**Movie Review by Gary Jason**

**Date: 11/20/06**

**Movie/director/company/date/running time:** *Triumph of the Will,* Leni Riefenstahl, DVD by Synapse Films, 1935, 120 minutes (B&W).

The question is sometimes posed whether motion pictures have anything like the power to change history that books do. The answer, *prima facie*, seems clearly no—just consider the influence that the Bible, say, or the Koran have had on world history. Now, in justice, we might note that movies, especially widely distributed movies with sound—have been around for only a fraction of the time books have been around. But factoring that in, just how historically powerful *are* movies?

I can think of no better place to start in answering this question than with an old film now available on DVD. In 1934, Hitler asked the young but already acclaimed German actress and director Leni Riefenstahl to film the big rally of his followers to be held in Nuremberg. It was a pivotal year for Hitler—with the recent death of von Hindenburg, Hitler was able to take the power of the German state fully into his hands. And this film would be his way of presenting himself to the German public. Riefenstahl took an immense amount of footage, and spent nearly a year editing it, producing as a result a powerful film which did indeed cement support for Hitler, much to her later disrepute.

The DVD, readily available through Amazon.com, has two nice features that DVDs can offer. First, it has incredible picture quality—it is sharp, not grainy the ways tapes tend to be. Second, it has optional features, including a voice-over narrated version by an historian, Professor Anthony Santoro. My suggestion is that you watch the film once without Santoro’s narration, then once again with it.

The film is a classic case of effective propaganda. A sketch of some of the scenes may convey some of its persuasive power. At the opening, the subtitles tell the viewer that this movie is to be an historical document, i.e., a historically accurate recording of this momentous event. The movie opens with Hitler in his plane, descending through the clouds like the Messiah from the heaven above, flying over the massed formations below.

In the next scene, we follow Hitler’s triumphant motorcade past adoring crowds, with their arms outstretched in the Roman salute. Riefenstahl’s cinematography is powerful: close-ups of women entranced by the Leader, Hitler featured in silhouette, cute blond children beaming at him. As Santoro notes, Hitler received something like ten thousand letters a week from adoring women. Santoro also notes the clever positive association of the Nazi movement with the beloved historical monuments of Nuremberg, and the constant use of very masculine imagery of the SS troops, Hitler’s bodyguard. I would also add that Riefenstahl accompanies this and all the other scenes in the film with a rousing musical score.

Another scene that must have played to great effect is the one of the massive Hitler Youth camp. You see handsome, wholesome and playful young men—washing, shaving, laughing—ready for breakfast. They engage in manly games while gathering firewood, as the cooks prepare sausages to be cooked. Santoro rightly notes that the scene is powerful because it evoked strong community feeling (in a nation that had witnessed so much division), with hearty food being served (in a nation that had seen such hard times). I find something even more important that the scene evokes. The German public witnessed during the Weimar Republic what most of them regarded as the degeneration of their culture. So it must have been deeply emotionally reassuring to the audience to see this scene conveying wholesomeness and psychic healthiness.

Several other scenes must have been powerfully reassuring to the audience, because the evoke feelings of national unity. First, there is a procession of farmers in traditional garb, including numerous children, who present some of their produce to Hitler. Santoro points out how worshipful the women are as they present their produce to the Leader. I would add that the political cleverness of the scene lies in its implicit message that the Leader values the farmers’ work, its evocation of respect for the rural life.

Similarly, there are a couple of scenes involving the cadets of the “Labor Front,” headed by Dr. Robert Ley. In the most striking scene, the young workers present their spades like rifles, and a handsome worker asks, “Where are you from?” As cadets answer with the names of their various home regions, Santoro notes that they represent all of Germany, again that theme of national unity. But I would add a crucial point: we need to recall that Hitler fought the communists for the support of the working class (remember, “Nazi” means the National *Socialist* German *Workers’* party). Scenes like this served to reinforce what Hitler says in his speech: we respect and value the German workers, they are a vital part of our new order.

Several scenes evoke religious feelings (although the Nazi’s were best described as pagan or atheist). In one scene Hitler tells the Hitler Youth that they are the flesh of our [German] flesh, blood of our blood. In another, Hitler—no question a good public speaker—invokes God directly: God ordained this movement…one empire, one nation, one people.

Amplifying all this, it must be reiterated, is Riefenstahl’s artful use of the camera. She would habitually arrange the shot to show Hitler as the largest figure in the scene, or show him from the back, or have side images of his head. In one spectacular scene (with sets designed by Albert Speer), you see an ocean of Nazi flags, with an immense tower of light illuminating a huge German eagle standard. Hitler talks from a gigantic elevated podium—literally from on high.

In another scene, one from a rally to honor the party members fallen in the fight against the communists (during the decade 1923-1933), Himmler, Hitler and Lutze march across a huge square flanked by enormous crowds holding flags. Again, the underlying appeal is one of unity, but this time directed to the middle class and business interests: we kept the Bolsheviks from doing to you what they did to the Russian middle class and businesses.

Let me revert to the original topic. My point is that movies can and have had impacts on history on the scale of books. But there are differences, to be sure, and ones tied to the specific strengths and weaknesses of the media.

The unique power of nonfiction lies in its ability to lay forth facts and reasoning to whatever degree of detail required. The unique power of fiction lies in its power to drive the imagination, that is, to create a possible world and to make the reader imagine what the characters feel. The unique power of cinema is that it presents us with images and sounds, that is, it works on the preliterate observational level. We see and hear things, including the facial and body language of the characters.

As I noted in an earlier review, cinema can and in the best films does work at the philosophic and literary levels, i.e., at the level of ideas and dialogue, plot and character. But in film, the presentation of the philosophic ideas and literary forms are subordinate to that observational force. So film-makers discovered early on that a stage play does not a film make, i.e., you can’t just put a camera in front of a stage and turn it on while the actors act a play. (Early British films tried that, and they sounded insufferably talky and stilted as a result). You need to let the audience do the observing, to see and hear—you need a screenplay.

Again, you can’t just film a lecture and have it succeed as a motion picture, not even as a documentary. The mind can’t follow the complexity of argumentation, especially while soaking in images and sounds. For that reason, no movie will ever change the world, say, in the way Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* did. Darwin succeeded in eventually convincing the vast majority of biologists (and the vast majority of educated laymen) that species evolve, and he did it by marshalling facts into one long argument to that conclusion.

But movies can persuade at a powerful subliminal, psychological level, and change history accordingly. The observational input that any film provides is easily passively accepted by the audience. Of course, when the film is based upon nonsense (as was *Triumph of the Will*, it amounts to only malevolent propaganda.

Add to this another difference between books and film, one that again highlights film’s immense power to persuade: film reaches a larger audience. In many societies to this day, large percentages of people are simply illiterate. They can’t read books, but they can and do watch movies (and TV)—movies which often give these illiterate masses their sole information about the world at large.

Indeed, the fact that watching film requires far less work than reading a book is another difference that explains film’s power to influence the public. In contemporary America, there are millions who can read, i.e., are in the technical sense literate, but never do so. They instead watch movies every weekend and four or more hours of TV a day. In my decades of teaching introductory philosophy classes, I have routinely encountered student resistance to reading even very short selections of classic philosophic literature, because the effort to follow carefully reasoned argument is more than what they are used to. This also manifests itself in the political ads we are subject to: in the last election, two Senate seats switched hands with the aid of powerful ads starring the actor Michael Fox, who is afflicted with Parkinson’s, presenting a pitiable sight as he urged voters to vote for the Democrat candidate so that embryonic stem cell research would be publicly funded. The message conveyed is that such presumably would lead to a cure of that ailment. The viewers reacted viscerally, although virtually none of them bothered to do even the slightest reading of the literature available on what such research has and has not accomplished.

The power of film to change history is undeniable, and is only likely to increase in the future.