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## Nazism and sport: The Dangers of Art Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** *In this article I argue how the bodily aesthetic of sport just before the Second World War was highly manipulated by Nazi Germany, having initially highlighted how art, as the exemplar instance of the aesthetic, became a means of propaganda and ideological positioning. Drawing from this and in such terms, the Berlin Olympics of 1936 is an interesting case study where this can be observed. Riefenstahl's subsequent documentation of the event with all its aesthetic charm further entrenched the sinister aims of the Nazis through the gentle, beguiling artistic quality of the arts or rather sport as art, so that terror slowly and one might say beautifully began to take shape without direct force – a simple manipulation of minds through images of the ideal, of the classical athletic body, of German strength and athletic prowess. In this way art, the aesthetic and a more common cultural expression such as sport became a powerful tool of propaganda that began to spread what would ultimately be a rain of terror throughout Europe and beyond.*

**Keywords:** *aesthetics, art, sport, Reifenstahl, Nazism*

Sport is a bodily art to a certain extent. The *Volk* (nationhood) was identified with the deep well-springs of nature, a Romantic spirit, so that the body was conceived as the muscular strength of the *Volk* that linked the nation to its beginnings in antiquity toward the collective organic body, the unified Reich of modern times. In this sense, sport embodied principles of German solidarity, discipline and racial purity. As an aesthetic act, sport exemplified the terror of Nazi culture in less blatant terms, but no less a precursor or part of the war machine that exemplified the terror that would befall the world, that escalated into the terror that is World War 2. This article consists of three parts. In the first instance, I describe how the Nazi regime manipulated art to serve their political ends and then I describe how that totalitarian dogma weaved its way into the quotidian, such as sport and in the third part of the article, I focus on a particular case study, namely Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, a specific example that highlights how these political ends may have been achieved and thus the significance of sport as a means of realizing those ends. The methods employed to achieve those ends can be described as – or derived from – artistic impulses. In this way, terror and aesthetics in a terrible irony are intertwined – beauty thus serving to mask the truth of ugliness of human atrocity and terror campaign..

While the recognition that aesthetics may mask politics and unethical positioning is certainly not new, what this article offers is to use sport, usually considered as trivial - and not hierarchically elevated as the exemplar of the aesthetic such as is the case with art where Nazi plunder is well documented - and demonstrates that it is precisely sports' artistic and aesthetic charm that renders it an excellent instance of such propaganda.<sup>1</sup> While there have been such studies of this sort, this article demonstrates that the strategies of sporting propaganda are derived from art, the paradigmatic instance of the aesthetic. In this sense, art and aesthetics are rendered all-pervasive and by extension, so too the possibility of the mobilization of the masses through the allure of sports and games.

### 1. THE NAZI ART WORLD

Art under Hitler was proscribed in that it ought to be of "blood and race", rather than aloof, and therefore accessible to all Germans. Culture was determined by the *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur* and the *Fuehrerrat der Vereinigten Deutsche Kunst* (Fuehrer's council of United German Art and Cultural Associations). An official attitude toward art was adopted and conformity to it enforced. This was the first time in Modern Western European history that the state took an official position (read: definition) of art!

Architecture was to be modeled according to the Greek classical example, which it was believed, had Germanic origins (at least according to Hitler). Hitler believed the Greeks represented a fresh and healthy view on life, one of both beauty and function and a majestic order. Architectural projects can be seen as "political cathedrals for the

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Third Reich.<sup>2</sup> Its style is marked by a lack of ornamentation and therefore a sense of timelessness, neutrality, and authoritarian monumentality. In sculpture, the official position was to endorse realism, again according to the classical model: figures that were “correct anatomically” and “scientifically” sound. In painting, like sculpture, representation was in favor of expressionism and abstraction. Zalampas sums up the National Socialist official artistic style as follows:

...a conservative, bourgeois mentality...banal...overlaid with nationalistic and racial veneers... no new artistic insights...utilized pre-existent German work that met with his (Hitler's) approval and ruthlessly pruned away all opposing elements...his (Hitler's)...insistence of monumentality in architecture and sculpture exaggerated so that it lost any sense of reality and humanity<sup>3</sup> (brackets my inclusion).<sup>4</sup>

Petropoulos writes that art was used by key members of the Nazi party in such a way that “possession of artistic patrimony reflected military strength and biological vitality” so that, in effect, they used art to further their own political careers and as a means of self-definition<sup>5</sup>. This vociferous collecting helped achieve a certain legitimacy and social recognition, as art was/is associated with power and taste. By rejecting art not sanctioned by the party (or so-named “movement”), the Nazi leaders made a statement about their identity while undermining modern art and its purported connection with the racially “impure”, the Jews. Hitler's own vast collection included the “pure” Austro-Bavarian genre painting stemming predominantly from the nineteenth century. Also included in his collection was an array of old masters and a limited quantity of contemporary “Nazi art”. One could say his military campaign post 1938 reflected his cultural “war” that began in 1933. As he attempted to unify the German Volk in Europe, so he sought to bring together all of the artworks that constituted the nations artistic legacy. This is aptly expressed by Petropoulos:

Hitler's behavior in the cultural arena prefigured and expressed designs on a more grand scale...so intense was the desire to propagate Germanic art across the continent and to control Europe's artistic legacy that these considerations, along with the biologically centered drive for Lebensraum (living space), the political mission to eradicate Communism, and the Realpolitik notion of military superiority, powered the expansionist machine.<sup>6</sup>

In order to realize this “cultural expansionism”, cultural associations were forced into liquidation and came under a new Reich Chamber of Culture, including music, visual arts, theatre, literature, press, radio and film. There was strict political control, and an attempt to defy the new cultural norm was suppressed through a combination of official censorship, exclusion and terror.<sup>7</sup> Some artists, however, enjoyed official patronage and rising incomes, as long as they conformed (Overy writes how there were thousands of Speer's, Hitler's chief architect after 1938<sup>8</sup>).

The art world of Nazi Germany was such that the discussion of film or art should not fuel ambiguity, that is, that it should not be aloof as mentioned above. In 1936, Goebbels' banned artistic criticism. The critical evaluation of artistic output was permitted only to those who were judged to display a National Socialist “purity of heart and outlook” and would say what the regime wanted.<sup>9</sup> Goebbels argued that art should be in the hands of “the people” and so there were positive forms of cultural participation for those who were not professional artists, a “peoples' culture”, serving the ideal that culture belonged to the collective will, not simply imposed by an elite art world. Culture was seen as the establishment of a new order that would express approved social values and political ideals to be appreciated by the art public rather than the narrow elite of the art world. Official art was representational, didactic and heroic or socialist realism. Therefore, unlike formalism, it was not art for arts' sake, but the valuation of the *idea* – expressed by Goebbels' – that “art is a function of the life of the people.”<sup>10</sup> Hitler recognized the power of art when he said: “...art, since it forms the most uncorrupted, the most immediate reflection of the peoples soul, exercises unconsciously by far the greatest influence upon the masses of the people.”<sup>11</sup> One might thus conclude

that the art world of Nazi Germany sought to include more than experts in the field, but was fueled by an artistic impulse to communicate at a simple, instinctual level so as to motivate the people to political action. Therefore, cultural aesthetics became political and military.

Petropoulos writes how the art world bowed to the Nazis in many respects and goes on to say that “the Nazi leaders could not have dominated the artistic sphere or have amassed such collections without the assistance of figures in the art world.”<sup>12</sup> He argues that the leaders provided the “political leverage and the operating capital, and the subordinates offered their skill and expertise.”<sup>13</sup> The art world consisting of museum directors and curators, art dealers, art critics, art historians and artists themselves were all connected or co-opted by the regime.<sup>14</sup> Buchner (General *Director* of the Bavarian State Painting Collection from 1933) played a role in the seizure of Jewish collections and the Aryanization of Jewish art dealerships in Munich. He was part of the regime’s plundering bureaucracy by the midpoint of the war. Others who became partners in the ideological aesthetic program were Posse (General *director* of the Dresden State Painting Gallery and Fuhrermuseum), Kummel (General *director* of the Berlin State museums), Baudissen (*director* of the Folkwang Museum in Essen) and they were not merely compliant but even instigated some of the Nazi activities. The “liquidation” of modern works from state collections in many cases marked the beginning of business relations between the dealers and Nazi leaders.

*Art critics* were the mediator between the regime and the public. It was a regulated activity which had to be part of the Reich Chamber of Culture and the discipline specific Reich Chamber for the Visual Arts and after 1936, critics had to obtain certification from the Propaganda Ministry. There were thus efforts to control the discourse on culture: an element in the increasingly totalitarian trajectory of the regime. The art press, art trade and art criticism was seen to be in the hands of Jews and the regime sought to change this un-German status-quo, especially the proliferation of modern art. The most important art critic of the time was Robert Scholz. Initially he sought to reconcile National Socialism and modernism but later succumbed to the officially sanctioned art. An aspect of “Scholz’s Faustian bargain...was his decision to abandon certain kinds of modern art and instead toe the more conservative line, which endorsed representative depictions and Germanic themes.”<sup>15</sup> Breker, the Reich sculptor par excellence was spoken of favorably by Scholz: He argues that “Breker here follows the spirit and spatial principle of antiquity, without classicizing, that is, being an imitator.”<sup>16</sup> In so doing, Scholz carves out an art peculiar to the regime. The leading figures in art criticism articulated the tenets of National Socialism in vivid terms so that the masses could comprehend in line with Hitler’s promulgation of the idea of art for the masses and in fact more people were exposed to the arts during the Third Reich than any previous period of German history. There were film and radio broadcasts of Hitler’s and Goebbels’s speeches on art, outings to museums through the “Strength Through Joy” organizations and art magazines and catalogues were sent to troops during the war. Critics articulated the regime’s policies by way of attacks on artists and their works that were not officially proscribed and by glorifying the “representative” art of the epoch. A number of critics became involved in art looting during the war.

Many *Art historians* left when Hitler rose to power. Those that stayed, like the critics and art Directors/curators hitherto mentioned, fell in with the government. Weigert, a Nazi historian claimed the following: “The university stands in service of politics” and continues that “certainly it is the new ideal of the voluntaristic, soldierly type that must be adopted in order to secure the fearful threats to the foundations of our naked existence.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, art historians were supposed to serve as “intellectual shock troops for the regime and provide a key component of the cultural, and even spiritual, underpinning of the Nazi movement” (Ibid.). The German art historian thus saw his role as the enhancer of national consciousness. The result, taken to its logical conclusion, is the intellectual justification for the aggressive and genocidal program, as “...the expropriation of property was part of a continuum that culminated in murder.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, the art historians formed part of the “single most prodigious plunderer in the history of human civilization.”<sup>19</sup> And yet, these historians, such as Kajetan Muhlmann believed they were not stealing, but simply “securing” artworks from other European states. In reality, many art historians worked first to determine the location of artworks and then to catalog the plunder.

*Artists’* work and lives were regulated by Reich Chamber for Visual Arts. Programs were implemented to support artists, but for those who did not garner official approval, there was but persecution and this resulted in a massive emigration of artists. Not so for the sculptor, Breker, whose work was seen as a symbol of the dignity and creative

drive, supposedly, the very idea of National Socialism. Forty-two of his works appeared in the Great German Art Exhibitions and heroic statues for New Reich Chancellery, as his work “glorified the racial struggle, they were symbolic stone piles of Aryan belief”<sup>20</sup>. His work is not just beauty in itself, perfect form or empty content, but in its brutal lines and planes, one could say, it is full of *conviction*. In this sense, Speer’s buildings too evoke a sense of grandness, awe and *firmness*. Via his artists, Hitler’s claim to world domination began before the world knew of it in the shape of a military onslaught. Such Propaganda filtered through into what I consider the “other” arts and games of culture, namely sport and in fact the ideal of the classical hero exemplified in the formal beauty of art finds a place in the image of the athlete. It is thus significant and unsurprising that the Nazis viewed the Olympics of Berlin as a great opportunity to further their agenda. In short: aesthetics is politics.

## **2. THE BERLIN OLYMPICS AND PROPAGANDA**

The United States, Britain and France all had intentions of boycotting the Berlin games, owing to Germany’s persecution of minorities.<sup>21</sup> Jews and other “dissidents” were barred from entry into sports clubs and the state had a say as to who was to be picked for the National side. Avery Brundage, the American IOC representative went on a fact-finding mission to Germany to assess the situation. Diem, the head of the German organizing committee showed Brundage the positive side of Germany and convinced him that Berlin would be good hosts and reflect the Olympic spirit of internationalism and peace (though some might claim Brundage chose to ignore what may have been unsavory). Ultimately, after much debate the Americans decided to go – besides, the argument goes – sport and politics are separate. The English and French followed shortly thereafter.<sup>22</sup>

Germany at the same time seemed to have won over Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, with huge sums of money and a Nobel Prize nomination. Thus, the ailing de Coubertin was complimentary of the Fascists, supportive of the impending games in Berlin and stated that the Olympics would be illuminated by a “Hitlerian force and discipline.”<sup>23</sup>

In March 1936, a few months before the games, German troops marched unopposed in the Rhineland, a neutral no-go area for Germany determined by the Treaty of Versailles. As with Germany’s racist sports policy, France, the United States and Britain chose not to react. This was the strategic post Hitler needed and he used the games as a diversion for his political and military goals. During the games, Hitler refrained from political pronouncements and posed as a genial patron.

The Berlin stadium seated over one hundred thousand spectators at the opening ceremony. First a recording of de Coubertin was heard, a short note on the internationalism of the games followed by Hitler who briefly declared the games open. Then the winner of the first Olympic marathon of modern times, Spiridon Louis, who led the Greek team, presented Hitler with a symbolic olive branch from Olympia, the site of the ancient Olympics. The ceremony also included the symbolic Olympic flame which was lit for the first time ever by a torch from a torch relay carrying a flame originally lit at Olympia. The largest aircraft – the Hindenburg airship – then flew over the stadium. As night beckoned, Hitler’s architect Speer had his “light architecture” (upward shafts of light) reign over the stadium like the “theatre of power” effects at the 1934 Nuremberg rally. It was a major media event with the biggest ever radio audience. However, the intensely German nationalistic flavor of the games was not wholly unnoticed. As the British journalist at the games, Peter Wilson remarked: “...the prevailing air was ...odiously chauvinistic and military.”<sup>24</sup> Nazism itself under Hitler as hitherto argued can be considered as visual and physical theatre and the 1936 Olympics, like the Nuremberg example, consisted of gleaming limestone (on which the torch was lit and the speeches made) and the polished surfaces and pageantry, a “great Nazi set piece arising out of the gullibility of the International Olympic Committee.”<sup>25</sup>

This “great Nazi set piece” created a certain fantasy. Gebauer observes that “the 1936 organizers produced a rare density and fullness of signs – space, time, contests, the masses, the athletes and the nations – literally nothing escaped the symbolizing mania of the organizers. Everything represented something else; everything, every event is connected with another; the real becomes a symbol for the unreal, everything was like a film.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the Berlin Olympics was a text whose subtext spoke beyond simply sports. Sport became a metaphor for strength, endurance and national pride. This is linked to the imaginative dimension, namely that sport operated within

specific confines (rules, allocation of time and space); it is a game and thus the “text” is about something that lurks within it that is not quite perceptible. Perhaps it was the playful, yet a sinister death-knell of the war to come. The Olympic bell at the time perhaps, with hindsight, confirms this reading.

Hitler’s appearance at the opening ceremony was heralded by an electrically amplified fanfare of thirty trumpets. The most famous living German musician, Richard Strauss, dressed in white, directed a huge orchestra and chorus of three thousand voices in “Deutschland Uber Ales”, the “Horst Wessellied” and the “Olympic hymn” – the latter written especially for the occasion (The IOC were to use the hymn as official music for all future Olympiads). Gymnasts, ballet dancers, amid Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> were included among the festivities at the stadium. The major political victory for the Nazis was that it represented a unitary will, that it would bolster German self-confidence, and most importantly, Germany would no longer be the pariahs of the world.

Germany accrued the highest medal tally which certainly made a point beyond the sports field and invested such an achievement with political and propaganda purposes. Mandell observes that the consequence of National and political fervor is that

...sport has been purged of true play and has rapidly gathered encrustations of myth, iconography, ritual, and dogma that make the meets or games take on sacred significance. And paradoxically, it is the best player who must be most deadly in earnest in mastering tactics in living up to the yearnings for patriotic supremacy that their society imposes upon them.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, contestants represent more than themselves, more than measuring up to the limits of their sport, but rather allude to world politics and the socio-economic historical moment. Contestants were thus to be watched and admired “not as sportsmen, but rather as political troops who treat the sporting contest only as their particular branch of the great struggle as a whole.”<sup>28</sup>

While this political “struggle” or maneuvering is going on, the fact is most athletes were oblivious to the political dimension or paid no attention to it. At the winter games in Berlin, a few months earlier the connection between art, propaganda and sport was more overt. The new ski-jump entrance contained two huge pillars, on the faces of which were mounted twenty-five-foot Greek figures, one with a German eagle in her left hand, the other with the Olympic rings, a sculptural blend of Olympism and Nazism; or more precisely: the penetration of Nazi “values” within the domain of the community of nations symbolized by the concentric circles of the Olympic symbol. The rostrum at the summer games had a similar design. The games, in the end, gave Nazism legitimacy.

During the games, there were also banquets and parties for officials of the competing nations. Together with the games, one could say that there was a celebration of the body, “a hybrid pagan festival.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, that the Berlin games did not simply reflect the Olympic ideal of merely taking part or participating, but to win for a cruel regime. Ironically, however the nations generally left feeling Hitler was a great leader, and that Germany were back in the fold of nations - happy, hospitable, prosperous and peaceful. This skulduggery was a part of the propaganda of the Nazi’s that aimed to soften the world, before unleashing their military might. In this sense, it is ominous that Germany beat the United States in terms of the medals tally as did Japan over Great Britain and Italy over France – surely a warning that totalitarianism was a power to be reckoned with and were, at that stage at least, “ahead of the game”. Roche puts it like this: “...sport culture became part of an aestheticisation of everyday life and mega-events became elements in a theatre of power.”<sup>29</sup> It is the numbing effect of the sensory and aesthetic that allows propaganda to weave its spell unchecked.

Hitler visited Speer, Hitler’s supreme architect, in 1934 with a vision of a new Berlin stadium to house four hundred thousand spectators, but Speer said the projected stadium would not meet correct Olympic proportion. Hitler responded by saying that after 1940 the games would be in Berlin eternally and *they* would then determine the measurements.<sup>30</sup> At Berlin in 1936, Hitler and the Nazis certainly determined the measurements. The far-reaching conclusion is that sport is not necessarily simply sport, at least not at Olympic level. Thus, pure formalism as an



aesthetic theory does not capture the fact that form and content coalesce and causes insidious historical and social realities. Aesthetics, once understood as a kind of Kantian pure form and disinterested pleasure and later as the art-for-arts sake mantra is itself a dangerous position, when considering the historical misuse of form, art and culture in general. The theories of Clive Bell, his maxim of “significant form”; the evolutionary formal logic of Alfred Barr and the attempt to demarcate a pure realm of Fine Art by Clement Greenberg, all potentially mitigate the ideological dimension of art with pure formalism, which as this article suggest is short-sighted.

### **3. RIEFENSTAHL'S OLYMPIA**

The documentary film was a means of both recording and creating a sense of Germanic conquest and inclusiveness of all nations at the 1936 Olympics. To achieve this Riefenstahl produced a film that would capture both the sensuous and intuitive aspects of a Germany that hoped to determine all future measurements in sporting contest and by extension, world supremacy. Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* is an artistic marriage of sport and cinema. In her use of montage and dramatic editing, and her use of short bits of film in applying the emotional residue of one sequence to apply to another, it becomes clear that she is an admirer of Hitler, even worshipful (certainly evident in her *Triumph of the Will*) and in this myth-shrouding adoration, we see a “...visceral revulsion that the beautification of something so awful should be so successful.”<sup>31</sup> This beautification was a result of her mastery of the advanced technique of “combining temporally disparate and spatially various views of a crucial instant or drama to produce a cinematic scene that was far more temporally compressed and visually dramatic than reality could ever be.”<sup>32</sup> To distill these exciting instants, she imposed a flowing of images and a near abstraction of motion and light. Riefenstahl spoke of her work in purely artistic terms: “I had the whole thing in my head. I treated the whole thing like a vision. I was like an architect building a house”<sup>33</sup> and she also speaks of her work as musical as a “harmony in the scale of frames and tones.”<sup>34</sup> A description follows with the intention that the reader will infer in these images a sense of how the documentary created a vision of a “muscular” Germany through its aesthetic appeal.

*Olympia* opens with the visual metaphor of creation set to orchestral music. There are clouds, rock formations, and classical Greek architecture. We soon realize that it is the buildings of Acropolis and then the fallen column drums of the temple of Zeus at Olympia. There are nude figures, beautiful bodies, “who appear to be offering their beauty to the sun.”<sup>35</sup> But as with the famed sculptor of the time, namely Brecker, these bodies, while beautiful do not invite dialogue or relationship: they are classical ideals abstracted from sensuous, vulnerable beauty. The strong “impenetrable” solitary runner carries a torch.

It begins with the use of light and dark, as classical columns rise up, and ruins rise from nature; the camera pans details and soon the bigger picture is grasped as the majestic music leads us to the Parthenon. Then there is a focus on ancient sculptures amongst the architecture. There are mainly faces which take up the whole screen, which then morph into female bodies against a smoky background and more serious music. Then the discus thrower of Myron morphs into a real athletic man who moves, naked and just about ready to throw the discus, with the sky in the background. The discus moves onto the shot-put and javelin with arms in the air, and soft, oriental music while there is playing with a ball. Nude women play with the hula-hoop and move in time. There is a dance of sort and a unity of bodies which then becomes the fire/flame (a close-up) of the torch bearer. Triumphant music follows as the runners take the flame through Europe to Berlin with the sea backdrop to the city. Then, as if the viewer is in the sky viewing down, we see the Olympic bell. The eagle is superimposed on the stadium chimes. Then the marching and parading routines commence, with the crowd saluting “heils” which some nations themselves follow. A blonde youth lights the Olympic flame. Speeches in various languages follow.

There is a focus on competitors (no music), their movement, the emphasis on stance, and stasis after vigorous movement. Facial expressions are pertinent here. Hitler is excited, even delirious, at a German victory, but viewed as just a normal spectator, though he is never shown amongst crowd, rather there are close-ups of his face.

Riefenstahl goes through all the Olympic events: the old style “high jump”, the flying long jump and other athletic contests whereas in part two she focuses on gymnastics, swimming, boxing (to a limited extent as she shows only a German victor), hockey, fencing and diving. Each of the medalists is given a laurel reef referring to the Ancient Greek origins of the games. Often, she deletes the crowd noise and one feels the concentration before an athletic

attempt, for example Owens' long jump. In the marathon she intimates the arduous nature of running, exploring running angles, shadows, muscles all set to dramatic music. As with *Triumph of the Will*, she explores the figure against a night background. At night, fire rules and envelops the nation in a unity of countries and flag waving; the Olympic bell forms a montage with a choir in the background and finally (in part one) an Olympic flag.

The second part of Olympia begins with calm, pleasant music. It is clearly a nature scene, with trees, a river, and the splendor of the German soil. There are flecks of light, ripples, and much detail: spider webs, insects, dew, birds, and streaks of sunlight. Then the runners are scoured at dawn. They run into the lake water naked, into a wash room, and there is a mood of play. The first clear focus reveals Nordic features. Man and nature appear in harmony and there is a jovial mood, as they bathe each other. There is the massaging of muscles, laughter, pleasure in the water, the tree-like columns of the architectural delights as in the opening of the film; a general feeling of cleansing. We see different training camps and hear music to go with the various exercises and set parallel to animals (for example, a Kangaroo). There is a feeling of fun-loving, of sport as innocent, and the world as welcoming guests at the games. It is a celebration of all lands and youth, that all is right in the world.

Riefenstahl was a pioneer in sports film<sup>36</sup> - in seemingly separating sports and politics - and she set the standard for subsequent televised sport. In the swimming there are beautiful water scenes. It all appears so natural. She follows the diving events from all angles as if the athletes are flying in the sky defying gravity. Toward the coda, the Berlin stadium recedes into the night sky, the bell is once again in focus, while Speer's architecture of light is seen from a bird's eye view of the stadium. A choir, the various nations' flags are brought into sharp focus followed by the Olympic flag. Finally, the flame goes out, the main music theme composed by Herbert Windt plays once more as smoke and light converge to a single pinpoint and the drama ends. *I would argue that this imagery together with the music asserts German cultural ascendancy and that sport via the artistic lens is a means of assuming charge as a world super-power.*<sup>37</sup> *Pure aesthetics, then, that is a kind of visual music that is simply self-referential or concerned with beauty, is a spurious, perhaps even a dangerous notion.*

One cannot, however mention the Berlin games without mention of the four-time gold medalist, Jessie Owens. He receives much attention in Riefenstahl's work. She focuses on his beautiful musculature, his concentration and euphoria in victory. Owens perhaps disproved German racial theory and Hitler was so incensed by his victory that he refused to shake hands with him or be photographed with him.<sup>38</sup>

The crowds in *Olympia*, unlike the runners, are a sort of "disembodied presence...devoid of physical appeal",<sup>39</sup> whereas the aesthetic movement and motion of the three Nordic women swinging exercise clubs in unison is sensual (when only a few are first shown, that is). The image slowly fades to six, ten, twenty, one hundred then ten thousand perfectly aligned women in faultless patterns in utmost unison: "We swoon with the instinctive grasp of the pure power of these masses, Volkisch gymnasts, as the camera immortalizes their actions, ever drained of fleshly beauty - for the artist in control has shown massed human motion abstracted, epitomized."<sup>40</sup> In this sense "sport as a human effort is transcended. The athletes have been striped of the limitations of space and time and then of humanity itself. We have been carried to an artistic realm of the ineffably beautiful and the undeniably false."<sup>41</sup> This reflects the Neo Romantic and Neo Classical ideal discussed hitherto. This ineffable transcendence of self and body via sport is epitomized in the marathon and "Windt's music itself tries to suggest the conflict of will and human flesh."<sup>42</sup> Thus where previous sport photography merely recorded, Riefenstahl enhanced and interpreted and ultimately made of sport an artistic artifice, something beyond human physicality and individual anxiety.

One may ask to what extent these aesthetic considerations were politically and ideologically motivated. One may conclude that her work was aesthetically motivated and non(political?) or even anti political or non-ideological<sup>43</sup>, in her focus on the "non Aryans" such as Jessie Owens and the oriental marathon winner Kitei Son. But that is not the case. German patriotism is not masked, as it is evident that the German competitors enjoy a keener togetherness, as if inspired by the nation.

I suggest that this documentary embodied the model of monumental film art promulgated by the Nazi state in its innovative capturing of the body in motion. Three central themes of film-making prevailed in the nineteen thirties: the attempt to establish film as a form of art, the use of musical codes, and the aspiration to convey cinematically a

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sense of epic grandeur.<sup>44</sup> This included German folk music, military music such as the Badenweiler march, early 19<sup>th</sup> century marching “*Ich hatt einen kameraden*” (“I had a comrade”) and the Horst Wessel Anthem. Often one can detect a serious and stern attitude, at other times even playful. Windts’ music is monumental, specializing in heroic scores and drawn from Wagner and Strauss. It is perhaps his version of sanctioned music.<sup>45</sup> This National film aesthetic used music in such a way that “music framed, legitimated and explained film as a form of monumental art.”<sup>46</sup> It is monumental both in the sense that it is a record of the historic moment and in that it is fantasy. I say it is the latter as it creates a feeling of Germanic destiny, and connection to Greece while at the same time depicting the body – youth – as that which is both human and godly. This is most poignantly expressed in the diving sequences where the graceful movements in the air lingers as the divers’ twist and turn and glide, “slowing the motion until he appears to be flying under his own power, effortlessly rising, soaring, turning.”<sup>47</sup> The law of gravity appears suspended; there is freedom from the harsh realities of the third Reich. The fantasy is the denial of the seriousness of the ideological framework of Hitler’s National Socialism. *The propaganda thus is, curiously, in that fact that it is not overtly propaganda!*

A further claim that Riefenstahl’s work can be seen to have only been able to rise out of National Socialism, as above “mere sport”, is that she managed to have the film ready for Hitler’s birthday and it was shown at the same venue for the premiere of the clearly ideologically motivated *Triumph of the Will*. Riefenstahl received the Nazi State Prize in 1938, the Grand Prize in Paris, the Polar Prize in Sweden, and first prize at the International Moving Picture festival in Venice where she was paraded arm in arm with Goebbels. Perhaps, then, the film should not be seen as a factual record, but as a form of propaganda, especially the opening twenty minutes, “where the international tradition of the Olympic games is exploited by shots of the Nordic torchbearer lighting the flame in Hitler’s new stadium followed by shots of the Fuhrer.”<sup>48</sup> Ulrich Gregor, a German film expert and director of the Deutsches Kinemathek in West Berlin holds the opinion that *Olympia* is still fascist in spirit, treating sport as “a heroic, superhuman feat, a kind of ritual”<sup>49</sup> – as the narration constantly repeats words such as “fight” and “conquest” while shots of marathon runners through the forest kindle notions of Nordic mystery and the like.

Nevertheless, it appears Hitler used Riefenstahl as a front for the Nazi party and gave the IOC and the world the impression that the famous actress-director was filming the Olympics as a private project, using private funds and her own film company. However, she obtained the funds through Goebbels’s ministry. According to Speer<sup>50</sup>, Hitler wanted to convey the impression of a peace-loving Germany to the many foreign guests and to Riefenstahl’s audiences – “a unified, strong, egalitarian Germany”. Riefenstahl played into this contrived image despite the exclusion of Jewish athletes and Hitler’s racial policies. She focused on Mauermayer, the female German discus thrower in a blending of propaganda and art whereby “an excellent and beautiful German athlete following Hitler so closely on the screen gave the viewer a strong impression that Germany was dominating the Olympic games of 1936.”<sup>51</sup> Hitler, however, did everything to be a good host and when he was reminded that a head of state was to keep a low profile and remain neutral to the visitors, he congratulated the winners in private. Thus, the propaganda was in what was not said, that is, in the embracing of the nations and the focus on the grace and beauty of the body without overt political content. The clutch of terror is all the more mystifying and galvanizing under the pageantry, nay the culture that is the athletic body and motion in relation to an artistic and cultural tradition. Aesthetics thus could be termed potentially dangerous serving to indoctrinate ideals that in fact led to a mighty campaign of terror.

Goebbels recognized the significance of the visual sense and appeal to the masses particularly in regard to film: “...the film is not an art for a thousand people...it appeals not to reason, but to the instincts. It is a sensuous art in as much as it basically addresses the eye.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, film satisfies the craving for images, the universal tendency of (modern) man towards a certain rhythm and order. This filmic mode of expression was assimilated into National Socialism. Even war-time newsreels can be considered an aesthetic experience and mystify its harsh realities in the dynamic kinetic energy of the media. In the same way, the sheer captivating beauty of *Olympia* both hides the truth and reveals an order posited on Nationalistic extremes.

Perhaps the reason why it is so difficult to separate fact from fantasy or the aesthetic from the moral (and political) is because to the extent one focuses on one polarity – say form, so one negates or ignores the other polarity, say content. The idea that there is a one to one correspondence between form and content (aesthetics and the extra-



aesthetic or moral dimension) is, I believe spurious, for meaning is contextualized and open to interpretation. In other words, one can enjoy the sheer beauty of something without moral concern; conversely one could refuse to engage with something aesthetically out of moral conviction. So, perhaps one can be scientific about it and say that the aesthetic and the moral (or extra-aesthetic) are related to one another as in an inverse graph – to the extent one focuses one aspect, so one ignores or cannot focus on the other. Allowing some intellectual flexibility, one can borrow from Niels Bohr's description of the wave-particle duality and call such an inverse relationship as adhering to the principle of *complementary*. If such a description is accurate, it means that just like the famous duck-rabbit example used by Wittgenstein, one needs to use both one's eyes, so to speak: At once aware of the aesthetic and the moral. In the process, one might avoid extremes: either being over-concerned with the aesthetic or with the extra-aesthetic (remember Plato held the view that art was in fact not a very positive human expression). In this respect, the redeeming beauty of Riefenstahl's Olympia may have been held in check by a more cognitive recognition of its underlying intent and effect at the time. Hindsight, of course is all too easy.

One can thus conclude that sport is not so innocent and its coupling with the aesthetic or artistic renders its "place" much more ambiguous and, at least in the case of Nazi Germany, even destructive both individually and socially. The question one needs to ask oneself at this juncture is whether the aesthetics (or fashions?) of the day is all-consuming and pressing, thus not allowing a clear logic to override the "play" of surfaces or perhaps more alarmingly, a clear-cut master narrative linking an/the aesthetic to a corresponding extra-aesthetic depth. These reflections thus converge on this point: If history informs the present, then Europe's tragic wars must influence the present. Hence one only hopes that the current aesthetics (extra-aesthetics) lead to abundance, inclusiveness, peace, expanded consciousness and diverse aesthetic and cultural expressions and forms. Yet silence and stillness too is necessary. How then can aesthetics redeem itself? How can form be ideal and free of ideology? Can there be disinterested, aesthetic experience? Having discussed at some length, the cultural war that Germany headed in the arts and in this analysis this filtered to the quotidian such as sport, I would suggest the following deliberation: Having for the most part described the manipulation of art and sport during the reign of the Nazis, one may analytically deduce that a) beauty itself needs to be critiqued, b) beauty or aesthetics and politics are not separate, that is there is by necessity a politics of representation.

In a world where social media is littered with images, then we are enjoined to sift through and discern fact from fiction without being seduced by the aesthetic (there is even, one may argue a crazy beauty in bomb explosions) – instead one is enjoined to not follow simply the eyes, but to navigate with an attuned sense of morality. Otherwise a new terror under the guise of a certain aesthetic charm is sure to lead to further terror campaigns as we are only too aware post 9/11.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> While this is not new, for example "Performing the Nation: Sports, Spectacles, and Aesthetics in Germany, 1926–1936" by N. Rossoll, 2010 or *Hitler and the power of aesthetics*, by F. Spotts, 2002, my approach, in addition to linking aesthetics and politics, is to draw from art, where art and aesthetics are not conflated.
- <sup>2</sup> Sherree Zalampas. *Adolf Hitler: A psychological interpretation of his views of architecture, art and music*. (Louisville: University of Louisville, 1987).
- <sup>3</sup> This can most readily be noted in Hitler's vision for a massive gallery in Linz, which was to be four times the size of the Louvre. His Olympic stadium was to be equally grand as it was to house four hundred thousand spectators. His vision for Berlin was to be equally impressive as the new Germania. But these yearnings surely see only the mass, rather than the individual. In this sense, a person becomes merely abstract and dehumanized.
- <sup>4</sup> Zalampas, 333-334
- <sup>5</sup> Jonathan Petropoulos. *Art and politics of the Third Reich* (London: Iniversity of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 261

- <sup>7</sup> But the rhetoric was at times rather subtle. Goebells' argued that the arts flourished most when it enjoyed the protection and support of official leadership, citing the examples of ancient art and the Renaissance in this regard, in which official commissions from official rulers fostered artistic progress. Thus, he argued for a justification of state direction of the arts and entertainment. He further maintained that he wanted to create art with his films, for example, not propaganda, an art that he deemed "educational" on a national level in its purest form, because the purpose of art is to serve the nation so the argument goes.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Overy. *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany/Stalin's Russia* (England: Penguin, 2004).
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, 371
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in Overy, 354
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Overy, 355
- <sup>12</sup> Petropoulos, 87
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, 54
- <sup>14</sup> It should be noted, however that there were fascist or nationalistic leanings of leading Modernist heroes such as Mies van der Rohe, Nolde and Barlach so that the conventional picture of art in Nazi Germany is much more complicated than it might seem.
- <sup>15</sup> Petropoulos, 116
- <sup>16</sup> Scholz in Jonathan Petropoulos. *The Faustian bargain: The art world in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, 167
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, 169
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 170
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 226
- <sup>21</sup> Maurice Roche. *Mega-events and modernity*. (New York: Routledge, 2000)
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 13
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 120
- <sup>24</sup> Wilson in Roche, 115
- <sup>25</sup> Nicholas O' Shaughnessy. "Selling Hitler: propaganda and the Nazi brand". *Toward Public Affairs* 9: 2009, 55-76, 68
- <sup>26</sup> Christopher Young. In praise of Jesse Owens: technical beauty and the Berlin Olympics 1936. *Sport in History* 28 (6), 2004, 80-93, 90
- <sup>27</sup> Richard D. Mandell. *The Nazi Olympics*. (London: Souvenir, 2000), 87
- <sup>28</sup> Hans Grass in Mandell, 292
- <sup>29</sup> Guy Walter. *Berlin games: how Hitler stole the Olympic dream*. (London: John Murrey, 2006), 246
- <sup>29</sup> Roche, 122
- <sup>30</sup> Roche, 128

<sup>31</sup> Mandell, 252

<sup>32</sup> Mandell, 257

<sup>33</sup> Riefenstahl in Mandell, 258

<sup>34</sup> Mandell, 262

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Riefenstahl employed strategic pits, towers, circling airplanes and observation balloons to get the right images.

<sup>37</sup> One might argue here that the appropriation of philosophers may serve Nazi ends, for example Nietzsche, in reference to his ideas of the *Übermensch*, of the need for struggle and noble competition and that life itself should be a heightened aesthetic experience.

<sup>38</sup> Young, 89

<sup>39</sup> Mandell, 264

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 267

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 268

<sup>43</sup> Her documentaries trained the camera-men who later shot newsreels and other propaganda footage. One could consider her work as film- art that responded to the greatness of the moment.

<sup>44</sup> Adapted from Morgan, B. Music in Nazi film: How different is *Triumph of the will*? *Studies in European Cinema*, 3(1), 2006, 37–53,

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Glen, B Infield. *Leni Riefenstahl: the fallen film goddess* (New York: Thomas Cromwell Co, 142, 1976).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 150

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 124

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 135/6

<sup>52</sup> Reichsfilmkammer 1941 in Infield, 26.

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Riefenstahl, L. *Triumph of the Will*. Indianapolis: Kartes Video Communication, 2009 (1935).

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