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# Leni Riefenstahl: a documentary film maker?

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## INTRODUCTION

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary's definition of the word 'documentary is, "adj. 1. consisting of documents (documentary evidence). 2. providing a factual record or report. - n. a documentary film etc." ( Allen, Oxford, 1991)

A documentary film is meant to inform and educate its audience, usually by aspiring to represent facts and evidence in an unbiased way, thus allowing an audience to draw their own conclusions. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* is frequently acclaimed as one of the greatest documentary films.

It is without doubt, a brilliantly executed record of the Congress of the Nazi Party held in Nuremburg in 1935. IN terms of technique, scale and emotional impact it genuinely was a triumph, and it continues to influence film-makers to the present day.

But Riefenstahl's patron was none other than Adolf Hitler. The Führer had personally appointed Riefenstahl, then a relatively inexperienced director, to take full responsibility for the film. She had, at very short notice in 1934, made a brave effort to film the shambolic Party Congress of that year. But Hitler had confidence in her abilities and he insisted that she be given vastly increased resources to film the Nuremburg Rally 1935. Riefenstahl more than justified this belief in her genius.

However, the very fact that it was regarded as a glorious success by the founder of the Nazi Party, must, from a present day perspective, create a feeling of unease about the film's authenticity. The historian Richard Barsam has said that *Triumph of the Will*, "is widely regarded as the most powerful, influential propaganda film in non-fiction cinema history" (Indiana, 1990, pp129)



If documentary film is about unbiased observation of events in the world of nature and man, can a film that has an avowedly propagandist purpose be a documentary?

Did Leni Riefenstahl, by choosing to serve the Nazi Party, betray her own genius as a film maker and exclude herself from the honourable tradition of documentary?



## CHAPTER ONE

### IDEAS OF MODERN DOCUMENTARY

Contemporary understanding of documentary film comes from the documentaries shown on T.V. The David Attenborough-type documentary or the exposé-type documentary are the two examples that the T.V. generation recognises. They are informative and educational, full of facts and figures which extend our understanding of the world around us. But historically, documentaries originate in the cinema. Because televisions and radios were not widely available, because illiteracy was a huge problem and widespread reading of newspapers and periodicals was not common, cinema documentaries were regular occurrences.

John Grierson (1898-1972), is considered the father of documentary film making in the English speaking world. Grierson, a film-maker in his own right, is probably most famous for his direction of the General Post Office film unit between 1933 and 1937. The unit's brief was to "bring the Empire alive" (Hardy, 1966, pp166). Grierson and his team of film-makers made many films explaining such complexities of a modern life as technology and industry. But the British documentary film genre stemmed from the Soviet propaganda tradition. Grierson himself introduced the most famous of the Soviet films to the Western world, such as Eisenstein's "*Battleship Potemkin*" which he helped prepare for English speaking audiences in New York in 1924. Though Grierson himself was a Marxist, the films he produced were educational and informative, in praise of the human spirit and avoided any Marxist dogma or propaganda.

Grierson believed that film and the other popular media would take over from the church and school as guide and mentor to the people. He felt that it was possible



to educate the public through the medium of film, by giving them an understanding of situations and events, thus helping facilitate their decisions. Grierson set about filming events to show the plight of the working class people in post-depression England. The films he made for the Empire Marketing Board and later the General Post Office, were on such subjects as improving housing, better nutrition, improving education, better and safer working conditions and improving education. Through these films, Grierson helped influence the reconstruction of post-depression England.

It was Grierson who identified the 'hang-over effect' of the documentary, Grierson believed that the hang-over effect of a documentary was far more important and powerful than the "novelty or sensation to knock a Saturday night audience cold" (Hardy, 1966, pp 199-211). By this he meant that the influence and lingering ideological effect on the audience that was possible with a documentary film. This effect could in turn influence a whole generation. British documentaries were jointly funded by the government and private sector which meant that Grierson and his contemporaries were allowed a freedom of expression unobtainable in totalitarian states like Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. For this reason, British documentary film makers were able to make philanthropic films exclusively to educate the audience.

As a film maker and theorist, Dziga Vertov believed that Soviet film's task was to document the social reality of the time. During the Bolshevik revolution, Vertov became a film editor on the production of the first Soviet newsreels. He was based in Moscow and produced *Film Weekly* every week and a half for over a year long period, between 1918 and 1919. Vertov received footage from all over Soviet Russia and edited it together. This was footage of the invading forces, the attempts to suppress the revolution, the first footage of the new government leaders and footage of the hunger and chaos caused by foreign intervention in the



Civil War. The films were to educate and unite the people of the emerging Soviet state by informing them of the successes and defeats of their comrades. During the Film Weekly period, Vertov also compiled three feature length documentaries from the same footage: *The anniversary of the Revolution (1919)*, *The Battle of Tsaritsyn (1920)*, and the thirteen part *History of the Civil War (1921)*.

While working on these newsreels, Vertov developed his cinematic principle of 'life caught unawares'. Vertov used his camera to capture 'fly on the wall' type footage of social and political events throughout the emerging Soviet Russia. This included footage of the return of the trolley line to the torn up streets of Moscow, the use of tanks as tractors and a hospital coping with injured and malnourished children.

Grierson and Vertov represent within documentary film making history, two of the founders of the genre. They, along with their contemporaries, established the rules of documentaries that still exist today. These rules relate to the amount of control exercised before and during production. In comparison with a fiction film maker, a documentary film maker can only control certain aspects of the production, whereas fiction film-makers can control all. In a documentary, the producer can set up shots to a certain extent, by their placement of the cameras and their choice of angles. The type of film and cameras used can also be under their control. The script should not be influenced or changed in any way by the production, nor should rehearsal be an option. Other factors such as the setting, the lighting and the behaviour of the people involved are usually uncontrolled. It is fundamentally the difference between the staged and the unstaged, between the controlled and the uncontrolled, and the emotional aim of the film - to the head or to the heart of the audience.



## CHAPTER TWO

### PROPAGANDA FILMS IN NAZI GERMANY

As minister in charge of the department of Enlightenment and Propaganda, Josef Goebbels had complete control over the German film industry from the 1933 elections, when the Nazi Party came to power. From the film studios at Babelsberg, near Berlin, Goebbels had hundreds of films made a year, 85% of which were popular light entertainment.

Arthur Maria Rabenalt, interviewed in the BBC documentary *Selling Politics* (Rees, BBC2, 1992), said that 'he (Goebbels) was movie crazy and liked to look at pretty women. So he basically liked exactly what the audience wanted.' Goebbels had the power to veto the production and screening of any film, which he did in 1933, when he saw the *Hitler Junge Quex*, because of its lack of subtlety. Film producers believed that Goebbels would appreciate overt propaganda films like *Hitler Junge Quex* (1933). This was a film about a Hitler youth who dies for the cause. But Goebbels hated it. Goebbels believed that the best form of propaganda was achieved by reaffirming the public previously held views and prejudices, not by trying to brainwash them into a new way of thinking. He believed that entertainment films were the best way of doing this for two reasons. The first was the ability to get the public into the cinemas, away from their worries and troubles and into the realms of fantasy. The second reason was that the cinema screen was accessible to everyone - literate and illiterate people alike. He believed that propaganda was like a convoy of ships: they had to travel at the speed of their slowest boat. Goebbels knew that the Nazi propaganda had to appeal to the mass audience and that entertainment was the best vehicle on which to do this. The concept of historical films appealed greatly to Goebbels for this reason.



Films using famous historical figures like Frederick the Great and Bismarck were made by order of Goebbels. These figures were intended to create an analogy between Hitler and historical figures and the similar situations. In the 1940 film *Jud Süß*, a Jewish man insinuates himself into the polite 18th century Württemberg society. He imprisons the husband of the perfect Aryan woman and tries to seduce her. He is captured and at the end of the film he is hung. The film was a huge success. Himmler, the leader of the SS, ordered that everyone under his command should see the film. Nazi audience research at the time found that the vast majority of the audience had made the connection between 18th century Württemberg and 20th century Germany.(Rees, BBC, 1992). For some people, through this film alone, Goebbels had successfully 'legitimised' the murder of Jewish people.

In 1934, Hitler approached Leni Riefenstahl, a famous young actress, to direct a film about him. This infuriated Goebbels. He knew that, since she was working under Hitler's personal request, he would have no control over Riefenstahl's film. Later, when Goebbels saw the film, he realised that Riefenstahl had broken his golden rule: Goebbels believed that Hitler was his greatest star and had systematically restricted the use of Hitler footage to short appearances on newsreels. This meant that the public had never been exposed to much footage of Hitler and so the myth surrounding him had intensified. These two facts - Hitler's personal request and Riefenstahl's liberal use of Hitler footage lead to the infamous animosity between Goebbels and Riefenstahl.

Throughout the Europe of the 1920's and 1930's, there was a general distrust of both democracy and imperialism as forms of rule. The public's distrust stemmed from the aftermath World War 1 and the depression that were endemic throughout the World at the time. Because of this and the widely held Nietzschean belief that 'God is dead', there was a longing for one person to



take control. Powerful individuals like Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Stalin and to a lesser extent De Valera in Ireland, rose to power and led the public. Despite the fact that the French Revolution had been fought to secured democratic freedom for all, fundamentally, people simply wanted a leader to take control. Erich Fromm says that,

...for greater parts of the lower middle class in Germany and other European countries, the sado-masochistic character is typical, and ... it is this kind of character structure to which the Nazi ideology had it's strongest appeal.(Fromm, London, 1963, pp141).

He goes on to explain that the 'sado-masochistic character' he is referring to is not the neurotic perverted type, but the type who 'admires authority and tends to submit to it, but at the same time he wants to be an authority himself and have others submit to him'. Though this is a very generalising statement, it does give an explanation as to why the Nazi Party, through Hitler became such a powerful force so quickly in 1920's Germany.

The 5th Party Congress was designed by Hitler and the Party to have maximum effect on its audience. Hitler knew the power of mass meetings on the public he was dealing with when he wrote in *Mein Kampf*,

...only a mass demonstration can impress upon him (the audience), the greatness of this community while seeing his way, he is grabbed by the force 'of mass suggestion', (Hitler, London, 1964, pp398).

And, if we take into consideration a statement made by Riefenstahl,

In school and in the family home, discipline came first ... Germans would be very enamoured of someone they could model themselves on. They were happy to let themselves be led, that's for sure, (Müller, 1993),

it seems that it was this 'sado-masochistic character' innate in the German psyche, that made them such ideal candidates for the manipulation of the 1934



Congress and Riefenstahl's film.

If there is a question mark over the claim that *Triumph of the Will* is one of the greatest documentary films, it can only be considered against the definition and tradition of documentary films outlined above.

The amount of control exercised by Riefenstahl and Hitler must influence the modern audiences perception of the film. *Triumph of the Will* is a powerful, well-constructed and stimulating film, worthy of study and discussion but not of the name 'documentary'.

It has been suggested that 'the most famous "borderline" documentary is Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. Controversy still rages as to whether the film simply documents the 1934 Nazi Party congress or whether the event was staged especially for the film. If the latter is true, the film would be the most stupendous effort of mise-en-scène in film history' (Bordwell and Thompson, 4th ed., 1993, pp.181).

I believe that *Triumph of the Will* was the largest stage managed event ever, with a cast of thousands, the backing and support of Hitler and the entire Nazi Party, and had the effect of promoting and condoning the Nazi party throughout Germany in the 1930's.

The biggest question hanging over *Triumph of the Will* is whether or not the 5th. Nazi party Congress was staged for the benefit of Leni Riefenstahl's camera. I believe that the entire event was rehearsed and staged for the benefit of the film cameras.

In 1933, Riefenstahl was asked by Hitler to make a film of the fourth party Congress. Against her will and at very short notice, according to Riefenstahl herself, she went to Nuremburg and filmed the event. She was not satisfied with the result but Hitler insisted that it be shown. The result was, *Sieg des Glaubens* (*Victory of Faith*, 1933), a short film financed by the Nazi Party. In this film the



disorganisation in the party and the small scale of the congress is obvious. There was undoubtedly more than one leader in the Party, Hitler was surrounded by the second in commands. Röhm, the leader at the time of the SA stood at Hitler's side sharing the limelight. A few months later, Hitler had him assassinated during the Röhm Purge. The soldiers can be seen whispering amongst themselves and as is said in the documentary *The Wonderful Horrible life of Leni Riefenstahl*, 'the Nazis had not yet learnt to march like Nazis'.

If we look on *Sieg des Glaubens* as the dress rehearsal for *Triumph of the Will* it is obvious that Riefenstahl had learnt from this first effort as had the Party. In *Triumph of the Will* Hitler is always seen alone, the soldiers march in perfect patterns, never break ranks, never whisper or look unsure of their place. The march-bys in 'Sieg des Glaubens' are all reviewed by Hitler from a single static point, and the podium from which he made his speech was short. In *Triumph of the Will* however, Hitler reviews the ranks from a moving car or high up on the platform; his speeches are made from a high podium and filmed by a moving camera.

In her book *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag film* (Riefenstahl, Munich, 1935 pp. 84), Riefenstahl herself says that 'the preparations for the Party convention were made in connection with the preparation for the camera work.' In other words, the event was being staged for the camera. It was not a 'real' or spontaneous event with integral purposes of its own at which the cameras happened to be an observer. Rather it was a staged, rehearsed, choreographed happening. Indeed, it might be argued that the event itself was less important than the film that was supposed to record it. An individual taking part in the Congress, lost in the great throng, moving on queue, could not have had any sense of its overall magnificence. These spectacular qualities were created rather than captured by inspired camera work, direction and editing.



Leni Riefenstahl did for the Nazi's what Busby Berkley did for girls in swim suits. And they were neither concerned with 'documentation' or 'truth'.

It is hard to take seriously Riefenstahl's claim that, 'It is history. A purely historical film'.(Delahay, Paris, 1965, pp 49).

Hitler wished the 5th Nazi Party Congress to be the biggest ever. His intention was that this congress would mark the beginning of the 1000 year reign of the Nazi Party. It was to demonstrate the 'order, unity and determination of the National Socialist movement. As a film it would be "... a documentary record of the unanimous loyalty to the Führer and therefore to Germany',(Welch, Oxford, 1987, pp148). It would be the chronicle of the first congress, the one everyone would remember. As Erik Barnouw says of the Congress and Riefenstahl's film ... it would be the 'announcement and demonstration to all the world of German rebirth.'

There were two main reasons why Hitler felt it necessary to stage the Party Congress and have a film made about it. The first motivation behind the Congress and the film was to rally the support of the German people behind the Nazi banner. Unemployment was high, morale was low after the Depression and the First World War. People were eager to find direction, motivation and a powerful and capable leader. By getting Leni Riefenstahl, already the embodiment of the perfect Aryan woman through her 'mountain films', to make the film of the Party Rally, it extended the persuasive power of the Congress to the entire country through the cinema.

The second reason and probably the most pressing at the time, was the necessity to show Party unity, to the members of the Party, to the German public and to the countries of Europe. Unity within the Party was important firstly because, after the death of President Hindenburg there were likely to be calls for a return to



traditional Imperialist rule. By displaying a unified front the Party could avoid this.. But far more importantly, the Party unity had to be prominently displayed because of the doubts caused by the Röhm Purge. Named after the murdered SA leader, the Röhm Purge was the systematic assassination of over a 1,000 people, ordered by Hitler. These murders were of people believed to be a direct threat to Hitler's domination of the Party. At one stroke, Hitler eliminated all organised opposition within the Party

So, the purpose of the 5th Nazi Party Congress was to demonstrate the unity, the discipline and the grandiose scale of the organisation. It was Riefenstahls job to record this demonstration through the art and technology of the cinema.

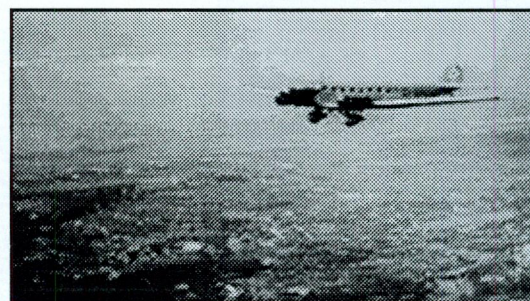
When the film was premiered on 29th March 1935, the members of the audience were each given a programme, called the *Illustrierter Film-Kurier*. It contained the names of each of the scenes and a verbal description of the first 4 of the film's 12 scenes. I have used the names and order given in the programme to create a graphic scheme of the film (see inside back cover). I believe that this will assist the reader with an understanding of the sequence of events, depicted in the film. It is also an interesting illustration of Leni Riefenstahls use of visual imagery.



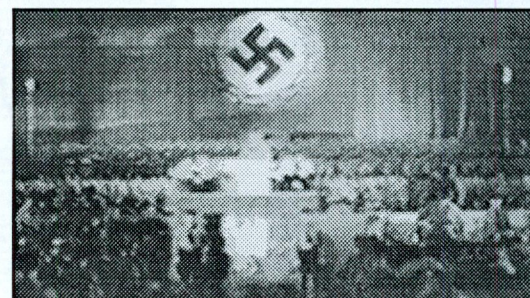
## CHAPTER THREE

### RECONSTRUCTION

Because of the structure of *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl and the Party could always maintain that the film was a documentary of the 5th Party Congress. The implication is that it adheres faithfully to the chronology of the actual event. The opening shots are of Hitler's airplane arriving in Nuremberg (fig. 3.1) and the closing shots are of the Hitler making the closing speech of the Congress (fig 3.2). This must therefore be a straight-forward account of events in the manner of any 'day in the life of...' report. But this surface simplicity was a carefully crafted illusion.

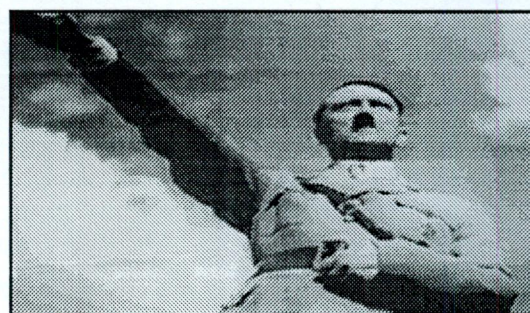


Hitler's plane arriving in Nuremberg fig 3.1



Hitler making the closing speech fig 3.2

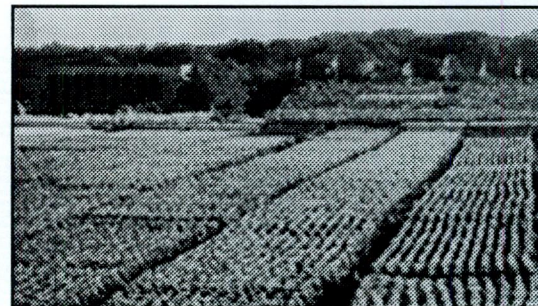
Before filming of the Rally began, Riefenstahl had detailed knowledge of the stadium in which the majority of mass meetings would be held. This meant that she could have rails laid between the ranks and around the base of Hitler's podium (fig.3.3). She had pits dug in front of the speakers platform, tracks and ramps laid so that the cameramen could film travelling shots. She was able to watch the soldiers marching in the stadium in preparation, and could place her camera accordingly. She even had a 120ft lift built behind the large banners at the back of the speakers podium (fig. 3.4). From this vantage point she shot some of the most spectacular footage of the 1.5 million attending the rally. But



Hitler greeting the Congress fig 3.3



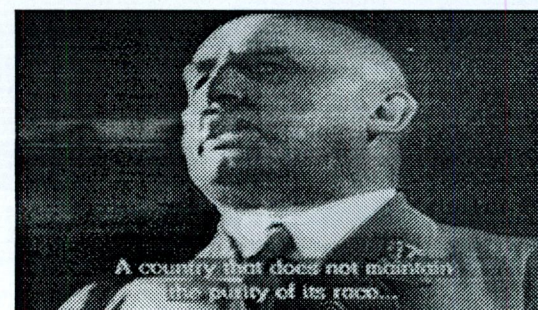
Riefenstahl's determination to produce the desired effect went beyond even these elaborate preparations. As a documentary director, she shouldn't have had any concern over the 'script', but since the leaders of the Party were the only ones speaking, that aspect was being tightly controlled from within the Party (fig. 3.5). But in their anxiety to create the right impression in Germany and the wider world, the film



Congress viewed from 120ft lift

fig 3.4

maker and her subject's were prepared to go for 2nd or 3rd takes. Albert Speer, architect and designer of the Nuremburg stadium said in his memoirs that Riefenstahl recreated and reshot some of the speeches. He maintained that the speech made by Hess, the deputy Führer of the Party was reshot on a replica podium in Babelsberg. As Speer watched, Hess turned and saluted 'Hitler so convincingly, that for the first time I questioned what I saw. (Speer, London, 1970, pp. 73).



District leader Streicher speaking at the Opening ceremony

fig.3.5

In scene 5, 52,000 labourers were brought into the Zepplinfield in Nuremburg and stood, in military order, carrying spades instead of rifles. While Hitler reviewed the spectacle from the speakers platform, the labourers are told to present arms (their spades) and stand at ease, like soldiers (fig. 3.6). And then, a small group of the labourers start speaking in unison:

'Here we stand; we are ready to carry Germany into a new era' they say. The leader asks, 'Comrade, where are you from?' And they reply individually, 'From Friesenland', 'And you?', 'From Pomerania', 'From Königsberg', 'From Silesia', 'From the coast', 'From the Blackforest', 'From Dresden', 'From the Danube', 'From the Rhine' and 'From the Saar'.

It is too obvious that this sequence was staged specially for the benefit of



Riefenstahl's cameras. It is impossible that, in a field of 52,000 labourers and spectators, a small group like this would have had any impact let alone be heard.

The only place that a sequence like this would have any impact is on the cinema screen. By staging this scene, Riefenstahl had created a sequence where "ordinary Germans could express their true feelings about the Nazi Party cause". By naming



Labourers presenting spades

fig 3.6

every area individually, it connected Hitler to every corner of Germany. And by showing it in a darkened cinema to thousands, it would have the effect of unifying them behind the banner. After all, they were watching their own fellow townsmen professing loyalty to Hitler and the Nazi Party.

"From the real life of the people was built up a faked reality that is passed off as the genuine one, but this bastard reality, instead of being an end in itself, merely served as the set-dressing for a film that was to assume the character of an authentic documentary'. (Kracauer, Boston, 1974, pp.301).

This statement from Siegfried Kracauer is widely quoted when questions arise about the authenticity of *Triumph of the Will* as a documentary. The 'faked reality' Kracauer speaks of is created by the order of events that Riefenstahl created in her film. Riefenstahl ignored the sequential order of events and instead imposed the chronological order of 'morning, afternoon and night' on her footage. Her handling and manipulation, gives the elusion of non-selective documentation of the rally. It also, by echoing the ancient rule of 'dramatic unity', creates another important feature of the film - its mythical quality. Events which took place over a period of seven days were organised and presented as a day long drama. Part of the reason for creating this alternative order of events, was to show the highlights of Hitler's interaction with the assembly. An intense feeling of leader worship is created by focusing the emotional climaxes of a week inside a 105 minute framework. It appeared that Hitler was the centre of the entire event.



All the spectators were gathered together by the power of one man - Hitler. This single, all powerful man was being heralded as the future of Germany, the way forward, the shape of things to come. It was by introducing this 'rhythm of time' as a fundamental part of the films frame-work and the movement in every shot, that gives *Triumph of the Will* its continuity and structure.

By choosing to organise the rally in Nuremburg, a city with links to many of the great episodes of German history, the Nazi Party were determined to establish their own connection to the past. Nuremburg had been the site of the Emperors Palaces and architecturally, it contained many examples of German urban history. The Nazi party, by connecting the history of Germany during it's most powerful period to the Third Reich created the elusion that the Nazi Party were the natural successors to this power. By suggesting that the Empire of Germany was the natural pre-cursor to Nazi Germany, ment that Hitler and his Party were given 'legitimacy' and historical security.

By modelling the very stadium in which the majority of open air meetings would be held, on ancient Roman arenas, once again the Party connected itself with the powerful and respected Roman Empire. For the same reasons as the Romans built their arena's, the stadiums design and construction was intended to be a constant reminder to the public of the power and strength of the Party, even when it was empty. The stadium, designed by Albert Speer, was intended to dwarf the individual standing within it's perimeters, echoing the Party's own ethos of anti-individualism. Throughout the film, the ordinary people are not portrayed as individuals, but as the tiny necessary parts in the creation of the of the superior Aryan race. In the same way, the sheer size of the Nuremburg stadium was intended to remind the spectators and troops alike, of the power of the Party.

But of all the anti-documentary devices the most revealing is the one referred by ,



Renata Berg-Pan in her book *Leni Riefenstahl* "...the speeches are compiled from various meetings and not just from the opening session as the film implies', (Berg-Pan, Boston, 1986 pp. 110). Riefenstahl has edited in sections of prerecorded film and has passed them off as genuine opening ceremony material. She has distorted reality and has lied to the audience.

The opening scene is not what it seems. Speeches that were recorded somewhere else are included in the opening ceremony. The opening ceremony was therefore, not as Riefenstahl shows it to be. The leaders of the Party did not take part in the Congress in the way she suggests. Realisation of this puts into question everything else that the film presents to the audience.

But that is not to say that *Triumph of the Will* should be ignored for these reasons. On the contrary. As Goebbels put it, when he was awarding Riefenstahl the National Film Prize in 1935: 'This represents an exceptional achievement in ... film production ...'(Berg Pan, Boston, 1980, pp128) It is a visually exciting and compelling film, even when this compulsion is fuelled by fear. It is a brilliant example of organisation and coordination. To feed, house and entertain 1.5 million people over a week long period exemplify the Nazi Party's ability to mobilise all the means at their disposal, which in this case, was all of Germany in 1934. And to make a film about it, for national and international distribution, demonstrates the power of the Nazi Party's internal marketing and propaganda machine. Their sophistication in ideas and techniques of mind manipulation were far in advance of their time.



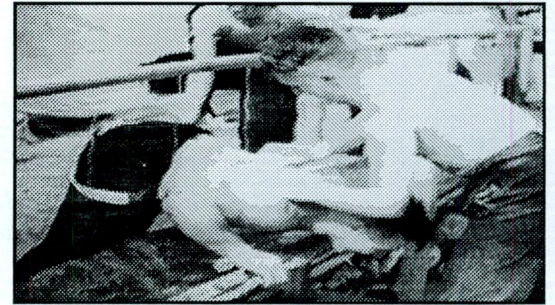
## CHAPTER FOUR

### STAGING

*Triumph of the Will* used the vast organisation that went into the staging of the 5th Party Congress as proof of the widespread support of Hitler, testament to the god-like power and strength of Hitler and the unlimited finances the Party seemed to have to stage such an event. Over 1 million people travelled to Nuremburg to take part in in the national Congress, both as spectators and marching participants. Riefenstahl used the spirit of 'community' that seems to have grown up over the 7 days, as proof of the happiness and security of those living in the tent city around Nuremburg. By showing the people eating, sleeping, washing and playing together (see scheme), the audience were shown the unity and comradeship so attractive and important to them. Long before the arrival of the Nazi Party, there had been a history of mass meetings and rallies in Germany, when entire families would leave home for a week and participate in organised outdoor, community life. Through *Triumph of the Will*, the public were shown an idyllic, simple life of freedom and security. They watched the men wake from sleep on their beds of straw in the third scene. The men gather at a communal open-air washing area. The audience hears the happy laughter of the men and traditional German folksongs, as they play like children in the water. These young, bare-chested men, have attained the child-like peace and security under the watchful eye of Hitler and the Party. They are healthy and strong, full of Aryan vigour, the underlying message being the acceptance and importance of the next generation to the present one. The audience is shown a man polishing his shoes, another writing a post-card. There are numerous shots of men shaving and brushing their hair - mass grooming in preparation for an important day. There is footage of them helping each other, by holding mirrors and straightening partings - images of reliance and dependence on each other within the



community (fig. 4.1). Riefenstahl, by showing the audience these sequences of comradeship and happiness, has invented the cause of the new found optimism that was sweeping Germany. The people are shown as finding strength, comradeship and purpose behind Hitler, as having a newfound belief in the strength of the human body and spirit and in the rewards of physical labour.



The community spirit

fig 4.1

By concentrating the audience's attention on the minute details of the Congress, the audience was given time to make the connection between the activities of the participants at the Congress and what was going on in the rest of Germany at the time. By keeping the public's view introspective and by creating a spirit of self-containment within Germany, Riefenstahl had focused attention away from the external Empire building ambitions of Hitler.

Throughout *Triumph of the Will*, there is the feeling of plenty and opulence. This is shown nowhere more obviously than in the 3rd scene of the film. The audience is shown the preparation of a typical German breakfast. Water is being boiled, pasta is being cooked, fires are being stoked and hundreds of sausages are being prepared for cooking. There is footage of women and children eating (fig. 4.2), and of people in traditional costume carrying baskets of food and flowers, like offerings to an altar, in a parade through the streets of Nuremberg. It is as if, through Hitler's leadership and guidance, the German nation's life would be like this, full of plenty with an end to hunger and want.



Child eating an apple

fig 4.2

In this film, Riefenstahl has depicted German life in its most 'attractive' form for



it's 1934 audience - food, work, self -reliance, power, progression and strong leadership. By using the metaphor of the Congress community, who lived in the tents, Riefenstahl has shown the German people living as one large community, relying on each other, self sufficient and happy. But Riefenstahl fails to depict any of the means employed by the Nazi Party in the acquirement of this way of life.

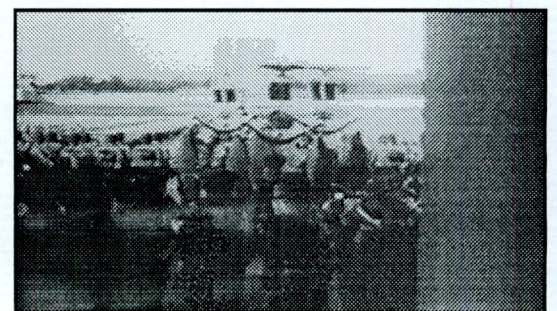


## CHAPTER FIVE

### MANIPULATION

'The possession of power is nothing without it's display', (Welch, Oxford, 1987, pp 149) This statement quantifies another reason why *Triumph of the Will* was a necessary in the eyes of the Party. The mere possession of power was not enough because it did not perpetuate itself. By giving public testimony to their power and unity, the Party increased their exposure in the consciousness of the public. And by so doing, the ordinary people were inticed to the Party's ranks. Because of the nature of the Nazi's message, a demonstration of the Party's physical strength as *Triumph of the Will* was, became the tangible manifestation of the propaganda message that the Party was instilling in the general public.

The Nazi Party's belief in the principles of order and symmetry, are apparent in the architecture of the stadium, as they were in many aspects of Nazi life. There were granite columns around the perimeters of the stadium, from behind which Riefenstahl shot the original long tracking shot. (fig.5.1). By night, these columns were replaced by columns of light, shining straight up into the night sky. These columns created an effect that was referred to as the 'cathedral of light'. It was a reminder to



Original tracking shot

fig 5.1

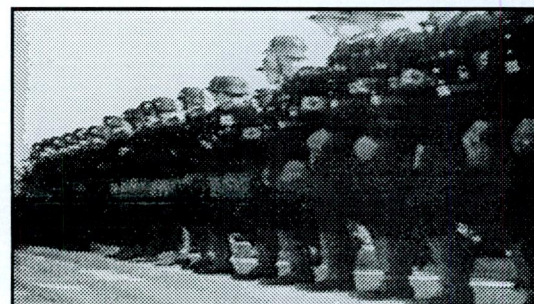
those present that they were surrounded and protected. By repeatedly showing patterns, Riefenstahl has depicted the order and control, qualities both admired and required by the Nazi Party. Sequences of soldiers marching en masse, of banners and flags, of cars and soldiers hats, of trumpets and cauldrons creating patterns are examples of chaotic life successfully moulded into order (fig. 5.2 - 5.4).



The patterns have also replaced the 'formal artistic structure' (Kracauer, Princeton Uni. Press, 1974, pp302) with aesthetically pleasing patterns, which compensate for the lack of real content and information in the film. Documentaries are intended to appeal to the intellect of the audience, bypassing the emotions and reason. Entertainment films are designed to appeal firstly to the emotions, and then to the audiences intellect. But in *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl created a film that appealed first and foremost to the emotions of the audience. By intentionally informing the audience through their emotional channels the aesthetic qualities of the patterns are adequate to command their attention for the duration of the film.

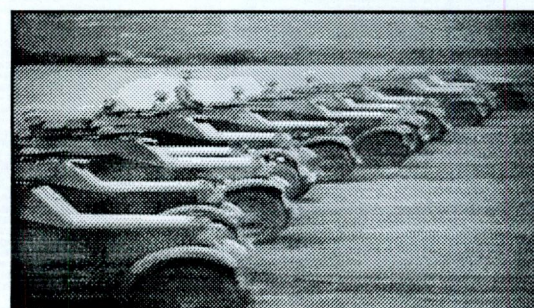
Riefenstahl's camera is constantly moving from side to side and up and down, gliding effortlessly from image to image. Riefenstahl was the first director to use large, continuous movements in her work, an example of her skill both as a director and as an editor.

The audience is presented with a constantly moving world and a feeling of insecurity and tension is created. The constant movement can be seen in the various marching scenes. But it is also apparent in the footage of Hitler's speeches. The audience was shown Hitler against the clouds and Party insignia, they were constantly looking up at Hitler. This effected their perception of him and their reaction, both psychologically and physically to Hitler and his



Marching Soldiers

fig 5.2



Manouvering cars from the 8th scene 5.3



Military review shot from scene 11 fig. 5.4



speeches. The audience were forced to react with their emotions first, bypassing their intellect and reason. This meant that they were receiving their information through their emotional channels and not their intellectual ones. Hitler, writing in *Mein Kampf* about the effects of mass meetings on the psyche of the individual, said,

" ... the individual ... now begins to feel isolated and in fear of being left alone as he acquires for the first time the pictures of a great community, which has a strengthening and encouraging effect on most people..."  
(Hitler, Munich, 1924, pp397-398) .

This is the effect that Riefenstahl was recreating and intensifying with her film.



## CONCLUSION

From the time the movie camera was invented, 'documentary' footage had a special appeal for audiences. When the Lumière Brothers showed their film of the train arriving in the station at St. Lazare, people were so impressed with its 'reality' that they fainted! Later, as the public became accustomed to the 'magic' of the cinema, there remained a firm interest in 'actual reports' of scenes that were moving, unfamiliar or exciting. Long before the arrival of television, and its Global Village, news camera-men and documentary film makers had begun to break down the barriers of distance.

This kind of communication was less glamorous than that of the entertainment film. But it was the area in which many very talented and idealistic people choose to work. Their belief in film was that it could bring to vast public, views of life that would, traditionally, have been hidden from them by geography or politics, class or religion. By observing and recording the lives of ordinary people as they coped with the problems and customs of their own place, the documentary film could strengthen the feeling of shared humanity among all men.

However, a diametrically opposed view of the nature of man and the purpose of communication grew up in the years after World War One. This trend found its greatest support in Germany. A glorification of tribalism, a denigration of the individual feeling and a systematic exploitation of fear and hatred, became the distinguishing marks of the Nazi regime.

Hitler and his followers despised democracy. Until the time came when they could destroy it by War, they would do their best to undermine it through propaganda.



Propaganda is not about telling the truth, although it may do so if it serves its purpose. The propagandist's attitude to his audience is basically one of contempt. He cannot afford to treat them as rational beings. He selects the information they may be allowed to see and envelopes it in an emotional package that will ease the audience into the conclusion he wishes them to arrive at.

The contrast, therefore, is obvious.

A documentary film maker reveals and explains and so hopes to create a new point of view from which his audience can learn.

The propaganda film maker conceals, rearranges and deludes, hoping to by-pass the audience's rational faculties and stimulate their emotions.

It seems obvious from the account of her life and work given above, that Leni Riefenstahl was primarily a propagandist.

To achieve the effects which her political masters required, Riefenstahl made a film that looked like an extremely good and accurate documentary. But it is no more a detached observation of events in the authentic record of daily life in 1934 Germany, than a Hollywood movie is an authentic record of daily life in California.

The Nuremberg Rally was a vast, theatrical display, funded, designed and choreographed for the benefit of the camera. The images captured on film, edited with great skill and augmented by material from other sources, created the appearance of unity, power, and discipline that the Nazi Party wished to present to the world. Leni Riefenstahl's relationship with their particular 'product' was, at best, the same as that of a commercial director with the tyres or the washing-up liquid he advertises, or at worst a Party member, like 90% of the population at the time.



It is possible that another film could have been made of the Nuremburg Rally. Had the news cameramen from Pathe and Gaumont and The March of Time, been present in the stadium, they could have recorded, along with the spectacle and the hordes, the honest, human experiences. Very often it is the ordinary, comical, disorganised moments that give the truest picture of the feelings of people and communities.

The newsmens footage might have been combined to make a feature length record of that vast meeting of German men and women. It would probably not have been so spectacular a film as *Triumph of the Will*, but it might have been a genuine documentary.



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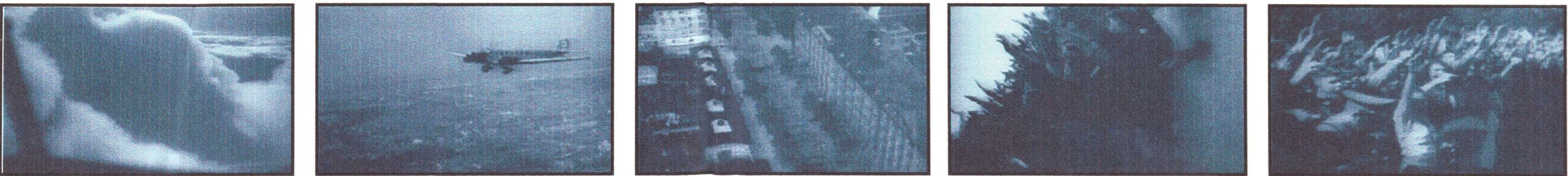
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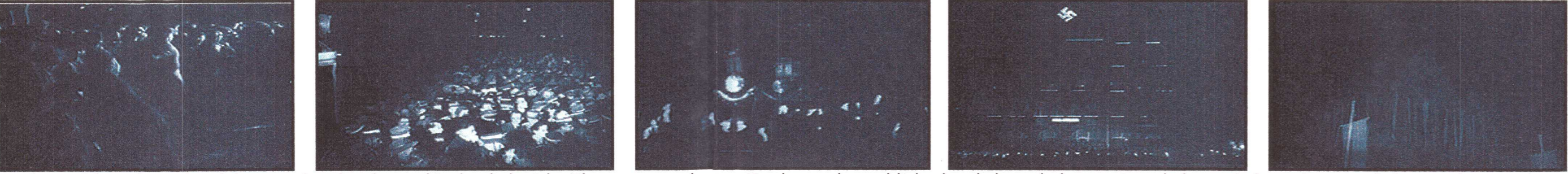


Scene 1  
'Happy  
Morning!  
'Festive Day'



"Sunlight floods the land of Germany. Clouds gather into clusters, rise up to form gigantic mountains surrounded by silver and golden rays, they subside, flow, scatter ... like a fantastic eagle, an ... aeroplane that carries the Führer towards the city, in which the great, proud, heart-stirring spectacle of a new Germany will be consummated. Onwards rushes the mighty machine. The roaring rhythm of the motor shouts into the wind: 'Nuremberg ... Nuremberg ... Nuremberg ...'. Far below the city is radiating, Boundless masses of people stare into the sky. There! - as close to the clouds, on the sun-golden firmament, the speeding shadow becomes larger, approaches. Thundering, it circles over the city. An aero -

Scene 2  
'Joyful evening'



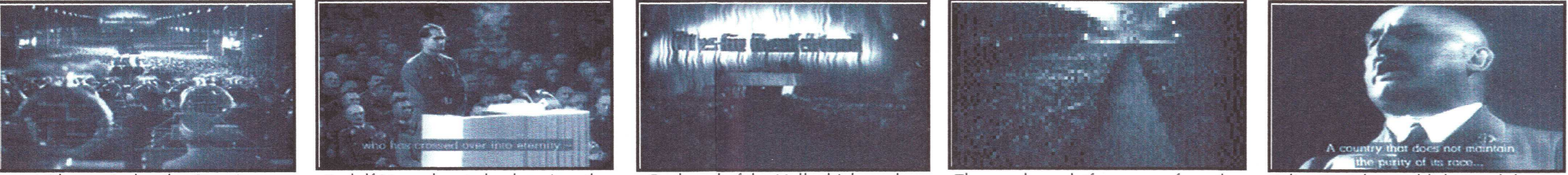
"In front of the Führer's hotel the crowd pushes forward in the dark night. The army marches up. Torches and searchlights break through the evenings darkness. In large, beaming lights a welcome shines from the hotel: 'Heil Hitler!' The army band groups in a large ceremonious circle, the grey of the steel helmets gleam in the dazzling light. The conductor raises his baton. On up to the starry

Scene 3  
'Parade of the  
Nation'



"A new day dawns. The soft light of the morning sun lies on the roofs, flickers about the centuries-old towers of the most German of German towns. Bells are heard in the countryside. The old, beautiful city in the colourful decoration of billowing flags, in the cheerful ornaments of its beautiful baroque monuments and figures of the venerable churches, awaits the grandiose spectacle. And

Scene 4  
'Opening of the  
Party Congress  
in the Congress  
Hall.'



Hitlers arrival at the Opening Ceremony.  
Rudolf Hess, deputy leader, gives the opening address.  
Back wall of the Hall which reads: 'Everything for Germany'.  
The speakers platform, seen from the end of the hall.  
Julius Streicher, publisher and district leader making one of the 10 speeches.

Scene 5  
'March past of  
52,000 men in  
the Labour  
Service'



Marching labourers, seen from within their rank  
A labourer tightly holding his spade, symbol for the Labourers.  
Hitler addressing the assembled Labourers.  
One of the labourers who speaks in unison.  
The Labourers prepare to march off, after Hitler's military-style review of their ranks.

Scene 6  
'Night Rally of  
the Storm  
Troopers'



This is the evening rally of the Storm Troopers, to the sound of 'People take your guns!' The trooper are often seen in silhouette against the smoke filled sky in contrast with the next scene. The dark smokiness of the SA rally "reinforces the men's blood brotherhood and suggests their mythic origins in fire". (Berg-Pan, Boston, 1980, pp114)

Scene 7  
'German Youth  
before their  
Führer'



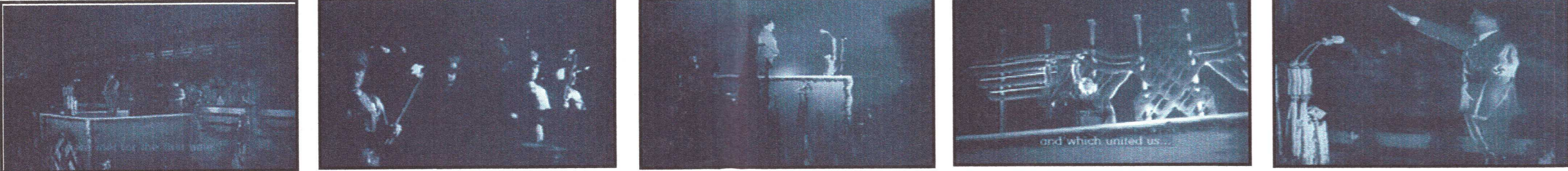
This is a sun lit rally for the Hitler Youth. The leader of the Hitler Youth Baldur von Shirlach, introduces Hitler to the crowd, giving a short speech. Then Hitler addresses the Youth. They applaud him and wave to Hitler as he leaves the podium.

Scene 8  
'Review of the  
Infantry and  
Cavalry'

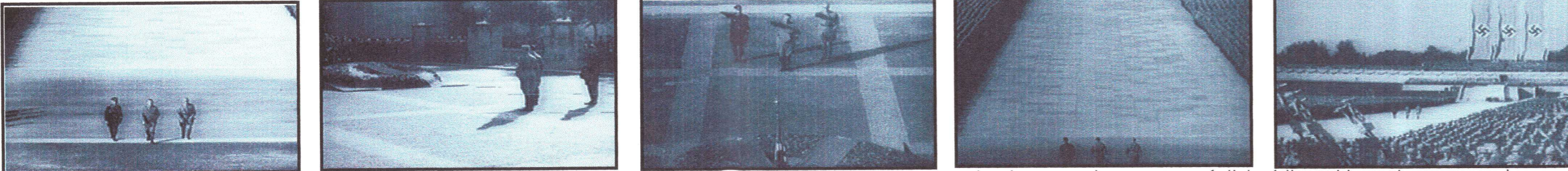


This is the shortest scene in the film, which was later used by Riefenstahl as the basis for *Tag der Freiheit (Day of Freedom)*. Hitler, Goering and some other military officials review the infantry and cavalry from a platform.

Scene 9  
Hitler addresses  
the crowd in  
the evening'

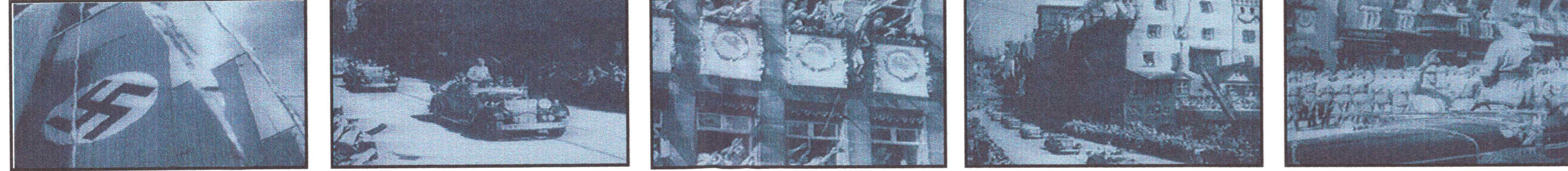


Scene 10  
'Honouring of  
the heroes in  
the Luitpold  
Grove'



Hitler, Himmler and Lutze walk to the War memorial through the ammassed ranks, all standing in perfect geometric patterns. They lay a wreath in memory of all the fallen soldiers. They return to the podium, Lutze introduces Hitler, who gives a speech about Party unity. Hitler then 'blesses' the standards and banners of the ranks, with the Blood Flag - supposedly the flag soaked in the blood of one

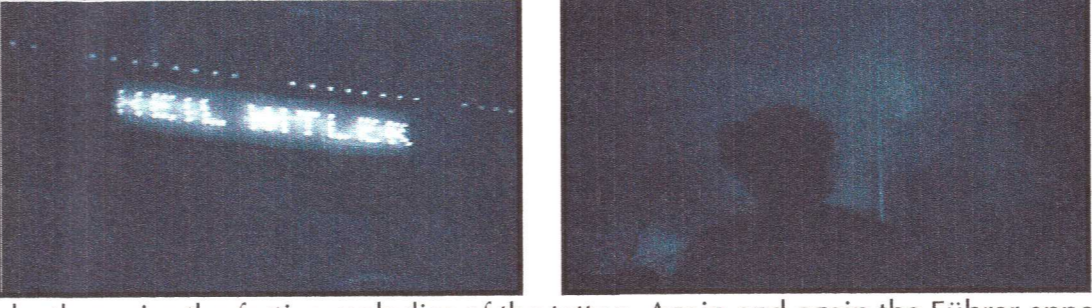
Scene 11  
Hitlers drive by.



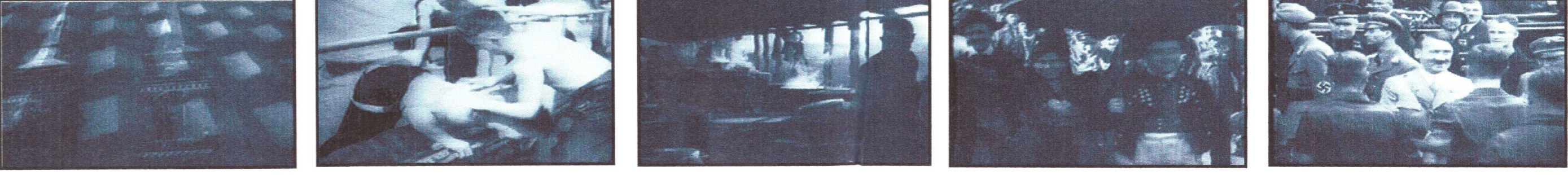
Scene 12  
'Closing  
Ceremony'



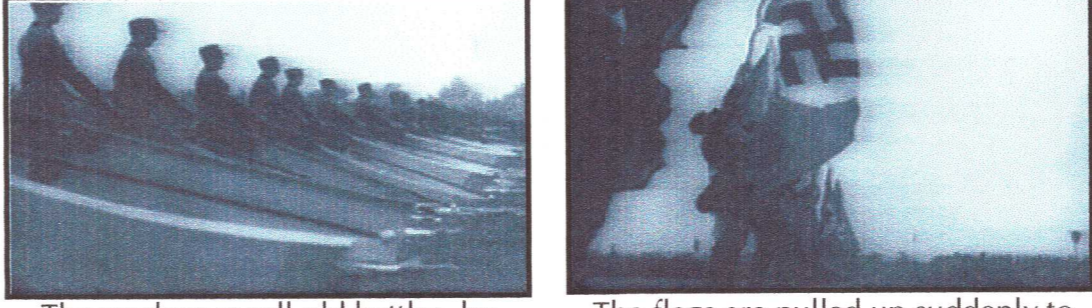
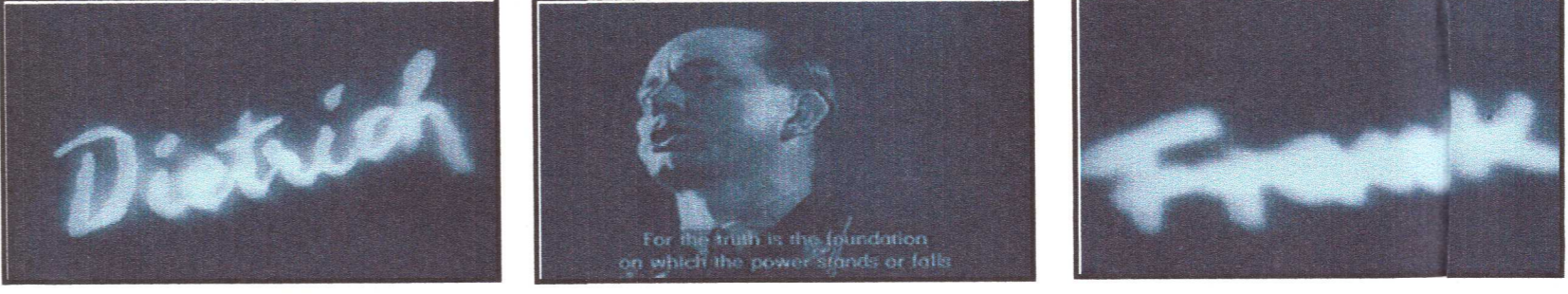
plane. The aeroplane! The Führer is arriving. As the gigantic bird finally hovers over the airfield, loses altitude, approaches, stops, the tenderness of anticipation of thousands has reached it's peak and is released in joyful, enthusiastic shouts. The Führer gets out of the plane. Here and there a brief, firm handshake, a friendly word, a glance of recognition. On the face of those who were able to be there is a light of grateful confidence. With a roaring cheers from all sides, the Führer rides into the city. The streets tremble with the shouts of loyalty, of love, of faith! Nuremberg greets the Führer of the Germans in the proud exaltation of the festive sun-filled day!"



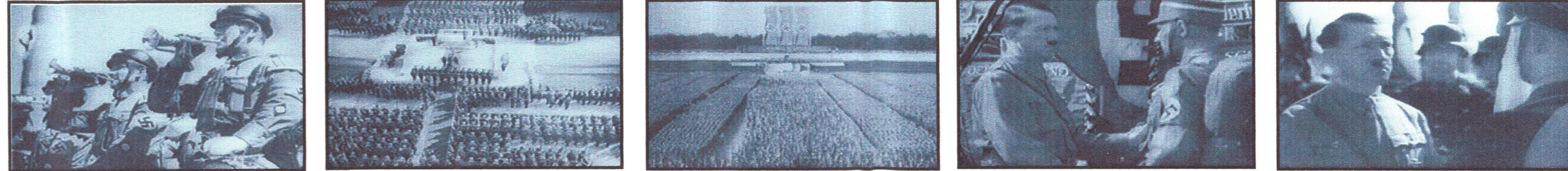
sky there rise the festive melodies of the tattoo. Again and again the Führer appears at his window, again and again he is cheered by the cheerful and exalted people on this festive, happy evening."



thus the festival continues to show in rapid, concise succession the events that become history:..."



The workers recall old battles, by dipping their flags slowly.  
The flags are pulled up suddenly to represent the dawning of a new era stemming from these past battles.



of the assassinated officers of the Röhm Purge.

