983 and the book was first published in 1987. The translation then came out for the first time in 1992. The finished work spans over 650 pages and covers her entire life, to the point when it was written. The book includes the following quotation from Einstein at the very beginning, before even the table of contents, which sets the mood for what Riefenstahl is attempting to do. Einstein, of himself, says: “So many things have been written about me, masses of insolent lies and inventions, that I would have perished long ago, had I paid any attention.”⁷⁰ There are two interesting parts to Riefenstahl using this quotation; the first is that she sees this book as a chance to clear up the lies that have been spread about her, the major objective of the work. The second interesting part is that Riefenstahl seems to feel that her plight, with film, is comparable to that of Einstein’s in some way. Whether or not this is the case is not important but it sets the tone that Riefenstahl takes throughout, she defends herself as an artist, as a director, as a person who never cared about politics, but also as a woman with such talent that no government should have been allowed to stifle. The exact position that Riefenstahl takes to defend herself in having made *Triumph of the Will* is something that we will discuss further in the second chapter. Both in her memoirs and in a film interview entitled *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, by Ray Müller, she demands that people listen to her version of what happened and see why she is guilty, in her opinion, of nothing. Writing her memoirs did not seem to help Leni Riefenstahl, the critics remained as ravenous as ever, protesting every exhibit she tried to present, defaming her character at each opportunity. In fact, it

⁶⁹ Barsam, Richard Meran. “Leni Riefenstahl: Artifice and Truth in a World Apart.” *Film Comment*: November 1973. pps. 32 – 37.

⁷⁰ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. First page after title page.

seems the lack of true emotion in her memoirs probably weakened her arguments more than anything.

Triumph of the Will is still being discussed, still being criticized, still raising various emotions. Leni Riefenstahl passed away in September of 2003 and this event has brought a resurgence of the debate on the film, and on her life. Countless articles have been written and published on Riefenstahl since her death and few of them carry a positive spin. Titles of these articles include: “Art and lies: thoughts on Leni Riefenstahl”⁷¹, “Leni Riefenstahl ‘the Devil’s Diva’”⁷², „Leni Riefenstahl. Die Traumtänzerin“⁷³, „Triumph des Willens über das Gewissen. Zum Tode der Filmkünstlerin Leni Riefenstahl, die den Nazis ihr Genie geschenkt hat“⁷⁴ and “Being Leni Riefenstahl meant never saying she was sorry”⁷⁵ amongst countless others. The articles are still being written and it is worth it to assume that there are other publications in development, of which we will know soon enough. The one clear factor to all of these articles is that no one is willing to forgive or forget Leni Riefenstahl’s making of *Triumph of the Will* yet, but there remains the confusion on how to deal with the film. This is the one film that haunted Leni Riefenstahl through the majority of her 101 years, and it seems that it will haunt film theory and theories of aesthetics for quite some time to come.

We have now arrived at an understanding of *Triumph of the Will* that is based on the historical understanding of the film and the role that it played and continues to play both artistically and politically. Not everything is certain in what has been written but what we have included is based on what is generally accepted as fact surrounding this film. Probably the most difficult part in giving an empirical analysis of this film is that nearly all discussions surrounding the film are emotionally charged. When it comes to World War II and the atrocities that surround it, it is very difficult to have a conversation without returning to all of the horror that was involved. It is essential to be clear that in our discussion of *Triumph of the Will* there will be no attempt made to rationalize or

⁷¹ From *Rabble News* at: rabble.ca.

⁷² From *BBC News* at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/entertainment/film/3097018.stm>.

⁷³ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Sept. 10, 2003 at: http://www.faz.net/s/RubF7538E273F_AA40069_25CC36BB8AFE338/Doc~E77B704529053483CAC8EE28EF97801B6~ATpl~Ecommon~Sspezial.html

⁷⁴ *Die Zeit* Sept, 11, 2003 Nr.38 at: <http://www.zeit.de/2003/38/Riefenstahl>.

⁷⁵ From *The Salt Lake Tribune* at: <http://www.sltrib.com/2003/Sep/09142003/arts/92061.asp?display=print>

sympathise with the Nazi ideology. The example of *Triumph of the Will* was simply chosen because of the fact that it is so well known and its value is so highly disputed. Any defence of the film is not a way to defend anything else regarding the time period or the political standpoints. Our question is entirely one of the aesthetic value of political works of art and nothing more.

The goal of this chapter was to understand better *Triumph of the Will*, why it was made, to what extent different people were involved, and how it has been treated up until this time. The key points to keep in mind as we venture forward are first that the film was made before Hitler had announced his anti-Semitic laws, and long before the beginning of the war. The next point is that the film is cinematically outstanding. As the director, Leni Riefenstahl did for documentary, and propaganda as it happens, what had never been done before. We must also bear in mind that *Triumph of the Will*, by our definition, is propaganda, but this does not exclude it from being a documentary. There will be no further discussion as to whether the film is one or the other, because we have already determined it to be both. We have seen the controversy surrounding Riefenstahl because of this film, a controversy that has not died even though she has. The most important thing that we have seen is that there is no consensus on how to appreciate this film.

Chapter two will continue along these same lines. We will look at the various interpretations of *Triumph of the Will* and see how different authors, from backgrounds both in philosophy and film theory, hold that we should value this film. From looking at these authors we will see what parts of their theories are good and which parts are insufficient. It was important for us to begin with a common understanding of *Triumph of the Will* in order for us to judge the theories that we are about to look at. A universal knowledge on the example at hand is the first step towards the creation of a theory that will be acceptable for everyone. Of course, this example is just one case of a political work of art, and the attempt is to propose a theory for all political works of art but through the next two chapters we will be able to see why this one example is enough to develop a general theory. We will now turn to the discussion of how to appreciate *Triumph of the Will* in an attempt to determine whether the aesthetic qualities are a sufficient condition in such an appreciation.

Chapter 2

Interpretations on the Proper Appreciation of *Triumph of the Will*

The positions on how to appreciate *Triumph of the Will* can be divided into two main groups. The first group holds that this film is a great film and that the political aspects need not be considered when discussing its value. This view is held most strongly by Leni Riefenstahl herself but by other authors as well, including Ken Kelman. The second group claims that any consideration of this film needs to be based on the fact that it is a glorification of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi regime. In this group, which is much larger than the first, there are authors such as Siegfried Kracauer, Mary Devereaux, and David Stewart Hull, just to name a few. Of course within each group there are more extreme positions and more moderate positions. In this chapter we will try to suggest an understanding of each of the interpretations, from the most severe position in each group, seen in sections 2.1 and parts of 2.3, to the most temperate, shown in sections 2.2 and the rest of 2.3. We will focus our attentions on three authors specifically. The first that we will look at is Leni Riefenstahl, 2.1, who defends her film as a documentary and nothing more. She is on the end of absolute autonomy for this film, asserting that it needs only be appreciated as a work of art. We will then look at Mary Devereaux, 2.2, who holds that we need to see the film as propaganda but still admits that there is an aesthetic advantage to appreciating this film. Her appreciation of *Triumph of the Will* is the closest to the middle of any of the positions we will look at. The third author that we will focus on is Siegfried Kracauer, 2.3.1, who is against this film being seen as anything other than political propaganda. His view is the precise opposite of Riefenstahl's view. We will also take a quick look at a few other authors that supplement the views presented by these three.

The point of this chapter is to understand the various positions on how to appreciate *Triumph of the Will*. When looking at these positions we will see that each of them is incomplete as an answer to our question and so when describing the various arguments we will also explain why these arguments are inadequate. This discussion will lead us to our third and final chapter, the point of which will be to propose our own theory of appreciation not only for *Triumph of the Will* but also for political works of art in general.

2.1 Riefenstahl's Proposed Interpretation of *Triumph of the Will*

Leni Riefenstahl, at first, refused to comment on *Triumph of the Will*, feeling that no defence was necessary. She claims that she believed the controversy of her film would end when people realised how silly it was to question the film. However, years of accusations and criticisms left Riefenstahl with the knowledge that she would never be free of the blame that came with her making a film the glorified Adolph Hitler. She says: "...I was finally forced to realise that I will never get rid of the shadows of the past. Nevertheless, I have found the strength to come to terms with this fate without bitterness."⁷⁶ This comment was made in response to an American protest at a film festival where Riefenstahl was to be honoured⁷⁷. This took place in 1974, forty years after the film was made. Even with this admittance, however, Riefenstahl continued to defend her film as nothing more than a documentary. Her explanation of the film unfolds in two sources primarily. The first is her memoirs and the second is the filmed interview by Ray Müller *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*. The latter was done only as a supplement to the former because Riefenstahl felt that her memoirs had not cleared up the accusations surrounding *Triumph of the Will* as she had hoped they would. After the Müller interview was complete she said that she would no longer speak of the film or her

⁷⁶ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992 p. 598.

⁷⁷ This film festival took place in Telluride, in Colorado. They opened the festival with Riefenstahl's *The Blue Light*. As mentioned in chapter 1, during the early 1970's there was a resurgence of respect and acknowledgement for Riefenstahl. This trip to the United States was spent not only at the film festival but doing interviews and making appearances at various festivals. Riefenstahl refers to this period as her comeback, but this is a questionable description as each of her appearances was protested and many cancelled beforehand due to the protests. The works that we will look at from Barsam, Kelman, Hull and others, were written during this period.

affiliations with the Nazis. After more than fifty years of discussion she felt there was no more that she could say to defend herself. We will look at these two sources and a few other interviews that she did, to get a clear understanding of why Riefenstahl believes the film should be celebrated, without question, and certainly without blame.

Riefenstahl goes into great detail in *A Memoir* describing the creation of *Triumph of the Will*. She does not put the same amount of effort into defending the film. This is because she believed that no defence was necessary. The main argument that she makes, in this book and in other interviews, explaining why there is nothing wrong with the film, is that the film is documentary and not propaganda. Riefenstahl holds that if the film were propaganda then it never would have won the cinematic awards that it did, especially not in France in 1937. Of the 1937 Paris World's Fair she says: "The next day *Triumph of the Will* was awarded the gold medal, which Edouard Daladier, the Prime Minister of France, presented to me. A documentary was being honoured, not in any way a propaganda film. What interest would the directors of the World's Fair and the French Prime Minister have had honouring Nazi propaganda?"⁷⁸ Riefenstahl asserts that her film was admired, and rightfully so, because of the quality of film that it was. She believes that the French would never have rewarded a director for creating propaganda, especially Nazi propaganda, and so her film could not possibly have been seen, at that time, as Nazi propaganda.

A second line of argument that Riefenstahl develops in her memoirs also supports the conclusion that her film is only a documentary and thus should be viewed as such. She argues that if the film were propaganda then it would have included some sort of commentary or plot, some description of how the viewer should interpret what they are seeing. *Triumph of the Will* does not do this, according to Riefenstahl, it only shows the events that occurred and allows the viewer to make what conclusions they will. She explains that the idea of having a commentary or plot was not even one that she considered: "A plot, of course, would be inappropriate. The only solution I hit upon was to shoot the documentary events in as versatile a manner as possible, with the emphasis

⁷⁸ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992 p. 209.

on dynamic rather than static tasks...⁷⁹ Through *A Memoir* Riefenstahl tries to impress upon the reader that her film was not propagandistic in its intentions and only seems so in hindsight. Her defence of the film as only a dynamic documentary is even more direct in *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*.

Ray Müller is both the director and the interviewer of *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* and this film could not have been easy for him to make. At this point Riefenstahl was, at best, hesitant to talk about her life, especially anything with regards to *Triumph of the Will* and when she did discuss it she was known for ending interviews abruptly if the questions did not suit her. Müller played the role of the interviewer cautiously, trying to create a sense of comfort for Riefenstahl but still getting the answers to the questions that so many people had speculated on for so long. When speaking of *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl seems proud, and nostalgic yet even more so frustrated and saddened. Early in the conversation about the film Müller asks why the film, if it is a documentary, as she presents it as, does not feel like a documentary. Her reply is that the editing style changes the feel of the film, it provides links like those in a fictional film, but that does not mean that it is not a realistic account of what occurred. Müller asks her if her film was a glorification of the Nazis and she responds somewhat enigmatically: "Either one makes a newsreel...or one can try to make the material into a film that's more interesting – but without posed shots."⁸⁰ Riefenstahl is saying that she edited the film as a fictional film and not a newsreel so that it would be more interesting, but editing style does not change the fact that the subject matter of the film is factual.

Riefenstahl believes that her film was a documentary and was not propaganda, and this defence of hers never falters once⁸¹. We can see the strength of her convictions

⁷⁹ Riefenstahl, Leni. 1992. p. 159.

⁸⁰ *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (film). Ray Müller, director. Kino Video; New York. 1998. 1 DVD, 188 min. Chapter 12 at 14:02.

⁸¹ In fact, she uses this same defence for her other films as well. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* she claims that her film *Olympia* is a pure documentary, that, just as is the case with the Nuremberg Rally, she did not see anything happening that she did not show. She insists that she did not add any propagandistic qualities to either film nor did she try to hide such qualities in the film. Again she says that she showed only what she saw, through her camera and those of her cameramen. The German text states: „Außerdem war "Olympia" nicht, wie "Das blaue Licht", ein Spielfilm, sondern ein reiner Dokumentarfilm. Die Kulissen waren nun einmal da, in Nürnberg wie in Berlin. Ich war nicht die Gestalterin des Objekts. Ich habe nichts propagandistisch hinzugefügt oder manipuliert, sondern das, was ich sah, möglichst gut von

when Müller goes on to ask Riefenstahl what the distinction between documentary and propaganda is, and why *Triumph of the Will* fits into one category and not the other. Calmly she explains: “There’s no commentator to explain everything. That’s one way it differs from a documentary and a propaganda film. If it were propaganda, as many say, there’d be a commentator to explain the significance and value of the occasion. This wasn’t the case.”⁸² Müller then asks Riefenstahl, if she was apolitical, as she claims that she was, then how was she able to edit the film and still keep in what was important. Riefenstahl replies: “That has nothing to do with politics. It’s a technical matter...an editor must decide which shots work best.”⁸³ She argues that it is the job of a good director to make this type of decision; it has nothing to do with her knowledge of the subject matter, but rather with her skill and judgement. Müller accepts this response but does not let Riefenstahl go without any further scrutiny of the meaning of her role in the creation of the film.

Müller clearly feels that Riefenstahl holds more responsibility than she is willing to accept. Interestingly, in an interview from 1996, Riefenstahl claims that she would not have shot any film if she had known that even one Jewish person would be harmed. She does go on to say that she made this film as well as she could, not for the political state of Germany, but for art.⁸⁴ Even if we allow that she did not know what Hitler stood for, that she only made a film and did not have any knowledge of what that film might be used for, we still arrive at the question of why she did not give herself the knowledge, why she did not ask any questions before signing on to do the film. It would seem a very bad system of practice for us to associate our name with a figure that we knew very little about. Müller poses the question of whether or not Riefenstahl believes that artists have some sort of responsibility towards their audience, a responsibility that would entail not

meinen Kameramännern filmen lassen.“ This information can be found in *Der Spiegel* from August 18, 1997 which can be found at: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/0,1518,123594,00.html>.

⁸² Müller, Ray. 1998. Chapter 12 at 14:54.

⁸³ Müller, Ray. 1998. Chapter 12 at 18:14.

⁸⁴ This is taken from an interview with Riefenstahl in *Berliner Zeitung*, from July 27, 1996. The original German text is as follows: „Ich hätte keinen Meter drehen können, wenn ich gewußt hätte, daß einem einzigen Juden was geschieht. Ich hatte ja fast nur jüdische Freunde. Aber, was soll ich zu diesen Filmen sagen, ich habe sie so gut gemacht, wie ich konnte - nicht für Deutschland, sondern für die Kunst.“ It can be found at: <http://berlinonline.de/berlinerzeitung/archiv/.bin/dump.fegi/1996/0727/kultur/0057/>

falsely representing the truth so as to persuade the public point of view. As always, Riefenstahl has an easy answer that exalts herself and *Triumph of the Will*:

How are we to judge artists...? What should we say about artists who make good films in the Third Reich? What does political responsibility mean? And to whom is one responsible? Take politics today. How can you tell who can assure us the right kind of future? ...If an artist dedicates himself totally to his work he cannot think politically.⁸⁵

In other words, it is not the artist's responsibility to be politically aware. In fact it is the artist's responsibility to be politically unaware, and therefore, unbiased in the work that they present to the audience.

Whether or not Riefenstahl actually presents an unbiased point of view in the film is still up for debate. While most people who have seen the film argue that it would be impossible not to see the bias it presents to the audience, Riefenstahl holds that it was only a factual account of real events. She tells Müller directly that she never felt anything she presented in the film would have done any damage, not to her own career but even more so, not to anyone else.⁸⁶ Riefenstahl argues that the film only represented the point of view that was already dominant in Germany at the time; reminding the viewer that Hitler (according to questionable polls, possibly) held 90% of the support. She holds that *Triumph of the Will* reflected this sentiment; it did not create a fascination and support for Hitler that was not real. This argument has a certain strength to it that is obvious when one sees the immense number of people that attended the rally and seemingly freely gave their support to the Nazi party. Near the end of her discussion of the film, Riefenstahl makes a few very interesting statements. She says: "I've never been proud of it [*Triumph of the Will*]. Neither today, nor then. Proud of what? All that slaving, all that work – it was ghastly."⁸⁷ She then goes on to say: "If I'd known what the film would bring me, I'd

⁸⁵ Müller, Ray. 1998. Chapter 13 at 26:49. The following quotation also appeared in *Die Welt* on January 7th, 2002: „Ich habe kein einziges Mal ans Politische gedacht. Das sehen Sie schon daran, dass ich die Wehrmacht nicht mit reingenommen habe. So habe ich die Reihenfolge nicht nach der politischen Wichtigkeit gegliedert, sondern allein danach, wie das Ganze wirken sollte.“ Here, Riefenstahl claims that she clearly was not political because she did not include, in the film, footage of the army. If she had of been political she would have seen how important such footage was and have included it. She says that she did not structure the film around the political importance of the participants but the result of the whole. Instead she was forced to make another film, after *Triumph of the Will* in order to show the importance of the army. (This appears in an interview that can be found at: http://www.welt.de/daten/2002/01/07/0107_kfi30_626_8.htm#weitereartikel).

⁸⁶ Müller, Ray. 1998. Chapter 13 at 30:22.

⁸⁷ Müller, Ray. 1998. Chapter 13 at 32:22.

never made it.”⁸⁸ These two final quotations are interesting for us because the latter has been used to defend Riefenstahl and make her seem regretful. In fact, however, when put together with the previous quotation, it is clear that her regret stems not from the political influence that it may have had but because it ruined her career and her health. This may seem a harsh judgement to make towards Riefenstahl but it actually makes her argument all the stronger. She has never believed that she was guilty of anything because she made *Triumph of the Will* and so her regret in making it does not come from guilt. When trying to see how one should appreciate this film, Riefenstahl’s answer is to appreciate it as you would any film. The political aspects are not important for her, she comments that the film could have been on fruits or vegetables and she would have treated the subject matter in the same manner.⁸⁹ Although Riefenstahl did not like to discuss the film, there are a couple of other interviews that are interesting to look at when developing her point of view on how to appreciate *Triumph of the Will*.

As mentioned earlier, Riefenstahl had a comeback of sorts in the late sixties through the early seventies. During this time period she did a few interviews, with the hopes of clearing the image that plagued her and any new works she attempted. There are a couple of interviews, one done by Michel Delahaye and another by Gordon Hitchens, which are particularly interesting for us. They are interesting because Riefenstahl, although remaining with her same line of argument, that she did not create a work of propaganda but only a documentary, adds another reason for believing her film is not propaganda. This reason, which she does not mention in her later interviews, is that the work may have been used for propaganda but it was not created as such. In the Delahaye interview Riefenstahl says: “But my film is only a documentary. I showed what everyone was witness to or had heard about. And everyone was impressed by it. I am the one who fixed that impression, who registered it on film. And that is doubtless why people are angry with me: for having seized it, put it in a box.”⁹⁰ If we consider that quotation along with the following quotation from Hitchens we can see the formation of this argument. “I did not make a propaganda film – I have made a documentary film, and *they* make it

⁸⁸ Müller, Ray. 1998. Chapter 13 at 33:15.

⁸⁹ Müller, Ray. 1998. Chapter 13 at 25:10.

⁹⁰ Delahaye, Michel. “Leni Riefenstahl.” *Interviews With Film Directors*. Ed: Andrew Sarris. Avon Books: New York. 1969. p. 458.

propaganda, yes?”⁹¹ We can see here that Riefenstahl defends her work as not being a creation of propaganda but she does not deny that it may have been used as propaganda. She claims that the reason people oppose her work is because they are afraid of what it shows, afraid of how people were so devoted to Hitler, afraid of what was real. She did not make a film hoping to convince people of Hitler’s greatness, they were already convinced, and this is what she showed. It is likely that she dropped this argument later on because admitting that the film was used as propaganda might have made her position seem weaker. Regardless, Riefenstahl insisted that *Triumph of the Will* and other similar works of art should be judged on their aesthetic qualities. Artworks should not be considered politically because artists should not concern themselves with politics. For art to be true art, according to Riefenstahl, it must be apolitical.

Riefenstahl’s explanation of how to judge works of art, political or otherwise, hinges on the understanding that *Triumph of the Will* is a documentary and not propaganda. This determination is the main reason why Riefenstahl’s proposed appreciation is not sufficient for us in determining how political works of art should be considered. We have already determined, in the first chapter, that the film is indeed a work of propaganda. Riefenstahl holds a view that claims her film could not be both a documentary and a work of propaganda.⁹² She believes that whether a film was propaganda or not depends on the intentions of the creator. We have shown, in fact, that whether a film, or any other work of art, is propaganda or not depends on how it is used. There is no doubt that *Triumph of the Will* was used for propagandistic purposes, regardless of Riefenstahl’s intentions. Because of Riefenstahl’s insistence that her film was only a documentary, her entire theory falls by the simple fact that we are able to show that the film was also a work of propaganda.

There are other factors that lead us to believe that Riefenstahl’s work cannot only be seen aesthetically. The first of these is directly related to the previous point. That is that this film was used for purposes beyond aesthetic purposes. It is accepted that

⁹¹ Hitchens, Gordon. “Leni Riefenstahl Interviewed by Gordon Hitchens, October 11th, 1971, Munich.” 1973 *Film Culture*: 56 – 57: 94 – 121. Italics are in the text.

⁹² As we have already seen, this distinction is not necessary to make. A film can be, as Kinkel calls it, a “dokumentarischer Propagandafilm” or documentary propaganda, which we have determined is the case with *Triumph of the Will*.

Triumph of the Will was used to recruit people to the National Socialist party. To what extent it was used is undetermined because it seems that the majority of people were already in agreement with the party at the time of the film's creation. In any case this film served a purpose that went beyond the aesthetic and so our appreciation of it must do so also. Other considerations that Riefenstahl's argument overlooks are the obvious political content, the celebration of a political system long since determined as morally repulsive and that part of the aesthetic beauty that she presents so well is not due to her filming abilities but to the setup of the rally itself. Because *Triumph of the Will* is in fact a work of propaganda, because it overtly promotes a horrifying political party and because Riefenstahl refuses to see all of the factors involved that led to her film being so aesthetically pleasing, her theory on how to appreciate political works of art is unacceptable.⁹³

We will continue to look at the thoughts of other authors, less directly implicated in the film, in attempt to find a theory that we can be satisfied with, a theory that will answer the question of how we can appreciate political works of art sufficiently.

2.2 Mary Devereaux's Proposed Interpretation of *Triumph of the Will*

In the article "Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" Mary Devereaux poses the question of what our appreciation of the film should be. Devereaux's question is quite similar to ours but her focus is different. Her reason for feeling that the film is interesting for direct consideration is that she believes *Triumph of the Will* gives the viewer a beautiful experience of what is evil. It is for this reason, according to Devereaux, that the film should be a concern to the appreciation of art. When watching the film one feels uncomfortable, a feeling which Devereaux attributes to the combination of beautiful and evil. She does consider the possibility that the viewer's discomfort is due only to the fact that the film is a documentary and that the history that it shows is a very sad and scary part of our history. She believes that this is not enough of

⁹³ As we have seen in the first chapter, page 10, the determination of whether an artwork is propaganda or not is determined by how the work is used and also by the intrinsic characteristics of the work. *Triumph of the Will* is a propaganda film in both respects.

an explanation, however, because the film is more than just a documentary, it is a work of propaganda. This film is disconcerting to the viewer and yet there is something in it that makes us respond positively. In fact it is this positive reaction that is so disconcerting. It is Devereaux's goal to reconcile this positive reaction with the repulsive reaction we have to the content of the film.

Devereaux considers two arguments in defence of an autonomous appreciation of *Triumph of the Will*. The first is the focus on the aesthetic. Some argue that the film should be watched with only the consideration of the beautiful in mind, and because the film achieves this beauty so well we will of course react positively. Devereaux reminds us, however, that it is not that the film is necessarily beautiful but that the subject matter is portrayed beautifully. Devereaux says: "But the claim that a concern for beauty and stylistic innovation is the only thing going on in *Triumph of the Will* is undermined by the film itself. As we have seen, the film is aimed not simply at stylistic innovation and formally beautiful images, but at using these means to create a particular vision of Hitler and National Socialism."⁹⁴ The purely aesthetic argument is not enough for Devereaux and so she then moves on to the argument that we have credited to Riefenstahl, that being that the film is only a documentary. Like our conclusion, Devereaux feels that this argument is unsatisfactory. She claims that whether Riefenstahl intended to make propaganda is not what matters; "Did Leni Riefenstahl *intend* to make a work of propaganda? If the question is 'Did she think to herself, 'I'm going to make a work of Nazi propaganda'?' the answer is probably no. But this is the wrong question."⁹⁵ As we have already shown, the film was used as propaganda regardless of the intentions of the director and so her intentions do not concern us. This does, again, show that the film cannot be judged solely as a documentary. The film cannot be judged purely aesthetically or as only a documentary and so Devereaux feels that we must continue trying to see how we can appreciate this work of art that allows something that is "morally evil" to be presented as something beautiful.

Devereaux also raises other questions such as what it implies about each of our characters that we enjoy the film and why *Triumph of the Will* was judged so harshly

⁹⁴ Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 237.

⁹⁵ Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 240. Italics are in the text.

after the war compared to other, significantly more anti-Semitic films⁹⁶. Because these considerations are not of interest to our question, we will pass over them to her discussion of exactly how to approach an appreciation of the film. Devereaux poses her question, which is nearly the same as ours: “*Triumph of the Will* also raises pressing questions about the attitude we should adopt toward the film as art. Should we praise it for its widely acclaimed aesthetic qualities despite its celebration of National Socialism?”⁹⁷ The first possible answer to this question that she presents is that of a purely aesthetic judgement, to which she refers as formalism. Now, there are many types of formalism when it comes to aesthetic appreciation but in this case, formalism refers to the idea that a work of art should be appreciated for its formal qualities only. The formalist response is to sever the aesthetic evaluation from the moral, in order to only consider the aesthetic. Devereaux points out that if formalism works then it solves her problem but she believes that it does not work for *Triumph of the Will*. She explains why it is not a reasonable answer to the question of how to deal with this film: “The reason that the formalist strategy fails in the case of *Triumph of the Will* is that distancing ourselves from the morally objectionable elements of the film – its deification of Hitler, the story it tells

⁹⁶ This is a very interesting part of Riefenstahl’s story. During the Nazi regime there were countless works of propaganda made but after the fall of the regime none of these films were criticized to the degree that *Triumph of the Will* was and continues to be. On page 240, Devereaux comments on this discrepancy: “Many, like the feature film *Jud Süß*, had much wider popular success. And some, like the virulently anti-Semitic “documentary” *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew, 1940), had arguably as harmful an effect on German thought and behaviour.” Alice Schwartzer in her article „Leni Riefenstahl: Propagandistin oder Künstlerin?“, in *Emma*, claims something very similar. She says: „Diese Männer erhielten nicht nur Absolution, ihre Arbeit wird bis heute hochgeachtet. Nur bei der einen Frau versucht man, die Qualität der Arbeit mit der Fragwürdigkeit der Person zu erschüttern.“ Essentially she is saying that these other directors received not only absolution for the films that they had made but also their work is still honoured today. Schwartzer claims that this may be due to the fact that Riefenstahl was a woman and that it is only with women that we look to question the value of the work based on a doubtful personality. Not everyone would agree with this reasoning, however. (This article can be found at: http://www.emma.de/6320_65691_492031.html) So we are left with the question of why *Triumph of the Will* treated so differently, with a ban in Germany on the film itself and Riefenstahl being blacklisted from making films again, when these other directors were allowed to continue making films? Devereaux attempts an answer: “*Triumph of the Will* is distinguished from these and other Nazi propaganda films in two ways. First, it is extremely well made. (And the fact that it is an excellent work of propaganda is what makes it so disturbing.) But the film is more than first-class propaganda. It is also a fine work of art. A work of creative imagination, stylistically and formally innovative, its every detail contributes to its central vision and overall effect. The film is also very, very beautiful.” So Devereaux feels that it is received in a more severe manner because it is a work of art as well as one of propaganda. This seems like a reasonable theory; however there are many others, some of which seem just as reasonable. In any case it is interesting to note that there are no examples of documentaries or even propaganda films that have created as much or as long of lasting controversy, as it has been the case with *Triumph of the Will*.

⁹⁷ Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 242.

about him, the party and the German people, and so on – means distancing ourselves from the features that make it the work of art that it is.”⁹⁸ Devereaux is saying that the formalist approach falls short because if we are to only see the aesthetic qualities of this film, then we will miss a large part of why the film is outstanding. If we distance ourselves from the political aspects, or in the case of Devereaux, the evil aspects, then there is little about the film that makes it interesting, cinematically, historically or philosophically. For this reason, formalism cannot be the answer of determining how to judge *Triumph of the Will*.

Devereaux moves on to second suggestion of how to appreciate this film and it is what she calls “sophisticated formalism”. This version of formalism does not make the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities but instead focuses on the relation between a work’s form and its content. In this way, it includes not only the formal elements but also how these elements are used to convey the subject matter, and so emotions, to the viewer. Sophisticated formalism emphasizes the aesthetic qualities and how those qualities are put to use in order to create a complete work of art. This type of formalism says that we can look at the work of art as a whole, not have to distance ourselves from it in order to appreciate it and yet it does not require that our judgement of a work of art be influenced by the message of the art. In the case of *Triumph of the Will* this would mean that we could see the formal, aesthetic qualities and how they are used well to express a certain message but that we can separate that judgement from judging the message itself. This is a compromise of sorts but Devereaux still feels that this theory is inadequate. She believes that where formalism ignores the content, sophisticated formalism just aestheticises it. This theory only discusses the content to the extent of how well it is expressed which leads to the same problem as with regular formalism, it ignores the fact that the message is part of the artwork as a whole, part of what is necessary to consider in order to judge the film. Devereaux explains: “Even sophisticated formalism, with its richer concept of the aesthetic, makes it impossible to talk about the political meaning of *Triumph of the Will*, the truth or falsity of its picture of Hitler, whether it is good or evil, right or wrong – *while doing aesthetics*.”⁹⁹ Devereaux has, at this point,

⁹⁸ Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 243.

⁹⁹ Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 245. Italics are in the text.

concluded that in order to judge works of art that glorify evil, we cannot separate the various qualities of the work and judge each on their own merit. In order to have a complete appreciation of *Triumph of the Will* and works like it, we must see all the parts of the work and see that it is each part coming together that makes the work of art what it is.¹⁰⁰ Devereaux now moves to explaining what she believes to be the best way to approach *Triumph of the Will* and similar artworks.

Devereaux claims that at this point she is left with two options for determining how to judge *Triumph of the Will*. The first is to say that there is more to art than aesthetics, which would allow questions of politics and religion to fall out of the category of aesthetics and still be considered art. The second option is to say that there is more to aesthetics than beauty and form. This option broadens aesthetics to any part of a work of art that makes it that particular work of art. Devereaux feels that the second option is the best option because it is more inclusive of all art and so goes with this theory. She emphasises the fact that when watching *Triumph of the Will*, in order to appreciate it properly, we must see the moral issues as well as the formal qualities. Devereaux feels that if we segregate the morally questionable parts from the work as a whole, then we segregate the film as a work of art, and the film is more than this. Although it is possible to see the work for its formal qualities only, doing this results in not seeing the work at all. She concludes that the aesthetics must be seen as more than just beauty and form, it must also include the political, the moral, and everything else that a work of art can present to the viewer.

Devereaux also points out the fact that she is aware that *Triumph of the Will* is a morally dangerous film; it attempts to persuade the audience of repugnant political ideals and does so through the use of beauty. It is, in fact, the way that beauty is used in the film that makes it such a concern for Devereaux. With this in mind, she arrives at her

¹⁰⁰ It is important to note that although our questions are not exactly the same, the conclusions that Devereaux has reached to this point fit well with our theory also. Neither formalism nor sophisticated formalism are sufficient enough answers on how to judge political works of art either, just as Devereaux points out that they are not enough for works of art that glorify what is evil. Her arguments against the two types of formalism work for our argument as well in that the reason *Triumph of the Will* is so interesting is because if one watches it on a purely aesthetic level then one will miss why the film is remarkable, just as if one is to watch it for a solely political or historical level. Until this point in Devereaux's argument, we are in agreement and she has explicated for us why separating the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic is not an option for this particular artwork. It is at this point, however, that our points of view will diverge.

conclusion of how the film should be judged. Devereaux claims that the film cannot be seen as a great work of art because it has flaws, specifically flaws in its vision. She explains that most people see beauty as linked to goodness and so it is because *Triumph of the Will* links beauty to evil that it is such a concern. The flaw of this film is that it allows evil to be presented through beauty, a flaw that makes the film less than great. Devereaux holds that as art critics, we should not appreciate fully those works that connect beauty with evil. She claims that this idea comes from a Platonic tradition and that "...the unity of beauty and goodness is a standard by which art should be measured."¹⁰¹ Devereaux feels that this is the best way to hold judgment on works of art that glorify what is evil. She says:

We are justified in doing so [judging artworks more harshly if they connect beauty with evil] not just as moralists but as critics of art. This is not to say that works of art should only show good people doing good things, or that they are meant to endorse only conventional conceptions of goodness. Nor is it meant to deny that a work of art – even on as morally flawed as *Triumph of the Will* – may nevertheless be of artistic value. But there is reason, I am claiming, to withhold the highest aesthetic praise from works of art that present as beautiful, attractive, and good what, on reflection, can be seen as evil.¹⁰²

Devereaux does not deny that *Triumph of the Will* has a value, but its aesthetic value should be minimised. The value that she feels this film has is one of a historical document and a case study for propaganda. The role of this film should be only to help prevent a recurrence of fascism and to help understand ourselves as people. Devereaux posed the question of how to appreciate works of art that present the audience with a beautifully depicted instance of evil and answered that such works can be appreciated, just not as great works aesthetically. She claims that *Triumph of the Will* has a value but its artistic value is, at best, limited, and that any appreciation of this film must see the tragic flaw that it contains, combining beauty and evil. Devereaux concludes that the only way to be safe in appreciating works of art that contain this immense flaw is to acknowledge the flaw and then limit the positive aesthetic value placed on the work.

We now have a clear understanding of Devereaux's position on how to deal with *Triumph of the Will* and it is clear that her position stands very far away from Leni Riefenstahl's position. We have shown that Riefenstahl's position is unsatisfactory

¹⁰¹ Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 250.

¹⁰² Devereaux, Mary. 1998. p. 250.

because it is based on an assertion (that the film is only a documentary) that we have shown to be invalid. Devereaux's position, however, is no more sufficient and this is for a number of reasons. The first reason, which is somewhat secondary to our thesis but important nonetheless, is her allegation that the film is problematic because it is evil presented in a beautiful manner. There is no question that *Triumph of the Will* is a glorification of Hitler, of the ways of the Nazi regime and of fascism, but does it necessarily follow that it is a glorification of evil? This is not to ask the question as to whether or not Hitler was evil or if his actions were evil for this fact can be granted immediately. Instead it is the question that since Hitler was evil and the film deifies him, then does the film actually praise what is evil? It is not certain that this would actually be the case. When the film was created it could not have been seen, as Devereaux claims, as combining beauty and evil even if it was considered to be propaganda. The film does not show the beauty of evil, does not consider that Hitler is evil and yet somehow beautiful, in fact, it does not even allow for the possibility that Hitler could be anything less than the perfect leader for Germany. If we do not immediately grant that the film is showing, in a beautiful manner, that which is evil, then Devereaux's initial reason for exploring the film has no ground. She believes that the film is so intriguing to those who watch it because it is an amalgamation of beauty and evil but, in our opinion, there is an easier answer. The film is intriguing to those who see it because it shows an image of an evil man that we do not want to see, the film presents an evil human being as beautiful, not evil itself as beautiful. This distinction is important because with this we can see the beginning of the weakness of Devereaux's argument. Her final conclusion is that we cannot give full aesthetic appreciation to those works of art that make evil seem beautiful. Even if we are to agree with this conclusion it is not clear that *Triumph of the Will* fits into this category since the film does not show anything directly evil at all, and in fact evades all potential negative images of Hitler. There was some evidence of Hitler being evil at this point but retrospectively we know much more about how evil Hitler became later and this comes mainly from the knowledge that we have attained since the war. The contemporary consensus on the wickedness of Hitler is not something that the general public had when the film was made and the film does not in any way, give the audience an image of that wickedness. The film focuses only on the positive side of Hitler and his

party, we never actually experience anything evil, we only see the optimistic side of an evil human being. Whether or not *Triumph of the Will* is the right example of evil being shown in a beautiful manner is questionable and so this is one area where Devereaux's theory is feeble.

Even if we are to grant Devereaux the thesis of her article there are still other areas in which what she claims is not applicable to what we are looking for or they simply are unreasonable statements. It is important to note, at this point, that Devereaux's question is not the same as ours, although it may seem quite similar at first. If we go back to the previous paragraph we will see that Devereaux thinks the reason that one feels uncomfortable watching *Triumph of the Will* is because of the fact that it combines evil with beauty. Perhaps the reason that the viewer is uneasy is more to the point that the film presents, in a beautiful and persuasive manner, political ideals that we now know to be unacceptable. It is the political aspects of the film that are our major concern and not how evil is represented. Devereaux does not try to qualify her belief that the film is problematic because of the beauty/evil mixture, she just claims it and assumes that it is the reason behind some people saying that the film should not be watched. This interpretation plays down, however, the fact that it is a political film, and it is the political point of view that we find disturbing. Devereaux asks how we can judge works of art that unite beauty with evil and then uses *Triumph of the Will* as the key example. Whether or not it is a good example for this question, we have shown, is uncertain, but regardless of this it is not our question and so should not be confused with what we are attempting to determine. Our question is how to appreciate political works of art and the reason that it stands out from what Devereaux is asking is because there is no easy distinction between good and bad political views. *Triumph of the Will* presents an intolerable political viewpoint, but we are looking for a way to judge all political works of art that are obviously political, and that does not include only those that are obviously evil as this is not an easy judgement to make with political works of art, usually.

The final, and most significant, criticism of Devereaux's argument on how to appreciate *Triumph of the Will* is that the conclusion is both somewhat contradictory to what she says in the rest of the article and unreasonable as an answer to our question. To say that her conclusion contradicts her argument is a bold statement to make but it is not

unfounded. If we consider first that Devereaux, as we have explained, feels that formalism is an unacceptable answer to how to judge the film, then her answer too is unacceptable for the same reasons. She claims that formalism, or even sophisticated formalism, will not allow a proper appreciation of the film because it is the work as a whole that makes the film what it is, and not its individual parts. Since we accepted this earlier in her argument then it must be applied throughout and when applied to her conclusion it does not work. Devereaux's conclusion seems to insist on the same ideas as formalism except that the focus is, instead of on the formal qualities, on the non-formal qualities. She is asking us to ignore the aesthetic but see the film for its historical and political value. This is contradictory because she has stated earlier that such a distinction cannot be made if we are to view *Triumph of the Will* properly. The second way in which Devereaux contradicts herself is that she claims that aesthetics must be seen as something more than beauty and form but she then says that we should restrict positive aesthetic appreciation to only those works that promote beauty and goodness. This is a problem, clearly as is shown by *Les fleurs du mal*¹⁰³, a work which, according to Devereaux, would not even be afforded an aesthetic appreciation. If the study of aesthetics should be something greater than the study of beauty, why has it become necessary to only appreciate those artworks that promote beauty? For these two reasons Devereaux's conclusion cannot be accepted as it stands.

If her conclusion were acceptable, however, it is still unreasonable for our question because it is not acceptable to say that we will reserve positive aesthetic appreciation for those works that unite beauty with goodness. Our question relies on the notion that this film already has been given a nearly unanimous positive aesthetic appreciation, but that it is promoting unacceptable political ideals. There is also the problem that we may not be able to determine for great lengths of time, which political ideals are acceptable (and so works of art representing them should be allowed a positive appreciation), and which are unacceptable. Again, in the case of *Triumph of the Will* it is very clear that these particular political ideals are repugnant but this would have been less clear when the film was made. Does this mean that at one point a work of art can hold the highest aesthetic judgement only to later be determined aesthetically unacceptable? A

¹⁰³ Baudelaire, Charles. *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Gallimard: Paris. 1996.

work that accomplishes an aesthetic achievement does so on all levels and so cannot be ignored because the content has been found to be displeasing or even evil. Devereaux's conclusion to withhold positive aesthetic judgement from those works of art that do not promote beauty and goodness would lead us to the conclusion, since few political standpoints are ontologically "good", that political works of art, for the most part, should not receive positive aesthetic appreciation. Clearly, ignoring the aesthetic value of political works of art is not the answer we are searching for when trying to determine how to appreciate such artworks. Another criticism can be made against Devereaux in that she uses very simple dichotomies to represent very complex notions. She opposes what is beautiful to what is ugly and what is good to what is evil. In *Triumph of the Will* the distinctions are not that simple. There are very important notions, such as the dramatic and the powerful, among others, that play a very important role and that Devereaux completely disregards.

Leni Riefenstahl and Mary Devereaux hold two very different views on how to appreciate *Triumph of the Will*. Neither author presents a theory that is an acceptable answer to our question, but there are still a few things that we have learned from these authors that will help us in finding an answer. The first is that this film, as with other political works of art, cannot be judged solely on the basis of the content. If the aesthetic dimension made by the director is ignored then part of what the film is, is ignored and so any appreciation will not be full. With that in mind, it is also unacceptable to judge the artwork based only on the aesthetic qualities that it has. Again, if we are to look at only one aspect of the work we will lose why the work is significant. *Triumph of the Will* is a perfect example of why our question is so difficult to answer because as soon as we segregate the political from the aesthetic we see that the importance of the film dissipates. It is easy to say that aesthetically it is genius and politically it is unacceptable but in saying this we miss entirely the fact that it is the combination of these two factors that has led us to our question in the first place. So, we now know that we cannot appreciate political works of art by separating the political from the aesthetic. We also know that we cannot simply ignore works of art that are political, because these works will be created and they will persuade people through the use of aesthetics, both positively and

negatively. Now that we see that neither what Riefenstahl nor Devereaux presents are reasonable solutions to the question of how to appreciate political works of art we will continue to look at other perspectives. Both authors have helped us arrive at certain conclusions and so as we continue we will be able to refine an acceptable conclusion to the question that we have raised.

2.3 Other interpretations on the appreciation of *Triumph of the Will*

2.3.1 Siegfried Kracauer

One author that is important to look at is Siegfried Kracauer because what he has written on the film has influenced countless writers since. This is particularly pertinent because he has a very negative impression of the film and his impression is, at least in part, based on an incorrect understanding of the rally's creation. As mentioned in chapter one, because of the book credited to Riefenstahl that was not written by her, Kracauer was under the impression that the 1934 Nuremberg rally was designed with the help of Leni Riefenstahl for the purpose of making a film. He says, of the rally: "...the Convention could evolve literally in a space and time of its own; thanks to perfect manipulation, it became not so much a spontaneous demonstration as a gigantic extravaganza with nothing left to improvisation."¹⁰⁴ He claims that the film represents a complete transformation of reality and that precise plans were drawn up so that the film could be presented in the manner that it was. We have already shown that Riefenstahl was not involved in the planning of the rally, neither in the physical appearance nor in the events that would take place, but that does not mean that Kracauer's point is wasted. In fact there are two interesting sides to what he is saying. The first, which has been mentioned, is that his interpretation has influenced a great number of contemporary writers on the subject. In fact, Devereaux is just one of many that cite Kracauer as a source for information on the details surrounding the planning of the rally.

¹⁰⁴ Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton University Press: Princeton. 1970. p. 300.

His point is also important for another reason as well: it emphasises the planning that went into the rally even though Riefenstahl was not involved in said planning, it is very clear that each step was carefully determined long before the crowds began to arrive at Nuremberg. This realisation brings us to another interesting point, which is the aesthetics of the rally itself. The main reason we have determined that the aesthetic and the political cannot be separated when judging *Triumph of the Will* is because in looking at only one side we miss the true value to the film. Part of the reason, as is now clear, that we would be missing something if we focused on each part individually is that the rally itself had aesthetic appeal. The pleasing sensation of the aesthetic that we have when watching *Triumph of the Will* is due to Riefenstahl's editing technique and her filming abilities but also the look and feel of the event itself. This rally was so well put together that it would have been impressive to watch, even if there had been no fancy editing or trick lighting. For this reason the aesthetic, in this case, can absolutely not be separated from the political and so our appreciation cannot separate them either. Kracauer's point is weakened due to the fact that it is based on false information, but that does not mean that it is without its value and so we will continue to look at what else he has to say on how we should interpret this film.

One reason that Kracauer finds the film to be problematic, along the same lines as the fact that it transforms reality, is that it focuses on emotions and not the intellect. He feels that *Triumph of the Will* asks the viewer to not think and that this should be a concern for any viewer. He criticises the unrealistic nature of what is presented as a documentary: "...from the real life of the people was built up a faked reality that was passed off as the genuine one; but this bastard reality, instead of being an end itself, merely served as the set dressing for a film that was then to assume the character of an authentic documentary."¹⁰⁵ This comment shows just how negatively Kracauer feels about the film. He talks about the techniques used: constant movement to show that life is in transition, the presentation of mass ornaments to give the film more weight, the complete construction of a non-existent reality; all of which he despises for they are used to convince people of something horrible. He, like Devereaux, comments on the uneasy feeling we get when watching the film and feels that it comes from the fact that we are

¹⁰⁵ Kracauer, Siegfried. 1970. p. 301.

watching a total disregard for all traditional human values, a manipulation of the bodies and souls of a whole people. This film is a total exploitation of a reality that never existed.

For Kracauer, *Triumph of the Will* is the antithesis of a documentary or of anything beautiful. He claims that it was never about showing how the party really was but all about omitting what the party really was about. For Kracauer, this film can show nothing but what is ugly and harmful in humanity and so has no value beyond this. Kracauer's point is as far to one side as Riefenstahl's is to the other. Although Kracauer's opinion is adamant on one side of the argument, just as Riefenstahl's is to the other, and based on a certain amount of misinformation, it helps our search for an answer. As with Riefenstahl and Devereaux, in not accepting Kracauer's theory we are closer to arriving at our own theory. Kracauer shows us that the event plays nearly as much of a role, aesthetically, as the film does. He also shows us that in downplaying the aesthetic worth of the film, it becomes something very ugly and very scary. The important thing to remember here, though, is that, upon first viewing the film, the audience may be uneasy but rarely would describe the film as ugly or scary. There is a pleasing reaction to this film due to the aesthetically pleasing images and therefore these cannot be ignored in the name of appalling political ideals. If we were to disregard the persuasive abilities of this film and films like it we would put ourselves in a very dangerous position where it would be much easier to use pleasing aesthetics to convince us of bad political ideals. This is part of the reason why it is so important to try to find a way to appreciate such works of art and still be able to see the work as a whole.

2.3.2 Richard Meran Barsam

Another author that is interesting to look at is Richard Meran Barsam. Barsam interviewed Leni Riefenstahl in 1973 for a film journal and then in 1975 wrote the *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will*. His position is interesting for us because, first, he has spent a great deal of time and energy on this topic but also because he holds a rather moderate position. In the interview with Leni Riefenstahl, Barsam comments on the fact that Riefenstahl argues that artists must remain separate and independent from the material world. He feels that Hitler may have chosen her because, in part, of this

idealistic stance she held on art and artists. Although it is unclear whether he agrees or disagrees with Riefenstahl, Barsam seems to admire her strength in standing by what she believes in. He says: "And despite her efforts and those of her supporters to create a fair climate in which the public might evaluate her work, she remains a figure of scorn and shame. This is the paradox of Leni Riefenstahl and the ironic reward of a lifetime which she thought was devoted to artistic integrity and independence."¹⁰⁶ He goes on to note other paradoxes that exist within the films of Leni Riefenstahl. He points out that part of what is so interesting about *Triumph of the Will* is its ability to attract and repel at the same time. Barsam also mentions how this film and her *Olympia* films come together in such an odd combination of documentary and propaganda at the same time. He can see that the film is not innocent, not free of moral and political shame but he does feel that artistically, this should not necessarily be a problem. Barsam claims: "*Triumph* is an aberration which will always weaken her [Leni Riefenstahl's] reputation, but it should not be allowed to obscure the beauty and strength of what remains of her achievement."¹⁰⁷ This assertion is a fascinating one as it is something that we have assumed to be true in formulating our question and yet, after reading Kracauer, we may question it again. Barsam allows us to hold onto the notion that the content of this film is distressing, yes, but the film is still a work of art, a very well made work of art, and this point should not be lost in any discussion of the film.

Much of what Barsam has to say in the *Filmguide* remains neutral. He attempts to explain the film through technical details and makes few judgemental comments, either on the value of the film or the guilt or innocence of Leni Riefenstahl. He does not really develop any view of his own on the film but does explicate the general feelings around it. Barsam states: "Today, we too acknowledge *Triumph of the Will* as a superb example of political propaganda even as we are repelled by its vision. The film is both documentary and propaganda, and moreover it succeeds in fusing politics with art. Critics of the film, however, have paid less attention to its artistic achievement than to its politics..."¹⁰⁸ This

¹⁰⁶ Barsam, Richard Meran. "Leni Riefenstahl: Artifice and Truth in a World Apart." *Film Comment*: #32, 1973. p. 33.

¹⁰⁷ Barsam, Richard Meran. 1973. p. 34.

¹⁰⁸ Barsam, Richard Meran. *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington. 1975. p. 67.

is one of the problems that we have seen and shown to be unacceptable when attempting to appreciate this film. It is easy to see why one might feel tempted to focus on the political side since it is such a fascinatingly horrific part of our history, however in doing that we do not do justice to our appreciation of the film. Barsam has allowed us to see why it is necessary to not get caught up in one side of this argument and has reminded us that it is possible to have an appreciation that would include both factors. Although Barsam does not offer an answer for how we should appreciate political works of art, he does help us to stay on the right track.

2.3.3 Ken Kelman

Ken Kelman in his article “Propaganda as Vision – *Triumph of the Will*” is one of a very few authors who supports Leni Riefenstahl and the creation of her documentary. He claims that the problem with many people who study this film is that they somehow feel that propaganda is not art or is somehow less of an art but he says that this is not the case. Kelman asserts that the film is a documentary, which does not exclude it from being propaganda, but even more so, it does not exclude it from being art. He says that it is a documentary because nothing is added to the footage that Riefenstahl shows, but through her film she is able to turn real life into grand illusion. Kelman feels that even though the film was used as propaganda it is such an outstanding example of what is possible with a documentary that it needs to be watched and admired. He claims:

Even in this most extravagant and romantic passage the technical bounds of ‘documentary’ are never strained beyond the breaking point...Thus Riefenstahl ultimately succeeds by virtue of her objective genre and material, combined with her intensely but subtly subjective vision, in creating perhaps the definitive cinematic obliteration of the division between fantasy and ‘reality’.¹⁰⁹

The reason that this quotation is so interesting is that it shows a very intriguing perspective on the film that has not been considered before. We have taken a great deal of time and energy to explain that the film is both a documentary and propaganda and that it is a great example of propaganda, but we have not looked at how great of an example of documentary it is. Kelman seems to say that because it does such an amazing job of showing reality in a non-realistic manner this film is sort of a goal that other

¹⁰⁹ Kelman, Ken. “Propaganda as Vision – *Triumph of the Will*.” *Film Culture*: Spring 1965. p. 166.

documentaries could attempt to attain. This seems contradictory to many of the authors who hold that since it is propaganda it loses its credibility as art, or even the more moderate authors who believe that because it is propaganda it could not be a good documentary. Kelman is able to show us that the fact that *Triumph of the Will* was used as propaganda does not make it a bad documentary but in fact a great documentary. It is the fascinating manner in which Leni Riefenstahl is able to present reality so extraordinarily that the film is an excellent example of documentary¹¹⁰.

2.3.4 David Stewart Hull

The final author that we will consider in this chapter is David Stewart Hull, who Riefenstahl mentions as one of the many authors that have judged her unfairly. Much of what Hull has to say on the film is a pseudo-empirical account of how the film came about. We say pseudo-empirical because it is heavily based on the information provided in Kracauer's book that has since been shown to be false. Hull uses this information to, essentially, attack Leni Riefenstahl as an immoral and revolting human being. His attack on Riefenstahl is not of interest to us as we have decided that the question of Riefenstahl's moral guilt is not related to our question and will not help us in any way to reach the conclusions that we are hoping to reach. The reason that we mention it here is that David Stewart Hull, even with his apparent disgust for Riefenstahl, still believes that her work should be studied. He says: "For her achievements on this level, she has been widely and no doubt justly condemned...and it seems unlikely that history will reverse the verdict. But it is also necessary to assess her as an artist, accountable to another kind of history..."¹¹¹ Hull is saying that regardless of how much one dislikes Riefenstahl personally and how difficult it may be to support the work of someone we may disagree with morally, to such a degree, we must still make ourselves look at Riefenstahl as an artist. Here, we must be careful for he is not asking us to separate the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic, which we have already shown to be impossible with this example. Instead he is asking us to see the film as a work of art and a work of propaganda, a work of history and a work of documentary, but not to see it as a personal creation of Leni

¹¹⁰ Kinkel (p. 79ss.) talks about how *Triumph of the Will* does not just represent reality but also constructs reality to a certain degree.

¹¹¹ Hull, David Stewart. *Film in the Third Reich*. Simon and Schuster: New York. 1973. p. 140.

Riefenstahl. Hull feels that whether or not we believe the film should have been made and regardless of how much we may feel that Riefenstahl is not right in her defence of the film as an innocent documentary, we must see the film as art and appreciate it as such. Hull's point of view is interesting for us because, although we have emphasised the fact that we are unable to separate the formal characteristics of the film from the political aspects and still give the film a proper appreciation, we have not mentioned the fact that we must still attempt to adopt a certain emotional distance. This may be difficult to do given the subject matter that is presented and we are not saying that the film should be watched without emotion but that these emotions should not be the sole basis for our appreciation, positive or negative, of the film.

We now understand how *Triumph of the Will* came to be, why it is an important example of a political work of art as well as the basic arguments as to how the work should be appreciated. Of these arguments there is not one that satisfies our question of how to appreciate political works of art, but the search has helped us to arrive at a certain number of conclusions. We have learned that it is not possible to separate the aesthetic from the political, as the formalists would suggest, because neither side allows for a complete appreciation of the work of art. We know that we cannot allow ourselves to ignore the aesthetic side to political works of art, suggested by the position of the moralists, to simply treat such works as though they were not art, for the persuasive side to pleasing aesthetics can be dangerous if we choose to ignore it. We have determined that the intentions of the author, although they provide an interesting background information, cannot be used to determine the value of the artwork, as psychologism has argued, aesthetically or otherwise. We have seen that when a documentary is used as propaganda it does not mean that the documentary has failed but perhaps that the documentary has been made particularly well¹¹². We have also been advised not to allow our appreciation of the film to be determined exclusively by our emotional reaction to the it, but slightly more by a cognitive approach to aesthetics, although we do not accept this

¹¹² Often the goal of a documentary is to expose a viewpoint that perhaps is not what is commonly accepted. If the documentary can actually persuade people of the point it is trying to make, then the director has clearly brought the information together in powerful way. There is currently a lean towards referring to documentaries as filmic essays. Like essays a documentary is a director presenting an argument, visually, to and audience.

theory entirely either. Probably the most important thing when looking at what these other authors have shown us is that there is no easy answer to this question. We have looked at the points of view of Riefenstahl, Devereaux, Kracauer, Barsam, Kelman and Hull and these are just the very tip of the iceberg of what has been written on Riefenstahl and *Triumph of the Will*.

At this point it is important to explain although there are, undeniably, a countless number of authors that could be used in this discussion, certain determinations had to be made and each of these authors were chosen for good reason. There may be a few more authors that appear in Chapter 3 but essentially the authors discussed in this chapter explain clearly the various interpretations of *Triumph of the Will*. Each author used for this chapter was chosen because they offered a strong argument for one side of the dispute or another. Riefenstahl's argument could not be ignored for it stands against so many others and she has the greatest stake in this discussion. Devereaux offered a question, of all the other authors, that was most closely linked to ours, and Kracauer has influenced nearly everyone who has written on the film since his book was published. Barsam, Kelman and Hull are mentioned by Riefenstahl, other authors and by one another as having a particularly interesting standpoint and this is why they were used. This is in no way claiming to be an exhaustive explanation of all there is to be said on how to interpret *Triumph of the Will* but hopefully it will give a solid foundation to the various arguments that exist. We are now at a point where it is necessary to attempt our own theory of how to appreciate political works of art, a theory that can apply to cases as clear-cut as this one, as well as to cases much less obvious.

Chapter 3

The Appreciation of Political Works of Art

We originally posed the question of how to appreciate works of art that openly represent negative political ideals in a positive manner; if such an appreciation could be based solely on aesthetic qualities or not and if not, on what it should be based. What we have found so far is that any appreciation of overtly political works of art cannot be done through studying only their aesthetic qualities. We used the example of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* to show that if we are to look only at the aesthetic qualities of the film, then we miss a great deal of why the film is so powerful. We are clear that it is not an option to see a political work of art only through the lens of artistic beauty, nor is it acceptable to see it solely as a work of political propaganda because if we were to do that, then again, we would overlook the complete value of the work. Our original question of whether or not the aesthetic qualities are a sufficient condition for the appreciation of political works of art has been answered. We can now easily see that the aesthetic qualities are, in fact, not sufficient when dealing with political works of art. We have, however, been unable to arrive at a theory that would allow us to appreciate such a work of art and that would incorporate fairly both the aesthetic and political qualities. We will now begin attempting to answer the more important question of how to appreciate such works of art, if the aesthetic qualities are not sufficient in said appreciation. Our search for a theory, to this point, has only considered theories that are directly related to *Triumph of the Will* and, since we have so far failed to come up with a satisfactory answer, we will continue the search with a broader scope. We will look at various theories on the appreciation of art and see if perhaps one of these theories will meet the requirements necessary to judge all political works of art fairly.

One of the most common types of theories suggested for judging artworks are theories of autonomy. We have determined that a theory of autonomy will best serve our purposes because we wish to maintain the aesthetic importance of any artwork. If we were to suggest that all works of art should be seen from a political perspective, we would diminish the aesthetic value and we want to avoid politicizing works that are not political at the outset. Because we want to avoid making political that which is not political, then it is a theory of autonomy that is necessary for us. What strength does an autonomy theory have that other theories of art appreciation do not have?

We will begin this chapter with a look at this question, in 3.1, and attempt to justify our choice of an autonomy thesis for the appreciation of political works of art. What is meant by a theory of autonomy of art for aesthetic appreciation? That is a question that is not easily answered and so in section 3.2 we will look at some of the most representative autonomy theories that presently exist. From here, in 3.2.1, we will be able to see, like with the various interpretations on how to deal with *Triumph of the Will*, that there is no theory that will satisfactorily deal with all cases of political works of art. These theories will, however, allow us to develop the criteria for what a theory would have to include if it were to apply in an acceptable manner to the appreciation of political works of art. The result, presented in section 3.3, will be an *outline of a theory* that could potentially lead to a solution to our question of *how to deal with such works of art in a complete and fair manner*.

3.1 Why a Thesis of Autonomy?

We have mentioned already that for our purposes, a theory of the autonomous appreciation of art would best serve our needs. This determination only came after a consideration of other theories on the appreciation of art and these theories should be shown so it is clear why they are not sufficient as an answer to our question. Our primary source for this explanation will be an article by Monroe C. Beardsley entitled: "Art and Its Cultural Context."¹¹³ In this essay Beardsley explains that he is fearful of theories of

¹¹³ Beardsley, Monroe C. "Art and Its Cultural Context" *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*. Ed. Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen. Cornell University Press: Ithaca. 1982. pps. 352 – 370.

art that focus too much on the cultural context of the work and not the work itself. He looks at three theories of art appreciation, other than a thesis of autonomy, and shows why each of them is inadequate. Beardsley then explains why a theory of autonomy is better and how this theory keeps the distinction of art from other aspects of culture intact, a distinction he feels is essential for any thesis on art appreciation. This article makes very apparent why a version of the autonomy thesis is the best choice when dealing with the appreciation of any work of art, even if the work is political.

Beardsley points out that contemporary philosophy of art does not seem to be an attempt to reconcile the various forms of art with other parts of culture. By other parts of culture, he is referring to things like politics and religion. Although this connection between art and other factors of culture is, to a certain degree, a necessary consideration to make, when we look at art, Beardsley feels that we need to be careful not to allow these other components to control the creation or appreciation of art. He feels that when looking at art, the focus needs to be on the aesthetic qualities primarily. Beardsley writes: “This theoretical task has as its practical analogue that of finding ways of preserving and enlarging the capacity of the arts to play their distinctive and needed roles in promoting the quality of social life, protecting them against the enormous political and economic forces that constantly threaten to control, distort, repress or trivialize them.”¹¹⁴ He makes clear, in this passage, that we cannot allow forces other than aesthetic ones to determine how we view art and the aesthetic. Another point that Beardsley brings up in this passage that he later explains further is that art has a “distinctive and needed role” in our society. This point is essential in understanding why a theory of art appreciation should be autonomous. Here Beardsley sets up the basis for his argument. We can see that he feels it is not only important to keep art separate from outside factors when appreciating it, but also that this separation is essential. Essentially, Beardsley presents us with a *positive argument for autonomy*. This is helpful because so far we have presented only negative arguments against other theories.

Another point that Beardsley makes that is part of the foundation of his argument for an autonomy thesis of art appreciation is his definition of culture. Although not

¹¹⁴ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 352.

directly important now, we will soon see how his definition comes to support the distinct qualities that he believes art to hold. Of culture, Beardsley claims: “When I speak of cultural competence as something possessed by a collective entity, a society, I mean this literally: societies have such properties, which cannot be reduced to properties of their members, though of course they are dependent on properties of their members...”¹¹⁵ This explanation of culture and society says that although societies have certain characteristics, characteristics coming from the individuals within the society, and are made up of individuals, this does not mean that each of the individuals making up the society contains each of those characteristics. The culture of the society is determined by the manner in which the individuals act within the society and so culture is created by individuals but is left to represent the entire society. It seems that this explanation of culture and society is acceptable. When considering the characteristics that describe a society it is clear that such characteristics do not describe each person living within the society. Beardsley’s explanation of culture and society is acceptable and will be important later for seeing how important it is for art to be seen as distinct from other parts of society.

Before Beardsley explicates his own autonomy thesis he shows why other attempts at showing how art should be appreciated are not acceptable. The *first argument* that he considers is that of John Dewey in his book *Art as Experience*.¹¹⁶ Here, Dewey explains his argument against an autonomous theory of art appreciation:

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which aesthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”¹¹⁷

Dewey’s position, as is seen in this quotation, is that the role of anyone speaking of philosophy of art should be to show how art comes together with other aspects of experience. He wants to say that the aesthetic is not different from and so should not be

¹¹⁵ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 353.

¹¹⁶ Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. Capricorn Books: New York. 1958.

¹¹⁷ Dewey, John. 1958. p. 3.

separated from other areas of life. Beardsley disagrees with Dewey. Beardsley feels that Dewey's argument rests on an impossible notion.

For Beardsley, it is not actually possible to put a wall around an artwork and separate it entirely from its "conditions of origin and operation in experience." This may seem an odd argument for Beardsley to make, since he is arguing for an autonomous appreciation of art but he explains that saying art can be entirely separated from culture is like saying that the state can be completely separated from religion: it is an ideal and not a reality. Beardsley is willing to accept that art is influenced by outside factors, but we must be careful of the strength of this influence. He says: "We can say that art is continuous with other segments of culture, if we don't overstress the term, for we don't want to deny emergence of genuine novelty, and that is, strictly speaking, *discontinuity* – in both nature and culture. We must allow for the possibility that art has distinctive functions and purposes and cultural roles..."¹¹⁸ Beardsley explains that art can be seen as created within culture but does not entail a necessary connection between the two. For him, one of the most important factors of art is its opportunity for novelty, and this type of artwork cannot be seen as dependent on culture. Beardsley insists on the fact that art plays a distinctive role in society, something he will explain better later in the argument, and part of this distinctive role is being innovative and being determined by nothing outside of itself. Dewey's explanation of why art should be appreciated through the consideration of factors outside the artwork rests on a premise that there is an option other than this, which Beardsley, in my view, shows does not exist. Everyone will appreciate a work of art from within their own cultural standpoint, this cannot be avoided, but this does not mean the same thing as saying that all artworks are then determined by that cultural standpoint.

The next theory that Beardsley criticizes as deficient as a theory for art appreciation is the Marxist's theory. It should be made clear at the outset that this is in no way an attempt to entirely explain and critique the value of a Marxist appreciation of art. We will look only at the general understanding of how to appreciate art according to the Marxists but this does not mean that we have considered every possible interpretation of

¹¹⁸ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 355.

the Marxist position on art. Beardsley refers to a quotation by Terry Eagleton in order to explain the basis of the Marxist position: “The notorious question which some Marxist criticism has addressed to literary works to assess their value – is its political tendency correct, does it further the cause of the proletariat? – entails the shelving of other questions about the work as ‘merely’ aesthetic.”¹¹⁹ Beardsley uses this quotation to show that the Marxist position entails a loss of the possibility that an artwork be only aesthetic. He acknowledges that for most Marxists being aesthetically superior is mutually inclusive of presenting the proper political viewpoint; that a positive aesthetic experience is directly due to a positive political position being presented. Beardsley disagrees with this inherent connection. As we have already seen, Beardsley feels that art is, in part, connected to the culture it is created in but that art needs to be seen as aesthetic first, with other potential factors being considered later. Beardsley spends some time further explaining the Marxist position before he makes entirely clear why he feels it does not work.

Beardsley restates the main thesis of the Marxist argument as such: “But the general thrust is evident: nothing important is to be found in a distinctive sphere of the arts; they count as significant cultural objects only insofar as they serve political purposes.”¹²⁰ Again, we make no claim here to be describing every Marxist position but only to give the general significance of what they say. Beardsley’s first reaction to the Marxists is one that we have already seen him develop. He has made clear that part of what separates art from other areas of culture, in this case politics, is the opportunity for the work to be novel and to change what is generally accepted. There are two points that Beardsley wants to make here. The first is made most clearly by another quotation by Eagleton: “Moreover, it *is* true that all major art is ‘progressive,’ in the limited sense that any art sealed from the significant movements of its epoch, divorced from some sense of the historically central, relegates itself to minor status.”¹²¹ Here Beardsley, through Eagleton, shows that great artwork, the artwork that remains important over the years, is the artwork that is innovative and progressive and so goes against what its culture has determined as valuable art. These artworks are the ones that change how art is created

¹¹⁹ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 356.

¹²⁰ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 357.

¹²¹ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 357.

and how it is viewed and this is why their importance remains. The second point that Beardsley wishes to make is that the suggestion that only political works of art have value has been proven false with many of the examples of art that are still appreciated aesthetically today that have no political value. This is not to say that they were not politically or socially influenced because this is something we cannot know, the point is more that they have no political purpose now and yet are still seen as great works of art. The only reason for such an appreciation must then be due to their aesthetic value.

Beardsley goes on to consider other variations of the Marxist appreciation of art but each one, he feels, puts too much emphasis on the relation of culture and society to the value of the artwork. Beardsley's main argument against the Marxists goes back to his explanation of culture and society. He feels that it is important to remember that although a society has certain characteristics, it is not necessary that each of the members of that society possess each of those characteristics. Beardsley reminds us that individuals create works of art, most often, and so it is entirely possible for the characteristics of the individual not to be in line with the characteristics of the society within which the artist is creating. Beardsley outlines this position: "...emphasis is on the individual person, who may in an indirect way be reflecting significant features of his culture even when he rebels against it or deliberately deviates from it, but whose rebellion or deviation cannot be completely explained by his acculturation."¹²² Beardsley's point is that even if we see that the individual acts within his or her culture, that does not mean that all of his or her actions are determined by said culture. Beardsley has shown that because art is always pushing and deviating from what is "normal" and because art is created by individuals and not by cultures as a whole, the Marxist view on how to appreciate art cannot be applied¹²³.

Beardsley has done well to see the importance of having an autonomous theory of art but there is one other theory of appreciation that he considers before accepting an

¹²² Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 359.

¹²³ The Marxist approach presents other problems as well as can be seen in the conclusion arrived at by Peter Nowotny who claims that *Triumph of the Will* is neither a documentary nor a work of propaganda. (*Leni Riefenstahls « Triumph des Willens ». Zur Kritik dokumentarischer Filmarbeit im NS-Faschismus*, Münster, Arbeitshefte zur Medientheorie und Medienpraxis, Bd. 3, 1981. p. 149.). Clearly this conclusion is not acceptable for us because we have already shown this film to be applicable in both of these categories.

autonomy theory. This final theory that he considers is a *semiotic* one, which in its most basic form says that an artwork is a sign of something else, namely the culture in which it was created. Beardsley points out that even if we are to accept a semiotic position on artistic appreciation, this theory neglects asking the question of what value artworks hold outside of being a sign for something else. He feels that the intrinsic value of artworks is what makes them important and he believes that this value is: "...making the world friendly as well as habitable..."¹²⁴ which has nothing at all to do with signs. The final argument that Beardsley presents for an autonomous theory of art is that the value of art is something that is autonomous from all other aspects of life. He explains that art has, what he calls, a "fictive character"¹²⁵ which is to say that all artworks pretend to be something that they are not. This is why art stands alone; this is the factor that distinguishes art from all other areas of culture and why art can be appreciated on a primarily aesthetic basis.

Beardsley holds that artworks can only serve their function as "fictive" works that make our world more friendly and inhabitable if we allow them to do so. In showing why non-autonomous theories do not do justice to the art that they are attempting to appreciate, Beardsley has developed his position for an autonomy thesis of art appreciation. Beardsley is able to summarise why he believes an autonomous appreciation of art is necessary as follows:

But individual artworks cannot carry out this function, cannot serve us in this unifying, reconciling way, unless we grant them a measure of independence and autonomy, a sphere of influence all their own, in which they can be respected as individuals. We have to approach them in something like a suppliant mood, setting aside for the moment concerns about their cultural connections, their causes and effects – through not, of course, their semiotic aspects, their meanings and references, when such they have – if they are to realize their potentialities and serve us well in their fashion.¹²⁶

Beardsley has shown that in order for us to appreciate art in a manner so as not to lessen the innate value of art in our lives, it is necessary for the appreciation to be of the autonomous sort. We have seen why other theories of how art should be appreciated fall short of what it is that we are looking for and so we will continue to search for a theory of

¹²⁴ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 368.

¹²⁵ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 369.

¹²⁶ Beardsley, Monroe C. 1982. p. 370.

appreciation of political artworks with this criterion, first of it ensuring the basic autonomy of the artwork.

3.2 Various Forms of the Autonomy Thesis

The autonomy thesis takes many forms and in order to explain the various forms and their potential applications, we will look at an article by Göran Hermerén entitled “The Autonomy of Art.”¹²⁷ In this article, Hermerén discusses twelve versions of the autonomy thesis. He outlines his intentions early on in the chapter, intentions that are very similar to our own in this section: “The purpose of this article is to outline a few distinctions by means of which it should be possible to discuss the problem of the autonomy of art in a rational manner.”¹²⁸ We will attempt to explicate the various interpretations of the autonomy thesis in a manner that will allow us to plainly apply the thesis to our question. As mentioned earlier, the article outlines twelve different versions of the thesis. We will look at most of these but not all, as some of them are already clearly not applicable to our question and so need not be considered.

The first thesis of interest to us is the third that Hermerén mentions. He calls this theory “*Autonomous Origins*”¹²⁹ and says that versions of it appear as such: “Interpretations as well as analyses and explications of works of art (paintings, poems, novels, etc.) (a) are always checked, or (b) can always be checked, or (c) can only be checked, or (d) should always be checked, against the qualities of the work of art in question.”¹³⁰ This type of thesis suggests that the meaning of an artwork is distinguished from the intentions of the artist and from the audience’s reaction. The interpretation of the work should be focused on only the characteristics of the work itself and nothing more. This thesis is particularly interesting because it most closely resembles the theories presented by both Theodor Adorno and Beardsley who are two supporters of the

¹²⁷ Hermerén, Göran. “The Autonomy of Art.” *Essays on Aesthetics*. Ed. John Fisher. Temple University Press: Philadelphia. 1983. pps. 35 – 52.

¹²⁸ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 36.

¹²⁹ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 38 (my emphasis).

¹³⁰ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 38.

autonomy thesis.¹³¹ For this reason, it has become a version of the autonomy thesis that is both well known and highly disputed. Hermerén points out the main problem with this view: “The problem with this thesis is, of course, that every work of art is open in the sense that it can be described and interpreted in many ways.”¹³² The interpretation of a work of art is never static even if we are to only look at the characteristics of the work. If we are to check the interpretation against the characteristics of the work then we will be no further ahead because each interpretation can focus on different aspects of the work. If we are to look at our example, it is clear that this thesis is insufficient for us because it was the social settings that allowed for the creation of *Triumph of the Will*. Given that the film is a work of political propaganda, it is impossible to have an interpretation of the film that is ample and not look at the social factors outside of the work. For this reason, the thesis of “Autonomous Qualities” is not an acceptable theory as an answer for the question of how to appreciate political works of art.

Adorno’s theory of autonomous appreciation of art adds an aspect that this reading of the theory misses slightly. Like Beardsley, Adorno would relate to the (d) version of this autonomy thesis, claiming that a work of art should be appreciated on the basis of its own characteristics and not outside factors. For Adorno, the influences of society are not what is important in the creation of the artwork and so should not be important in determining how the work should be interpreted. Hermerén explains Adorno’s position: “...Theodor Adorno has argued that art is autonomous in the sense that it cannot be derived from its social setting; thus, facts about the social setting of a work of art are not decisive in checking interpretations of it.”¹³³ Adorno’s argument is that because the artwork is not primarily influenced by factors outside of the world of art, then those factors are not sufficient in deciding whether the work has been interpreted

¹³¹ The works of each of these authors are foundational in any contemporary discussion of aesthetics. We have already explained the position of Monroe C. Beardsley and so will not explain it further here except to say that he holds the (d) version of the above thesis. We will, however, look briefly at the position that Adorno holds in the following paragraph. The primary work where Adorno outlines his autonomy thesis is the following book: Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis. 1997.

Although this particular version of the autonomy thesis is shown to be insufficient for us it is still interesting to look at Adorno’s theory because it has made such a significant contribution to contemporary theories of aesthetics and also because the thesis as described above does not entail fully, all that Adorno’s theory encompasses.

¹³² Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 38.

¹³³ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 38.

sufficiently. Adorno explains his view of the autonomy of art by looking at how the artist is affected during the period when they are creating. He says: “The social standpoint of artists may serve to interfere with conformist consciousness, but in the actual development of works they become insignificant.”¹³⁴ He then goes on to say:

The immanence of society in the artwork is the essential social relation of art, not the immanence of art in society. Because the social content of art is not located externally to its *pricipium individuationis* but rather inheres in the individual, which is itself a social reality, art’s social character is concealed and can only be grasped by its interpretation.¹³⁵

By looking at these two quotations we can see that according to Adorno, the interpretation of art cannot be done through the consideration of social settings because it is not the social settings that created the artwork.

Adorno’s opinion of the autonomy thesis, granted much more detailed and explicit than we have allowed for here, is intriguing because he, like Beardsley, does not deny that works of art are, to a certain degree, connected with the world in which they are created. Adorno is willing to accept an association between artworks and the social settings of the time and place of which the work is a result. What he is unwilling to accept is that these social factors should then be used when determining the value of the work, or how the work should be appreciated. Adorno feels that the only proper interpretation of an artwork will not include social factors and it is for this reason that his thesis will not work for us. On the whole his argument works well but as we have seen, political works of art are not necessarily comparable to other works of art. Part of why our example is so interesting is that the social aspects that influenced the film are obvious: there is no question as to which political standpoint is being represented and whether or not the interpretation is positive. With political works of art, especially with works of art that double as works of propaganda, the social influences are clear and these influences are part of what makes the work stand out as something other than a regular artwork. For this reason, any interpretation of works like *Triumph of the Will* is weak if it does not take into account the social and political factors that determine the work. Adorno’s theory, therefore, does not apply in a fashion that is helpful to us.

¹³⁴ Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis. 1997. p. 232.

¹³⁵ Adorno, Theodor. 1997. p. 232

When considering this version of the thesis presented by Hermerén we must also be careful not to accept the *opposite theory*, which would suggest that the interpretations of all works of art should be checked against social and political factors. This type of appreciation does not work either because it lessens the aesthetic value of the work, especially with works that are not influenced politically. It could be argued that all works of art are influenced by the social surroundings of the artist, in fact this is argued, because the artist is not able to extract him or herself from the worldview in which he or she is living, but we must remember that it is not what influences the work that is our concern. We are concerned with how to appreciate the artwork and a sufficient appreciation should not include factors that are not inherently part of the work. If we are to judge all artworks based on political viewpoints, then many great works would be overlooked for they say nothing politically, neither positively nor negatively. It is also possible that works that have no political standpoint may be appreciated as though the work supports the political status quo, for if the work does not stand out against it, then it must comply with the present situation. This reception to artworks is no more acceptable. For this reason an aesthetic interpretation is necessary for all works and a political interpretation only for those that are intrinsically political.

The next autonomy theory that Hermerén explains is called "*Autonomy and Reference*."¹³⁶ This account states that "Works of art (a) do not refer to anything whatsoever – every work of art is a closed world without any connection with anything else; or (b) do not refer to any subjective or objective reality outside the realm of art – works of art only refer to other works of art."¹³⁷ This thesis is easily disputed and so has little value for us. Hermerén points out that there are too many counterexamples for this thesis to be true. This version of autonomy makes a very large distinction between art and life but this is a distinction that, from our example, clearly cannot be made so easily. This theory could not possibly apply to *Triumph of the Will* and so cannot apply to political artworks. We may be able to see the value of such a theory when it is used for appreciating a novel where all events and characters are entirely fictitious, but this is of no value to us. From the first theory we were able to take away the fact that in order to

¹³⁶ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 39 (my emphasis).

¹³⁷ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 39.

properly appreciate political works of art there must be a certain consideration of the social settings in which the work was created and from this theory we can see that our appreciation of political artworks must also include a deliberation on the references of the work.

Another side of the autonomy thesis that is of interest to us is under the category of “*Autonomous Structures*”¹³⁸ and it says: “The work of art constitutes a microcosm, a world of its own, which in various ways is related to a macrocosm, a world outside the work of art.”¹³⁹ This thesis at first glance is interesting for us because it gives us a certain sense of a relative autonomy. The suggestion here is that an artwork may simply be an expression of the real world. This seems, at least to a certain degree, to be the case with *Triumph of the Will* given that it was, although propaganda, a documentary and so deserves further consideration. One question that arises with this thesis, however, is how does this help us with the question of the appreciation of political artworks. Perhaps the answer is to suggest that political artworks should be appreciated simply as a reflection of the political world that exists. Surely, however, this is not what we want to say. In fact, the job of most propaganda is to show how the world would or could be if the proper political decisions were made, it does not show how the world is. Was everybody at the 1934 Nuremberg rally joyous and jubilant at the arrival of Hitler? Likely this is not the case but it is what we see. Propaganda is not a cinematic manifestation of the political world but an illusion of an impossible and nonexistent political world. So if we are to say that art is a microcosm that is related to the world as a macrocosm, it seems that we have run into a couple of snags. First, this thesis does not help us to see how we should then appreciate works of art, political or otherwise. The second problem is that not all political works of art necessarily relate to the world in any authentic manner. As previously mentioned propaganda may not at all refer to the world that actually exists and a political work of art could potentially be a microcosm referring not the macrocosm of the world but to another microcosm of a world ideal to those creating the propaganda.

Hermerén points out another reason as to why this thesis is weak. He claims: “If, however, at the same time it is argued that this microcosm is genetically or causally

¹³⁸ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 41 (my emphasis).

¹³⁹ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 41

dependent on the macrocosm, it is difficult to talk about the autonomy of art without being misleading, considering that one of the basic meanings of 'autonomous' is 'independent'."¹⁴⁰ He makes a point that we have mentioned earlier, which is that we need to be cautious not to look at artworks through a lens that is not necessary. Hermerén points out that if a work is to be autonomous then it cannot be compared or appreciated through the worldview that the appreciator might have. This thesis at first seems intriguing because it offers a combination of aesthetic qualities while including the necessity of how it applies to the world. As the theory exists, however, it lacks any applicability. We have already made clear that we cannot accept a theory that requires all works of art to be considered politically or socially and this is what the theory suggests we do. This theory claims that art is a microcosm that exists only within the macrocosm of the world that creates it. In this there is the suggestion that all works of art can be seen as representative of the world that they come from, which we have shown is not the case either. For these reasons, this version of the autonomy thesis is not one that we can accept as an answer to our problem of how to appreciate political artworks.

Under the label of "*Autonomous Institutions*"¹⁴¹ Hermerén explains the following form of autonomy of art appreciation: "The institution of art is autonomous in the sense that there is no political, moral, or religious authority telling artists what to do and how to do it, or forbidding them to choose certain motifs, means of expression, and so forth."¹⁴² Although clearly not applicable to our film this outline of autonomy of art is very attractive for us to discuss. The immediate reaction is to say that clearly what is said here is false because it would unmistakably not apply to our example as *Triumph of the Will* was commissioned as a work of propaganda. Also this theory would dismiss all works of propaganda from the category of art. Perhaps those who suggest such a theory do not believe that propaganda is art at all and so from this perspective our film would simply not be art. We cannot accept it, however, because we have already determined that being propaganda does not exclude a work from also being art. This thesis also does not work because many of the most famous historical works of art were commissioned by churches or kings and we cannot simply dismiss these works as well. Obviously this thesis is not

¹⁴⁰ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 41.

¹⁴¹ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 42 (my emphasis).

¹⁴² Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 42.

acceptable for us, but Hermerén goes on to suggest a different interpretation of this thesis that may be more appropriate in a manner that we could find useful.

The *next type* of autonomy is very similar to the previous, but with a slight difference. Hermerén explains it as: “The institution of art ought to be autonomous in the sense that there *ought not to be* any political, moral or religious authority telling artists what to do and how to do it, or forbidding them to choose certain motifs, means of expression and so forth.”¹⁴³ This sort of autonomy rests on the notion that art should not be influenced nor should it be censored in any form other than by the artist’s regulations on him or herself. The reason that this thesis is interesting is that it is difficult to completely disagree with. Obviously a certain amount of censorship is already in place and just what amount of censorship there should be, if any, is an interesting question but not one that is important for us. It would be nice to say that governments should not determine or influence the work of the artist but this is not presently something that could be enforced and also not something that helps us to answer the question of how to view political works of art. This theory would suggest that there be no works that are politically influenced, however, even if it were possible to enforce, it would not ensure that no political works of art be created as the artist would have complete freedom to make his or her work as political as they see fit.

Hermerén suggests that this thesis is one that should be generally accepted but he does admit that there are certain exceptions. He says:

Suppose, for instance, that works of art are created that in a persuasive way advocate fascism or the use of heavy drugs or encourage people to commit crimes or take part in racial discrimination. Considering the damages and tragedies that might follow – for example, fascism and the use of drugs – I would be inclined to say for moral reasons that there *are* important exceptions...¹⁴⁴

This quotation is fascinating for an obvious reason, that being the reference to persuasive works of art that advocate fascism. Whether or not Hermerén had *Triumph of the Will* in mind is not important because his position is clear just the same. He would have us believe that there should be very little “political, moral or religious authority telling

¹⁴³ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 43. Emphasis added.

¹⁴⁴ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 43.

artists what to do”¹⁴⁵ but what should be controlled would include works of art that promote disagreeable political ideals. If this had been the case then the film we are using as an example, possibly, would never have been made, although some could argue that may be a good thing. There are other concerns with such a judgment of how art should be controlled because it is rarely clear when political ideals are so horrible that they should not be permitted. Often, due to differing circumstances, a regime commits many acts of inhumanity before it is ever seen as doing so and condemned for their actions. To a certain extent this is the case with *Triumph of the Will*. At the time of its release, few people felt that it was a glorification of a repulsive political standpoint and it was primarily celebrated as a work of art. If we are to agree with Hermerén, this would mean that works of art that have already been created could at one time be highly celebrated as works of art and then later be forbidden. This approach is not one that will work for us because it is too retrospective. We are searching for a way to appreciate political works of art that can withstand the test of time and changes in the political standpoint of the audience. This example of the autonomy thesis does not help us because it leads us to believe that political works of art either are not works of art at all or should not be created. Either way, given the case with which we are working, this seems a somewhat naïve approach. We know that a work of political propaganda can also be a work of art and we also know that political works of art are and will continue to be created both as something as simple as presenting the artist’s own point of view and something as questionable as persuasive political propaganda. With this knowledge we need to determine how to deal with these works of art in an aesthetic manner as well as a political one and this thesis does not help us to do that.

Another example of the autonomy thesis is what Hermerén refers to as “*Autonomous Effects*.”¹⁴⁶ This thesis says: “Works of art have (a) only aesthetic or artistic effects on the beholder’s thoughts, attitudes, and feelings, and on society at large, or (b) no important nonaesthetic or nonartistic effects of that kind.”¹⁴⁷ Here the suggestion is that the artwork will only influence the audience receiving the work. This,

¹⁴⁵ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 43.

¹⁴⁶ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 44 (my emphasis).

¹⁴⁷ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 44.

like the previous theory that we looked at, is easily disputable, given many examples but specifically the example that we have been working with. It is very easy to see that a work of art can have effects on individuals and societies that go far beyond the aesthetic, in fact this is the entire motivation for the creation of propaganda. Hermerén points out that this thesis may be useful in determining how we should appreciate or interpret works of art. If we accept what he says, however, then we are stuck in the same trap as the previous thesis. We are left attempting to say that works of art have no effects other than aesthetic effects and we have already shown that to be false. There is nothing in this theory that we can use when attempting to answer the question of how to reasonably appreciate political works of art.

The final three varieties of the autonomy view all come under the category header of “*Autonomous Values*”¹⁴⁸ and each of them seems appealing for us. The first states: “The nonartistic and nonaesthetic effects of works of art (a) are, as a matter of fact, always separated from, or (b) can always be separated from, or (c) should always be separated from, the aesthetic and artistic value of the work of art.”¹⁴⁹ Hermerén refers to this as a sort of *critical Puritanism* but it is a very similar thesis to what we have described in the second chapter as *formalism*. Again we can see the weaknesses of this thesis, as attractive as it might seem at first, when considering the example that we have put forth. We have been able to show that in the case of *Triumph of the Will*, separating the aesthetic from the nonaesthetic, if even possible, leads to a diminished understanding of the value of the work as a whole. There are many aspects to the film and the value of the film is most evident when it is seen in its totality. As we have already seen, dissecting this work of art, along with other political works of art, dissipates the reason for which the film is so fascinating. When the aspects are looked at individually it is easy to appreciate the aesthetic and hate the political but it is the combination of the aesthetic with the political that makes the example as intriguing as it is. A revision of this thesis is what Hermerén suggests next.

In attempting to make an autonomy thesis that is more accessible the following is suggested: “Works of art (a) are, as a matter of fact, always evaluated, or (b) can be

¹⁴⁸ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 45 (my emphasis).

¹⁴⁹ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 45.

evaluated, or (c) can only be evaluated, or (d) should always be evaluated, without considering any non artistic or nonaesthetic effects, values or intentions.”¹⁵⁰ It is true that this thesis is an adjustment of the previous one but it still has not become something that is acceptable and this is for the same reasons that we have already stated. The example of *Triumph of the Will* makes it very clear that in order to appreciate it fully we must consider effects that are nonaesthetic. Hermerén, too, points out the weaknesses of this argument: “First of all, it has to be admitted that in the practice of many critics moral, political, and religious considerations do play an important role when works of art are evaluated.”¹⁵¹ This quotation explains well why this example of the autonomy thesis cannot be applied to our example or to political works of art at all. It is our objective to find a theory of art appreciation that can be applied to political works of art and all that they entail. This theory does not allow us to do that but there is one further version of it that may be more helpful for us.

The final adaptation of the notion of autonomy is an attempt to use the ideas behind the previous two depictions but to make the theory something that can be practically used as a basis for art appreciation. The last form of autonomy of art is: “In cases of conflicts between values or norms, aesthetic and artistic considerations should always be decisive and outweigh moral, political, and religious ones when works of art are to be evaluated.”¹⁵² The theory described here could potentially be the most useful one that we have come across until now. There are still concerns and questions that go along with this thesis and Hermerén is quick to point them out: “What demands do we (readers, listeners, beholders) have a right to make on works of art and on artists? What demands do artists and works of art have a right to make on us? And what requirements should be satisfied if these demands are to be met in a democratic society?”¹⁵³ His questioning reflects a concern that we have had along the way, that being whether or not these theories can actually be applied in all situations. It is difficult, in fact it seems more difficult all of the time, to propose a theory of art appreciation that will include all works of art but exclude the appreciation of that which is not art. This particular thesis is of

¹⁵⁰ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 46.

¹⁵¹ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 46.

¹⁵² Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 46.

¹⁵³ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 46.

interest because it does give the audience a certain understanding of what it is they can do to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the work without negating the nonaesthetic qualities. As we have explained, in works such as *Triumph of the Will* it is impossible to appreciate the film and divide the aesthetic from the nonaesthetic. This thesis allows us to consider both qualities of the work, although it does put *prominence on the aesthetic qualities*. This thesis may work very well as starting point for us, as a foundation for our own theory. Whereas this theory could hold as a general maxim for all works of art, with a little reworking we may be able to use it for an appreciation of more specifically political works of art.

The autonomy thesis that we have here suggests a division, which is problematic, as we have seen, but still holds that each side is important. If we are to accept this thesis as is, without further questioning, then we are likely to run into the same problems that we have seen with the other theses, and so this is not what we will choose to do. Instead we will use this thesis, along with what we have learned from the description of the previous theses, in order to set out certain *criteria for what a theory of aesthetic appreciation of political works of art must include and what it must exclude*.

We have been unable to find one theory that suits that for which we are looking and so we must attempt to create a theory that is suitable. We have previously determined that we want a type of autonomy thesis as our guide for the appreciation of political works of art but this is not an easy task. Hermerén explains why: “ ‘Is art autonomous?’ does therefore not have a single, clear answer; distinctions have to be introduced before an attempt is made to answer the question.”¹⁵⁴ This is precisely what we will now attempt to do: to outline the necessary distinctions for a theory of art appreciation that would include political works of art. It is important to note that our discussion of the various forms of the autonomy thesis in no way claims to be a complete account of all discussions of art appreciation, in fact not even of all versions of the autonomy thesis. We had previously determined the autonomy thesis to be the closest to what we required in a valuable and applicable thesis for political art appreciation and so the previous discussion reflects that. There are numerous other interpretations of how art should be appreciated

¹⁵⁴ Hermerén, Göran. 1983. p. 47.

and, although each may have their own value, they were not pertinent to our discussion. We can now move on, seeing what an exploration of the autonomy thesis has taught us, to determining the criteria for our own type of view on the proper autonomous appreciation of political artworks.

3.2.1 Criteria for a Theory for the Appreciation of Political Works of Art

Up until this point we have looked at numerous theories, both on how to appreciate *Triumph of the Will* and on how to appreciate works of art in general. We have been unable to come up with an answer to the question of how, given that the aesthetic qualities of political works of art are not a sufficient condition in their appreciation, can such works of art be appreciated. We have not found an answer to this question but we have reached a number of conclusions. It is now important for us to look at the conclusions to which we have come in order to see if we can determine a set of criteria for a theory that would be able to provide an answer to our question. We will see what we have learned from the various theories that we have already considered in order to decide what of those theories works and what does not work. It is the hope that this investigation will lead us to a foundation for a theory that can be used to appreciate all, including political, works of art in a fair and complete manner.

The *first* fact of which we can be sure is that we want to have *a theory that can be applied to all works of art*. We have seen many interpretations of how artworks should be appreciated but they either do not work in the case of overtly political works of art or they do not work in the case of completely apolitical works of art. If we are to develop a theory of art appreciation that only applies to political works of art then we will be no further ahead than we are right now because such a theory would serve only to segregate political artworks from works that are purely aesthetic. We want to establish a theory that will allow political artworks to be seen as artworks primarily, but with potentially added considerations so that the appreciation of the work can be complete. The main problem that we have experienced with the other theories that we have considered is that the form of appreciation they offer is not complete. We have so far looked at theories that say the only important factors of the artwork are the social factors, but this neglects the artistic

and beautiful qualities that the artwork may possess. We have also seen theories that stress the aesthetic qualities but with a political work of art, looking at only the aesthetic qualities is taking a risk because often the political qualities are influential and when combined with beauty become more powerful than they would be on their own. In fact it is precisely this combination that makes the appreciation of political works of art so much more difficult than that of nonpolitical artworks. However, we want our theory of appreciation to be one that can be applied to political and nonpolitical works of art alike, and not create a division between them. This is the first criterion for our theory, to be a theory that can be applied to all works of art, a theory that does not require a judgment of the work before the work is experienced. If we are to have two separate manners of appreciation, one for political works of art and one for the rest of art, then we would have to make the determination of whether or not the work is political before we observe it so that we could appreciate it in the correct way. Clearly it is not an option to pre-judge the political character of an artwork and so it is necessary that we have one theory for all of art that can adapt to the type of artwork when adaptation is necessary.

The *second* criterion that our theory must follow is that it has to be a version of the *autonomy thesis*. This is not to say that it must be one of the versions that we have already considered since we have shown these to be inadequate, but that we must ensure the autonomy of the artwork to the greatest degree possible. We have used the writings of Monroe C. Beardsley to show that other variations on the interpretation of how to best appreciate works of art are not as strong as the autonomy thesis. One of the most important aspects of our theory must be that it ensures the integrity of the artwork and the distinct character and value of art in general. There are authors, as we have seen is the case with John Dewey, who claim that an autonomy thesis segregates art too much, that art is a part of culture and so should be appreciated as such. Beardsley replies to such arguments by saying that art truly is part of culture and that not appreciating it through our culture is impossible. Everyone appreciates art from the worldview that they already hold and for this reason it is not necessary to then add to that appreciation a further cultural implication. If we are to necessarily link an appreciation of an artwork to the culture of the individual who created the work then we are to take complete credit away from the artist. Art, although part of culture, is not determined by it and this is an

important point with the autonomy thesis. Other arguments against the autonomy thesis include those by the Marxists and the semiotic argument. Beardsley is able to show that the Marxist appreciation of art, in its various forms either negates the possibility for novelty in art or diminishes the value of nonpolitical artworks and potentially put political implications on artworks that are in no way political. Neither of these options, although perhaps not fully representing the Marxist position, are acceptable for us. We cannot accept that the value of an artwork should be determined by its value as a political statement and so the Marxists do not pose a valid argument for us. Beardsley also shows that the semiotic argument, although reasonable, is insufficient because it fails to allow for the distinct role of artworks. Over all of the various postulated theories of how to best appreciate art, the only one that fairly applies to all types of art, our number one criteria, is that of the autonomy thesis.

The autonomy thesis that we wish to present does not claim that art and outside social considerations of art are or should be entirely separated from one another for this is an unrealistic expectation and, as we have seen, excludes the appreciation of political works of art. Instead we wish to have a theory of autonomy that will allow for the fact that art is created within culture but needs to be appreciated for the work that it is and not for what has influenced it. The primary consideration for the appreciation of any artwork needs to be the aesthetic considerations. If the aesthetic considerations are enough to consider the work in its entirety and espouse the full value of the work then this is all that is required as the autonomy of art thesis dictates. If the work cannot be fully appreciated with only the aesthetic qualities, as is the case with our example, then and only then are further considerations required. The autonomy of the artwork must be ensured in all possible situations.

Our *third* criterion seems at first opposed to our second and it is this seeming opposition that makes our theory so difficult to establish. We have said that no work of art should be appreciated through social interpretations when it is not necessary for it to be appreciated as such. We now must see that in the cases where social factors do play a significant role in the creation of the work, they must play a role in the appreciation. Just as we will not allow for purely aesthetic artworks to be appreciated in a political light, we cannot allow for political works of art to be appreciated on a solely aesthetic basis. The

reason for this criterion is twofold. The first is, as we have already seen, that the value of a political work of art is, at least in part, the value of how the political aspects are combined with the aesthetics. If we are to separate these qualities of the artwork, then we do not appreciate the artwork at all; our appreciation is limited to just a part of a whole that we cannot see. The second reason for not ignoring the political aspects is that in ignoring the political aspects of a work we open ourselves to be convinced of negative political ideals. We must be aware of what we are seeing so that our reaction to it can be properly directed. It is too easy to be persuaded by what is beautiful and so we need to be aware of the political when it is shown to us, especially when it is shown to us in a persuasive manner.

There is an interesting theory that we have not yet considered that may be helpful at this point. This is the theory of appreciation presented by Allen Carlson.¹⁵⁵ Carlson's theory is not entirely applicable to ours as he is presenting a theory of the aesthetic appreciation of the environment as well as of art¹⁵⁶. Part of what he claims, however, can be put to use in what we are trying to say because he believes that there is a common structure to both forms of appreciation. It is in how he suggests that we appreciate art that we are interested in. Carlson holds that a true aesthetic appreciation of the environment requires that we have certain background knowledge on the "history of production" of the (natural or artistic) object that we are appreciating. That is to say that the more we know, the more we will appreciate it. Carlson says: " 'Knowledge about' is relevant under three conditions: when it does not weaken or destroy aesthetic attention to the object, when it pertains to the meaning and expressiveness of the object, and when it enhances the quality and significance of one's immediate aesthetic response to the object."¹⁵⁷ He feels that having knowledge about the environment changes our appreciation of it from being something like a "cow-like stare" to "appreciation not only responsive to the object but informed by knowledge about it."¹⁵⁸ Although Carlson is not primarily interested in

¹⁵⁵ Carlson, Allen. *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture*. Routledge: New York. 2000.

¹⁵⁶ We will look at one very specific point that Carlson makes but, in his book, he presents a very detailed theory. The rest of the theory is not of interest to us, at this point, and so we will only focus on this section.

¹⁵⁷ Carlson, Allen. 2000. p. 105.

¹⁵⁸ Carlson, Allen. 2000. p. 105.

political works or art, his theory can be applied directly to political artworks (as he does himself, for instance in his discussion concerning Picasso's *Guernica*).

We have seen that remaining apolitical can be quite problematic, as is the case with Riefenstahl, and so a certain amount of knowledge about politics is necessary if we are to not be persuaded by the aesthetically pleasing political works of art. As Carlson claims, in this sense our appreciation goes from being uninvolved to responsive. If we understand the political ideals and are aware of the goal of the artwork that is being presented to us we can properly judge the artwork and not be distracted by the message, positive or negative, of the work. In fact, if we consider the three criteria that he presents for the occasions when knowledge increases the appreciation of an artwork, we could see that perhaps this can help us determine when a political appreciation is necessary. This is to say that if it is the case that 'knowledge about' the political aspects, given that there are any political aspects, of an artwork increase our appreciation of said artwork, again positively or negatively, then said artwork should be appreciated politically as well as aesthetically.

3.3 Partial Autonomy

We have now arrived at the point where the proposition of a theory is possible. What we have come to is a theory to which we can refer as *partial autonomy*. The essence of what this theory would entail has been outlined in the previous section but can be clarified slightly. *Partial autonomy requires that artworks be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities only, when it is possible, and primarily for these qualities when it is not possible.* Partial autonomy insists that the appreciation of artworks that are overtly political, especially those presenting a negative political viewpoint in a positive light, include the political aspects that led to its creation and the political aspects to which it may have led. Partial autonomy is a theory that does not demand that the viewer distinguish whether an artwork is political or not before viewing the work. This is a theory that applies to all appreciation all of the time. Just as an individual charged with a crime in the Canadian judicial system is innocent until proven guilty, partial autonomy starts with the maxim that an artwork is autonomous until proven otherwise. Artworks

cannot be shown to not be autonomous until the work has been experienced and it is only at this point that we can determine whether or not the political aspects need to be considered as well.

An interesting question to consider is whether or not films are being made today that are as overtly political as *Triumph of the Will*. Our first response might be that it would be unlikely that a film be made that would be comparable to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. The reasons for which this film is still part of conscience of the general public are many and varied. We must hope that the circumstances will never be so extreme again so that they would allow for a film to become as controversial as this one. However, there are many present day cases of documentaries receiving acclaim and reaching a wide audience. These films present us with the same concerns that we had with *Triumph of the Will*, even if the concerns are not as extreme. If we consider a few of these films, we will be able to see quite quickly that the unease that we have mentioned with political artworks is not dead and needs to remain in our mind when we appreciate art.

The first film that we will consider is Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*¹⁵⁹. This is not the first documentary made by Moore, nor is it the last. The reason that we will start here is because it was a film that brought the documentary genre back to the general public. While for quite some time, documentary was not seen as entertainment, this film changed that conception. It is a film about the shooting deaths at Columbine high school, an intense look at the "gun culture" in the United States, and at how these two things may be related to one another. We established in chapter one that a film could be both a documentary and a work of propaganda. So, is *Bowling for Columbine* a work of propaganda? Given the negative notion of the term propaganda, many people would say no. The film was awarded the "Best Documentary" of 2002 prize at the Academy Awards. To draw a parallel, we can re-state that Riefenstahl felt that her film winning the awards did prove that her film could not have possibly been a work of propaganda. However, we have seen that her film was in fact propaganda, so the award itself means very little. Of course Academy voters likely would not admit to voting for a work of

¹⁵⁹ Moore, Michael. *Bowling for Columbine*. United States of America. 2002. 120 minutes

propaganda as best documentary. The question remains: is the film propaganda or not? If we consider our previously accepted definition of propaganda; that propaganda is an object used to transmit ideas to the masses, to change the opinions that people hold and to make controversial ideas seem acceptable, then it is difficult to believe that this film is not a work of propaganda. Clearly Moore has a direction in mind when presenting this film to the public and he wants to persuade the public on their attitudes towards guns. If the United States is the “gun crazed” culture, as Moore presents it, then his opinion that this is not an acceptable attitude is controversial, and he tries to make it seem as though his response is the only reasonable response to have. Again, we must be clear in that calling something propaganda, we are not saying that any value of the artwork is lost. *Bowling for Columbine* brought documentary propaganda back to the forefront of educational entertainment and it seems to have been only the beginning of this trend.

Since *Bowling for Columbine*, two documentary films have made rather large impacts on the film world, both openly criticizing corporations. The first was *The Corporation*¹⁶⁰ a Canadian film that looks at the legal standing of corporations and the damage to which such a standing has led. The second film is *Super Size Me*¹⁶¹ a documentary that directly outlines the health risks of eating fast food (specifically of eating food from McDonald’s). Both of these films would fit into our description of propaganda. Again, while we can assume that most people would not agree with this determination, it remains that these films were created and released for the purpose of influencing the general public. Of course, it can be argued that the influence is a positive influence but that does not mean that the films are not propaganda¹⁶². Clearly propaganda is still being created in an artistic fashion and being sold to the masses as documentary fact. There is one further film that we will consider in order to show just how pertinent our question is.

The final film that we will consider is one that has not even been released yet but the controversy surrounding it is already so great that few people have not heard of it.

¹⁶⁰ Abbott, Jennifer. and Achbar, Mark. Canada. *The Corporation*. 2003. 165 minutes. Big Picture Media Corporation.

¹⁶¹ Spurlock, Morgan. *Super Size Me*. United States of America. 2004. 96 minutes. Samuel Goldwyn Films.

¹⁶² Interestingly in order to give a visual impression of just how bad certain corporations are, the film *The Corporation* includes edited sections of *Triumph of the Will* with the suggestion that the evil of corporations is somehow analogous to that of the Third Reich.

That of course is Michael Moore's latest work, *Fahrenheit 9/11*¹⁶³, a film that apparently criticizes the Bush administration and their handling of events after September 11, 2001. The reason that this film is so interesting to us is twofold. First, it is interesting for the controversy that the film caused¹⁶⁴. Miramax originally held American distribution rights, but they refused to distribute the film. The reason that they gave for not distributing the film was that Miramax is, in part, owned by the Walt Disney Company and this company did not want to be associated with the film, being as political as it is, during an election year. The Weinstein brothers bought the rights to the film, from Disney, for the cost of making the film and, along with two other distributors (Lion's Gate Entertainment and the Independent Film Channel), will distribute the film in North America. The controversy of this film is surrounding the fact that it is a political film, a film so political that many people do not want to be associated with it (although it is almost certain to make more than a reasonable amount of money). The controversy that the film has created makes it interesting for us already but there is another reason that this film is fascinating for our question of whether our question is a valid question today.

The second reason that this film is so interesting is that it has been awarded the Palme d'Or¹⁶⁵ at the 2004 Festival de Cannes. It is not only interesting that *Fahrenheit 9/11* won, although that in itself is interesting¹⁶⁶, it is also interesting because of what followed. "For the first time in the history of the Festival de Cannes, Gilles Jacob gave the jury an opportunity to explain their Palme d'Or award choices."¹⁶⁷ This is the first time in the history of the film festival that the jury members were allowed to justify why they had chosen whom they had chosen to win the awards. The reasons that the jury members gave are directly relevant to our question. The jury members, in discussing *Fahrenheit 9/11*, were first asked about whether or not the politics of the film influenced

¹⁶³ At this time this film has not been released. For further information on it look at: <http://www.MichaelMoore.com>.

¹⁶⁴ The details of all that has occurred in the attempt to release this film can be seen at the following website: http://movies.go.com/movies/F/fahrenheit911_2004/.

¹⁶⁵ This is the top prize for a film and this is likely the most recognised film festival in the world.

¹⁶⁶ This is the first documentary to be awarded the top prize since 1956. This is seen at: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5039229/>.

¹⁶⁷ Festival de Cannes official website: http://www.festival-cannes.com/news_archive.php?language=6002&page=1&actu=2833.

their choice. Quentin Tarantino¹⁶⁸ said: “Judging a film by its politics is a bad thing. If it wasn’t some of the best filmmaking, then I would not have chosen it. [...] You can’t strangle this movie with the title documentary. Michael is [playing] with the format to bring us a movie-documentary-critical essay.”¹⁶⁹ Benoît Poelvoorde went on to say: “We had long and passionate debates. We put the politics aside so as to talk film.”¹⁷⁰ Both of these quotations are fascinating because they imply that the politics of the film can be separated from its artistic qualities. The next question the jury was asked was why they chose to give such an honor to a documentary, again with very interesting results. Kathleen Turner claimed: “We felt it was more than a documentary. We believe this film creates its own category and that’s why it stands apart.”¹⁷¹ Tilda Swinton questioned: “Who would have thought that cinema could get stretched this far?”¹⁷² These two quotations are reminiscent of the praise that was awarded to *Triumph of the Will* when it was first released. What does it mean to say that a film is more than a documentary? We have established that a documentary can fit into other genres as well, and as long as it does not entirely cross the line into fiction then there is not really a problem with a film being called a documentary.

What these jury members are really saying is that the film is great for its aesthetic qualities only and that the greatness comes from the fact that it is not a documentary in the usual understanding of documentary. Could that be because it is, as well as a documentary, a work of very good propaganda? Of course, the film could be something more than a documentary for many reasons, but with our understanding of propaganda in mind, it clearly is a work of propaganda as well. This film is the perfect example of a film to which our thesis should be applied. It is fascinating for the jury members to maintain that this film is great due to its aesthetic qualities only. Clearly Moore had a direction in mind when he made the film, a certain point of view that he has determined to get across to the general public. How could his film be a great film if this entire purpose can be put aside? If his film is really as great as the jury members contend that it is, then it must

¹⁶⁸ Film director and president of the jury at the 2004 Festival de Cannes.

¹⁶⁹ Tarantino, Quentin. Festival de Cannes official website. Jury Press Conference. May 12 – 23, 2004.

¹⁷⁰ Poelvoorde, Benoît. Festival de Cannes official website. Jury Press Conference. May 12 – 23, 2004.

¹⁷¹ Turner, Kathleen. Festival de Cannes official website. Jury Press Conference. May 12 – 23, 2004.

¹⁷² Swinton, Tilda. Festival de Cannes official website. Jury Press Conference. May 12 – 23, 2004.

have achieved the goal that it set out to accomplish. If, however, the aesthetic qualities are so easily distinguished from the political qualities, then the political qualities must not be that strong in the film and if this is the case, then the film cannot be great. This may seem a harsh distinction to make but as we have seen in the first chapter there are various types of propaganda.¹⁷³ *Fahrenheit 9/11* was created for propagandistic purposes; it was not created and then used in a propagandistic manner. Because it was created as such, the political qualities of the film are at the very base of its design and so cannot reasonably be separated from the aesthetic qualities. If the political qualities were something that were imposed on the film, after the fact, then perhaps they would be distinguishable from the aesthetic, but that is not the case with this film. It is an example of how, when a political aim is at the foundation of the creation of an artwork, politics and aesthetics can become conjoined within an artwork and therefore should be appreciated as such. These examples show that the question we have raised and the theory that we have suggested is as applicable today as it would have been upon the initial release of *Triumph of the Will*, at a period of time when there actually existed a Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment.¹⁷⁴

The question now is how to determine which works of art are political and which are not, which artworks need the added political consideration and which ones do not. With cases like *Triumph of the Will* it is quite obvious that the work is political. There is no question with this film that part of what makes it stand out is the combination of aesthetic and political qualities. By seeing the positions present by Riefenstahl, Devereaux and others, it is clear that any consideration of the film that does look at the combination of aesthetic and political qualities is insufficient in describing what makes the film outstanding. It seems clear, also, to say that any work of political propaganda needs to be considered from a political standpoint, even those which at first may seem to be free of political qualities. Other examples are not nearly so clear cases of political

¹⁷³ Note chapter one, page 10.

¹⁷⁴ The website www.MoveAmericaForward.org also presents the position that *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a work of propaganda. In the section found at: <http://www.moveamericaforward.org/Emails/PR20040617-1.html>; we see the film being described as both “anti-war propaganda” and as “anti-military propaganda”. What is interesting is the inherent negative spin to the term propaganda. We have mentioned this already but these examples make it very clear that, now, if a work is to be determined as propaganda, then the work has now value and any ideas presented in the work should be dismissed. This is a very intriguing change from the time when Riefenstahl was making *Triumph of the Will*.

artwork and so the determination of how to appreciate them becomes much more difficult. At this point one might raise the objection that *Triumph of the Will* was perhaps not the best example to use since it is too clear of a case and does not represent the majority of political artworks. Such an extreme example, however, was necessary in order to show just how complex the appreciation of certain artworks can be. *Triumph of the Will* is not like most political works of art, true, but what is different about it is its extreme command over both the aesthetic and the political aspects of film. As we have seen many authors suggest that the best way to appreciate such a film is to consider the aesthetic apart from the political or vice versa. Because this film combines so amazingly the two facets, it becomes much easier for us to show why the two cannot be separated and dealt with individually, which makes it such a good example.

We have not answered, yet, the question of how to determine which artworks this theory should apply to but the following standard should be observed: artworks should be appreciated solely on an aesthetic basis except in any case where an artwork attempts to persuade the viewer of a political point of view, has an overtly political theme, is the result of or is commissioned by a government office, or clearly argues for a political standpoint. In these cases the aesthetic appreciation is still important but should be continuous with an appreciation of the political aspects that will help to determine the true value of the work.

How, then, should we look at *Triumph of the Will*? We are certain that the aesthetic qualities are not a sufficient condition in appreciating this work of film, but neither are the political qualities. We can conclude that any proper appreciation of *Triumph of the Will*, will evaluate the aesthetic and artistic aspects at the same time as acknowledging that the work is a political one. We must be aware that the intention of the film, at least partly, is one of persuasion and so our appreciation should be cautious. We must be able to say that the film has many superb images and beautiful representations but that these images and representations are of something that is the opposite of superb and beautiful. Not only should our appreciation of the film consider both the aesthetic and the political aspects, but our appreciation naturally does just that. It is impossible for us to watch a film like this one and distinguish it as either a work of art or a work of propaganda. Our appreciation of this film, and so of other political works of art, must

reflect this impossibility and so combine the two sides of the film, just as they are combined within the film. The way in which to appreciate a political work of art is to simply react to it as we do automatically, we see the aesthetic united with the political, and we should not try to alter the work so as to fit it into one specific field of appreciation.

Conclusion

We have arrived at a point where we can conclude that the aesthetic qualities of an artwork are not sufficient in the appreciation of the artwork if the artwork is political. We have also looked at how we should deal with artworks that are political and how we can give them a proper appreciation without negating either the aesthetic or political aspects. There are still questions to be answered, of course. One of these questions has to do with the example that we have considered. As we have already explained, *Triumph of the Will* is a very clear and extreme example to choose, given the content and time period of the film. The question that arises at this point is whether or not political documentaries or propaganda should still be a concern for us. We will not question whether political artworks are presently being created because we can be sure that there would be no disagreement to this fact¹⁷⁵.

It was through various steps that we were able to arrive at this conclusion. The first chapter was an empirical look at the *Triumph of the Will* and the historical context surrounding its creation. This was an important step because it was necessary for anyone who may read this, to have an understanding of the film, even if he or she may not have seen it. In this chapter we also considered what a work of propaganda consists in and were able to determine that our example is, in fact, a work of propaganda. This determination was useful in the first part of the second chapter where we considered Leni Riefenstahl's explanation of how the film should be understood. Because she claimed that the film was only a documentary, it was clear that her interpretation of the film does not fit with ours and so is not satisfactory. We also found helpful, but unsatisfactory theories from Devereaux, Kracauer, Barsam, Kelman and Hull. From these authors we did not come up with a theory but we were able to determine what was important to avoid

¹⁷⁵ Films such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Bowling for Columbine*, along with films like *The Corporation*, make it clear that political documentaries are still being created and still have influence in our society.

in the creation of theory of appreciation. It was through further consideration, in the third chapter, of Beardsley, that we were able to conclude that we needed to have a version of the autonomy thesis. By looking at the various forms of the autonomy thesis and the theory of appreciation suggested by Carlson, we were able to arrive at a few pertinent points, necessary for the foundation of our theory.

What we have been able to see is that it is important to keep aesthetic qualities separate from other qualities, when appreciating an artwork, whenever this is possible. What we have also seen is that this is not always possible. There are certain artworks that, when we distinguish their political aspects from their aesthetic aspects, we take away their true value as a work of art. There are examples of artworks whose greatness comes from the combination of the political and the aesthetic that the artist is able to construct, artworks that, without that specific combination, are not worthy of interest. When an artist is able to unite these two aspects in one work, in a manner that allows for a great artwork to come into existence, then we must be aware that this is what has been done. We cannot simply say that all works of art are aesthetic only, or that all works of art have political aspects because that is not true, as we have seen. What we can say is that most artworks are purely aesthetic and that we need to have a different appreciation for those works that are not.

In order to properly appreciate all artworks, we have suggested the theory of partial autonomy. This theory states that artworks should, generally, be appreciated in an autonomous manner. This is to say that nothing should influence the appreciation of the artwork other than the aesthetic qualities that the work possesses. However, if the artwork crosses the line from being purely aesthetic into a work that promotes a political ideology then this must be recognized. Partial autonomy holds that on the outset, all artworks should be approached as though they are autonomous. It is only after viewing the artwork that we can know if it is a political work or not, and so if it requires an appreciation of the political as well as the aesthetic. This second form of appreciation is important for a couple of reasons. The first is that, as *Triumph of the Will* has made clear, we must be careful of political ideals that are presented to us in a beautiful and persuasive manner. If we are to pretend that the political aspects of the film are insignificant, then it is more likely that they will persuade us. If, however, we are aware of the political aim of the

artwork, then we can make a conscious choice to accept or reject the political position of the film. The second reason that this added appreciation is imperative is that it allows us to fully appreciate the artwork. As we have shown, separating the various qualities of the work takes away from its true value. A great work of art is great because of how all of the pieces come together in one work. If we are to divide those pieces, then we also divide the greatness of the work. Certain critics have claimed that *Triumph of the Will* is great on a purely aesthetic level. We have shown that this could not be true because in watching the film we are affected, negatively, by the political perspective that is promoted. The opposite is also true. If the film is purely political propaganda, as many have asserted, then it should not produce the sense of awe and wonder that it does in so many people, and we should not desire to still watch and celebrate it today.

The application of the partial autonomy theory may not be easy. There are clear cases of artworks that cross the line of pure art to political or propagandistic artworks. In these cases we know that we must consider the political qualities when appreciating the artwork. However, there are many cases that remain on or close to this border that we have drawn. We have set up some criteria to help us determine when an artwork should be considered political, but art, as surely we can all agree, does not fit easily into the categories that we create for it. For these cases that are on the border of being political artworks, we must be all the more careful. We must be careful to not ignore certain aspects, and so not appreciate the work fully, but we must also be careful not to impose political viewpoints on an artwork that do not exist within the work itself. Our original goal was to determine how to properly appreciate political works of art but what we have arrived at is a theory of appreciation for all artworks. It may not be easy, but if we keep in mind the goal of a complete but fair appreciation for all artworks then perhaps we will be able to at least come closer to a proper appreciation of all art. Such an appreciation would allow for great artworks to be seen for what they actually are, and nothing more or less than that.

The notion of partial autonomy is not complete in this thesis. There are still practical considerations that need to be developed but the foundation is there. In order to properly appreciate an artwork we need one theory that can apply to all artworks; if we look for something less, then art is made to fit into categories, which it cannot do. We

also need to see an artwork, whenever possible, as only an artwork, to not impose any factors, social, religious or political, that do not exist within the work. Equally as important, however, is that we need to include political considerations when they contribute to the existence of the work as a whole. One thing that should be understood in the case of *Triumph of the Will* is that the importance of the film is neither due to its political aspects nor its aesthetic qualities alone but the combination of the two. It is the way in which the political is combined with the aesthetic that makes this film one that is often described as exceptional. In this case, and in cases like it, political considerations must be included when appreciating the artwork so as not to diminish the true value of the work. The theory of partial autonomy allows for complete appreciation of all artworks from the moment of their creation and this, for as long as the work will be considered.

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