

“I compose the Party Rally...”: The Role of Music in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will**

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I. Propaganda Film or Documentary?

Germany, September 1934: The National Socialists have been in power for about a year and a half and once again Nuremberg serves as the arena in which they display their power. The “Reich Party Rally of Unity and Strength (*Reichsparteitag der Einheit und Stärke*)” takes place in Nuremberg from September fourth to the tenth. At great expense—financial and personal—a young director heads the effort to capture the spectacle cinematically. The result, the *Documentary of the Reich Party Rally of 1934*, or *Triumph of the Will*, to use its more familiar title, reaches German movie theatres in 1935.¹ It receives the *National Film Prize*, the prize for best documentary at the film festivals in Venice, and is honored with the gold medal at the world exhibition in Paris in 1937. Today, in Germany, public screening of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* is prohibited and many cinematographers regard it as the “best propaganda film of all times.”²

After the war, the dubious role fell to *Triumph of the Will* of serving as a repository of footage for documentaries about the Third Reich. This is hardly surprising as the film was itself a documentary. Growing accusations against Leni Riefenstahl for her alleged cooperation with the Nazi regime cited *Triumph of the Will* as primary proof. This too is hardly surprising as the film was first used as propaganda.

But, until her death, Riefenstahl repeatedly disputed having ever made a propaganda film. She claimed that *Triumph of the Will*, along with her other two films of Party meetings, *Sieg des Glaubens* (1933) and *Tag der Freiheit* (1935), simply depict “real events on film, without alteration.”³ The Party rally was already there; she was simply assigned the task of capturing it on film. Thus, Riefenstahl maintained, her films were not propaganda but documentaries.

It is certainly true that almost all elements in *Triumph of the Will* were recorded during the week-long rally.⁴ But the actual event was already in itself propaganda. The Reich Party meetings of

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¹ Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*, special edition, Synapse Films, 2001, DVD. Time code 00:01:51.

² Ray Müller, *Die Macht der Bilder*, Omega Film GmbH/Nomad Films, 1993, Video-cassette. Time code 1:04:45.

³ Leni Riefenstahl, *Memoiren* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen GmbH, 2000), 255.

⁴ Some scenes were re-recorded in a studio, such as the speech of Julius Streicher at the inaugural conference. What and how much was reenacted in addition is still debatable. (see footnote 29 in Lutz Kinkel, *Die Scheinwerferin. Leni Riefenstahl und das “Dritte Reich”* (Hamburg, Germany: Europa Verlag, 2002), 75.

the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei) were purely ceremonial: no political decisions were made, representatives elected, nor were programs discussed. Instead, they consisted of roll calls, parades, and speeches, all transpiring against the background of a swastika bedecked Nuremberg. Albert Speer had designed and built gigantic structures exclusively for the rally filmed by Riefenstahl. In his autobiography, Speer calls the chapter pertaining to these Party Meetings *Gebaute Megalomanie* (Constructed Megalomania).⁵

In an interview with the *Magdeburger Tageszeitung* of December 12, 1935, Riefenstahl stated with regard to *Triumph of the Will* that the goal was “to allow the image to express itself more strongly than it did in reality.”⁶ This certainly reveals the intention to underline the propagandistic nature of the event and to go beyond simply capturing reality. Furthermore, *Triumph of the Will* was conceived as a *Hitlerfilm*.⁷ In no other movie of the Third Reich era is Hitler seen more frequently than *Triumph of the Will*—a fact that was even used for advertising purposes in movie theatres.⁸ Martin Loiperdinger has determined that about a third of the film footage is devoted to Hitler and that his voice is heard in two thirds of the soundtrack, thereby making Hitler the main protagonist.⁹

Thus, Riefenstahl’s goal lay not simply in amplifying the effect of the rally, but rather in focusing with particular care on the figure of the “Führer.” With respect to this, she always used the term “artistic treatment.”¹⁰ *Triumph of the Will* was therefore never meant to be a neutral document that relayed the events of the rally without bias—far from it. Georg Seesselen has quite eloquently commented on the conflicting statements made by Riefenstahl: “She summons the artist’s privilege to rise above reality, but also refuses the responsibility of the artist by posing as a mere messenger.”¹¹ Contrary to Riefenstahl’s assertions, *Triumph of the Will* was certainly conceived as a propaganda film, achieving its end through artistic treatment of documentary material.

Since the mid-eighties German scholars have published a number of articles dealing with *Triumph of the Will*—only the role of music in the film has been neglected. The reason for this quickly becomes apparent when film scholars are asked: they argue they would rather leave the matter to the experts, namely musicologists. Martin Loiperdinger, for example, has noted, “the use of music [...] demands its own musicological analysis.”¹²

However, an all-encompassing analysis is still missing today. The only publication focused on the music of *Triumph of the Will* is a biography of the composer who scored the film, Herbert

⁵ Albert Speer, *Erinnerungen*, 2nd Ed (Frankfurt, Germany: Ullstein GmbH, 1969), 63.

⁶ Citation in Martin Loiperdinger, *Rituale der Mobilmachung. Der Parteitagfilm “Triumph des Willens” Von Leni Riefenstahl* (Obladen: Leske und Budrich, 1987), 59.

⁷ The term originates from a journal entry of Goebbels on May 17, 1933. In the meantime, the term has become common in relation to *Triumph des Willens*.

⁸ “[...] Never have we seen the face of our Führer so closely, never have we been allowed to study his features so completely, never have we looked into his eyes so much.” *Völkischer Beobachter, Berlin*. (March 29, 1935). Cited in Loiperdinger, *Rituale*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰ Leni Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films* (Munich, Germany: Franz Eher Nachf. GmbH, 1935), 12.

¹¹ Georg Seesselen, “Blut und Glamour,” in *Filmmuseum Potsdam*, ed. Leni Riefenstahl (Berlin: Henschel, 1999), 192-213.

¹² Loiperdinger, *Rituale*, 58.

Windt.¹³ At first glance, his compositions stand in the foreground of *Triumph of the Will*; however, they account for no more than a fifth of the total music in the film. In fact, the great majority of music consists of marches and (battle) songs, which may have been too “obvious” as to demand the attention of musicologists.¹⁴

II. Rhetoric in Film

Martin Loiperdinger has thoroughly analyzed the propagandistic objective and method of *Triumph des Willens (TdW)* in his work *Rituale der Mobilmachung (Rituals in Mobilization)*. “Mobilization” should not be interpreted as meaning physical deployment for battle; rather, it connotes “spiritual mobilization” and refers to the psychological preparation and even rallying of the population for the coming war. “It is about inner readiness for sacrifice, including one’s own life.”¹⁵ The prerequisite for achieving this self-sacrificing mindset is primarily the readiness for unconditional obedience—obedience for the “political abstraction of Germany,” iconized by the swastika and embodied in the absolutist executive power of Adolf Hitler.¹⁶ According to Loiperdinger, *TdW* achieves this in three stages of mobilization: ideology, myth, and finally, ritual.

Under “ideology” he cites “a catalog of beliefs pertaining to race, nationhood, and the struggle for existence.”¹⁷ Possible entries in this catalog, for example, would be “To sacrifice one’s life for fatherland and the Führer is the highest achievement” or “The Führer above all.”¹⁸

The moral justification of ideology is located in “Myth.” One can mention the “Horst Wessel-Myth” as an example of a sacrifice of life: SA-militiaman Horst Wessel was fatally shot in the so-called *Kampfzeit der Bewegung (Warring times of the movement)* during the Weimar Republic, and was turned into a martyr by the National Socialists. Similarly, the Führer-myth, the elevation of Hitler to an “earthly Messiah” became the validation for his ascension to absolute power.¹⁹

Ideology and myth alone, however, are not sufficient to transmit a propagandistic message to the public. According to Loiperdinger, this is the central role of “ritual.” He interprets the term as a combination of two definitions by Erving Goffmann (1974) and Murray Edelman (1976). First, ritual is characterized by engaging all participants in “common motor activity” that offers a common ideological point of view.²⁰ Second, introducing Goffmann’s conception, ritual also involves subjugating the participants to a higher power, resulting in “reverence.”²¹

Deployments, parades, roll calls—*TdW* is inundated with ritualistic actions that are distinctive for their common motor activities. The way in which these rituals function is quite plain, for a

¹³ Volker Reimar, *“Von oben sehr erwünscht”- Die Filmmusik Herbert Windts im NS-Propagandafilm* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2003).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57. See footnote 228

¹⁵ Loiperdinger, *Rituale*, 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁸ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitagfilms*, 11.

¹⁹ Loiperdinger, *Rituale der Mobilmachung*, 148.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*

person demonstrates his investment in the occasion simply by participating. Someone who goes to church on Sunday signals that he is a Christian and that he believes in the doctrines of Christianity; thus, those who participate in a roll call before Hitler demonstrate to the world that they have been subordinated to the power of the “Führer.”

The aspect of conformity in *TdW* also manifests itself in the dispersal of roles amongst participants: The only person who has a clearly defined individual role is Hitler, his role being “Führer.”²² All others blur into a gigantic mass of people, the only differentiating factor being that some wear uniforms and some do not. Loiperdinger designates the uniformed group as standing in for the “Party” while persons out of uniform represent the “People.” This distinction becomes very clear in Hitler’s closing speech: “The ultimate goal must be that all decent Germans become National Socialists. Only the best National Socialists are Comrades in the Party.”²³ Through this statement, the ritual gains a power of persuasion that is hard to ignore: “Decent Germans,” who are represented by people in civilian clothing, are the audience to the ritual proceedings of the uniformed “Party Members.” Hence participation in the ritual is the privilege of an elite. Thus, the only way to rise above the mass of German people, to which one already belongs through birth, is to become part of this elite. The unconditional surrender to Hitler offers the individual social advancement.

Even more than these implicit messages, carefully planned cinematography entices the film-viewing public, drawing them into the ritual. The geometric shapes formed by the filmed masses, the rhythm of the cuts, camera angles that were unusual for the time, and especially tracking shots—everything is perfectly coordinated to depict the ritual as an aesthetically pleasing object. These production choices are so effective that they still embody the image of National Socialism and fascinate us even today.²⁴

III. The Music

The role of music in this carefully polished production has mostly gone unexplored. But even a cursory examination of the soundtrack reveals that the meaning of musical elements in *TdW* cannot be viewed as trivial: although the cinematic medium was still new, it was highly unusual that commentary should be completely lacking from the “documentary” about a Party event. The only sound that enhanced, or in this case substituted, for the so-called “voice-over,” and thus was in the position to comment acoustically on the events on screen, was music.

The suspicion that music was meant to function as a “commentator” is strengthened by the fact that it filled an important role even in the conceptual stage of the film—a role of equal importance to the visual. For Riefenstahl, the moviegoer is “listener and spectator.”²⁵ In one instance, she comments specifically on her Olympia movies: “Is the image strong? The sound may

²² Ibid., 64ff.

²³ *Triumph of the Will*, time code 1:44:03.

²⁴ See Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, “*Opa war kein Nazi.*” *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*, ed. Walter H. Pehle (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), 105ff.

²⁵ Ibid.

stay in the background. Is it the sound that is strong? Then the image must be secondary.”²⁶ Apparently, music was far from nominal importance. Rather, it was a necessary ingredient for her cinematic collages. This is not surprising when one considers the director’s background. The actress and director began with a career in dance, which, as she reports, enabled her to have “a better understanding of music.”²⁷ Her mentor was the alpine film specialist Arnold Franck, one of the best-known directors of so-called “filmic films.” This rubric refers to a film-making trend in the 1920s that treated cinematic technique in a manner explicitly parallel to musical composition. Movements and gradations in light and shadow were to match the rhythm and timbre of the soundtrack.²⁸ This technique was defining for *TdW*: “I compose the Party Rally [...] from the plethora of forceful images as they jump towards me from the screen.”²⁹ Given that the director of *TdW* is consistently described as an obsessive perfectionist, one can assume that she had also had her hand in the musical shaping of the soundtrack. An anecdote is revealing in this regard: on occasion, Riefenstahl placed severe strictures on the materials Herbert Windt was allowed to use, which elicited a measure of ambivalent respect from him. Reportedly, in family circles he often described Riefenstahl as a “hysterical goat, but with an uncanny artistic prowess.”³⁰

Windt himself was a student of Franz Schreker and an admirer of Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner. His compositional style is characterized by a strong affinity for a late romantic sound, but is also informed by elements of new music. During the period of the Third Reich, he was a kind of star among film composers. His name was even used on billboards to entice more people to see the films he had scored. He had been part of Riefenstahl’s staff for *Sieg des Glaubens* in 1933. In addition, he wrote music for all her movies after *TdW* with the sole exception of *Tag der Freiheit* (1935). For Windt, the foremost purpose of film music was to “heighten the spiritual meaning of film sequences,” or, in other words, to comment emotionally on the action on screen.³¹ He was very much aware of music’s potential to awaken certain associations and used this extensively in his film compositions.³²

Although he only composed a fraction of the music in *TdW*, it is reasonable to assume that he was actively involved in the selection and implementation of the remaining music. Riefenstahl is unlikely to have relinquished the opinion of a musical professional such as Windt for a film soundtrack that consisted mostly of music. Windt’s presence during post-production, when a long march sequence was added to the sound at the end of the film, is suggestive in this regard.³³

²⁶ Michael Delahaye, “Leni and the Wolf. Interview with Leni Riefenstahl,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* 5 (1966): 54. See citation on p. 36 of Volker Reimar, “Vom Thingspiel zur filmeigenen Musik. Herbert Windt und seine Zusammenarbeit mit Leni Riefenstahl,” *Filmblatt* 21 (2003): 29-38.

²⁷ For more on Riefenstahl’s dance career see p.16ff in Claudia Lenssen, “Leben und Werk,” in *Filmmuseum Potsdam*, ed. Leni Riefenstahl (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1999), 12-117. Also Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl. Die Verführung des Talents* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 2000), 26ff. Riefenstahl, *Memoiren*, 60.

²⁸ See Loiperdinger, *Riefenstahls Parteitagfilme*, 22-25.

²⁹ Leni Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 28.

³⁰ Sibylle Windt in R. Volker, *Von oben sehr erwünscht*, 218. (Interview with Herbert Windt’s daughter from June 4, 1995.)

³¹ Herbert Windt, “Warum Musik im Film?” in Hellmuth von Hase, ed., *Jahrbuch der deutschen Musik* 1943 (Berlin: Gemeinsamer Verlag von Breitkopf und Härtel und Max Hesses Verlag, 1943), 182ff.

³² I am forgoing a more detailed discussion of the biography and compositions of Herbert Windt at this point. For more information refer to the work of Volker (*Von oben sehr erwünscht*).

³³ See Riefenstahl, *Memoiren*, 231.

Musical Material

Altogether, in excess of fifty pieces or motives are used for *TdW*. Roughly eighty percent of those were not originally composed for the film. Because of its widely varied repertoire, the score is a sort of “musical collage.” In general, the music can be divided into three categories. Despite some ambiguity in the definitions, these rough categories nevertheless offer a useful point of departure.

The first category, symphonic music, is thus designated because it is characterized by the use of a big symphony orchestra. This music consists almost exclusively of original film compositions by Windt, who took the opportunity to refine some motives from *Sieg des Glaubens*.³⁴ For *TdW* he adapted his work to Riefenstahl’s rapid cutting technique by using a series of small musical motives (mostly broken triads), which gave him the necessary compositional freedom.

There are only two places in which symphonic music not by Windt is used: the *Horst Wessel Song* appears near the beginning of the film in an orchestral arrangement, having been preceded by variations on the tune.³⁵ The second instance is the so-called *Awaken Chorus* from the prelude to the third act of *Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.³⁶ Riefenstahl demanded the use of the *Awaken Chorus* as well as *Meistersinger von Nürnberg* against Windt’s explicit wishes, attesting to her ability to choose pieces that would evoke certain associations: the *Horst Wessel Song* was the Party Hymn and also a musical representation of the sacrificial myth—indispensable in the context of this movie. The *Awaken Chorus* also carries multiple levels of meaning. Initially, it seems like an appropriate choice simply because its sound accompanies images of awakening Nuremberg in contemplative and peaceful sequences. An analogy is drawn between the opera and the Party meeting. *Meistersinger* then as today was known as the defacto National Socialist opera and by invoking it an initial political connection was created. In addition, Goebbels repeatedly drew a parallel between Wagner’s *Wach Auf* and the “Deutschland Erwache!” slogan, which can be seen as a motto for spiritual mobilization.³⁷ It is already apparent here that the choice of music is made on the basis of its associative potential. Evidence of this is also found in other categories.

The second category is marching music, which constitutes the greatest part of music in *TdW*. As previously shown, it is especially important to make the connection between the individual piece and its thematic references. This is especially true for marches, which were composed for specific NS organizations or occasions, for example the *Leibstandartenmarsch* for the SS-Bodyguards of Adolf Hitler by Ernst Walter Müller-John, or marches from the first half of the 19th-century like the *Königgrätzer Marsch* by Johann Gottfried Piefke.

³⁴ See Volker, *Von oben sehr erwünscht*, 57.

³⁵ *Triumph of the Will*, time code 0:03:03.

³⁶ Measures 16-24 and 44-50. *Triumph of the Will*, time code 0:14:00. Often literature indicates use of “Wagner-Music” in general or even of specific pieces or motives. However, only the segment named above and the conclusion of Gottfried Sonntag’s *Nibelungenmarsch* contain direct citations from Wagner.

³⁷ See Volker, *Von oben sehr erwünscht*, 68.

The third category, songs, encompasses the remaining musical numbers, all of which contain lyrics.³⁸ With only a few exceptions, soldier songs and National Socialist songs dictate the tone of this category.

When considering the music of the film in its entirety, a strong military character becomes apparent, mostly brought about by the plethora of soldier songs and marches. With the aim being spiritual mobilization, the choice of these types of music seems logical and quite successful. However, a look at the associative potential for this music reveals more. The contents of the songs and marches that do not directly relate to National Socialism make reference through lyrics and titles to the Napoleonic wars: *Lützows Wild, Bold Hunt*, *The God Who Made Iron Grow*, or even Beethoven's *March of the York Corps*. This period was meaningful for National Socialism in that it was the first historical moment in which a concrete image of “Germany” was formed. For the first time, German fiefdoms and small states that had previously been at war with another united to expel an overwhelming conquering force: France. In the end, the outcome was successful. By contrast the loss of the First World War, the so-called “dishonor at Versailles,” the demilitarization of the Rheinland, etc., were an unbearable embarrassment for Germany. Thus, the music in *TdW* was not simply militaristic; rather, it expressed a yearning for a militarily powerful “Great Germany.” Here, the choice of musical pieces from the past evokes a “glorious future”—a myth is used specifically to heighten the willingness for mobilization.

The fact that most of the film score consists of marches and that even some songs are heard in a march arrangement can also be interpreted in a propagandistic light. In his article in *MGG* about the march, Achim Hofer explains that its original function lay in “coordinating the lockstep of a marching group” and also to “strengthen courage for battle.”³⁹ Now when one relates this definition to the goals of mobilization, one realizes that they fit together surprisingly well: the coordinating function focuses on the common motor activity of the ritual and thus supports unconditional obedience, the avoidance of any deviation. Strengthening of courage for battle falls in line with a heightened willingness for sacrifice.

In addition, it is evident that one particular strategy is indispensable for this film, whose target audience is the entirety of the German people—cultivating mass appeal. The audience knew the lyrics and melodies to the majority of the marches and songs. The use of such well-known pieces was recommended by the highest authority: “All propaganda has to be colloquial and must be able to adjust its message to the comprehension level of the most limited mind among the target group.”⁴⁰ Even today, the reaction of audiences to the music in *TdW* is astonishing: many hum or even sing along quietly with the songs and marches.⁴¹ It is unlikely that the filmmakers were unaware of this effect at the time. Newspaper articles of that period confirm this, one report about the premiere of *Sieg des Glaubens* noting, “As the last note [of the film] faded away, the audience, which was deeply moved, rose in order to show their solidarity with the Führer and his movement

³⁸ Many of the marches also have lyrics, however, these were usually added later.

³⁹ See p.1668 in Achim Hofer, “Marsch” in *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*, ed. Ludwig Finscher (Sachteil V. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1996), 1667-1682.

⁴⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, edition 405-409 (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1939), 197.

⁴¹ Recorded by the author during a movie showing.

by singing the National Socialist Anthem [*Horst Wessel Song*].”⁴² On this occasion, the audience’s unconditional submission to Hitler is demonstrated through music, by their audible participation in the ritual of the Party Rally through the communal activity of singing.

But in order to make this movie palatable for the masses, close attention was also given to the music on a formal level. First, one notices that all compositions outside of Windt’s oeuvre are in a major key. The somewhat somber minor key is mostly avoided, which could have to do with the title of the film—a “minor Triumph” is somewhat contradictory. If one examines the order of pieces, something astonishing comes to light: with only two exceptions, the pieces that do not fall in the symphonic category are arranged such that each is in a key that is no more than three keys removed from the previous piece along the circle of fifth. An example will serve to illustrate:

... B - E - A - D - G - C - F - B-flat - E-flat - A-flat - D-flat...

If a piece is in C major, the most distant possible keys of the next piece are E-flat major and A major. This strategy would be logical when songs or marches follow rapidly in succession. However, this rule of key selection is also maintained if a speech interrupts for several minutes and a change into a farther removed key area would have posed no problems. In light of the propagandistic intentions, it is surely no coincidence that the method of connecting one scene with the next makes use of the most familiar element in tonal harmony: the cadence. This carefully structured organization once again makes it apparent that music was given a prominent role in the making of the film and that its use was carefully thought through.

Music and Image

How is this music combined with images? One possible approach is to interpret the relationship diegetically. In film studies, a “diegetic sound” is an event in the soundtrack for which the audience perceives the source as being present on screen. A “non-diegetic sound” thus comes from “off-screen.”⁴³

This approach is especially relevant for *TdW* considering, as previously mentioned, the music functions as commentary in this film. From the beginning, the film is imbued with a higher level of authenticity than fictional films because it was designated a documentary of a Party rally. Riefenstahl even promoted the movie publicly by saying that its rendering of the rally was “completely true, completely genuine.”⁴⁴ However, the music is not “completely true”: in her memoirs, Riefenstahl

⁴² Cited in Volker, *Von oben sehr erwünscht*, 50; from *Licht Bild Bühne* (February 12, 1933).

⁴³ See Robert Stam and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 60.

⁴⁴ Cited in Lutz Kinkel, *Die Scheinwerferin. Leni Riefenstahl und das „Dritte Reich“*, Hamburg: Europa Verlag, 2002, 80. “Leni Riefenstahl erzählt...wie der Reichsparteitag-Film entstanden ist” (“Leni Riefenstahl tells...how the Reich’s Party Rally movie was created”). Interview with Leni Riefenstahl in *Ufa-Information* (March 27, 1935).

reports on the extensive over-dubbing for a march sequence at the end of the movie.⁴⁵ This leads to the suspicion that other passages in the film may also have been enhanced by music after filming.

By itself this would not be unusual. In *TdW*, however, it is especially striking because the music is presented as diegetic over long stretches. This includes music from “off-screen,” giving viewers the impression that it was also audible during the Party rally. The presentation of the music is so perfectly coordinated with the images and the original sound that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between sound added in postproduction and sound that existed previously. In addition, there is barely any source material on the creation of the soundtrack. The audience member has no choice but to face the music that is presented with a healthy dose of skepticism regarding its authenticity. However, the movie was (and parts still are) presented to audiences as a “document” rendered “completely true, completely genuine”; dubious though it may be, particular emphasis is placed on its authenticity. It seems that the producers of the film placed immense importance on audiences unreservedly accepting this re-interpretation of the Party rally as a truthful presentation of reality. As I have already mentioned, the attempt to paint a picture of National Socialism that would be widely accepted through *TdW* has been successful up until today.

In essence, three techniques were used to convey diegesis:

1. The most simple and obvious method is also used most frequently: musicians are shown playing the soundtrack.
2. The motion in the picture is almost completely synchronized to the music, which gives the impression that the people on screen are hearing and moving to the music.
3. In general, the filmmakers count on the probability that the audience will accept the material presented to them at face value.

The third point needs further explanation, and an example will serve to illustrate. In a sequence from the middle of the movie, the battle song *Volk ans Gewehr* (*People, to Arms!*) accompanies the beginning of a nightly SA roll call.⁴⁶ The light in this scene is highly diffuse. The darkness is only illuminated by torchlight, and, at first glance, the torchbearers are only recognizable as shadows. The song heightens the almost ritualistic quality of the sequence, and, combined with the lyrics, the viewer could get the impression that some mysterious ceremony is transpiring—a ceremony designed by the SA. But if one examines the frames more closely, it becomes clear that none of the SA-men are moving their lips. The audience is led to think that the men are singing purely by accepting the scene at face value. In fact, it is unclear from the images alone whether any music was sounding at all; it is just as likely that it was drawn from the following sequence, taken during the speech of SA-Head Lutze. Here directorial manipulation successfully combines singing with an indeterminate origin and a filmed sequence.

There are many instances in *TdW* such as this when the critical viewer cannot reach a final decision about the diegetic authenticity of the music. These sequences, however, make the manipulative potential of musical commentary that much clearer.

⁴⁵ Riefenstahl, *Memoiren*, 231.

⁴⁶ *Triumph of the Will*, time code 0:41:22.

In film, rhythm serves as a special link between music and image. The relatively new medium of films with sound presented opportunities to film composers. During the era of silent film, people believed it was futile to write original film music since there were logistical difficulties in having live theatre musicians synchronize image and sound. It was nearly impossible to coordinate musical rhythm and the rhythm of the visual sequences. In the talkie, however, only a single successful recording was necessary, and the perfectly coordinated picture-music combination could be copied and performed many times over.⁴⁷

As noted previously, Leni Riefenstahl was rooted in the tradition of “filmic films,” the goal of which was to compose “rhythmic pictures.” In *TdW* Riefenstahl aimed to portray “the inner rhythm of the actual event.”⁴⁸ Therefore rhythm had an essential meaning for the film. It is also worth mentioning that Riefenstahl cut from image to image in a much higher frequency than was common at the time. She thus created a more rapid rhythmic *tactus* for the image sequences. Almost all musical excerpts, even the symphonic ones, are characterized by a clear rhythm. *Legato*-passages are the single exception. Given her milieu, one can assume that Riefenstahl, a perfectionist, paid particular attention to synchronizing aspects of the movie, strongly shaping the rhythm of both image and sound.

Dramaturgically, all the possibilities of the talkie are exploited; cuts and musical rhythm are synchronized precisely with each another. The aforementioned SA roll call, for example, contains a recording of fireworks that almost seem to be dancing to the rhythm of the accompanying march music.⁴⁹ In another spot, the rhythm is so delicately tweaked that it seems at first coincidental: a military band (seemingly) plays a march arrangement of *The God Who Let Iron Grow* as tribute to Hitler who stands in front of his hotel.⁵⁰ The cuts consistently avoid beats one and three, falling instead on the unaccented fourth beat. One sees images of fire, smoke, flags, and the silhouettes of backlit soldiers—again, an almost ritualistic atmosphere. If Riefenstahl had timed her cuts to the downbeats, the *staccato*-like result would have destroyed this atmosphere. Still, the regularity of the cuts is testimony to a venture strongly governed by rhythm.

The rhythmic combination of image and sound continues throughout the whole film and reaches its climax at the end with a twenty-minute long (!) sequence coined the *Vorbeimarsch* (Passing March).⁵¹ In this section, uniformed members of different Party organizations are seen marching past Hitler. Riefenstahl reports on the sound production of this particular sequence in her memoirs. It was of utmost importance to “get the music to be synchronized with the picture.”⁵² And indeed, it seems as if the troops are marching to the marches of the soundtrack, even though this music was not actually performed at the time. That rhythm forms the connective tissue of the

⁴⁷ See Anselm Kreuzer, *Filmmusik. Geschichte und Analyse*, ed. Renate Möhrmann (Frankfurt a. M.: Verlag Peter Lang, 2001), 59ff.

⁴⁸ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitagfilms*, 12.

⁴⁹ *Triumph of the Will*, time code 0:44:08.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, time code 0:13:01.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, time code 1:16:47. The rhythmic climax towards the finale is also common in other propagandistic events such as the NS-theatre genre “Thingspiel.” See Henning Eichberg and Glen Gladberry, et al., *Massenspiele: NS-Thingspiel, Arbeiterweihespiel und olympisches Zeremoniell*, ed. Günther Holzboog (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977), 59ff.

⁵² Riefenstahl. *Memoiren*. 231.

film, something that is more or less evident throughout, becomes especially clear here: coordinated by a march rhythm, ritual subordination is celebrated. Through the complete synchronization of picture and soundtrack, the “inner rhythm of the actual event” finds its fulfillment in a communal pursuit: guided by music it becomes absolute ritual.

The Staging of the “Führer”

The ideology that spawns these rituals is National Socialism, embodied in the “main protagonist” of *TdW*, Adolf Hitler. In the dramaturgy of the film, it is obvious that this protagonist is given special treatment, including a specific musical characterization. The sequence that follows the opening credits, *Hitler's Arrival*, is one of the best examples.⁵³

At first one sees clouds, shot from an airplane. Eventually they disperse and give way to a view of Nuremberg. Aerial shots of the city follow in which Party troupes are seen already marching. Subsequently, the landing of the airplane is shown, and Hitler disembarks in the company of a few Party officials. A cheering crowd receives him. This is the first time that the images reveal that Hitler was actually on the airplane. However, the music makes this apparent for the audience earlier:

I charged the cameraman with the task of filming from the plane, capturing images of parts of the plane itself, and showing how Nuremberg comes through the clouds, but without revealing who sits inside. I thought that the sequence would make a good transition. [...] And then I got the idea [...] to underlay the shot of the clouds with the *Horst Wessel Song*. In that moment [...] viewers would realize that that plane could only be Hitler's.⁵⁴

The *Horst Wessel Song* has many implications here. First, it is the Party anthem of the National Socialists. It also points towards Horst Wessel's sacrificial myth and thus has a direct connection with spiritual mobilization. Now used as a symbol for the “Führer,” its role in the film is further solidified: in the person of Hitler, all the values of National Socialism are unified. In addition this sequence reveals the special meaning of the *Horst Wessel Song*: it acts as the musical equivalent to Hitler and the swastika, the embodiment and icon of National Socialism respectively.

Although it is performed here by a symphony orchestra in an instrumental arrangement, contemporary viewers would have been aware of the words of the first strophe, which was the part of the song most commonly sung. The last two lines are especially significant and are repeated in the song: “Comrades, killed by the Red Front and by the opposition/ March along in spirit among our ranks.”⁵⁵ Notwithstanding the peculiarities of German grammar, which make it unclear who shot whom, the nod to the sacrificial myth is obvious at this juncture

Taken in its entirety, this introductory sequence immediately presents a theme that is fundamental for the rest of the film: Hitler, the “Earthly Messiah” descends from the heavens to the

⁵³ *Triumph of the Will*, time code 0:02:15.

⁵⁴ Hermann Weigel, “Im Interview mit Leni Riefenstahl,” in *Filmkritik* 188 (1972): 395-433. Cited in Volker, *Von oben sehr erwünscht*, 55.

⁵⁵ “Kameraden, die Rotfront und Reaktion erschossen/ marschier'n im Geist in unsern Rehen mit.”

German people, carrying in his luggage the “good news” about the sacrificial cult for Führer, nation, and fatherland.⁵⁶

As expected, the people in Nuremberg receive him triumphantly. After the opening of the Party Rally, Hitler calls role at the various Party organizations (FAD, HJ, Political leaders, SA, and SS). These respective groups prostrate themselves in ritual events and swear loyalty until death. These events build to the highpoint of the film, the aforementioned *Vorbeimarsch*.

This climax could serve as the end the film, but one last sequence follows, the *Schlusskongress*, or “closing service” as it has been called.⁵⁷ Rudolf Hess announces Hitler’s closing speech after a festive procession of the top Party officials, underscored by the *Badenweiler Marsch*, and a flag parade accompanied by Gottfried Sonntag’s *Nibelungenmarsch*. In about nine-and-a-half minutes, the longest speech in the entire film, Hitler praises the past of the “movement” and, in the fashion of a seer, prophesizes a glorious future.

What follows has truly liturgical overtones: Rudolf Hess advances to the podium, apparently moved by the words of his “Führer.” He proclaims the credo of the entire film in a single sentence: “The Party is Hitler, but Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler.”⁵⁸ A little confused but still unambiguous: everything—at least in Germany—is Hitler. A supernatural omnipotence is ascribed to the Führer, who is once again portrayed as a Godlike being. The audience in the hall confirms this in a kind of “credo”: they rise and sing the *Horst Wessel Song*.⁵⁹ By connecting this scene and the opening sequence, one can draw the interpretation that at this moment that Hitler’s messianic message, descended to earth from the transcendental sphere, has taken root—the triumph of his will. The final scene of the movie is consistent with this interpretation as it begins precisely at the same moment as the last two lines of the *Horst Wessel Song*. Three successive images are shown, each fading into the next: first clouds, second a Swastika, and third marching SA troupes filmed from below. “Comrades, killed by the Red Front and by the opposition/ March along in spirit among our ranks.” In this final sequence, the viewers not only hear the lyrics, but also see the “dead comrades” marching to some kind of National Socialist Valhalla—just as the “Führer” prophesized in his speech. Through their “credo,” the “congregation” is given entry to the heavenly halls from whence their “Messiah” came.

This sequence is an impressively planned finale that combines all the essential elements for a spiritual mobilization: ritualistic, unconditional obedience to the omnipotent “Führer,” and the potential for self-sacrifice promise the way to paradise. All this is underscored equally by image and sound.

This religious rhetoric is by no means novel, but it has proven highly effective through the ages. The church promised heavenly ascendance to crusaders for their atrocities. Today, direct entry into Heaven is also allegedly reserved for suicide bombers. There are valid arguments against

⁵⁶ Loiperdinger, *Rituale der Mobilmachung*, 148.

⁵⁷ *Triumph of the Will*, time code 1:35:07. Daniel Knopp, *NS Filmpropaganda. Wunschbild und Feindbild in Leni Riefenstahls “Triumph des Willens” und Veit Harlans “Jud Süß”* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2004), 49.

⁵⁸ *Triumph of the Will*, time code 1:49:02.

⁵⁹ This was a commonality, or rather a ritual, at the end of Party events. (see Volker Mall, “Wer hat eigentlich wen erschossen? Stundenentwurf zum Thema ‘Horst-Wessel-Lied und Kälbermarsch’” in *Neue Musikzeitung* 11 (2001): 21.

classifying National Socialism as a religion, but for *TdW* religious imagery is not just a component of the film, it is central to the entire production.⁶⁰

IV. Summary and Perspectives

To summarize, the musical dramaturgy in *TdW* was executed with the same attention to detail as the visual material, which other analyses have already explored. A plethora of other examples could be mentioned besides the scenes already discussed. All of them would support this thesis.

In selecting the musical excerpts, accessibility to the public was a crucial factor, for it would enable the film to reach a wide cross section of the population. The potential for symbolism was also crucial to the director, something that is strongly demonstrated by the focus on spiritual mobilization. In particular, the symbolism in the *Horst Wessel Song* was exploited with special care. The persuasiveness of the material presented, consistent with the propagandistic spirit, was heightened by supplying the viewer with a strong sense of diegesis and thereby suggesting a higher level of authenticity. The crucial role of music cannot be underestimated once it is realized that the symbolism inherent in the soundtrack took the place of a commentator. The close, almost ballet-like synchronization of music and image attests to the intensive engagement with music on the part of the filmmaker. Riefenstahl was careful to fulfill her intentions in the framework of the individual scenes as well as in the overall dramaturgy.

This example of the way Hitler's image was shaped shows clearly that music stood at least on par with the visual material in terms of its dramaturgical effect. The final sequence, in which all elements of spiritual mobilization combine in a way that places equal weight on film and music, is not the only example.

The points discussed suggest that there are grounds for further inquiries from other perspectives. For example, many authors have described the soundtrack as borrowing from Wagner. Some even name specific titles.⁶¹ However, the only proven Wagner citations in the film are the *Awaken Chorus* and the *Nibelungenmarsch*, a march arrangement of a Wagner theme by Gottfried Sonntag.⁶²

Nevertheless, Windt's compositions characteristically seem to evoke this association. Reimar Volker comes to the conclusion that the relationship of Windt's music to Wagner could not be stringently proven and thus cannot be stated in musicological terms. However, a close association with a late-romantic style and a use of carefully crafted, fanfare-like motives could explain the tendency for this observation.⁶³ But there are a few hints that *TdW* contains more Wagner than Volker suggests, especially in connection with the structure of the film.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Loiperdinger, *Rituale der Mobilmachung*, 148.

⁶¹ That is, a fanfare from the *Rienzi* overture sounds during the beginning of the *HJ* roll call. See Calvert Smith, "Triumph of the Will. A Film by Leni Riefenstahl," in *Celluloid Chronicles Press* (Richardson: Texas, 1990), accessed 15 February 2005 <<http://www.geocities.com/emruf4/triumph.html>>

⁶² Composed with motives from Wagner's *Ring*.

⁶³ See Volker, *Von oben sehr erwünscht*, 72.

⁶⁴ See Stefan Strötgen, *Die Tonspur zum 'Hitlerfilm'- Musikalische Inszenierungsstrategien in Leni Riefenstahls 'Triumph des Willens'* (Bonn: Philosophische Fakultät der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 2005), 65-68. [Unpublished master's thesis]

Another point: it is also possible to consider the dramaturgy in light of the NS theater genre “Thingspiel.” This is especially important in relation to the music since Herbert Windt had already been active in that genre before he became involved in *TdW*. Similarities between the film and “Thingspiel” are so obvious that a direct influence seems highly likely.⁶⁵

An assertion that has long been accepted for the visual part of the movie can now be made about the soundtrack: *TdW* is a carefully crafted representation of the NSDAP, and especially of its “Führer” Adolf Hitler, that subtly prepares the viewer for a war that would break out in earnest three years later. This film is certainly not an innocent collage of pre-existing recordings; instead, it is perhaps the “best propaganda film of all times.”

Abstract

Triumph of the Will, Leni Riefenstahl’s film documenting a 1935 National Socialist rally in Nuremberg, has become iconic of Nazi Germany. Its footage frequently serves as a repository for images of the Third Reich. This article explores the tension between the film’s propagandistic elements and Riefenstahl’s claims that she was simply capturing events as they unfolded. As a director of documentaries, Riefenstahl believed it was her role to make any given image “express itself more strongly than it did in reality,” an aesthetic mandate that allowed her to exacerbate the propagandistic nature of the rally. This is particularly evident in the film’s use of music, which scholars have largely ignored. By blurring the line between diegetic and non-diegetic musics, seeding the soundtrack with popular songs designed to appeal to a large audience, and underscoring images of Hitler with the *Horst Wessel Song*, the Nazi Party anthem, Riefenstahl did not create a “neutral document” of an event. Instead, she produced a film that reinforced the ideology of the National Socialists, steeling the German populace for the war that was shortly to come.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 69ff, and Reimar Volker, “Vom Thingspiel zur filmeigenen Musik. Herbert Windt und seine Zusammenarbeit mit Leni Riefenstahl,” *Filmblatt* 21 (2003): 29-38.