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Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*

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I

Leni Riefenstahl's documentary of the 1934 Nuremberg rally of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, *Triumph of the Will*, is perhaps the most controversial film ever made. At once masterful and morally repugnant, this deeply troubling film epitomizes a general problem that arises with art. It is both beautiful and evil. I shall argue that it is this conjunction of beauty and evil that explains why the film is so disturbing. My aim in this essay is to explore the relationship of beauty and evil in *Triumph of the Will* and to use this examination of a particular case as a way of investigating the more general problem of beauty and evil in art. Having looked at this case in detail, I want to draw some broader conclusions about the inadequacy of the usual solution to the problem of beauty and evil in art and to suggest the direction we should move in to develop an account of aesthetic value rich enough to handle cases as difficult as *Triumph of the Will*.

My main aim is philosophical, but I shall have to turn to more concrete matters before taking up the philosophical issues. I will briefly describe the historical background of the film and the circumstances in which it was produced (Section II). I will also provide some sense of *Triumph of the Will* itself, that is, of its artistic strategy and how it contributes to the film's overall effect (Section III). I will then be in a position to turn to the problem of beauty and evil in the film and to the more general problem of beauty and evil in art that is my central concern (Sections IV–VI).

II

The 1934 Nuremberg party rally was one of several mammoth political rallies sponsored by the Nazi Party between 1923 and 1939. It lasted seven days, involved tens of thousands of participants, and was estimated to have drawn as many as 500,000 spectators.[1]

The film of these events was made at Hitler's personal request and with his support. Hitler himself gave the film its title, *Triumph des Willens*. He also went to Nuremberg to help with the preproduction planning, carefully orchestrating the spectacle that would involve thousands of troops, marching bands, and ordinary citizens.

Like the rally, the film's production was a large, well-organized event. Riefenstahl's crew consisted of 172 persons: 36 cameramen and assistants, 9 aerial photographers, 17 newsreel men, 17 lighting technicians, and so on.[2] The crew, uniformed as SA (Sturmabteilung der NSDAP) men so that they would not be noticeable in the crowd,[3] used thirty cameras and worked nonstop for a week. Riefenstahl held daily directorial meetings at which each member of the camera crew received instructions for the next day. Scenes were

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rehearsed beforehand, and the front ranks of the Labor Service men were trained to speak in unison.[4]

Concerned that the long parades, endless speeches, and days of nearly identical events would bore her audience, Riefenstahl rejected the static format and voice-over commentary of the conventional newsreel. Instead, she adopted and expanded methods of mobile photography developed by Abel Gance and others for the (fictional) feature film. Wherever possible she had rails and tracks laid throughout the rally site, including a circular track built around the speakers' podium[5] and a lift installed on a 140-foot flagpole. The crew was even instructed to practice roller skating.[6] These devices enabled Riefenstahl to infuse shots of her frequently stationary subjects with action and motion.

Distilled from sixty-one hours of footage, in a process of editing that Riefenstahl worked twelve to eighteen hours a day for five months to complete, the final version of the film ran just over two hours. Its intensely dynamic visual material was set to a score of Wagnerian music, German folk songs, military marches, and party anthems (including the official party anthem, "Das Horst Wessel Lied") intercut with the sound of cheering crowds and party speeches. The result, in both style and effect, was a radical departure from the standard newsreel. An innovation in documentary filmmaking, *Triumph of the Will* was also, as is generally recognized, a major contribution to the history of film.

The film premiered at the Ufa Palast in Berlin in March 1935 before an audience of foreign diplomats, army generals, and top party officials, including Hitler.[7] None of the Nazi officials, not even Hitler, had seen the film in advance[8] – an extremely unusual circumstance at the time, since no film could be screened in private or public until it was passed by the censorship board.[9] Some party members thought the film "too artistic," though whether the objection was to artistic technique itself or to the film's suitability for political use isn't clear. Others, especially members of the army, were angry at Riefenstahl's omission of most of the military exercises (the footage had been shot in bad weather). Hitler, however, was delighted with the film.[10] Although it is difficult to know exactly how widely *Triumph of the Will* was shown or how it was received,[11] it apparently enjoyed some popular success, despite the German public's preference for entertainment films.

In any case, artistically, *Triumph of the Will* immediately established itself, winning recognition not only in Germany (where it was awarded the 1935 National Film Prize), but also abroad, where it won the Gold Medal at the Venice Film Festival. Two years later, it won the Grand Prix at the 1937 Paris Film Festival, where, to their credit, French workers protested Riefenstahl's appearance when she came in person to accept her award.

III

In turning to the film itself, there are three things to note: its structure, its vision, and its narrative strategy. Each of these features contributes to the film's notable effect.

Structurally, *Triumph of the Will* has twelve sections or scenes, each focused on a particular party rally event: Hitler's arrival in Nuremberg, the Hitler Youth rally, the folk parade, Hitler's address to the SA, and so on. The film *appears* to present these events as they unfold. In fact, Riefenstahl ignores chronological order almost entirely, working instead to create a rhythmic structure for the film.[12] Her aim, she states, was "to bring certain elements into the foreground and put others into the background," to create a dramatic succession of highlights and retreats, peaks and valleys.[13] This musical structure was created largely in the editing room, where, working without a script, Riefenstahl used a variety of means – alternating scenes of day and night, moving from solemnity to exuberance, and generally altering the pace of the film from sequence to sequence and within the individual scenes themselves – to give the film a determinate rhythmic structure.

This rhythmic structure is manifest in sequences such as the film's third section, "The City Awakening." The portrait of early-morning Nuremberg begins slowly and lyrically as the camera travels high above the quiet, mist-covered rooftops of the old city. Church bells toll and the film dissolves to a lively shot of morning activity in the tented city used to house rally participants. Here, drums beat and bugles announce the start of day for residents, who emerge jauntily from their tents to wash, shave, and eat breakfast. The tempo and pace of this montage of daily activity increase, climaxing in brightly lit shots of healthy, bare-chested youths, working and singing old German folk songs as they polish shoes, haul wood for

the camp stoves, and prepare for the more serious activities of the rally itself.

By building these scenes to a crescendo of dramatic intensity, Riefenstahl means to hold the spectator's attention and generate some of the same enthusiasm and excitement felt by rally participants. These same techniques are used throughout the film, in scenes of Hitler's speeches, troop reviews, and the like. Even the most prosaic subjects, such as the repetitive passages of military marching, are made visually interesting and dramatic by these techniques. Not surprisingly, these tightly organized rhythmic sequences are quite effective.

Much has been written on the formal features of Riefenstahl's art.[14] What has not been generally appreciated is that the film's artistic achievement is not merely structural or formal. Equally important is Riefenstahl's masterful command of traditional narrative means: theme and characterization, the use of symbolism, and the handling of point of view. It is the use of these devices to tell a *story* – the story of the New Germany – that, combined with the structural techniques already surveyed, creates the vision of Hitler and National Socialism that makes *Triumph of the Will* so powerful.

That vision is one in which the military values of loyalty and courage, unity, discipline, and obedience are wedded to a heroic conception of life and elements of German *völkisch* mythology. In Riefenstahl's hands, an annual political rally is transformed into a larger historical and symbolic event. *Triumph of the Will* presents the Nazi world as a kind of Valhalla, "a place apart, surrounded by clouds and mist, peopled by heroes and ruled from above by the gods."[15] Seen from the perspective of the film, Hitler is the hero of a grand narrative. He is both leader and savior, a new Siegfried come to restore a defeated Germany to its ancient splendor.

In establishing this heroic vision, Riefenstahl works with several striking motifs: the swastika, the German eagle, flags, Albert Speer's towering architecture, torches and burning pyres, moon and clouds, the roar of the crowds, Hitler's voice. Her strategy is to use these aural and visual motifs to establish three key ideas, encapsulated in the National Socialist slogan *Ein Volk. Ein Führer. Ein Reich* (One People. One Leader. One Empire). These three ideas, introduced by Riefenstahl in slightly different order, are the *Führerprinzip*, leader principle or cult of the leader (the *Führer*), the unity of the people or national community (the *Volk*), and the strength and power of the German nation (the *Reich*). Each has a central role both in the film's vision of Hitler and in its story of the New Germany.[16]

The first and most important idea, the *Führerprinzip*, has obvious roots in messianic Christianity.[17] The idea of a great historical figure or great man who has the will and power to actualize the true will of the German people was frequently dramatized in Nazi cinema. But *Triumph of the Will* is the only Nazi film that directly identifies this mystical leader with Hitler himself. From its very first frames, Riefenstahl's film presents Hitler as the leader long sought by the German people and as "the bearer of the people's will."[18] He is a god-like, mystical figure who descends – literally – from the clouds, his plane flying in over the mist-enshrouded towers and spires of medieval Nuremberg. These shots of the advancing plane are intercut with striking aerial footage of Nuremberg – a city representative of the old Germany and of the glorious Teutonic past, its castle a bulwark against foreign intruders. The shadow of the approaching plane falls over the columns and columns of marching troops who fill the streets below. All this takes place as themes from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* slowly give way to the Nazi Party anthem, much as the old Germany slowly gives way to the new. The climax of this scene comes several minutes into the film when the plane lands, its door opens, and Hitler appears to a roar of approval from the waiting crowds. By such means, Riefenstahl makes Hitler's arrival at the rally – as well as his every subsequent appearance – resonate with deep historical and national significance for the German people.[19]

In the early sequences of the film, Riefenstahl stresses not only Hitler's messianic leadership, but his humanity. This is a leader who moves among the people, who shakes hands and smiles. Shots of Hitler are intercut with shots not only of enormous crowds but of individuals, especially children, laughing and smiling. Even small details, like Hitler stopping his motorcade to accept flowers from a mother and child along the road, are designed to support the film's vision of Hitler as the much-beloved father of the German people.

The second key idea of *Triumph of the Will* is the unity of the support for Hitler among the German people (*ein Volk*). Within the universe of the film, *everyone* supports Hitler. The crowds that fill scene after scene are staggering in number, their enthusiasm unending. Nowhere do we see anyone

– a postman, a traffic cop, or a pedestrian – engaged in ordinary business. Day after day, the narrow Nuremberg streets are filled to overflowing with old and young. People hang from the windows; they throng the stadium. All yearn to catch a glimpse of the *Führer*.

The beauty and sheer exuberance of these scenes celebrate these pro-Nazi sentiments. Indeed, several scenes appear to have been explicitly constructed to demonstrate that Hitler's support knows no class or regional barriers. For example, in the fifth sequence of the film, the presentation of the Labor Services, 52,000 corpsmen appear in review before Hitler at an enormous outdoor rally. Riefenstahl begins with the usual documentary-like shots of the men as they stand in formation, shouldering their shovels like guns and reciting patriotic slogans. But then she does something unusual. She constructs a montage of individual faces calling out the names of their *Heimat*, or regional homeland. "Where do you come from, comrade?" asks their leader. "From Friesland." "And you, comrade?" "From Bavaria." "And you?" "From Kaiserstuhl." "And you?" "From Pomerania . . . from Königsberg, Silesia, the Baltic, the Black Forest, Dresden, Danube, from the Rhine, and from the Saar. . . ."

This carefully crafted passage makes the idea of a national community visually (and aurally) concrete. Hitler's supporters, the film shows us, are a unity – one people – despite their differences; it is Hitler – one leader – who brings them together. The stirring music, the marshaling of flags, and the great German eagle towering over the stadium underscore the importance of the contribution of even the most ordinary laborers to the New Germany – planting forests, building roads "from village to village, from town to town." In the words of the workers themselves: "*Ein Volk. Ein Führer. Ein Reich – Deutschland.*" The effect is one of order and national purpose, a national purpose made manifest in the final shot of the sequence: the Labor Services men marching toward the camera, their image superimposed over Hitler's raised fist.[20]

The third and final idea central to *Triumph of the Will*, one *Reich*, is most prominent in the film's final sequences. Here Riefenstahl's strategy is the visual display of power (*Macht*).[21] Her aim is to show the enormous military forces that stand behind the *Führer* and the solidity of their support.[22] In demonstrating power, the ritual of the mass meeting itself had a central role: the waving swastikas, the uniforms, the legions of marching, chanting followers, the torches against the night sky – all contributed to the spectacle designed to display Hitler's personal and political power.[23]

Triumph of the Will does more than present a set of ideas; it weaves them into a story, makes them part of a grand narrative. The 1934 party Congress had two titles: the Party Day of Unity and the Party Day of Power. Riefenstahl works with the themes of both unity and power, manipulating artistic form not only to create enthusiasm for Hitler and the National Socialists but to evoke fear. As noted, the opening of the film focuses on cheerful scenes emphasizing the spontaneous loyalty of ordinary people. Party and military forces are little in evidence. In contrast, the two final sequences – the military parade with which the Nazis leave Nuremberg and the somewhat anticlimactic final congress – center on Hitler, high-ranking party officials, and regiment after regiment of tightly disciplined troops. There are no smiles or laughing children, no young boys, no women with flowers. These are men – ready to go to war.

Running nearly twenty minutes, the final parade sequence is the longest of the film. Riefenstahl presents a seemingly inexhaustible stream of massed forces. We see the straight-legged, stiff-kneed marching troops from every angle, constantly moving, in a dazzling display of dynamic editing. Riefenstahl cuts back and forth between shots of the men in uniform, party officials, and Hitler. In contrast to the opening scenes, Hitler stands alone, apart from the people: watching, saluting, receiving ovations. The mood is somber. The power of the Nazis is presented as daunting and unquestionable.

To summarize, then, Riefenstahl weaves the narrative and thematic elements of her film around the central National Socialist slogan *Ein Führer. Ein Volk. Ein Reich* as tightly as she weaves the visual elements of eagle and swastika. As she tells it, the tale of Hitler – stalwart and alone, heroic – is the tale of the German people. His will is their will. His power their future. It is all this and more that makes *Triumph of the Will* the powerful film it is.

IV

Clearly, *Triumph of the Will* is a troubling film. My claim is that it is so because of its conjunction

of beauty and evil, because it presents as beautiful a vision of Hitler and the New Germany that is morally repugnant. But might not there be a simpler, more straightforward explanation of the film's disturbing nature? Can't it be wholly explained by the fact that the film is a documentary?

As a *documentary* film, *Triumph of the Will* is disquieting because the events it portrays are themselves disquieting. As a documentary *film*, *Triumph of the Will* conveys the sheer immediacy of these events. We view Hitler's speeches, the flag ceremonies, the spot-lighted evening assemblies as if they were happening *now*. And our knowledge that what we are seeing stands in a causal chain of events that led to the Second World War and the Holocaust makes this immediacy chilling. It is as if we were watching the buds of these horrors unfold before our eyes.

But Riefenstahl's film does more than document historical events. And it is more than an ordinary documentary. *Triumph of the Will* is also troubling because it is a work of Nazi propaganda. The word 'propaganda' originated in the celebrated papal society for "propagating the faith" established in 1622. In modern contexts, the term has taken on more specifically political connotations. In claiming that *Triumph of the Will* is a work of propaganda, I mean that it is designed to propagate the Nazi faith – and mobilize the German people. *Triumph of the Will* thus unites the older religious connotations of 'propaganda' with the modern political connotations, presenting National Socialism as a political religion. Its images, ideas, and narrative all aim at establishing the tenets of that religion: Hitler is a messianic leader, Germany is one *Volk*, and the Third Reich will endure for a thousand years.

It may come as some surprise, then, to learn that the film's status as propaganda is controversial. Amazingly, Riefenstahl and her supporters deny that *Triumph of the Will* is a work of propaganda. And because there is a controversy – in fact, a rather heated one – we need to pause briefly to take up this issue. Riefenstahl and her supporters contend that her concerns in *Triumph of the Will* – as in all her films – were aesthetic, not political: that it was the cult of beauty, not the cult of the *Führer*, that Riefenstahl worshiped. The claim is that stylistic devices like the cloud motif in the film's opening sequence, the rhythmic montage of faces in the Labor Services sequence, and so on were *just* that: stylistic devices meant to avoid newsreel reportage, enrich the film artistically, and nothing more.[24]

Certainly Riefenstahl *was* preoccupied with beauty in *Triumph of the Will*. Her films of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, her photographs of the Nuba, indeed the whole of her artistic corpus, make clear that visual beauty was one of her central artistic preoccupations. 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.

The pure-aestheticism defense is also belied by the historical record. Riefenstahl was, as she willingly admits, a great admirer of Hitler. Attending a political rally for the first time in her life in February 1932, she was "paralyzed," "fascinated," "deeply affected" by the appearance of Hitler and the crowd's "bondage to this man."[25] Even at the end of the war, by which point she, like many Nazi sympathizers, claims to have harbored doubts about Hitler's plans for Germany, Riefenstahl, by her own admission, "wept all night" at the news of his suicide.[26] To this day, Riefenstahl has never distanced herself from the political content of *Triumph of the Will* or any of the other films she made for Hitler.[27] Nor, despite years of ostracism and public controversy, has she shown – or even feigned – remorse for her artistic and personal association with many members of the Nazi Party.

It might be added that Riefenstahl agreed to film the 1934 Nuremberg rally only on condition that she be given complete artistic control over the project, a condition to which Hitler apparently agreed. She demanded, and got, final cut. Thus, we can assume that the film Riefenstahl made – the film organized around the ideas of *Ein Führer. Ein Volk. Ein Reich* that presents Hitler as savior to the German people, and that describes the Nazi future as full of promise – is the film she chose to make.

The film's history also supports its status as propaganda. Goebbels, who as minister for People's Enlightenment and Propaganda, was largely responsible for the creation of the *Führer* myth, thought the film a great achievement, unprecedented in its representation of Hitler as father of the German people and leader of the New Germany. In recommending that *Triumph of the Will* be awarded the National Film Prize, Goebbels proclaimed:

> The film marks a very great achievement. . . . It is a magnificent cinematic vision of the Führer, *seen here for the first time with a power that has not been revealed before*. The film has successfully avoided the danger of being merely a politically slanted film. It has translated the powerful rhythm of this great epoch into something outstandingly artistic; it is an epic, forging the tempo of marching formations, steel-like in its conviction and fired by a passionate artistry.[28]

Indeed, so successful was *Triumph of the Will* in articulating the *Führerprinzip* that, as one historian of German propaganda put it, "there was no need to make another film about Hitler . . ."[29] *Triumph of the Will* was the definitive Nazi documentary about the *Führer*. Although a series of later films associated Hitler with other great men of Germany's past (e.g., Bismarck and Schiller), no other documentary about the *Führer* was, in fact, ever commissioned.

Riefenstahl also maintains that *Triumph of the Will* was what might be called "a pure documentary," that it merely records the reality of the loyalty and hope Hitler once inspired. In her words, the film "is purely historical. . . . It is *film-verité*. It reflects the truth that was then, in 1934, history. It is therefore a documentary. Not a propaganda film."[30]

This second line of defense is clearly at odds with the first: her claim that the film's concerns are purely aesthetic. She wants, on the one hand, to tout her considerable artistic accomplishments in giving life to the boring speeches and endless marching and, on the other hand, to maintain that she did little but record events as they unfolded, that her film is *cinema verité*. Can she really have it both ways? But let us bracket the issue of consistency and good faith and simply note that the claim of pure documentation, like the claim of pure aestheticism, is refuted by the film's structure. As we have seen, *Triumph of the Will* is a carefully crafted, artfully constructed film. Its principles of organization are governed not by the chronological sequence of the events depicted in the film, but by the demands of the film's narrative vision: the highly selective (and distorted) story about Hitler of which Riefenstahl is the author.

Of course, documentaries are never just transcriptions of events. Documentary filmmakers always edit and construct. They always take a point of view. But even allowing for this general point, it remains true that *Triumph of the Will* is an extreme case of a documentary film whose organization is governed by political aims.

The pure-documentary defense also conveniently overlooks certain crucial features of the relation between the film and its subject matter. One of the most remarkable facts about *Triumph of the Will* is that the reality it records is a reality it helped to create. This is what Siegfried Kracauer was getting at when he made his famous "faked reality" charge:

> . . . 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 in itself, merely served as the set dressing for a film that was then to assume the character of an authentic documentary.[31]

Riefenstahl, in other words, helped to set up the spectacle her film was designed to document. As she herself acknowledged in a now-famous remark, "[T]he preparations for the Party Convention were made in concert with the preparations for the camera work."[32]

One can of course argue that, unlike the staged scenes of Nazi events made in Hollywood, this "faked event" was part of Nazi history: a real event, not just the set of a movie. But this real event did not just "unfold"; it was constructed in part *to be* the subject of her film. By "faked reality," Kracauer can be understood to mean something like what we would now call a "media event." Furthermore, in filming this event, Riefenstahl gave form to Hitler's vision of Germany's future. To cite her own words, she took "nothing but speeches, marches, and mobs" and brought this material alive, creating a stirring film spectacle that could be replayed again and again. Riefenstahl used her considerable talent and her art to create an image that helped further and sustain the vision of National Socialism shared by Hitler, Goebbels, and Speer. Surely much of the infamy of the 1934 rally is due to Riefenstahl's film.

We can close this discussion of the controversy over the film's status as propaganda by noting that both lines of defense (the aesthetic and the documentary) are framed in terms of Riefenstahl's intentions. Each of these arguments is of the form: "*Triumph of the Will* is not a work of propaganda, because Leni Riefenstahl did not intend to make a work of propaganda." 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. The right question is: "Did she think something to the effect that 'I'm going to show Hitler in a way that will mobilize the German people in his support'?" And the answer to this question, presumably, is yes. Had Hitler won the war, Riefenstahl wouldn't be defending herself by disavowing the intention to make a work of propaganda.

In any case, the debate about Leni Riefenstahl's intentions (what was going on "in her head") is largely beside the point.[33] For the question whether *Triumph of the Will* is a work of propaganda is a question about the *film*, not a question about (the historical person) Leni Riefenstahl. And as we have seen, the answer to this question is plainly yes.[34]

So *Triumph of the Will* is a work of Nazi propaganda. And that is clearly part of what makes the film so troubling. But Riefenstahl is not the first or last artist to make fascist art. Hundreds of propaganda films were made in German between 1933 and 1945. 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 behavior.

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 part of what makes it so disturbing.) But the film is more than first-class propaganda. It is also a 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. *Triumph of the Will* can be properly called a work of art because it offers a beautiful, sensuous presentation – a vision – of the German people, leader, and empire in a recognized artistic genre (documentary) of a recognized artistic medium (film). It is the fact that *Triumph of the Will* is an excellent work of propaganda *and* a work of art that explains why Riefenstahl's film has more than historical interest and why it has a place in film and not just history classes.

V

As art, *Triumph of the Will* is problematic for reasons other than those associated with its excellence as a work of propaganda (e.g., its capacity to mobilize the German people in the 1930s), and it is as art that *Triumph of the Will* is most disturbing. What makes *Triumph of the Will* problematic and disturbing as art is its artistic vision: its vision of the German people, leader, and empire. Riefenstahl's film portrays National Socialism (something morally evil) as beautiful. To view the film in the way in which it was intended to be seen is to see and be moved by (what Riefenstahl presents as) the beauty of National Socialism.

If this is right, it raises a question about how we are to respond to this film. Its every detail is designed to advance a morally repugnant vision of Hitler, a vision that, as history was to prove, falsified the true character of Hitler and National Socialism. Enjoying *this film* – recognizing that we may be caught up, if only slightly, in its pomp and pageantry or be stirred by its beauty – is likely to make us ask, "What kind of person am I to enjoy or be moved by this film?"[35] Isn't there something wrong with responding in this way to a Nazi film?

This worry arises because *Triumph of the Will* presents National Socialism as attractive and, in so doing, aims to make us think of National Socialism as good. Hitler and what he stood for are commended. This is different from a case like Klaus Mann's novel about Nazism, *Mephisto*, where the evil described is clearly not presented as attractive or as meant to win our allegiance. Riefenstahl doesn't just ask us to imagine finding the *Führer* and his message appealing, but actually to find them so.[36]

The concern is not only that if I enjoy such a film, I may be led to act badly (e.g., to support neo-Nazi movements), but also that certain kinds of enjoyment, regardless of their effects, may themselves be problematic. Pleasure in this work of art (like pleasure in a work of art that celebrates sadism or pedophilia) might lead one to ask not just about what one may *become*, but about who one is *now*. The point is an Aristotelian one. If virtue consists (in part) in taking pleasure in the right things and not in the wrong things, then what is my character now such that I can take pleasure in these things?

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? We recognize D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* as an important film despite its racism, and we admire the Pyramids despite the

great human cost paid for their production. Should we similarly bracket questions of good and evil in looking at *Triumph of the Will*? Alternatively, should we insist that the moral implications of Riefenstahl's work undermine its aesthetic value? Or is this formulation of the problem too simple?

These questions merely highlight the long-standing general problem of beauty and evil: that aesthetic and moral considerations may pull in different directions. The problem emerges not only with *Triumph of the Will* and the other cases mentioned earlier but with, for example, the literary works of the Marquis de Sade and T. S. Eliot. The problem posed by the conflict between the demands of art and the demands of morality is familiar. What are we to make of it?

For much of the twentieth century, the standard solution to this conflict has been to recommend that we look at art from an "aesthetic distance." As originally described by Edward Bullough in 1912, an attitude of aesthetic distance allows us to set aside the practical concerns of everyday life, including questions of a work's origins, its moral effects, and so on, and concentrate exclusively on the work of art itself. By "the work itself" Bullough means, of course, the work's "formal" (i.e., its structural and stylistic) features. Bracketing all non-formal features frees us, at least temporarily, "to elaborate experience on a new basis,"[37] much as we do in appreciating the beauty of a fog at sea despite its danger.

The basic strategy here is simple: when approaching a work of art that raises moral issues, sever aesthetic evaluation from moral evaluation and evaluate the work in aesthetic (i.e., formal) terms alone. This is the formalist response to the problem of beauty and evil. Formalism treats the aesthetic and the moral as wholly independent domains. It allows us to say that, evaluated morally, *Triumph of the Will* is bad but, evaluated aesthetically, it is good.

In recent decades, formalism has become rather unfashionable, having been subjected to serious criticism by feminists, philosophers of art, and others. Formalism nevertheless plays a dominant role in discussions of *Triumph of the Will*. One explanation for this is that the formalist strategy may seem especially well suited to cases such as *Triumph of the Will*. Like Bullough's fog at sea, the Nazi content of Riefenstahl's film *is* threatening. And it is certainly true that without some measure of distance, we risk being too overcome with emotion or too caught up in what is morally objectionable to attend to what makes the work aesthetically good. Viewing the film from a disinterested (what Bullough calls an "objective") point of view gives us a way of setting aside the components that make it morally objectionable. This enables us to appreciate at least some of the features that make it aesthetically good. If the strategy works, there *is* no problem of beauty and evil. Indeed, one of the aims of formalism is to show that there is really no such problem – to show that it is illusory.

But in the case of *Triumph of the Will*, the formalist strategy fails. It won't work here, not because we're too obsessed by the moral issues to assume a properly distanced standpoint, or because when we assume a posture of aesthetic distance we forget about the historical realities associated with the film, or because adopting an attitude of aesthetic distance toward a film like *Triumph of the Will* is itself an immoral position (though some may wish to argue that it is).[38] Nor does adopting an attitude of aesthetic distance require that we literally forget about the historical realities. Aesthetic distance is, after all, only a shift in perspective, and a temporary one at that.

The reason 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 about him, the party, and the German people, and so on – means distancing ourselves from the features that make it the work of art it is. If we distance ourselves from these features of the film, we will not be in a position to understand its artistic value – that is, why this lengthy film of political speeches and endless marching is correctly regarded as a cinematic masterpiece. We will also miss the beauty (horrifying though it is) of its vision of Hitler.

Like all religious and political works of art (e.g., Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Orwell's *1984*, Wright's *Native Son*), *Triumph of the Will* has a message.[39] We can bracket that message – that is, the political elements and aims of the film – in favor of its strictly formal elements, just as we can read *The Inferno* while ignoring its Christianity. But in doing so we omit an essential dimension of the film, and an essential dimension of its beauty. To see *Triumph of the Will* for the work of art it is and to fully grasp its beauty, we need to pay attention to its content – to just those elements of the film that formalism directs us to set aside.

In emphasizing the importance of the film's content, I don't mean to underplay the significance of its formal elements. Unquestionably, a large part of what the film is, and of what makes it artistically valuable, consists in its striking images and beautiful patterns of movement. Moreover, the purely formal features of *Triumph of the Will*, considered in abstraction from their contribution to the film's message, are (as formalism teaches us) unproblematically beautiful.

But *Triumph of the Will* is a work of artistic mastery – perhaps, I dare say, of genius – not merely because of the film's purely formal features (the beauty of Riefenstahl's cinematography, her skillful editing techniques, etc.) but, perhaps most important, because of its artistic vision, its particular, utterly horrifying vision of Hitler and National Socialism. That vision is the essence of the film.

If taking an attitude of aesthetic distance means paying attention only to the formal aspects of the work (to the image and not to what it means), then aesthetic distance fails in the case of *Triumph of the Will* because it requires us to ignore the essence of the film.

Now, defenders of formalism can opt for a more complex understanding of aesthetic distance, one that does not require us to bracket an artwork's content. According to this view (call it "sophisticated formalism"), understanding a work of art consists in grasping and appreciating the relationship between its form and content, that is, the connection between the message and the means used to convey it. Artistic success consists in expressing a particular message in an effective way. Sophisticated formalism thus allows – indeed requires – us to pay attention to the particular content of the work. On this subtler view, we can't just ignore the content of art or its message. We must attend to the relation between a work's form and content, if we are to appreciate the work itself.

Sophisticated formalism introduces a new conception of the aesthetic. The simpler version of formalism defined the aesthetic narrowly, in terms of a work's formal elements, considered by themselves. The new, more complex conception tracks the *relation* between form and content. A work's aesthetic achievement consists in the skill with which it expresses its content. Understood in this way, the aesthetic value of *Triumph of the Will* involves not just its formal accomplishments, but also how these stylistic means are used to convey feelings of awe, admiration, and oneness with Hitler.

Note that sophisticated formalism doesn't require abandoning the distinction between aesthetic and moral evaluation. As with the simpler version, with sophisticated formalism, aesthetic evaluation belongs to one domain, moral evaluation to another. Sophisticated formalism tells us to judge not the message but its expression. In this respect, the approach we are meant to take toward the National Socialist elements of Riefenstahl's documentary is no different from the approach we are meant to take toward the Christianity of *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*. Our finding the message conveyed by *Triumph of the Will* repulsive (or attractive) should not therefore affect our aesthetic judgment. Nor should it affect our aesthetic response to the film.

Indeed, according to sophisticated formalism, *Triumph of the Will* and works of art like it shouldn't (from an aesthetic point of view) cause any problem at all. We can distance ourselves from – that is, set aside – the moral dimension of the work's content while still *paying attention to* that content – that is, the way in which the film's content figures in its expressive task.

Is this broader, more inclusive understanding of aesthetic distance satisfactory? The answer, I think, is no. 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*. These cognitive and moral matters are ones we are meant to distance ourselves from when engaged in the business of aesthetic evaluation. Sophisticated formalism doesn't ignore content, but it does *aestheticize* it. When we follow its recommendations, we adopt an aesthetic attitude toward the Christianity of *The Divine Comedy* and an aesthetic attitude toward the National Socialism of *Triumph of the Will*. Sophisticated formalism is, after all, a kind of formalism. It focuses on the (formal) relation between form and content. From its perspective, the content of the film (its vision) is relevant to evaluation only insofar as it is expressed well or badly. Thus, even on sophisticated varieties of formalism, essential elements of *Triumph of the Will* remain irrelevant to its aesthetic evaluation. Hence, here too, formalism fails to respond fully to the work of art that *Triumph of the Will* is.

Content is not always as important as it is in the case of *Triumph of the Will*, but here, as in the case of much political and religious art, the formalist

response makes it difficult or impossible to explain why works like *Triumph of the Will* should be considered problematic in the first place.

At this point there are two ways to go. We can say that there is more to art than aesthetics or that there is more to aesthetics than beauty and form. The first option allows us to keep the historically important, eighteenth-century conception of the aesthetic intact. (It is in effect the conception of the aesthetic introduced by sophisticated formalism.) This conception has the advantage of keeping the boundaries of the aesthetic relatively narrow and clearly defined. And it keeps aesthetic evaluation relatively simple. Questions of political meaning, of truth and falsity, good and evil, right and wrong fall outside the category of the aesthetic. One implication of adopting this option is that, since there are works of art that raise these issues, the category of the artistic outstrips the category of the aesthetic.

The second option broadens the concept of the aesthetic beyond its traditional boundaries. It says that we are responding to a work of art "aesthetically" not only when we respond to its formal elements or to the relationship between its formal elements and its content, but also whenever we respond to a feature that makes a work the work of art it is. (These features may include substantive as well as formal features.) On this second option, the aesthetic is understood in such a way as to track the artistic, however broadly or narrowly that is to be understood.[40]

It is this second route that I recommend. Let me at least briefly say why. The first option remains wedded to a conception of the aesthetic that preserves the eighteenth-century preoccupation with beauty. This is a rich and important tradition, but it focuses – and keeps us focused – on a feature of art that is no longer so important to us. Indeed, one of the significant and widely noted facts about the development of modern art is that beauty is no longer central to art. The price of regarding this conception of the aesthetic as the only legitimate one is to marginalize aesthetics – isolating it from much of the philosophy of art – and, indeed, from much of our experience of art.

Opting for this broader conception of the aesthetic gives us a more inclusive category, one more adequate to what art is in all of its historical and cultural manifestations and to the full range of its values. It sets much of what we humanly care about back into the aesthetic arena and offers a much more complete view of the value of art.[41]

My claim, which employs this richer conception of the aesthetic, is, then, that in order to get things aesthetically right about *Triumph of the Will*, we have to engage with its vision. And this means that we have to engage with the moral issues it raises. This nonformalist notion of the aesthetic rides piggyback on a nonformalist conception of art. It doesn't require wholesale abandonment of the distinction between aesthetic and moral value. We can, for example, still distinguish between the formal beauty of *Triumph of the Will's* stylistic devices and its moral status as a work of National Socialist propaganda. Nor does it require denying that art and morality belong to different domains. But it does require recognizing that there are areas where these domains overlap and that certain works of art, especially works of religious and political art, fall within this overlapping area.

VI

In Section IV, we began by canvassing different explanations for the troubling nature of *Triumph of the Will:* that it is disturbing because of the horrible events it documents, because it is a work of propaganda, because it propagates a highly selective and distorted picture of Hitler and National Socialism. Each of these factors helps to explain why the film is troubling, but none of them gets at what is, I have argued, the most unsettling feature of the film: its conjunction of beauty and evil.

We then, in Section V, considered the standard solution for dealing with the problem of beauty and evil, namely, formalism, which holds that aesthetic evaluation can be severed from moral evaluation and that art *qua* art must be evaluated in formal terms alone. Each of the two versions of formalism we considered, simple and sophisticated, maintained that the problem posed by the juncture of beauty and evil in *Triumph of the Will* (and works like it) is illusory. The simple version attempted to dissolve the problem of the juncture of beauty and evil by focusing on the formal features of the film and relegating the film's content to a domain outside the boundaries of aesthetic evaluation. The sophisticated version attempted to dissolve the problem by focusing on the relation of form and content in the film. It, too, held consideration of the film's morally objectionable content (its vision) to fall outside the domain of aesthetic evaluation. But, as we have seen, formalism fails in the case of *Triumph of the Will* because

in bracketing the very components that make the film morally objectionable (i.e., its content), it also brackets the film's essence as a work of art – its vision of National Socialism.

The failure of formalism shows that the problem of beauty and evil is real. Indeed, each of the candidate explanations for the threatening nature of the film can be recast as accepting and giving different interpretations to this problem. As a documentary, *Triumph of the Will* conjoins beautifully rendered footage and the celebration of horrible historical events; as propaganda, the film conjoins a masterfully constructed political narrative and a distorted picture of Hitler's character and aims; as formal expression, it conjoins masterful cinematography and morally repugnant content. But the most trenchant account of the relation of beauty and evil in *Triumph of the Will* focuses on the fact that the film renders something that is evil, namely National Socialism, beautiful and, in so doing, tempts us to find attractive what is morally repugnant.

The upshot of these reflections is that the question we considered before – How are we to respond to *Triumph of the Will*? – can't be evaded. As we have seen, there are really two questions here, one about us, one about how we are to evaluate the film as art.

First, the question about us. What does it mean about us if we find this film beautiful? Does it show that there is something wrong with our character? That we really approve of or endorse fascism or the doctrines of National Socialism? That we approve of the Final Solution? The answer to the question about us depends on what, in finding the film beautiful, we are responding *to*. As the simple version of formalism showed, some elements of the film are unproblematically beautiful: the film's fine camera work, its rhythmic editing, and so on. Responding to these elements of the film isn't the same as endorsing its National Socialism. One can respond to the formal elements of the film without supporting the work's message. Nor is there anything problematic about responding to the relation between form and content in the film. If we are responding not to the film's content *per se*, but only to how that content is *presented*, then, here too, we are not endorsing the film's message.

My analysis, however, shows that there is another feature of the film that is not so innocuous: its vision. In order to respond fully to the film as a work of art, we must respond to this vision. Indeed, my analysis implies that appreciating the film as a work of art requires responding to the beauty of this vision of National Socialism. But this means that the proper formulation of the question about us is, What kind of people are we if we find this vision beautiful? It is not immediately obvious that we *can* find this vision beautiful without endorsing fascism or the doctrines of National Socialism.

Here it is important to be very clear about what is meant by the film's vision. When I speak of the film's vision, I do not mean something that might be meant by the word 'vision', namely the abstract doctrines or ideals of National Socialism, but rather the film's deifying portrait of Hitler as the beloved father of a happy, smiling people and of a national community unified by its desire to labor for the New Germany.

Appreciating the beauty of this vision (seeing the possible appeal of the idea of a benevolent leader, of a unified community, of a sense of national purpose) is not the same thing as finding the doctrines or ideals of National Socialism appealing. I can consistently see this concrete vision as beautiful (or attractive) and reject the doctrines and ideals of the National Socialists, be utterly horrified by what they did, and so on.

There is a step between finding the film's concrete artistic vision beautiful and endorsing the doctrines and ideals of National Socialism. The step is a moral one, a step we need not (and, of course, should not) take. So it is possible to appreciate the beauty of the film's vision without compromising ourselves morally. But, it is important to note, one of the central aims of *Triumph of the Will* is to move its audience to take this step, to find the historical realities and doctrines of National Socialism appealing. Part of the evil of the film consists in the fact that it is designed to move us in this way – in the direction of evil.

That the film aims to move us to find National Socialism appealing is also one of the things that makes responding to it so problematic. The film *is* potentially corrupting. To appreciate the beauty of its vision – or to acknowledge our appreciation – is to open ourselves to a work that presents us with the temptations of fascism. One reason that the sense that there is something troubling about *Triumph of the Will* will not – and should not – go away is that there *is* something morally dangerous about the film.

I want now to turn to the second question: How should the fact that the film is evil figure in our

evaluation of it as a work of art? Having gotten clearer about the real insidiousness of the film, we may be tempted to claim that it is of little or no artistic value. But this response won't do. *Triumph of the Will* clearly is of artistic value. As we have seen, it is an extremely powerful film, perhaps even a work of genius.

Should we then say that *Triumph of the Will* is a terrific work of art, despite its insidiousness? Here I think we should hesitate. For all its accomplishments, *Triumph of the Will* is flawed. It is flawed because its vision is flawed. Its vision is flawed because it misrepresents the character of Hitler and National Socialism and because it presents as beautiful and good things that are evil, namely Hitler and National Socialism. These flaws are relevant to the evaluation of *Triumph of the Will* as art because, as our examination makes clear, the film's vision of National Socialism is part of the work of art that it is. If that vision is flawed, then so is the work of art.

One explanation of our enduring reservations about the film is that many of us have certain intuitions about the relation of beauty and goodness. One place those intuitions get articulated is in Plato. Even those of us who are not Platonists are heirs to a Platonic tradition that identifies beauty and goodness, a tradition that conceives of the beautiful as consisting not only in giving pleasure to the senses but also in engaging and satisfying the mind and spirit. (For example, in the *Phaedrus*, beauty is thought to awaken the longing and passion for what is higher, for the Good.)[42] It is this ancient, strongly entrenched strand of thinking which, I suggest, accounts for the sense that there is something paradoxical about a work of art that so tightly weaves the beautiful and the morally evil. Indeed, one of the most shocking things about *Triumph of the Will* is that it so clearly demonstrates that beauty and goodness can come apart, not just in the relatively simple sense that moral and aesthetic evaluation may diverge, but in the more frightening sense that it is possible for art to render evil beautiful.[43]

If *Triumph of the Will* shows that the Platonic tradition is wrong to identify beauty and goodness, it also provides support for the idea that the *unity* of beauty and goodness is a standard by which art should be measured. If good art must not only please the senses, but also engage and satisfy us intellectually and emotionally, then we are, I suggest, justified in criticizing *Triumph of the Will* for rendering something evil beautiful.

We are justified in doing so 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 one 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 to be evil.[44]

One question remains. If Riefenstahl's film is flawed in the ways I have described, why watch it? Well, we obviously don't sit down to watch *Triumph of the Will* for fun. But it is an important film. It is worth watching because of its historical value as a chronicle of the rise of fascism in Germany and of events leading to the Second World War and as a case study in how propaganda works. It is also worth watching for its formal beauty and expressive power. In addition, we may watch *Triumph of the Will* for much the same reason some feminists examine works of pornography: so that in confronting these works we may learn something about a way of seeing the world we reject.

There are at least two further reasons for watching the film. The more obvious one is that part of preventing a recurrence of fascism involves understanding how fascism came to be thought attractive, how parties like the National Socialist German Worker's Party called upon and met certain underlying human wishes of many Germans in the 1930s (e.g., for a strong leader, for community, for a sense of national purpose). Deciding not to ban (or avoid) materials like *Triumph of the Will* means learning not to deny, but to live with, the historical reality of the Third Reich. The second, related reason is that confronting the film's vision of National Socialism may allow us to understand more fully ourselves as human beings. Imagining seeing the world as Riefenstahl represents it, however disturbing, may enable us to confront, and come a little closer to comprehending, both the real and potential tendencies that have come to define human evil.

The most important reason, though, for watching *Triumph of the Will* is that it provides the very conjunction of beauty and evil we find so unsettling. It allows us to see that beauty and evil can, and have been, conjoined. And it allows us to see that one of the disturbing things about art is that it can make evil appear beautiful and good. Thus, what we might think is a reason for *not* watching the film is, upon reflection, the very reason we should watch it.

A methodological coda. In the course of our examination of the problem of beauty and evil, we have spent a great deal of time focusing on the historical and artistic details of one particular case. It is worth considering why. 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. This detailed historical and artistic examination was part of a larger strategy of looking at a particular case as a means of exploring the more general problem of beauty and evil in art. But why start with a particular case? Why not begin with the more general issue and work to the particular case? The reason, which I can state here in only an abbreviated way, is that the problem of beauty and evil in art is real, but it becomes real only insofar as it arises in particular cases. We go to the particular cases because that is where the issue comes to life. The historical and analytic work of this essay is not mere propaedeutic to the philosophical inquiry but is inextricably bound up with the philosophical inquiry itself. This is not a new approach, but one whose locus classicus is Plato's discussion of Homer in Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*.

Notes

For comments on earlier drafts of this essay, I thank Ted Cohen, Michael Hardimon, Deborah Lefkowitz, Jerry Levinson, and Claudine Verheggen.

1 Estimates of the number of people who came to the Nuremberg rally vary. The city already had a population of 350,000. For a detailed discussion of the 1934 rally and its attendants, see Hamilton T. Burden's *The Nuremberg Party Rallies: 1923–1939* (New York: Praeger, 1967), esp. 79, 85–7, 90.

2 Renata Berg-Pan, *Leni Riefenstahl* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 99.

3 Ibid.

4 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (New York: Noon Day Press, 1960), 301.

5 Leni Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir* (New York: Picador, 1987), 160.

6 Ibid., 159. Erik Barnouw offers one of the most interesting and detailed descriptions of the film coverage of the Nuremberg rally and the lengths to which Riefenstahl went to get it. See his *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 101–3.

7 David Welsh, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 149.

8 Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*, 165–6.

9 The Reich Cinema Law, which went into effect in February 1934, stipulated that all kinds of films, even film advertising and film stills, were to be submitted to the censorship board. Both private and public screenings were covered by this law, and each film print was required to carry an embossed stamp of the German eagle. That *Triumph of the Will* by-passed this considerable legal machinery suggests that Hitler had complete faith in Riefenstahl's political "soundness." See Welsh, *Propaganda*, 17–22.

10 Berg-Pan, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 131.

11 Some reports indicate that the film ran in all the major German cities but only for a short time, others that it continued to be shown throughout the Nazi era. In the absence of historical evidence, it is also unclear to what extent the film was used for purposes of propaganda or with what effect. Again, historians and critics disagree. Some credit the film with winning many to Hitler's cause; others maintain that the film was little seen outside the largest cities and not widely used by the Nazis.

12 See David B. Hinton, *The Films of Leni Riefenstahl* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 36–7.

13 Andrew Sarris (ed.), *Interviews with Film Directors* (New York: Avon Books, 1967), 461.

14 See, e.g., Welsh, *Propaganda*, and Berg-Pan, *Leni Riefenstahl*.

15 Richard Meran Barsam, *Filmguide to "Triumph of the Will"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 27–8.

16 Unlike most commentary on *Triumph of the Will*, which stresses the film's idolization of Hitler (e.g., Riefenstahl's use of low-angle shots and backlighting), the interpretation I offer here, to my knowledge, stands alone in stressing the use Riefenstahl makes of the three interlocking ideas of *Ein Führer, Ein Volk*, and *Ein Reich*.

17 It also has roots in the Nazi's distorted reading of Nietzsche. For this history of the concept of the *Führerprinzip*, I follow Welsh's illuminating discussion in *Propaganda*, 145–7.

18 For more on this notion of Hitler as "the bearer of the people's will," see ibid.

19 On the symbolic importance of Nuremberg for the Nazi rallies, see Burden, *Nuremberg Party Rallies*, 3–9.

20 The extent of the staging of this sequence has been much discussed. Certainly this closing shot could

not have been filmed without considerable advance planning and cooperation from the troops, none of whom look at the camera.

21 The idea that power must not only be held but visibly displayed is something that Riefenstahl takes from Hitler and the Nazis. As Eugen Hamadovsky, who later became the Third Reich's national broadcasting director, wrote in 1933: "All the power one has, even more than one has, must be demonstrated. One hundred speeches, five hundred newspaper articles, radio talks, films, and plays are unable to produce the same effect as a procession of gigantic masses of people taking place with discipline and active participation" (cited in Welsh, *Propaganda*, 149).

22 The solidity of Hitler's support was important to emphasize in light of the Roehm purge. In what came to be known as the Night of the Long Knives (June 30, 1934), Ernst Roehm and other SA leaders suspected of treachery against Hitler were roused from their beds and shot without hearings of any kind.

23 For a discussion of the importance of mass meetings in the projection of the *Führer* cult, see Welsh, *Propaganda*, 148.

24 See, e.g., Hinton, *The Films of Leni Riefenstahl*, 58.

25 Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*, 101.

26 Ibid., 304–5.

27 In addition to *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl made an earlier documentary for Hitler, a short, hastily organized film on the 1933 Nuremberg rally. This film, *Victory of Faith*, introduced Riefenstahl to the documentary film form. Following *Triumph of the Will*, she made a third party rally film, *Day of Freedom*. This last film was made to appease the Wehrmacht generals she had angered by their underrepresentation in *Triumph of the Will*.

28 *Volkischer Beobachter*, May 1, 1935. Cited in Welsh, *Propaganda*, 158. Emphasis added.

29 Welsh, *Propaganda*, 159.

30 Riefenstahl quoted in Sarris (ed.), *Interview*, 460.

31 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 301.

32 This remark is widely cited. Its source is Riefenstahl's book on *Triumph of the Will, Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag Films* (Munich: Franz Eher, 1935).

33 For a good introduction to the standard debates over authorial intention, see Gary Iseminger's collection, *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

34 As it is, the film cannot be legally shown in Germany because it is a work of National Socialist propaganda.

35 Ted Cohen raises similar questions about laughing at jokes in bad taste. See his "Jokes," in *Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. Eva Schaper (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 120–36.

36 The distinction between a work that asks us to *imagine* a certain response (e.g., being amused, being attracted to) and one that asks us really *to be* amused, attracted, and so on is discussed by Berys Gaut in "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

37 Edward Bullough, " 'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912): 87–98, 108–17.

38 Some have argued that by adopting an attitude of aesthetic distance toward certain kinds of artistic representations we risk hardening ourselves to real human suffering. Being willing to run that risk for mere aesthetic pleasure may be thought morally insensitive and a kind of moral fault.

39 What it is for a work of art to have a message is, of course, a matter of great complexity. On the general question of what an artwork's saying something amounts to and how we determine what, among various possibilities, it says, see, e.g., Jerrold Levinson's "Messages in Art," *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 2 (June 1995): 184–98. While not addressing these issues directly here, I am assuming that works of art are capable of communicating attitudes and beliefs toward what they describe or otherwise present. What those attitudes and beliefs are is something a work itself manifests when read against the background of its cultural and historical context.

40 An example of this general approach can be found in Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

41 I am not, of course, suggesting that we abandon the older conception of the aesthetic completely; as I have acknowledged, it is a useful, although not exhaustive, conception.

42 In the *Phaedrus*, Plato also argues that the sight of beauty may arouse an appetite or lust unconnected with deeper feeling (the appetite of "a four-footed beast" [250e]). But, he maintains, in people of reasonable nature and training, the sight of beauty arouses complicated feelings of awe, reverence, and fear, which in turn warm and nourish the soul, motivating it to pursue the good. My concern in this essay, however, is with the broad outlines of a tradition inherited from Plato and not with the considerable subtleties of the Platonic texts themselves.

43 Making this move – allowing that the attitudes a work endorses may compromise its artistic value – is likely to meet with the objection that adopting such a (nonformal) standard of evaluation compromises art's autonomy. The worry here is that a standard that evaluates art in ethical or political terms will expose it – perhaps unwittingly – to various forms of

interference, e.g., the whims of political fashion or religious intolerance. This is a serious worry, but it rests on a misunderstanding. The suggestion that moral or political considerations may be relevant to the evaluation of art does not entail that such considerations be the only factors relevant to their evaluation, nor does it imply that these considerations must invariably take priority.

Most important, such an evaluative standard does not entail the abandonment of the idea of artistic autonomy. The principle of art's autonomy, properly understood, is the idea that works of art deserve a "protected space," a special normative standing. The idea that art deserves this protection is traditionally defended by appealing to a formalist theory of art, but it can also be defended on straightforward political grounds. The basic idea here is that works of art are a political good. They deserve protection because, as forms of expression, they often play an important social and political role: articulating existing ways of seeing and thinking or challenging and pushing beyond them.

Thus, the suggestion that *Triumph of the Will* is of less artistic value because of its celebration of National Socialism is a rejection of formalist standards of artistic evaluation; it is not a rejection of artistic autonomy. This analysis of the idea of artistic autonomy is based on my "Aesthetic Autonomy and Its Feminist Critics," forthcoming in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press). For a more developed response to worries about censorship, see my "Protected Space: Politics, Censorship and the Arts," in *Aesthetics: Past and Present*, ed. Lydia Goehr, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 50th Anniversary Issue (Spring 1993): 207–15.

44 The view that the endorsement of ethically bad attitudes can be an aesthetic failure of a work is defended by Berys Gaut in "The Ethical Criticism of Art."