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### Media Artifact: Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will"

Feminist theory allows the attentive theorist to employ a series of rigorous analytical tools in the examination of an intended object. This is no less the case when the object is a media artifact: examples from film, television etc., may be placed under analysis through a set of concepts crucial to feminist theory, such as the identification of presupposed/unconscious relationships of power and the notion of gender as ideology. Some artifacts, however, can remain particularly demanding of this approach, insofar as they display a certain ambivalence at the heart of their very constitution. In the case of Leni Riefenstahl's classic 1935 documentary *Triumph of the Will*, this ambivalence is immediately tangible. At first glance, the work bears a fundamental tension: it is on the one hand, a classic work of cinema, created by one of the foremost (female) directors of all time. On the other hand, both the content and the context of the film are anti-feminist: Riefenstahl's film is essentially a piece of propaganda art, financed by Nazi Germany - it is a depiction of the Nuremberg Nazi rallies of 1935, in which the Nazi movement is portrayed in a glorious fashion.

From one perspective, the film represents a pure example of an ideological piece of cinema, since Riefenstahl is essentially presenting the Nazi ideology from an almost celebratory view, as opposed to a critical perspective. From a contrasting perspective, the immediate paradox of *Triumph of the Will* is that its director is a woman. The very documenter of this ideology is considered to be the Other by the Nazi ideology, as in Nazi Germany the Otherness of the woman is evident in the patriarchal nature of the Nazi system. In other words, here is an apparent case of a marginalized member of an ideology elevated to a position of power – it is Riefenstahl's aesthetic vision that makes *Triumph of the Will* a masterpiece of cinema. This situation presents an immediate paradox for feminist theory, as the

patriarchal nature of the Nazi ideology would seem to contradict with the prominent role given to Leni Riefenstahl as a director. In other words, it can be said that within this oppressive ideological framework, Riefenstahl as woman, which is to say, Riefenstahl as Other, was nevertheless granted a certain autonomy and power within this very ideological framework in order to produce a piece of cinema, namely, to create a work of aesthetics and of artistic creation amidst an environment that immediately seems non-conducive to the autonomy of the Other.

In this regard, the media artifact of *Triumph of the Will* produces an immediate series of questions: can we consider Riefenstahl's directorial vision and possibilities as merely an anomaly within the ideological framework of Nazi Germany? How can we think the apparent paradox of a woman being granted the power for artistic creation within a Nazi ideology? How can such an event be approached using the conceptual apparatus of feminist theory? The latter question is particularly important, insofar as the tension of Riefenstahl's status as woman *contra* a patriarchal ideology is the crucial paradox at the heart of the existence of *Triumph of the Will* itself. Rather than understanding this paradox as a limit to feminist theory, we will instead argue that this paradox evinces the pervasiveness of ideology in society, a pervasiveness that can take many forms, such as gender as ideology or race as ideology. In other words, Riefenstahl's apparent contradictory artistic autonomy evidenced in the creation of the film is rather indicative of a false autonomy, a false power. Essentially, Riefenstahl is only allowed power within the ideology of Nazi Germany, to the extent that her films must all the while remain ideological. That is to say, that Riefenstahl must concede (perhaps on an unconscious level) to produce a film of ideological content demonstrates that her apparent role of power as director is essentially illusory: The particular workings of ideology rather overdetermine and determine the (illusory) power that Riefenstahl possesses. In other words, this is an illusory form of feminist emancipation, similar to contemporary statistics that cite for example, increased numbers in women's education and employment. Such statistics, or the fact that Riefenstahl is a female director within a patriarchal society, rather suggest

the ever-expanding reach of a particular ideology, as opposed to radical change or emancipation: this is essentially the perpetuation of ideology itself on a more grander scale, in the sense of the extent of its narrative reach. Thus, I will argue that Riefenstahl's film demonstrates a certain illusory point of power, despite the dynamic extent of her aesthetic vision. The latter remains fundamentally limited by ideology and the discourse of power, as Riefenstahl is unable to break from this form of domination and realize a true autonomy.

It is first necessary to provide a recapitulation of Riefenstahl's film. As Smith writes, *Triumph of the Will* "is a true documentary, completely made up of 'actual' footage – the ultimate in incontrovertible credibility. The wonderful paradox here is that under any conditions but this absolute reportorial truth, the propaganda itself would be quite incredible." (95) Riefenstahl's film is essentially a documentary account of the 1934 Nazi rally held in Nuremberg, Germany. The documentary form, however, is supplemented by Riefenstahl's commitment to a rigorous aesthetic vision. Riefenstahl is not merely interested in an archival account of the rally, but rather to turn the documentary form into a form of art. At the same time, such a form of art, considering its object, remains radically political and ideological. McQuire suggests that, "one reason that *Triumph of the Will* remains so contentious is that its techniques remain so contemporary. If it was in Nazi Germany that the possibility for establishing a national polity integrated by new media technologies was first systematically explored, his political space has clearly spread in the present." (149) Thus, one of the key features of *Triumph* is that it is an early recognition of the possibility for aesthetic media to influence and promote ideology. On an underlying ideological level, the film thus remains remarkably current when considering questions of the form and transmission of ideology, or in Althusserian terms, how ideology interpellates subjects. (Zizek, 57) Accordingly, through the ground gained in a historical, cultural and ideological distance from the film, *Triumph* may be viewed as a clear documentation of how ideology works: Following McQuire's interpretation, one can see how ideology functions, in terms of the structuring of the rallies, how it makes

people feel a part of these rallies, and the organization of the entire performance under the commanding presence of Hitler, who prominently features in the film as a kind of “Big Other.” Following this line of thought, it can be said that *Triumph of the Will* is most significant for not documenting a particular ideological trope, such as an ideological interpretation of the sexes in the form of gender as ideology, but rather that the film remains fascinating as a depiction of ideology itself. This is not to say that there are not certain tropes within the film, such as gender as ideology (for example, the “motherly” roles the women play in the rallies, as opposed to the “warrior” roles the men play) or race as ideology (the film is an obvious attempt to portray the glory of the German race). Rather, in the comprehensiveness of the film’s account, it is almost as if Riefenstahl has succeeded in filming ideology itself.

At the same time, however, the crucial aspect of the film from the perspective of feminist theory is that the creator of the film is a woman. It is Riefenstahl’s eye that captures and forms these images. From the perspective of feminist theory, the key question *Triumph of the Will* poses is thus not how gender as ideology is represented in the film, but rather that a woman is involved in the production of ideology. In other words, the film poses a critical question to feminist discourse, as it is not so much the content of the film that must be analyzed, but rather *the very existence of the film itself*. The concentration on the aspects of the rally and some of its obvious ideological tropes remains secondary to the more pressing notion that the media artifact is produced by a woman within an ideological context that is anti-woman: It is precisely a film made both within and about ideology. This is not to diminish the aesthetic relevance of the film in terms of its form and content. Rather, this aesthetic relevance further complicates this pressing question. Devereaux writes: “according to sophisticated formalism, *Triumph of the Will* shouldn’t cause any problem at all.” (245) Riefenstahl’s achievement can thus be viewed as doubly astounding: First, it is an achievement of sophisticated formalism, that is to say, a recognized aesthetic masterpiece. Secondly, the film is recognized as an aesthetic masterpiece despite its profoundly ideological content. This is yet another paradox of the film: *Triumph*

remains compelling precisely because the aesthetic genius of Riefenstahl is clear, an aesthetic genius that demonstrates itself both through the purely ideological context of the film and at the same time over against the controversy of the film's content.

It is precisely, however, the ideological nature of the film - as opposed to questions of its clear aesthetic genius - that makes the film so paradoxical. If *Triumph* was merely notable for its exemplary "sophisticated formalism", as Devereaux phrases it, the Riefenstahl case would not be so contentious. Rather, *Triumph* is problematic because a woman has created an ideological film that is also a work of art. This is problematic, insofar as Nazi Germany remained a thoroughly patriarchal society. Kitchen writes: "Under ideal circumstances [women] were to be confined to the home as mothers of radically sound children, all in the interests of eugenics, racial politics, and preparation for war." (288) Following Kitchen, while women may have possessed specifically delineated roles in Nazi society, it is nonetheless clear that the precise meaning of gender as ideology was determined by a more dominant ideological trope of race as ideology. This does not suggest that gender was not conceived from an ideological viewpoint in the Nazi world-view, but rather that gender as ideology was thought through the grounding notion of race as ideology. As such, gender remains radically ideological in Nazi Germany, according to the possibilities afforded to women through an underlying racial ideology.

Such a clear delineation of women's roles shows why Riefenstahl's directorial position remains a point of controversy: Riefenstahl was given a place of power in a society that was lucidly oppressive to women. This is why Baer suggests that Riefenstahl "has proved consistently vexing for both German film studies and feminist film theory." (159) The problem thus becomes how to reconcile this apparent paradox. As Foell notes, while this paradox presents a particular challenge for feminist theory, such a challenge can nevertheless perhaps be explained in terms of Riefenstahl's historical reception: "As exasperating and culpable as Riefenstahl may be, feminist scholarship must ask whether it is an accident that a female film pioneer has become the popular personification of the term "fascist aesthetics," when many

male artists who actively and knowingly collaborated with the Third Reich have not been similarly targeted.” (149) Foell offers a compelling point: Despite the contributions of male artists during the Nazi period, it is Riefenstahl’s art in particular that has been retroactively described as archetypical of fascist aesthetics. In other words, the critical views to Riefenstahl can be understood as a continuation of a patriarchal, non-feminist appropriation of historiography, in which the woman is blamed as the “bad Other” by a patriarchal ideology.

While Foell’s thesis is intriguing in terms of questions of the reception of Riefenstahl, it cannot address questions regarding the existence of *Triumph* as media artifact in itself. From this perspective, the question is not who is the archetypical representative of fascist aesthetics, but rather the significance of the film itself as a radical aesthetic celebration of Nazi ideology made from the perspective of a woman. There thus remains a resolute tension surrounding *Triumph*, and this is why Riefenstahl remains such a controversial figure within feminist discourse. Consider, for example, Susan Sontag’s text “Fascinating Feminism”, in which the author attempts to move against any rehabilitations (such as Foell’s) of Riefenstahl as a victim of patriarchal oppression. Sontag writes that Riefenstahl “made *Triumph of the Will* with unlimited faculties and unstinting official cooperation (there was never any struggle between the filmmaker and the German minister of propaganda). Indeed Riefenstahl was...in on the planning of the rally – which was from the start conceived as the set of a film spectacle.” What Sontag thus emphasizes is the complicity of Riefenstahl with the dominant ideology. That she had “unlimited facilities” for the making of the film demonstrates that Riefenstahl had no quarrels with the governing ideology: Riefenstahl was precisely granted such unlimited power to the extent that the Nazi government was aware that she was supportive of their ideology. That Riefenstahl was also involved in the planning of the rally that is *Triumph*’s focus emphasizes that she was not merely an artistic observer of National Socialist ideological content, but rather that she contributed to the creation of this content itself: in this regard, the film is not only a documentary, but achieves a certain fictional

status insofar as the director aids in the constitution of the subject of her study. It is thus this particular tenuous position that Sontag identifies that makes the task of subsequent feminist interpreters of Riefenstahl all the more difficult. What is gleaned from such disparate approaches to Riefenstahl – i.e., as ideological collaborator or as victim of the continued oppressive patriarch society that proclaims her exemplary of fascist aesthetics – is certainly indicative of precisely the “vexing” nature of the Riefenstahl case from the perspective of feminist theory. In this regard, however, the case of *Triumph* serves as an endorsement of feminist theory, as the different views of Riefenstahl are symptomatic of the heterogeneity of feminist theory itself, that is, its possibility to provide disparate viewpoints on a single artifact. In other words, it shows that feminist theory is not merely a linear form of discourse. As Projansky writes in her criticism of linear views of feminism, as demonstrated in the notion of “postfeminism”, the very existence of postfeminism “defines feminism as having followed along a linear historical trajectory.” (70) What is important about Projansky’s definition and rejection of such linearity is that feminist theory must remain dynamic since ideology is ever-present across historical periods and especially in paradoxical cases such as that of Riefenstahl’s: the case of Riefenstahl demonstrates feminist theory’s radicality insofar as it can provide multiple viewpoints on a specific object, as opposed to signifying a mere linear viewpoint on the issue.

Yet Sontag’s contention remains that feminist theory, despite its heterogeneity, must recognize Riefenstahl’s guilt in the creation of the film, even though she was a woman. Sontag’s argument is that although a female director made *Triumph*, the trope of “gender as ideology” central to the Nazi discourse remains intact: insofar as Riefenstahl produced ideology, she is thus complicit with the very notion of gender as ideology. However, Sontag’s argument at this point can be viewed as not entirely satisfactory, as Riefenstahl was chosen as director of the films not because of her gender – rather her very gender was inconsequential in the selection of the director – she was selected because she was viewed as a considerable talent. In essence, the paradox of Riefenstahl is that on the one hand, the fact that a female director made

*Triumph of the Will* prima facie attests to a non-gender and non-ideological position within the Nazi ideology – her pure talent secured her the role of director and thus had nothing to do with gender and ideology – on the other hand, Riefenstahl nonetheless produced a purely ideological film. Sontag explains away this paradox as follows: “Riefenstahl was precisely the only German filmmaker who was not responsible to the Film Office (Reichsfilmkammer) of Goebbels’s ministry of propaganda.” Thus, Riefenstahl could be fully trusted to produce an ideological narrative, insofar as she completely assumed the Nazi ideological perspective: at the same time, this ideological perspective was detrimental to women. The underlying current of Sontag’s text is that Riefenstahl was a firm believer in Nazi ideology.

Certainly, one of the possible resolutions to this paradox is that Nazi ideology, as mentioned, was not based on gender as ideology, but rather emphasized race as ideology. In other words, the gender roles of women in Nazi Germany were symptomatic of the racial ideology: gender was not the focus of this ideology. Thus, it was possible for Riefenstahl to produce an artifact such as *Triumph* to the extent that she remained complicit with race as ideology. That is, Riefenstahl would seem to represent the crucial racial German ideal, namely, that of the autonomous *ubermensch*, who also happens to be a woman: to the extent that in Nazi Germany race as ideology was the dominant ideological trope, gender as ideology followed from this position. Riefenstahl could be an anomaly in this hierarchy, a woman assigned to a prominent position, only inasmuch as she maintained the dominant ideology of race as ideology. This does not however diminish the underlying patriarchal ideology that was in conjunction with the racial ideology: Riefenstahl has been described as “a woman who had created representation for an oppressive patriarchal system.” (McCabe, 114) Riefenstahl thus at first glance seems to transcend gender as ideology, according to the very fact of her status as woman director within a patriarchal ideology; yet at the same time she promoted this very ideology. The anomaly of this case corresponds to the difficult and tortured reception

of her work in feminist theory, a case that remains continually stuck between rehabilitations of Riefenstahl and views such as Sontag's and McCabe's.

There remain difficulties, however, in trying to situate Riefenstahl and *Triumph* outside of ideology: in one sense, the rehabilitations of Riefenstahl undermine the ubiquity of ideology, and recalls one of the crucial theses of Slavoj Žižek: "the possible end of ideology is an ideological idea par excellence." (2) What Žižek means is that precisely at the moment when one believes they are outside of ideology, ideology rears back in its strongest form. Ideology functions at its best precisely when its delineations are undetected, when one does not know that they are being ideological, that is, that they are operating according to a particular social construct. That Riefenstahl remained outside of ideology to the extent that she was a woman making films in a patriarchal society does not mean that she somehow transcended this patriarchy, but rather that she remained radically within the grips of this ideology. Rich's defense of Riefenstahl emphasizes precisely this point: "it is impossible not to recognize and mourn the pressures that drive token women to compromise their sisters and to serve misogynist and anti-human values." (Rich, 37) The contradictory phenomenon of a female director producing films in a patriarchal society must be viewed as a product of the patriarchal society itself and the ubiquity of ideology.

It is significant to note that in contrast to this view of the ubiquity of ideology, Riefenstahl maintained her autonomy in the film's creation: "Just as the film is still to be seen today, it came into being from out of my imagination alone." (Rentschler, 312) Yet Riefenstahl's own view of her art betrays exactly how ideology works according to the Žižekian definition: the point when one thinks they are completely out of ideology, when a work is "completely of one's own imagination" is when ideology is at its most powerful. This is precisely because the presuppositions that ideology thrives on remain unmasked: autonomy is viewed as autonomy when it is really a total heteronomy. Riefenstahl is not merely an autonomous producer of exquisite aesthetic visions; this is one of the myths that ideology produces. The presence of the social construct remains intact, and one can be sure that this

construct is present acutely in the moments when its presence is denied. This denial is equivalent to the denial that ideology exists.

This denial is essentially a double denial in the case of Riefenstahl, insofar as she denies being within ideology, which essentially means that she denies her status as a woman within this ideology. In other words, this artifact is precisely compelling to a feminist analysis because here it is not so much the content of the film that poses the difficult questions of analysis: characterizations of gender as ideology are not essential to the content of the film (although they are part of it), it is the production of ideology itself that must be viewed in terms of gender. This seems at first glance to reverse the claim that ideology is produced by gender; here is a case where a woman is producing ideology. The feminist response to this reversal however is clear and combines two apparently contradictory notions. On the one hand, in Riefenstahl's work she is essentially not occupying the position of gender, that is, she has no gender: in the creation of the film, she is producing ideology. On the other hand, she remains within gender because she is embroiled in ideology itself – ideology can be produced on all levels – ideology can produce gender roles in the relations of husband to wife, of mother to child, etc. The key to the paradox from a feminist perspective is to view Riefenstahl's apparent freedom from patriarchy as demonstrated in her creation of *Triumph* as rather evincing the total presence of ideology: even her freedom is thoroughly ideological. This is demonstrated most clearly in the ideological nature of *Triumph* itself. Accordingly, even Riefenstahl's directorial freedom is ideological, that is, even amidst her apparent autonomy, this autonomy was a false autonomy, insofar as it was created by an ideology. Riefenstahl could only become a free director by giving her very freedom over to ideology: this is a case of non-freedom and ideology at its strongest.

This is not to subtract from the aesthetic genius of Riefenstahl's work. Rather it is to demonstrate, much as Rich noted, the continued presence of ideology. The tragic moment of Riefenstahl is that she can only break from the constraints of gender as ideology insofar as she would herself produce ideology. This is what

makes the case of *Triumph* so compelling for feminist theory: what is at stake in this media artifact is not merely the simple analysis of content, in order to delineate examples of gender as ideology and a patriarchal social construct. Rather, it is the existence of the film itself that shows the pervasiveness of ideology: even in the moments when a woman may be considered an autonomous director, ideology is present, thus demonstrating the ubiquity of the notion of gender as ideology. Simultaneously, however, according to this very ubiquity, a media artifact such as *Triumph* also demonstrates the necessity of feminist theory: to the extent that ideology is ubiquitous, feminist theory must also remain present in the form of a critical resistance. Deveraux: *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.

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