Mary Devereaux, “Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*

**I**

Film covers, like a documentary, a Nuremberg rally in 1934 of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party.

MD addresses the beauty and evil of *TotW* as a general problem for art itself.

Her treatment of this issue is meant to overcome the inadequacy of the “usual solution to the problem…”

Essay will consist of a brief treatment of TofW’s ‘artistic strategy’ (Section II) and the film’s overall effect (Section III), then turn to the problem of beauty and evil in art (Sections IV-VI).

**II**

Rally: 7 days long, 10k’s of participants, 500K spectators.

Hitler requested the film, and Adolf gave the film its title. He carefully orchestrated the spectacle that he wanted to create.

Hitler gave the filmmaker a massive production crew (172 people: 36 cameramen & assistants, 9 aerial photographers, 17 newsreel men, 17 lighting technicians, etc. Production involved 32 cameras working ***nonstop for a week!***

LR rejected usual newsreel approach to covering such events (static camera + voice-over commentary) since she thought it would be boring (given that newsreels were designed to be very short summaries of several recent world events, she was certainly right). LR applied already-developed techniques of *mobile photography* for fiction films; extensive use of long tracks for ongoing tracking shots (including circular track around speakers’ podium) so as “to infuse shots of stationary subjects with action and motion.” (repurposed in LR’s *Olympia*). Wagner’s music in background, plus German folk songs, military marches, and party anthems combined to create the soundscape (along with cheering crowds and the speeches).

Editing took five months @ 12-18 hours per day (holy sh\*t!)

Won the Gold Medal at the Venice Film Festival, and the Grand Prix at 1937 Paris Film Festival.

**III**

MD on the film itself:

Structure: 12 sections on 12 separate rally events; presents events *as if* ***as they unfold*** (obv., an illusion created through editing since the film puts the actual events in a different order than they occurred during the weeklong rally); LR’s aim was to enhance and create a dramatic arc the film presents to the viewer (with “highlights and retreats, peaks and valleys”). This amounts to *cinematic* ***rhythm***, thus applying a principle of music to film. Result: third section is *lyrical* in presenting early morning in Nuremberg, with tempo increasing as the day progresses in a way that LR thought would recreate the “same enthusiasm and excitement” felt by rally participants. The film deploys the same kind of *rhythmic sequences* throughout the film (probably the most novel element of the final film).

LR’s evidently masterful command of the formal features of the film is not her only mastery: she adds “command of traditional narrative means…theme and characterization, the use of symbolism, and the handling of point of view” resulting in a documentary film that “tell[s] a *story*” [349Lm]

TotW displays and trumpets *military values:* loyalty, courage, unity, discipline, and obedience wedded to a heroic conception of life that deploys elements of German *völkisch* mythology. The Nazi world it portrays exists in “a place apart, surrounding by clouds and mist, peopled by heroes and ruled from above by the gods” with Hitler portrayed as both ‘leader and savior, a new Siegfrieg”.

JP: note how this would play well to a disaffected German population that has suffered a major defeat in WW-I, made worse by reparations demanded by the winning allied countries, and a catastrophic collapse of the German economy in the late 20s, early 30s (along with most other ‘first-world’ societies during that period).

*TotW* uses specific motifs designed to portray and reinforce each of three National Socialist slogans: *Ein Volk. Ein Führer. Ein Reich* (One People. One Leader. One Empire.).

Motif One: The *Führerprinzip* has obvious roots in messianic Christianity: “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. *TotW* was the only one of these that made Hitler the mystical leader built into this old messianic Christian idea.

JP: Trump’s *rallies,* anyone?

The *will* that triumphs is, then, the *will of the German People Themselves!*

Nuremberg represents: “old Germany and … the glorious Teutonic past, its castle a bulwark against foreign intruders.” The scene of Hitler’s arrival at the rally is the capstone of a sequence that builds dramatically so that his emergence from the plane is its highest dramatic moment, thus evoking the motif of Siegfried the Savior of Germany and applying it *directly* to Hitler himself.

Hitler is not only represented as a messiah, but as a *man of the people*, out and about where he “shakes hands and smiles” and, most effectively, among *children!*

Motif Two: the Unity of the People. “…*everyone* supports Hitler” [at least, as the film seems to show], and *all are focused on Him and the Rally* (none are portrayed as engaged in ordinary daily activities). The film carefully constructs, in the 5th sequence of the film, a series of “individual faces calling out the names of their *Heimat*” and each one comes from a different part of Germany, amplifying the “man of the people” motif.

Motif Three: Display of Military Power (*emphasized in the final sequences* of the film, and part of its effect is the natural result of the masses of coordinated and “seemingly inexhaustible stream of massed forces” presented in that last, and longest film sequence.

*TotW’s* story is not just *any* story: it is the Story of the Nazi-based Resurrection of the German People and Nation.

**IV**

*TotW* is a perfect example of the classic problem with art that combines “beauty with evil”. But MD proposes an alternative explanation of what is morally repugnant about the film: **it is a documentary**. While the cinematic means used and associated achieved effects work beautifully, what they present *is disquieting* in and of themselves since they are presented *as if representations of Real Life* there in Nuremberg, and by implication, in Germany itself. This impression is amplified when the film is regarded from the point of view following WW-II and the discovery of the Holocaust.

Why the appeal to Pure Aestheticism is no Defense:

1. While LR was clearly an film artist focused on *beauty* and creating films that *were beautiful,* in the case of *TotW* the beauty is clearly side-by-each with the disquieting/disturbing/morally objectionable story it is telling.

2. LR *was* an admirer of Hitler. And even after the war ended and the Holocaust evidence was rolling in, she revealed that she “wept all night” at the news of his suicide.

3. Never distanced herself from the political content of *TotW* (and she died in **2003!**).

4. She insisted on and got final cut (so the resulting film is hers and hers alone).

Riefenstahl defended her presentation of the events in the 1934 Nuremberg Rally on the basis that it was just a pure documentary, that is, a representation of what happened there, and how it looked to those who participated, that shows the loyalty and hope Hitler once inspired, and is just history, not propaganda…. just an example of *cinema verité* … thus distancing herself from responsibility for the *realities* that her documentary presents and the charge that the film is *promoting* the view of Hitler it supports (which would make it propaganda).

JP Query for class: What are some reasons for rejecting this defense of her film?

MD: while all documentaries are *constructed* and hence never “just transcriptions of [real] events”, *TotW’s* “organization is governed by political aims.”[352Rt]

After all: LR was responsible for helping to set up the spectacle that her film was designed to document.

LR’s retort: but this event *really happened* and *did support Hitler and the policies and objectives of National Socialism in Germany in the interwar period!*

Reply to LR’s retort: *your film was* ***constructed to amplify*** all the pro-Nazi motifs that were part of the rally. This implies her *support* for the Nazi project.

MD’s best point: LR’s defenses (both aesthetic and documentary versions) against the propaganda charge take the form “LR didn’t *intend* to make a propaganda film, therefore, it is not a propaganda film.”

JP: Why is this not a good defense of LR: while she couldn’t have foreseen accurately the role *TotW* played in amplifying and promoting the eventually very successful Nazi project (and could not have been held *literally* responsible for creating the conditions that produced all the morally repugnant consequences of National Socialism under the guidance of its leader, Adolf Hitler), this only relieves her of responsibility for promoting the Nazi project through her film if all that makes as film propaganda is that it *succeeds* in changing things in Real Life so that the values and goals it promotes ***come to pass in Real Life***. Reasonable retort: but all that is needed for a film to be propaganda is that it has *the selling of an idea, set of values, interpretation of history and associated beliefs in its audience* as **a controlling objective**.

**V**

The success of *TotW* is of interest to those studying *art* because it is clearly *a very accomplished work of cinematic art*.

The problem for art students: this is a *disturbing work of art* because it clearly makes National Socialism appear to be **beautiful**. [P353Rt]

One aspect of the problem: raises for the viewer the question “What kind of person am I if I enjoy or am moved by this film?” Is there something *wrong* about reacting to the film in this way?

Aristotle thought that *virtue* consists (in part) in taking pleasure in the right things and not in the wrong things. If that is right, then it would seem that taking pleasure in *art that promotes immoral [political/historical objectives and behavior]* would count as *taking pleasure in what are wrong things*.

Another question worth asking: is it immoral to praise the film for its aesthetic properties because they were *in service of propagandistic ends that were themselves immoral*?

MD: e 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.”[353Rb/354Lt]

What about the works of Marquis de Sade and T. S. Eliot?

Standard response to the problem of beautiful-but-evil art: “look at art from an ‘aesthetic distance’”, or as MD puts it, “…sever aesthetic evaluation from moral evaluation and evaluate the work in the aesthetic (i.e., formal) terms alone.”[354Lm]

This approach has been challenged by feminists, some philosophers of art, and others in present discussions of the problem of beauty+evil in art.

MD’s objection: to sever the moral implications of *TotW* is to remove *the actual work of art* from consideration.

JP: ok, but then it must *still* be possible to appreciate the work *in some of its elements* even if one cannot separate the moral and aesthetic properties of the work *itself*. (is this just a defense of the ontology of artworks, and if so, does it miss the point of ‘aesthetic distance’ in art appreciation? To say otherwise seems to risk making some works of art *impossible to evaluate* on nonmoral grounds…but let’s see what MD has to say about this obvious problem for her view).

MD avoids this problem because she thinks that to remove the moral element in *TotW* is *not* to require that we *reject the work* as something to view and evaluate. In fact, she clearly thinks that if we remove the moral dimension, we actually turn the film *into something else* and thus *detach ourselves* from the experience of watching the film (which is, after all, *part of what* ***constitutes*** the film for some philosophers/theorists trying to account for and comprehend the nature of artworks proper).

So MD’s revised response to art beauty that is evil amounts to a rejection of *formalism* (and this is a view that has many proponents, not lease *myself* [especially formalist accounts of music like those that confuse the symphony with the score]).

MD considers the possibility that it is only *unsophisticated formalism* that has a problem with beautiful/evil art that it cannot solve. But perhaps it can be avoided with *sophisticated formalism* that only takes the view that it is possible to *set aside* consideration of the moral features of an artwork and focus exclusively on its *aesthetic* features.

Her verdict: this doesn’t work as that means removing *part* of what *constitutes the artwork* in the process of ‘abstracting away’ its morally-relevant features, and more importantly, it seems to make it impossible to ascribe something *problematic* to *the work itself*.

JP: in other words, you cannot separate *form* and *content* this neatly!

How to solve this new problem:

Two strategies:

a) preserve the useful/valuable 19th century distinction between what is beautiful, and hence properly of *aesthetic interest*, and the content (which would unavoidably include any disturbing moral implications/features of the artwork);

b) “properly aesthetic responses to an artwork *should include* both formal and content-related elements, since both contribute to how we respond aesthetically to artworks”

Upshot: aesthetic response, and its causes, should determine what *counts as aesthetic* and formalism just removes part of what clearly helps to *constitute and generate* our response to artworks, the part that relates to the **content**.

JP: and this seems right. Given that ‘aesthetic’ can be taken to just refer to all the ‘experiential seemings’ that constitute the direct object(s) of our conscious attention to artworks, it is arbitrary to remove those that involve our *morally-tinged* ‘experiential seemings’ (like the ‘repugnance’ appearances!).

**VI**

MD now makes her case that what makes *TotW* troubling goes beyond the moral implications of what it promoted as a bit of cinematic propaganda, and the moral implications of any such art-as-propaganda, but rather, is grounded in the very ***combination of beauty and evil*** that constitutes *TotW* as the work of art we are experiencing and responding to/evaluating.

Upshot: we cannot separate out the form and content of the film and use this to apply the notion of ‘different *ways* of responding’ to it that keep the beauty and the evil separated *at the level of our response to it*. In effect, MD is arguing that this is a trick of the mind that is actually *not possible in fact.* This means that here the moral question about ‘canceling’ art by immoral artists is **completely separate** from whether we can separate the beauty of *TotW* from its morally repugnant features (which we *can* do with the ‘good art/bad artist’ strategy for denying that cancellation of artworks is a reasonable consequence of discovering morally problematic features of the artists in the way they conduct their lives independent of their artmaking (but if their artmaking *involves* these immoral issues, then the problem associated with ‘bad artist’ infects the ‘art made by bad artists’ and make lead to ‘immoral art’.

JP: Whether this demands cancellation of the *works* depends on a host of issues we are not addressing here.