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*Battleship Potemkin* 
and *Triumph of the Will* 

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Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (Germany, 1935), at one level a documentary record of the 1934 Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg, is known as one of the lethal ideological weapons associated with Hitler’s authoritarian political régime. The film uses lyrical everyday imagery to give a realistic form to the world presented by inter-cutting Nazi Socialist imagery with medieval art forms, images of festivity, and a human touch: a woman with mouth and eyes agape, a child, a cat, and smoke at dawn. The film was unusually successful in shaping national and international opinion because of its naturalistic way of reporting actuality. Marshalling the social memory and collective perception of the German nation, the film subsequently generated the greatest moral controversy in cinema history over the purpose and nature of so-called ‘documentary’ cinema.
Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (USSR, 1925), on the other hand, reconstructs through the power of dramatic montage an episode in the 1905 Black Sea mutiny which includes the notorious massacre of civilians on the Odessa Steps. Both films were designed as national propaganda. *Potemkin* conceived as part of a cycle of films celebrating, in the wake of the successful Russian Revolution of 1917, the 20th anniversary of the earlier, failed Revolution. *Potemkin* is clearly and directly agitational in form and content, *Triumph* is constructed to support a national political agitation through its surface character of tranquility.

Both films distort historical events to create specific ideological meanings. Their acclaimed ‘realism’ creates a popular ideological cinema which aims to transmit political verities, but which also transcends mere State ideology through film form. Unlike *Potemkin*, *Triumph of the Will* claims to report the historical truth by using actual, incontestable footage in strict chronological order. The result is an overwhelming emotional spectacle of National Socialist imagery that mixes the concepts of ideology with mythology to project Hitler’s singular, charismatic persona.

**The Spectacle of Nazi Propaganda: Triumph of the Will**

*Triumph of the Will* opens with assuring sequences that follow a slow, mystical rhythm over subdued music and alternate between the shots of Hitler’s plane and the columns of faithful followers in the ancient city. The sequence reflects Hitler’s promise to rebuild Germany under his wing as the shadow of his lone plane touches the city. The shadow of this iconic German ‘eagle’ becomes a focal point as the whole of the ancient city breathlessly peers upwards
to their saviour as he gazes down through the skies to reassert his pledge of recovery and renovation. This sequence is evidence of Hitler’s appeal as he comes to stir up ancient Nuremberg with his dynamic promise to launch a Third German Empire. While the crowds hail his arrival, the third-person visual narrative suddenly shifts to Hitler’s point-of-view as he reviews the parade. This scene focuses on serenity and apparent peace.

*Battleship Potemkin* contains an inter-title - “*Revolution is the only lawful, equal, effectual war*” - which refers us to an external authority, Lenin, whereas in *Triumph of the Will*, we witness unlimited fascination with a present hero who can be acknowledged in the flesh. Several low-angle shots of Nazi symbols against the sky reflect the prioritisation of war aims in the lives of the masses; metaphorically, they also reflect the higher position of the Nazi leaders and a lower position for the people of the metropolis. The ‘will’ of the individual is subsumed into a greater ‘will’ as the nation fulfils Hitler’s ambition to unite Germany for all time. The mood of collective heroism is similar to that of *Potemkin*, but has a greater emotional and psychological impact. Their difference lies in the covert turbulence which lies under the controlled calm of *Triumph of the Will*.

Riefenstahl’s manipulation of standard cinematic techniques transforms soldiers, volunteer workers, the ancient city and its inhabitants, the party leaders, and the decorated officers into a singular totality; only the saviour figure is singled out as an individual. The simplification of film form leaves behind a complex sweeping statement of the content: the unified body of men, women, and children is dedicated to the cause. Their happiness rests on Hitler’s promise to rise above the
humiliation of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and to resurrect a glorious nation.

The symbolic imagery of the Teutonic, with its fire and smoke as well as thousands of flickering torches, is used to celebrate the union of earthly people with the Führer. Shots of the eagle and the swastika linger before we switch to a low-angle shot of marchers as they head up into the sky. The close shots of Nazi emblems repeatedly emerging symbolise the passion for the insistent and reliable pomp of Nazism; the common people simply come and go. All, including Hitler, seem to be possessed by a preoccupation with symbolism and hierarchy.

Like Battleship Potemkin, Triumph of the Will uses precise editing to display compositional movements with flawless rhythm and continuity in terms of light and formal geometry within the mise-en-scène. Riefenstahl maintains the documentary tradition yet her subjective vision dissolves the distinctions between reality and fantasy. Triumph of the Will brings together the mobile cinematic techniques of Griffith and Gance, and Eisenstein’s editing techniques, with what Riefenstahl referred to as “Herr Gaede’s sound tables and the Steenbeck table technique” to set the tone of the film through the various subdivisions of its five major segments.¹

The sequences covering Hitler’s Arrival and the Night Rally establish Germany’s fascination with the Fuhrer and his Party. The City Awakening, Youth Encampment, Folk Parade, and Congress Opening sequences strengthen the aura of fascination and comfort associated with Hitler. The coverage of the Labor Corps Review and Lutze’s address to the S.A. confirms the emotional impact of the support for Hitler and the settlement of issues pertaining to the Röhm affair. The
Hitler Youth Rally, the Review of the Army, and Night Rally of Political Leaders sequences authenticate the unlimited support for Hitler’s consolidation of executive authority, while the S.A., S.S., N.S.D.A.P. reviews, Hitler’s address and the Closing Rally sequences enhance the psychological appeal of a singular national totality.

**Re-Making History: Battleship Potemkin**

By contrast with the structure of *Triumph of the Will*, *Battleship Potemkin* presents itself as a take on the traditional five-act drama. In ‘Men and Maggots’ sailors angrily protest against rotten meat in a sequence hinting at male impotence through extreme violence and uncompleted action as a frustrated young sailor smashes the same plate twice against a table²; *Triumph of the Will*, by contrast, maintains a sense of powerful male muscularity, self-control and composure throughout.

In the second segment, ‘Drama on the Quarterdeck’, great psychological tension is created when marines are summoned to execute the protestors, and the mutiny begins. Here wide shots are juxtaposed with extreme close-ups as the ship’s old, white-bearded priest pompously prays for the condemned. This inter-cutting between the priest tapping his palm with a crucifix and a junior officer nervously patting the handle of his sword hints at tensions between Church and State in Tsarist Russia, just as Riefenstahl later renders a tension in the German case.

It also points to an oppressive parallel between the crucifix and sword as the former eventually is left stuck in the deck when the priest is slain. This sequence creates extreme psychological tension through the rapid inter-cutting of shots
of varying scales and lengths in a tonal montage. This emotional peak ends in a trough of sombre nocturnal calm. Compared to this treatment, in *Triumph of the Will* the psychological tension is linked to a mythological aura and a determinate ideology of war.

The third segment of *Battleship Potemkin*, ‘An Appeal from the Dead’, sees the dead sailor Vakulinchuk lying in state on the harbour mole. Eisenstein intercuts shots of the harbour with studies of mourners as they file endlessly across the breakwater, in the luminous haze of the fog, in an expression of solidarity between the sailors and the townsfolk. The famous sequence which follows on the Odessa Steps, with the dreadful massacre of citizens by Tsarist troops, is perhaps the most powerful montage sequence in the history of cinema. The sequence embraces the mechanical and primitive temporal lengths of metric montage, involving the rhythmic montage of soldiers’ feet descending the stairs, in murderous martial unison, to create a high degree of “contrapuntal tension”.

Riefenstahl uses similar editing techniques to achieve a natural effect while reconstructing the historical truth. In a montage of close shots of the churning, plunging pistons, rotating camshafts, waves, battleships, squadron, canons at the port, and the huge muzzle canon of the ‘Potemkin’ we conclude with the climactic and eventually triumphal ‘Meeting the Squadron’ sequence, where the ‘Potemkin’ waits to know if she will be joined in solidarity by other vessels. Reversing the truth of history, the mutiny is represented as successful.
Dialectical Montage

In *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl explores the philosophy of Eisenstein’s dialectical montage. According to this theory, a montage sequence contains a montage cell or a thesis in juxtaposition to its opposing visual content or antithesis that “*produces a synthesis that in turn becomes the thesis of a new dialectic*”; the visual opposition involves cognitive assumptions on viewer’s part and relates to a conflict of ideas, “*linear directions, planes, volumes, or lighting*” that lead the viewer to simultaneously, but not sequentially, perceive the meaning of the film.\(^4\) This dialectic functions at the psychological level and does not necessarily follow the technique of narrative logic. The outcome is a highly developed form of cinematic rhetoric which transcends the mere recording of an event.

According to Cook, Eisenstein believed that “*This dialectic is a way of looking at human history and experience as a perpetual conflict in which a force collides with a counter force*.\(^5\) In *Triumph of the Will* the dialectic takes the form of alternations throughout the film between Hitler and his followers as he inspires and is inspired by them, and they take inspiration from him whilst in return fuelling his will to power. In the case of Riefenstahl this recurring pattern of thesis and antithesis in fact largely maintains the hierarchy of narrative form through shots and counter-shots, directional high-angle shots of the leader and low-angle shots of his followers.

The dialectic of *Potemkin* creates a direct physical collision of thesis (victims) and antithesis (Tsarist troops), whereas *Triumph of the Will* defines the potential of perpetual human
conflict in history through a conceptual collision of determinate ideologies. In *Triumph of the Will*, the thesis (Hitler) and antithesis (followers) synthesise an overtonal montage reflecting a Nazi ideology of war. The threat of a German unison under Hitler is far greater than the collective heroism of *Potemkin* as the mythology of the saviour rules the collective perceptions of the mob.

*Triumph of the Will* overcomes smaller disagreements pertaining to Röhm in favour of a collective will to fight the greater disagreement with the Allies and with former German leaders. Where *Potemkin* is a depiction of physical trauma, *Triumph of the Will* reflects the determination to physically combat the psychological trauma of a nation. *Potemkin* powerfully mirrors the weak moments of human tragedy, whereas *Triumph of the Will* reflects the powerful fanaticism of a cherished will as German men, women, and children happily embrace the ideology of war.

In *Potemkin*, child plus mouth equals scream; in *Triumph of the Will*, child plus mouth equals a motto. In the first a woman with a mouth agape is expressing shock, in the second a fascination with Hitler, and his racism and anti-Semitism. In the first, the thesis and antithesis forces render a direct physical collision of protagonists and antagonists as they move towards each other. In the second, the thesis and antithesis movements of the saviour and his followers fuse together in a mutual cause.

**Trauma and Resolution**

The first materialises the physical, psychological, and intellectual trauma of a desperate conflict while the second clearly aims at rising above these traumas through its
unlimited ‘will’. In the first, the militia follows the fleeing citizens while some plead and protest. In the second, the people come forward to express absolute unanimity with the State and the military. The first cries out against agony, whilst the second cries to blissfully embrace agony. The first is a story of direct local action and reaction, whilst the second is the story of a greater national reaction against external forces. The first is depiction of chaos, the second an organised determination.

In *Triumph of the Will*, Ruttmann’s opening titles visually follow Eisenstein’s metric montage pattern in juxtaposition to an aural tonal montage. The metric montage begins with ‘On September 5, 1934’ and develops in a series of titles. Underneath the metric montage, the aural tonal montage develops from mournful notes to a triumphant tone as the title ‘19 Months after the Beginning of Germany’s Rebirth’ appears. This difference in visual and aural montages creates a new kind of collision and a greater ‘overtonal’ montage.

The film follows an up-and-down pattern from the opening to the closing sequences, for example, the crowd hailing Hitler’s arrival (peak) and the city awakening (trough). The most important peak in the film captures a transformation in Hitler’s character; his calm and composed persona gives way to that of an agitated figure waiting to resume his speech during the closing rally. Hitler asserts his agenda: “The best of the German race, in proud self-confidence, have courageously and boldly claimed the leadership of the Reich and Nation.” A reaction shot of the Nazi leaders confirms their assurance of the claim. The film ends with a long shot of the crowd enthusiastically singing the *Horst Wessel Lied*, and a huge swastika.
Riefenstahl develops the film’s structure around National Socialist imagery, streamers and flags bearing the swastika symbol, the faithful soldiers and volunteer workers, and the decorated Nazi leaders. These images are edited in the form of an overtonal montage to create an idyllic impact, reflecting, what Rollins refers to as an “inborn love of regimentation and harsh discipline”.

Hitler wanted active bodies with passive brains to hail him and follow his commands. The desired kinetic and kinaesthetic vigour is borne in the choreography of rhythmic images: speeches by Nazi leaders, their names beaming through the symbolic darkness of the screen, marching men, swastikas, German eagles, crowds.

The intense emotional impact combines with the sublimely romantic, the overtonal with the kinaesthetic, through anatomical compositions of individual bodies in movement and the collective motion of the unified body of the German people. Riefenstahl creates a concise structure heavily relying on psychological stimulation for achieving defined goals. The Nazi movement was both a political movement and also a psychological movement to emotionally involve Germans in the drama of war. Following the formal if not the political model of Battleship Potemkin, Triumph of the Will also controls the physical and emotional conduct of its viewers through direct physical and emotional sensations.
Notes and References


3 Ibid., p. 150.


5 Ibid., p. 148.