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REEXAMINING THE ESTABLISHED: THE CASE OF *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL*

ABSTRACT

This article critically reexamines *Triumph of the Will* and its widely accepted role as a paradigmatic example of immoral art. Although frequently cited in discussions of the interaction value debate and ethical criticism of art as an immoral artwork, the article argues that the film's complexity undermines its suitability as a clear example of immorality in art. By discussing its immorality from various perspectives and forms of immorality (content, production, authorship), the article highlights the film's ambiguity, especially when interpreted through different time and genre frameworks. Reexamining the Established: *The Case of Triumph of the Will* investigates notions of content, artistic intentions, and reliability, questioning the debate over the film's immorality by juxtaposing propaganda, documentary, and historical context. The article offers an extensive analysis of artistic procedures, aesthetic achievements, genre determinants, and historical data, emphasizing the need to understand the complexity of the case. This extensive analysis offers a new reading of the film, noting that the film's immorality heavily depends on background knowledge, historical distance, and audience perspective. Consequently, the article concludes that while *Triumph of the Will* is morally and politically troubling, the extensive investigation and interpretation tasks make its use as a foundational example in discussions of immoral art problematic and call for greater critical nuance.

KEYWORDS

Triumph of the Will, Leni Reifenstahl, immoral artworks, ethical criticism of art, value interaction debate, propaganda art, historical context, artistic intention, aesthetic and moral value

Introduction

The discussion about the value of art, particularly the relationship between aesthetic and/or artistic value and ethical value, becomes especially demanding in examples of immoral art.

Within the debate on the relationship between aesthetic and ethical values, two main directions have emerged: the autonomist, which attempts to maintain the autonomy of aesthetic value in the evaluation of works of art, and the interactionist, which brings together several different proposals on how this

relationship works. The value interaction debate concerns various proposals of mutual influence of the ethical and aesthetic dimensions. In this sense, we are talking about different versions of moderate autonomism (keeping the conceptual distance between aesthetic and moral, unlike the more radical version of autonomism, it still allows that moral features are significant and affect value, but indirectly), moralism (very generally, it claims that moral value has a relevant importance in assessing the value of a work of art, i.e. that it stands in relation to the aesthetic value of the work, which is most often manifested in the way that the moral flaw of the work of art is also an aesthetic flaw, i.e. that a moral flaw diminishes the value of a work) and immoralism (the basic assumption of immoralism in general is that the immorality of a work affects its aesthetic value; that the immorality of the work itself increases the value of a work, i.e. a work of art can be successful, despite or precisely because of its moral flaw). The value interaction debate is a vibrant discussion that becomes increasingly interesting and diverse in proposals, particularly when it involves examples of immoral art.

Methodologically, this article operates within the framework of philosophical aesthetics, or ethical criticism of art. In doing so, it draws in part on insights from film studies. I develop my argument as a case study, treating *Triumph of the Will* as a complex work whose formal, contextual, and historical features I carefully examine in order to test and refine claims about immoral art. The analysis combines what Nannicelli (Nannicelli 2020) calls an interpretation and production-oriented approach: I address both the film's representational content and the conditions of its production, including issues of authorship, epistemological reliability, and moral responsibility. In this way, the paper is situated within interactionist accounts of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical value, without assuming a simple priority of one domain over the other.

When discussing immoral works of art, they are generally considered those that portray or support an immoral perspective, character, features, content, or emotions, or invite the audience to a similar affective response. In another place, I wrote in more detail about the types of immorality in works of art (Czerny Urban 2021) and generally separated them into three categories: content immorality, immorality of the creation of the work, and works by immoral authors. At this point, I will only briefly mention the specifics of the types of immorality, and later emphasize the one I refer to in the discussion. The first type - substantive immorality concerns cases when art can offer immoral characters, deal with immoral themes, only to describe them, promote them, or make them desirable and/or beautiful. Such art is contrary to the attitudes that in real life we consider correct, which we strive to follow and which we wish to promote and respect. This view of immorality is consistent with what Nannicelli (2020) speaks about as a kind of immorality observed in cases where we consider a work immoral from an interpretation-oriented perspective. Therefore, in these cases, immorality is revealed primarily by dealing with the content, that is, it is seen and recognized in the interpretation of the work itself. The second type of immorality consists of works of art that we consider

immoral due to the way they are produced, which is compatible to the product-oriented approach proposed by Nannicelli (2020). The third type of immorality is that which we see as morally problematic due to the immorality of the author himself. This type of immorality is also found in the context of a proposal for a product-oriented approach to the ethical evaluation of art. When I discuss immorality in the rest of the text, I will consider applying both an interpretation-oriented and a production-oriented approach to our analyses of the selected example, for which we claim to have identified some ethical flaws.

Triumph of the Will

The film *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl 1935) is, in this vibrant discussion about ethical evaluation and assessing (im)moral art, one of the most frequently used examples. By reviewing the literature¹, it is justified to claim that the authors use it as a paradigmatic example of immoral art, particularly where something morally wrong is presented as desirable, right, good, and/or beautiful. Additionally, we need to take into account important aspects of production and authorship, as well as tasks related to genre and context.

This article will demonstrate that the example, although frequently used, is not entirely appropriate. Its immorality, viewed from different temporal and genre positions, is not as unquestionable as it seems at first glance. I do not intend to discuss the assessment of artistic value itself, or the value interaction debate (vibrant discussion and argumentation between different positions of autonomism, moralism, and immoralism, which frequently use *Triumph of the Will* as an example) that would result in delivering the final verdict about the *Triumph of the Will*, as it is conditioned by an ethical discussion (since I support the notion that artistic value is composite value), and I believe it should certainly follow. The article primarily questions the adequacy of the example itself, asking whether it is precise and reliable enough to be suitable for (partially) building a discussion on it. This analysis will demonstrate that, unlike previous analyses, the film is not inherently immoral in content; instead, external factors condition its immorality. It will also be shown that by pointing to the author, a new perspective on the film's possible immorality will open up. Finally, it will demonstrate that the complexity of the example does not contribute to the clarity of the value interaction debate.

Before arguing this position, the article will present some general data and characteristics of the film and emphasize its significant aesthetic achievements. I will demonstrate that the film *Triumph of the Will* is artistically extremely

¹ In the context of the discussion about the *Triumph of the Will* as an example of an immoral work of art, see, for example: (Anderson and Dean 1998); (Carroll 1996); (Carroll 1998); (Eaton 2012); (Gaut 1998, 2007); (Kieran 2002); (Kieran 2003); (Kieran 2004); (Mullin 2004); (Jacobson 1997); (Walton 2008). But these authors also discuss the film: (Bach 2002); (Burns 2019); (Gunston 1960); (Harold 2005); (Hinton 1975); (Nannicelli 2020); (Sennett 2014); (Gunston 1960); (Ross 2002); (Sklar 1994); (Soussloff and Nichols 1996).

valuable and that discussing it as an example of the problematic relationship between aesthetic and ethical value is justified. Then, by placing it at the core of the debate on the film's genre and the temporal conditionality of interpretation, I will indicate multiple possibilities for evaluation and emphasize the content problem. Also, some notions about the author's epistemic and ethical reliability will be discussed.

Although the discussion of the value of immoral works of art is important, justified, and rich, the complexity of the film *Triumph of the Will* does not contribute to its clarity. Of course, this does not mean that one should ignore the fact that *Triumph of the Will* is commonly considered an immoral film in philosophical debates and discussions outside academic life. However, although it has been presented so far as a paradigmatic example of immorality in art, it will be shown that it can hardly be one.

About *Triumph of the Will*

Leni Riefenstahl, real name Berta Helene Amalie, made one of the most controversial films ever, *Triumph of the Will*. *Triumph of the Will* was a film made during the Sixth Congress of the National Socialist Party in Nuremberg in 1934. The Congress lasted seven days and involved tens of thousands of participants and about 500,000 spectators (Devereaux 1998:347).

Leni Riefenstahl made the film at Hitler's request². In an interview titled "The Immoderation of Me", which was recorded with her on the occasion of her 100th birthday by Sandra Maischberger (Panitz 2002), Riefenstahl says that she was blackmailed and had to agree to make the film. She also adds that she stipulated that it would be the only film of its kind she would make. In addition, Hitler provided organizational and operational support³ and named it *Triumph des Willens* himself. According to Devereaux, Hitler went to Nuremberg to help with pre-production plans, carefully organizing an event that included

2 *Triumph of the Will* was not the only film Riefenstahl made for Hitler. The film *Victory by Fate* had been released the year before, but at her request, her name was removed from the list of people who worked on the film. Although she opposed its production, Hitler demanded that the film be completed. Copies of the film disappeared, and only one copy was found in Great Britain in 1986 (Chorny 2019).

3 Riefenstahl arranged for the film's production to be underwritten by her studio (Chorny, Maksym 2019). Thus, the credits for the film's production were Lena Riefenstahl-Produktion and the Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP. Given that she refused at first, not wanting to take on the responsibility of filming the film, they agreed by allowing her the autonomy she requested for filming. She says this in her book: "Since I would never cooperate with the party, only private financing would be considered for that project. Moreover, I succeeded faster than I expected because UFA, which was not yet under the auspices of the Ministry of Propaganda, was enthusiastic about that project. After an agreement with the general director Ludvig Klic, my company 'L. R. studio-film d. o. o.', which I renamed because of that production 'Rajhsparťajfilm d. o. o.' concluded a contract of 300,000 marks. I could work as an independent producer and hire Valter Rutman, and I hoped that this would also make Hitler happy" (Rifenšal 2006).

thousands of troops, marching soldiers, and ordinary citizens. The film's production was extensive, and the team consisted of about 170 people, including camera operators, assistants, drivers, and pilots for airplanes and airships. The entire team was disguised as military forces to not stand out in the crowd; they used 30 cameras and worked seven days non-stop. Riefenstahl held meetings every day to give instructions on teamwork. The scenes were rehearsed (Devereaux 1998:347–348) (Hickey 1994:9–10).

Devereaux lists a series of processes and methods Riefenstahl used to make the film. For example, considering long parades, speeches, and monotonous events would be boring to her audience, Riefenstahl rejected the static format and narration of typical film works. Instead, she adopted and developed the methods of motion photography. Narration is completely omitted from the film; the narrator does not exist, and all the narrative content is placed in the speeches that are exchanged at the Congress (Devereaux 1998:348). As Corliss states: "She needed no narration to tell you what to think or feel; her images and editing were persuasive enough" (Corliss 2002). Speeches will prove highly significant for further discussion in the second part of the text.

Devereaux points out that Riefenstahl developed and improved filming methods with a moving camera, using rails to get shots in the crowd and around the podium where the speeches were being given. She also installed one camera on a crane tied to a 40-meter-high mast and secured the moving image by asking the film crew to learn how to roller skate to have liveliness and dynamism in the still images (Devereaux 1998:348).

The filming resulted in a large amount of material (61 hours), and after five months of work, Riefenstahl made the film's final version, lasting just over two hours. Wagner's music, German folk songs, military marches, and anthems, including the official anthem, "Das Horst Wessel Lied," punctuated by the sounds of crowds and speeches, only contributed to the final result. *Triumph of the Will* was radically different from the newsreels of the time. Just as it was recognized as an innovation in documentary film, *Triumph of the Will* is also generally accepted as a film that greatly contributed to film history (Devereaux 1998:348) (Burns 2019). Corliss maintains that because of her work on *Triumph of the Will* (and *Olympia*), Leni Riefenstahl can be regarded as a major innovator in cinema history, comparable to figures such as Eisenstein, Griffith, and Welles (Corliss 2002).

The film premiered in Berlin in March 1935 in front of foreign diplomats, generals, and party leaders, including Hitler. As Riefenstahl herself (Riefenstahl 1995) notes, the film did not go through the usual procedure of the Censorship Board, and even Hitler did not watch the film before its official release. Namely, it was common practice that every film had to pass the Board's review, so such a move indicates that Hitler fully trusted that Riefenstahl would present it in the light he wanted it to be. Devereaux agrees and writes that some party members criticized the film as too artistic and resented the omission of some military exercises, but that Hitler himself was delighted with the film (Devereaux 1998:348).

Artistically, the film secured recognition in Germany, where it was awarded the National Film Award. Welch writes that Goebbels awarded her the award, explaining the decision to award the *Triumph of the Will*:

The film marks with a very great achievement amongst the total film production for the year. It is topical, in that it shows the present: it conveys in monumental and hitherto unseen images the stirring events of our political life. It is a magnificent cinematic vision of the Führer, seen here for the first time with a power that has not been revealed before. The film has successfully avoided the danger of merely a politically slanted film. It has translated the powerful rhythm of this great epoch into something outstandingly artistic; it is an epic, forging the tempo of marching formations, steel-like in its conviction and fired by a passionate artistry. (Welch 1983)

The film was recognized abroad, winning the Gold Medal at the Venice Film Festival and, two years later, the Grand Prix at the Paris Film Festival (Sennett 2014:54).

However, beyond the historical background, it is essential to emphasize the extraordinary contribution that the main features, structure, vision, and narrative, made to the film. Devereaux states that the director almost did not respect the chronological order of events but created a rhythmic structure of the film, independent of the actual order of events. She made most of the progress in editing, working without a script, using many devices: switching scenes of day and night, moving frames from ceremony to wealth, changing the film's pace from scene to scene and creating a dynamic rhythmic structure (Devereaux 1998:348-349). Strögtén explains the role music played in the film, from being crucial in establishing the rhythm to using familiar melodies to contribute to Hitler's demand that propaganda must be "colloquial and must be able to adjust its message to the comprehension level of the most limited mind among the target group." The musical dramaturgy was given the same attention as the visual one (Strögtén 2008).

Although it is accepted that the formal side of Leni Riefenstahl's work is of exceptional artistic value, it sometimes goes unrecognized that equally important is her masterful handling of traditional narrative devices: theme and character characterization, use of symbols, and use of ideas and telling the story of the New Germany, with which she forms a very striking image of Hitler and the party (Devereaux 1998:348-349). From the film's perspective, Hitler is a hero, a leader, and a savior, a new Siegfried who will restore Germany and its former glory (Devereaux 1998:348-349).

Devereaux believes that with artistic means, Leni Riefenstahl wants to cause enthusiasm for Hitler but also wants to arouse fear. Riefenstahl (and Hitler) change the motives for achieving this, from the spontaneous expressions of emotions of ordinary people at the film's beginning through the central part dominated by military parades and faces ready to go to war. From the smiling faces at the beginning of the film, there is a final parade, the longest in the film, which shows a tireless mass of the army, showing people who are ready to go

to war. The story of Hitler becomes the story of the German people. His will is theirs because his strength is their future (Devereaux 1998:350). Devereaux says: "The power of the Nazis is presented as daunting and unquestionable." (Devereaux 1998:350).

This presentation of the film's formal features, which highlights the artistic decisions Riefenstahl made and the methods she used, reveals her thoughtful and carefully conceived artistic work. It is evidence of clear intentions to create not only a document of the times but also a work of art that will express a particular view of the directed reality it depicts.

Two significant sequences in the film help concretize the connection between the film's formal devices and its propaganda power. The film begins with Hitler's arrival by plane. It is shot in a way that transforms the mere act of travel into a quasi-mythical descent. First, we see the plane above the clouds, accompanied by music that creates a sense of solemn anticipation. Then we see the city below, the crowd, and finally Hitler himself. The montage, the alternation of aerial and ground shots, and the absence of verbal commentary invite the viewer to experience the leader as literally "above" the ordinary world. The imposing, theatrical presentation and the aesthetics of elevation and distance support the political idea of an almost superhuman figure.

Riefenstahl applies a similar method to scenes of youth gatherings. The camera often lingers on the faces of young boys and girls, their expressions of excitement, admiration, and pride. These close-ups are interspersed with medium and long shots of large marching masses, creating a visual grammar in which individuality is absorbed into collective unity. Speeches addressed to the youth, emphasizing obedience, sacrifice, and courage, are framed by images that make these qualities appealing. The film's formal characteristics thus serve the familiar nationalist rhetoric. Through a powerful affective experience, the viewer is encouraged not only to understand but also to feel the appeal of the political vision presented.

As we will see in the continuation of this discussion of *Triumph of the Will*, the problem of the status of the work encompasses two possible approaches; that is, it relies on two issues that we encounter in the discussion - one concerns whether *Triumph of the Will* is propaganda art or a document of the times. The conclusions we draw from this part of the discussion are relevant for the further discussion of the value of the work itself. The second issue concerns the temporal context and the conditionality of the period from which we approach the analysis of the film. This issue is almost absent in the literature, but it is an important one to notice.

By addressing these two topics, I will also emphasize the elements of authorship, which can be observed through the prism of reliability and responsibility.

Propaganda or a Document of the Times?

If we briefly leave aside what seems to be the fundamental problem of the film's status, which is, of course, the debate on how to evaluate a work of art that so

unequivocally glorifies Nazism, we are left with the primary task of trying to unravel the genre issue of the film. Namely, on the one hand, we have clear reasons to claim that the film is a work of propaganda art, and on the other hand, Leni Riefenstahl has maintained throughout her life that the film is simply a document of the times. The following text will offer reasons in support of the claim that we correctly interpret it when we see it as a propaganda film.

Leni Riefenstahl has argued on several occasions that the film *Triumph of the Will*, like her other works, is a work of artistic creation, not a political stance; that, as Devereaux writes, she believed in the cult of beauty, not the cult of the Fuhrer (Devereaux 1998:351). In an interview she gave to Sandra Maischberger, she says: “I don’t see anything political in *Triumph of the Will*, I look at it like all the other films” (Panitz 2002). She similarly claims:

But if you see this film again today you ascertain that it doesn’t contain a single reconstructed scene. Everything in it is true. And it contains no tendentious commentary at all. It is history. A pure historical film ... it is film-vérité. It reflects the truth that was then, in 1934, history. It is therefore a documentary. Not a propaganda film. Oh! I know very well what propaganda is. That consists of recreating certain events in order to illustrate a thesis or, in the face of certain events, to let one thing go in order to accentuate another. (Thomson 2010)

The opening line of Ebert’s film review of *Triumph of the Will* reads: “These [*Olympia* and *Triumph of the Will*], are by general consent two of the best documentaries ever made” (Ebert, Roger 2008).

Referring to the well-known discussion of documentary and propaganda, it is worth briefly considering the idea that film is a document of time, as Riefenstahl claims. If there are specificities of the medium, or rather differences in it, and I believe that there are, at this point, it is, I believe, useful to make an analogy with what Nannicelli claims, when discussing photography and the characteristics of the medium, or rather the difference between documentary and artistic photography. Namely, Nannicelli, speaking of photography, correctly emphasizes that the medium in which the artist works is something that offers particular possibilities, ethical challenges, but also limitations, or “obviates certain possibilities for moral achievement or moral failure” (Nannicelli 2020:79). There is a difference in that an artist can convey a specific ethically content as a document, or try to aestheticize it, or express a certain attitude towards what the work represents (Nannicelli 2020:81). Although he is not discussing documentaries in film here, I believe that his discussion of the difference between simply documenting and creating a work of art from ethically problematic scenes is helpful to us. Of course, I am not equating the examples, primarily because it is questionable whether *Triumph of the Will* really represents something ethically problematic, which we will explore in the rest of the text. However, the fact is that she manages the material, shoots, and directs it in a way that would make it artistically successful while aestheticizing its content. Just as war photography can be documentary, it can become morally problematic if its primary intention is to serve an artistic purpose, which

drastically changes how we evaluate it ethically. Similarly, *Triumph of the Will* is problematic, even if we try to interpret it as a documentary film, because it contains clearly visible artistic moves indicating that Riefenstahl aimed to do more than merely portray the Congress. Her artistic moves are proof that she made shifts in the depiction of events with a specific intention - to aestheticize the Congress which is clearly visible. It would be too ambitious to go into a deeper discussion about the very nature of documentary film, its interpretive dimension, the demand for delivering facts, the need for clearly emphasized and transparent subjectivity, and epistemological responsibility. I will briefly refer to is the latter.

However, the fact that the film is a representation and document of the times, and that it will truly remain in the history of cinema as one of the best documentaries does not diminish the fact that interpreting it only as a documentary means not to see the power and value of film as a propaganda art, for which we have good reasons.

Its value at least partially lies in the good fulfillment of the function of propaganda art. If we look at how propaganda is defined, we find the following:

Propaganda is a more or less systematic effort to manipulate the beliefs, attitudes, or actions of others by means of symbols (words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, signs, hairstyles, coin designs, postage stamps, and so on). Intentionality and a relatively heavy emphasis on manipulation distinguish propaganda from ordinary conversation or the simple free exchange of ideas. Propaganda practitioners have a specific goal or set of goals. To achieve these goals, they deliberately select facts, arguments, and symbols and present them in a way that they believe will have the greatest effect. To maximize their effect, they may omit relevant facts or lie, and they may try to divert the attention of those who need to respond (i.e., the people they are trying to sway) from everything but what they are propagandizing. (Smith n.d.).

Propaganda is, therefore, an attempt to influence public opinion or attitudes, which, according to Ross, implies a type of intentionality (Ross 2002:18). All of the above speaks in favor of the clear intention of portraying Hitler and the National Socialist Party as something desirable and correct.

Although Riefenstahl claims to have documented events, Sennett emphasizes that this is not necessarily the opposite of propaganda, because, as he argues: "Often the most successful propaganda involves the truth, or at least a version of it" (Sennett 2014:48). Therefore, the fact that it used real footage and actual events does not argue against the claim that it is a propaganda film because the truth, although not the goal of propaganda but a means to achieve the goal, can undoubtedly be used to maximize the desired effect (Sennett 2014:48).

Sennett emphasizes that many commentators have given the film the status of art first and then propaganda, but that the Nazis saw the film primarily as "politically especially valuable" rather than "artistically and politically valuable," which contradicts Leni Riefenstahl's claims (Sennett 2014:57). Namely, as Sennett claims, she insisted that she was not responsible for the film's content

or political messages because she did not write the speeches, but rather Hitler and the other people whose speeches were shown in the film. However, Sennett correctly argues that, although she did not write the speeches, nor did she devise aspects of Nazi ideology or design the entire spectacle, we cannot see her role as neutral. “It was she who shaped the filmic record of the events in the first instance through choice of shot, position of camera, and direction of many of those involved in close-up sequences. She then refashioned the raw footage through her aesthetically impressive editing into the arresting images of the completed film.” (Sennett 2014:58–59).

Recent work has sharpened this line of argument. Andres Veiel’s documentary *Riefenstahl* (Veiel 2024) based on newly available archival materials, further undermines the image of Riefenstahl as a politically naïve documentarist who merely “recorded” what others staged.

One of the significant indicators supporting the claim that this work is a work of propaganda art is that, some 80 years later, the film cannot be freely shown publicly in Germany. Germany still finds the political messages in the film powerful and persuasive (Sennett 2014:61).

Thus, by filming and documenting a real event, Leni Riefenstahl used many aesthetic means and methods to portray Hitler and the ideology of a people, a leader, and an empire as desirable and beautiful. She claimed that her role was neither political nor propagandistic. At the same time, Bach claims that Riefenstahl said that her relationship with Hitler and the people was of exceptional importance and that she set herself the task of portraying and expressing it in a way that glorified him (Bach 2007:124–40). Considering the facts that Riefenstahl made the film at Hitler’s request, that he financed it, that he gave it a title, that the film’s premiere took place without the Censorship Board, that Riefenstahl stipulated that she had complete artistic freedom over the project, that at least some scenes were pre-directed (new arguments in favour of this claim are represented by Wahl (Wahl, 2025)), and that she edited the raw material, disregarding the chronology of events and thus avoiding the boring sequencing of scenes, to create a visually impressive work that portrays the congress, Hitler, and the events of those seven days as beautiful, correct, and desirable. We are not wrong to claim that the film is a significant propaganda work.

To summarize, although there are arguments against the claim that *Triumph of the Will* is a propaganda work, the appeal to artistic intentions (and, at the same time, the refutation of propaganda intentions) and, as previously discussed, the appeal to documentary, these seem not to be sufficient to dispute the propagandistic notion.

What remains questionable is how much impact the film had on viewers, or how much of its supposed purpose was achieved. There are two reasons why it is problematic to have a further discussion about the success of *Triumph of the Will* as a propaganda film: one concerns the fact that we should enter into a broader discussion about the consequences of works of art and “proving” them; and the other, more problematic, that data on audience reactions and

effects are almost unavailable to us. This is because the documentation from that period is very scarce, and we have legitimate reasons to believe it was also censored or explicitly fabricated as part of the policy of National Socialism. However, I believe that this is not too important for us here, let alone disastrous. What is important is to show the genre orientation, thereby underlining the author's intentions.

We cannot deny that the film shows a visible worship of beauty, the claim that she was only interested in artistic and stylistic innovations and formal beauty is still rugged to accept. Namely, all these segments are visible, but they were used to create a particular vision of Hitler and the National Socialist Party. After all, she never distanced herself from the political content attributed to her in *Triumph of the Will* or any film made for Hitler, and she did not show remorse for her artistic and personal attachment to members of the National Socialist Party (Devereaux 1998:353).

It is precisely the fact that it is both a work of propaganda and art that makes it historically important and deeply problematic. Namely, the fact that *Triumph of the Will* is a work of propaganda would not be problematic if the film's message were not (Devereaux 1998:357).

The Immorality of *Triumph of the Will* and the Historical Context

In her text on Robust Immoralism (Eaton 2012) Eaton, noting that there is something she calls the extrinsic immorality of the work, spoke about both temporal conditioning and the target audience. Namely, how we evaluate Titian's painting has been completely changed by the time gap between the moment Titian painted it and the more contemporary moment in which we begin to criticize the same scene as immoral, and that, quite clearly, nothing has changed in the painting. Eaton explains this, among other things, by referring to the fact that we are not the target audience for the work today and that, in this example, we are dealing with extrinsic immorality. In this situation, the work of art does not prescribe immorality itself.

Although it may not seem so at first glance, this example has something to do with how we evaluate the *Triumph of the Will*.

There are two legitimately different temporal contexts within which it is possible to observe, analyze, and evaluate *Triumph of the Will*. The outcomes that we will obtain from these two distinct contexts are different. I believe that there are differences in interpretation and evaluation between that moment immediately after the creation of *Triumph of the Will*, that is, when its intention to influence the masses, promoting a particular ideology, was significant and possible, and today, almost 90 years later, with the knowledge of everything that Nazism brought.

How are these perspectives different, and what are their conditions? To consider the same, we need some historical data and place the plot and content of the film in a historical context in order to determine that the immorality that we see and load into the film today is not the same as the "immorality" that

could have been visible in the film at the time it was shown. However, first, it is necessary to detect what kind of immorality we are referring to when we claim that *Triumph of the Will* is an immoral film. The common understanding is that *Triumph of the Will* is immoral because the perspective it portrays, promotes, and glorifies is immoral because it presents something morally wrong as beautiful and desirable. Therefore, we should analyze the film content.

The film's content is monotonous, dramaturgically and artistically well executed. However, the film (apart from the use of artistic means in editing, the use of music, and the previously mentioned methods) does not contain narrative content except for that expressed through the speeches of the main characters. It is important to note that in the content of the work itself, in the speeches, there is no specific record that we would characterize as immoral outside the context of time, especially the perspective we have during and after the war, or that we certainly could not characterize it as undoubtedly immoral. Here are examples of the most significant speeches that will demonstrate the above:

Hitler's speech to young Germans:

My German youth. After one year I can greet you again here. You standing here today represent something that is happening all over Germany. And we want that you, German boys and girls will absorb everything that we wish for Germany. We want to be one people and through you, to become this people. We want a society with neither castes nor ranks. And you must not allow these ideas to grow within you. We want to see one Reich! And you must educate yourselves for this. We want this people to be obedient and you must practice obedience in yourselves. We want this people to be peace-loving but at the same time to be courageous. And you must for that reason, be both peace-loving, you must be both peace-loving and strong. We want this people not to become soft but to become hard and, therefore you must steel yourselves for this in your youth. You must learn sacrifice and also never to collapse. Whatever we create today, whatever we do will all pass away... But in you Germany will live on. And when we can no longer hold, the flag that we tore from nothing you must hold it firmly in your fists! And I know that it cannot be any other way as we bind ourselves together. For you are flesh of our flesh and blood from our blood! The same spirit that governs us burns in your young minds. And when the great columns of the movement sweep through Germany today then I know that you will close ranks and we know that Germany lies in front of us, Germany marches within us and Germany follows behind us! (Translations: Gushue, P. B., Santoro, A. R. and Transcribed from the movie by Carreon T. n.d.)

Hitler's closing speech:

The sixth party day of the Movement has come to an end. To millions of Germans outside our ranks this might be seen as a show of political strength. But to hundreds of thousands of fighters it was much more than that. This was a great spiritual gathering of old fighters and comrades in battle. And perhaps, despite the splendor of this display, some of you will think longingly of the days when it was hard to be a National Socialist. Even when our party consisted of only seven people, its members proclaimed two principles: the first was

that it (the party) aspired to be a party with the right ideology, the second was that it wanted to be an uncompromising and united force in Germany. We, as a party, had to remain a minority, because we had mobilized the most valuable elements of struggle and sacrifice in the nation, and they are never a majority but always a minority. Since the best racial component of the German nation, proudly self-confident, courageous and daring, demanded the leadership of the Reich and the people, the people followed their lead in ever greater numbers and have submitted to it. The German people are joyfully aware that the eternal flight of appearances has now been replaced by a stable wedge, which feels and knows that it represents the best German blood, rises to the leadership of the people and is determined to hold on to the leadership, to perfect it and never again to surrender it. There will always be a section of people who will be active fighters, and more is required of them than of millions of other people. For it is not enough for them simply to say: "I believe", they swear "I will fight". The Party will forever be the leadership of the German people, unchanging in its doctrine, solid as steel in its organization, pliable and adaptable in its tactics, it is the complete manifestation of the spirit of the nation. All decent Germans become National Socialists. Only the best National Socialists become members of the party. Previously, our opponents saw that through the ban and persecution of our movement the mold that has inhabited it is being purified. Now we ourselves must practice selectivity in ourselves and we must throw out what has proven to be rotten and therefore what not of our kind. It is our wish and intention that this state and this Reich should endure through the millennia ahead. We rejoice in the knowledge that the future belongs entirely to us. Where older generations might still waver, our youth swears and gives us body and spirit. If we in the party grasp the ultimate essence and idea of National Socialism, through the joining of the forces of all of us, it will forever and indestructibly be the heritage of the German people. Then the splendid and glorious army of the old and proud armed services of our nation will be united with a party no less bound by traditional leadership, and together they will establish and strengthen the German people and carry on their shoulders the German state and the German Reich. At this moment tens of thousands of comrades are leaving the city. While some are still remembering, others are already preparing for the next roll call and people will always come and go and will always be caught up, absorbed and inspired, because the idea and the Movement live in our people and with the Movement are the symbol of eternity. Long live the National Socialist Movement! Long live Germany! (Translations: Gushue, P. B., Santoro, A. R. and Transcribed from the movie by Carreon T. n.d.)

These speeches are tools to strengthen the spirit and raise the morale of the people and the army, especially the young. We can clearly link them in terms of content, style, pace, and performance to the most often policies of nationalism. Moreover, while we do not (have to) agree with such ideologies, nor see the value and significance in what has been said, the fact is that they are very flat, simple, intended for the broad masses, clear and explicit in strengthening the unity, in this case, of the German people. Unfortunately, very similar speeches can still be found in some political arenas today.

However, content-wise, they do not represent what makes *Triumph of the Will* morally reprehensible. Namely, by reviewing the literature, that is, criticism

of the film itself (not ethical criticism of the work), we do not find a primary concern with the content of the film. Criticisms and evaluations are primarily based on the formal characteristics of the film, data on its creation and premiere, and similar aspects.

Ethical interpretation and evaluation of a film, on the other hand, is usually most often related to elements that are not inherent to the work itself, that is, to insights into what followed in the period after 1934, and not to the work itself.

The reason we usually consider *Triumph of the Will* to be immoral is that we say it promotes an ideology that we know is horribly, wrongly, terrifyingly evil. However, what we are referring to is not what is present in the film (substantially speaking, certainly not in the speeches). There is no mention of anti-Semitism in the film, no clear indication of the horrors that lie in the background or in the immediate future of what is said. From this perspective, with knowledge of what followed, we inscribe the content into *Triumph of the Will* ourselves.

Ebert, in his commentary on the documentary about Lena Riefenstahl, notes that Riefenstahl claims that there is no mention of anti-Semitism in her films, that she did not know about Hitler's genocidal plans until after the war, and that she was a naive artist who was interested in images, not ideas. However, he emphasizes:

But the very absence of anti-Semitism in "*Triumph of the Will*" looks like a calculation; excluding a central motif of Hitler's speeches must have been deliberate, to make the film go down more easily as propaganda. Nor could a film professional working in Berlin have been unaware of the disappearance of all of the Jews in the movie industry. (Ebert 2012)

Let us therefore return for a moment to Eaton and her example of *The Rape of Europe*. Eaton argues that the immorality of *The Rape of Europe* is extrinsic to the work. Similarly, immorality operates in the example of *Triumph of the Will*. Its content is not unquestionably immoral. We can try to approach the work beyond our knowledge of Hitler and National Socialism and notice that what the film promotes is political single-mindedness, obedience, but also the glorification of the people and the state, which, however, is nothing significant specific exclusively to Hitler's speeches. What makes the film's content deeply problematic is contained more in what the film does not show than in what it does.

However, what we know today and simultaneously condemn, and to which we attach artistic importance, is the assumption that Riefenstahl's position was not neutral. Because of her close connection with Hitler and the entire regime, it seems justified to condemn her move to present such an ideology as positive, one that we should admire, one that we should support.

This is why, among other things, we need to briefly focus on a feature that Nannicelli strongly links to the product-oriented approach, which concerns the moral responsibility of the author. Although nothing immoral happened in the production itself, based on the available information, we still see Leni

Riefenstahl as responsible for what she presented to the audience. I believe that two key things speak in favor of the questionable ethical effect of her work: epistemic unreliability, the fact that she maneuvered with the data in the film, or instead, what she did not show is equally significant for the film, which makes her an unreliable author, and the fact that she made a propaganda film under the guise of documentary.

Eaton also refers to target audience and argues that, in the case of the example of *The Rape of Europe*, we are not the appropriate audience today, which we can to some extent apply to the example of *Triumph of the Will* (Eaton 2012:283). Here, I am not claiming that we have to agree with the idea of a target audience, but that invoking the idea that the same work that can play its role or fulfill its function at a certain moment may be a work that will be completely unsuccessful in that sense at another moment. Invoking the notion of the target audience actually detects the point at which the context of evaluation and interpretation becomes significant. We can discuss *Triumph of the Will* from this position, asking ourselves to what extent the immorality of *Triumph of the Will* depends on the temporal conditioning of the audience?

The question of context is, of course, more complex than this short presentation. When I talk about context here, I primarily refer to the historical context of the work's creation in relation to today. Nothing fundamental has changed in the moral sense, and this is not the case of moral relativism. The change in assessment does not come from a modification of moral attitudes, as is the case, for example, in the film *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915).

In *The Birth of a Nation*, racism is much more explicitly inscribed in the content: black characters are presented through dehumanizing stereotypes, and the Ku Klux Klan is openly glorified as a heroic and desirable force. The work prescribes, in Eaton's sense, very clearly immoral responses. In contrast, the immorality of *Triumph of the Will* depends mainly on what the film does not show and on the historical knowledge we bring to its interpretation. The speeches and images in the film promote unity, obedience, and national pride, but they do not explicitly articulate anti-Semitism or genocide. This does not, of course, make the film morally innocent, but it does mean that its immorality is more mediated by background information and temporal distance than in *The Birth of a Nation*. For this very reason, and in comparison to the above example, *Triumph of the Will* is a poor candidate for being a paradigmatic case of immoral art.

The fact that we experience a film's content differently depending on the temporal context is conditioned by the horrors that occurred subsequently. However, to truly understand the difference between the two perspectives, the one from 1934 and today, it is necessary to briefly reconstruct the historical context of the film *Triumph of the Will*'s creation.

Hitler came to power in 1933 when he became Chancellor of the Third Reich. With him came three National Socialists: Frick, Göring, and Goebbels as Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda (Reichsminister für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda). In order to centralize power, Goebbels

established the State Department for Culture and, with the help of the Ministry of Propaganda, supervised, directed, and censored all German mass media (Angelovski 2012:54). As Brenner writes, Minister of the Interior Frick and his advisory office began to change public artistic life with various regulations. By a decree issued at the end of June 1933, Hitler appointed Goebbels responsible for matters related to spiritual activities, including events, public information, and advertising for the needs of the state and all institutions dealing with the aforementioned activities. From the Ministry of the Interior, it takes over the Department of General Education, issues of national celebrations, radio, the College of Politics, the Department of Art, music, theatre, and Film. The Foreign Service has transferred to it the news service, education, art, film, and sports; the Ministry of Economy and Food has transferred trade fairs and advertising, and the Ministry of Education has transferred to art (Brenner 1992:50–60).

The Nazis realized very early on that art had a significant influence on individuals, that is, that art was a highly successful way of creating public opinion and directing the behaviour and thinking of the audience. However, at the same time, they realized that this influence needed to be directed. In early February 1934, they established the Film Censorship Board, on whose behalf the film supervisor accepted or rejected the offered scripts. After filming and editing, the films had to be shown to the board. The Minister of Propaganda appointed the board and ensured that no domestic or foreign film threatened the state's interests, the National Socialist regime. Guided by the idea that film could cause strong psychological effects, National Socialism managed it as a state medium and supported its ideology through film art (Angelovski 2012:54). As stated in the Teacher's manual related to *Triumph of the Will*, Hitler's understanding of propaganda and its importance is evident from several quotes from *Mein Kampf*, which he wrote in 1924–1925, for example: "The task of propaganda is not to objectively present the truth, but to convince the masses." and "Never try to convert the masses to your opinion in the morning sun. Instead, dim lights are useful - especially in the evening when people are tired, their powers of resistance are small and their complete emotional capitulation is easy to achieve" (Social Studies School Service n.d.).

These political moves and methods were widely used in the period preceding the time point that Riefenstahl recorded. However, a few months (even years) before the Congress, Goebbels began a campaign of persecution of artists and burning books. Namely, the Germans believed that part of the identity of the people was tied to their literature. So, due to the National Socialists' belief that Jews were undesirable people in Germany, they believed that their literature was also a threat to society. For this reason, in 1933, they began burning books. In April 1933, the Association of German Students (DS) and the National Association of German Socialist Students (NSDStB) organized "Action against the Jewish Destruction of German Literature". These two organizations invited members and announced the public burning of Jewish literature (Lelas 2019:7). "Blacklists" (*Schwarzen Listen*) of undesirable authors and works began to be compiled, and it became dangerous to own left-wing literature. During March

1933, there was a plan within the Ministry to burn books, even entire libraries, and the National Socialist Party and journalists supported the action, resulting in illegal confiscation and destruction of books. In April 1933, two manifestos were written - "Twelve Theses Against the Un-German Spirit" and "Fiery Speeches" - which were read at book burnings. On the night of May 10, 1933, public book burnings began across Germany, for which preparatory activities had been organized the day before - tons of books were brought to the meeting places. Goebbels was present at the Berlin book burning and also gave a significant speech (Lelas 2019:18). Brenner talks about the media perception of this act, that is, that the book burning was covered by the media in Germany and abroad (Brenner 1992:65-67).

The historical events described here are important because of the perception of what is shown in the film, or rather, what is not in the film. Namely, although more specific anti-Semitic events only followed later - in 1935, the anti-Semitic law known as the Nuremberg Laws, and three years later, Kristallnacht, and then the camps and the most horrific genocide the world has ever seen, the fact is that an anti-Semitic atmosphere prevailed in Germany. It seems that Leni Riefenstahl can, therefore, be justifiably criticized for ignoring the situation that she could not have been unaware of. However, it is difficult to place on her shoulders the burden of everything that makes us judge the film as immoral.

Another piece of information is important for understanding the historical context - Dachau, the first concentration camp, was established in March 1933. In its first years, it was primarily a camp for German communists, social democrats, and other opponents of the Nazi regime. After 1935, i.e., after the establishment of the Nuremberg Laws and after Kristallnacht, it became primarily a camp for Jews (Dachau n.d.).

Bach is right; *Triumph of the Will* can be seen as two films - one for the audience of the 1930s and the other for us today. In this sense, it makes sense and connects with Eaton's target audience. One is a film for those who saw it then; it is ignorant of the things to come, and those who watched it then had a different view of it than we do today. It is another film for us, in which we see Auschwitz, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Dresden, or the Nuremberg Tribunal (Bach 2007:140).

The specificity and phenomenon of what is happening with *The Triumph of the Will* is that subsequent events conditioned the immorality, which was not necessarily related to the film itself. We can imagine (some nicer) world in which *Triumph of the Will* was simply a propaganda or documentary aesthetically impressive work of art from 1934, about a man who had the support of the masses and grand political ambitions, a rather right-wing ideology, who did not realize them. The question is, would we see the film as immoral in that case? Without intending to diminish the interpretative power with which it is usually interpreted as an immoral work here, but the question is: what is it conditioned by? The answer should be: from something external to the film itself. We can also imagine a situation where, for example, a person watches the film who knows absolutely nothing about the Second World War. In that case,

the interpretation would depend on what the film depicts, not on our knowledge of historical information. It is evident that if we focus on interpreting the film's content, which should primarily concern its representational properties or the content it represents, we will struggle to defend the film's immorality.

As for the target audience, *Triumph of the Will* is a successful (artistically) propaganda film that presents Hitler and the idea of National Socialism as the correct, desirable, beautiful political worldview and life option. The same film is morally completely unbearable today but also artistically very successful. How Leni Riefenstahl masterfully "convinces" us of the correctness of what we now know with certainty to be more immoral is genuinely worthy of artistic admiration. It is immoral, among other things, because it is false; that is because it successfully presents to us a false value as one that we should admire.

None of this leads us to a form of relativism according to which the same work can be simply "morally good" in one context and "morally bad" in another. The basic moral standards - concerning, for example, political oppression, violence, or racism - remain stable across contexts. What changes is which features of the work are epistemologically and interpretively accessible, and how much background knowledge we are entitled to bring into our evaluation. In the case of *Triumph of the Will*, our current assessment is shaped by a historically informed awareness of what National Socialism actually achieved, not by a change in basic moral principles.

So, all of the above, and related to the historical context of the film's creation and artist, points to several key things - *Triumph of the Will* did not show the full complexity of the moment it seeks to document. We cannot view Leni Riefenstahl as (completely) innocent in depicting the Congress because the image she offered us is an embellished picture of the political situation; ignoring certain events of which she was a contemporary is highly significant. However, it is equally correct to say that the film itself, in terms of content, does not represent everything that we know will happen as a result of Hitler's rule, that is, what kind of horrible world will emerge from the glorification and blind adherence to the Nazi political ideology that the film presents to us as acceptable.

Conclusion

This presentation of the problems that *Triumph of the Will* brings has shown us why I believe I am right when I claim that, although perceived as immoral, it is not the ideal example of immoral art, or at least not an ideal example of content immorality. Its ethical evaluation and determining it as immoral rests on a whole series of background information, which is not an integral part of the work and is not necessarily provided by the film. Namely, art often counts on the audience entering the interpretation with specific knowledge and attitudes. However, in the example of *Triumph of the Will*, handling background information, awareness of the author's intention, her doubtful epistemic and moral reliability and responsibility, and noticing the complexity of the interpretational context are tools that go beyond the usual way of interpreting and

evaluating works of art. The extensive research that the film requires makes it problematic for discussion and challenging to consider it a paradigmatic example of immoral art. Given that it can be interpreted in terms of genre both as a documentary film and as a film of propaganda art, and that it can be interpreted from the context of the time when it was created, which is different from the context of the time in which we interpret it today, it seems that its immorality is not fixed and intrinsically, unequivocally written into the work itself. Therefore, it is inadequate to be a paradigmatic example of immoral art.

However, this new reading of the film does not diminish the importance of the value interaction discussion. On the contrary, it only shows how complex and important the discussion is. This example emphasizes the importance of evaluating from both the content and production sides, considering the foundations of the interpretation and the completeness of the creation process, and the author's figure. At the same time, this procedure that has been undertaken for the value interaction discussion that is yet to come is too complex to serve as a guide for examples of other works. On the contrary, the complexity of *Triumph of the Will* is the exception rather than the rule, which further argues in favor of its difficulty in serving as a paradigmatic example.

Although I cannot offer an entirely positive explanation here, the discussion I have presented points to a dynamic, hybrid view of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical value. Rather than strongly prioritizing moral over aesthetic value or vice versa, it is suggested that different contexts, genres, and, obviously, the conditioning of audience attitudes can influence which value is perceived as crucial. In the case of *Triumph of the Will*, aesthetic achievement and ethical failure are tightly intertwined, but not in a way that allows for a simple, one-way reduction of one domain to the other. Any adequate evaluation must keep both dimensions in mind and monitor how they interact in different temporal and interpretive contexts.

In this text, I have shown why the complexity of the film *Triumph of the Will* is inappropriate for it to be taken as a paradigmatic example in the discussion of immoral art. Namely, I have shown that its content is questionably immoral and that two different time perspectives also condition different interpretations or evaluations. When we add to this the widely known discussion of the film genre and notion of author (un)reliability, this results in the possibility of obtaining very diverse positions and the impossibility of generating one precisely founded and unquestionable type of immorality. Despite our primary beliefs that the film is immoral, its immorality is not as unambiguous. At the same time, the film is extremely valuable, apart from its aesthetic value, as it is cognitively and morally challenging and offers us an opportunity for moral and cognitive progress. However, for such an understanding, observing the previously mentioned key elements is necessary.

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Milica Černi Urban

Ponovno preispitivanje prihvaćenog: slučaj *Trijumf volje*

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad kritički preispituje film *Trijumf volje* i njegovu široko prihvaćenu ulogu paradigmskog primera nemoralne umetnosti. Iako se često navodi u raspravama o debati o interakcionoj vrednosti i etičkoj kritici umetnosti kao nemoralno umetničko delo, rad tvrdi da složenost filma podriva njegovu podobnost kao jasnog i nedvosmislenog primera nemoralnosti u umetnosti. Razmatrajući njegovu nemoralnost iz različitih perspektiva i oblika nemoralnosti (sadržaj, produkcija, autorstvo), rad ističe ambivalentnost filma, naročito kada se tumači kroz različite vremenske i žanrovske okvire. Ovaj tekst ispituje pojmove sadržaja, umetničkih namera i pouzdanosti, dovodeći u pitanje samu debatu o nemoralnosti filma kroz sučeljavanje propagande, dokumentarnog pristupa i istorijskog konteksta. Rad nudi opsežnu analizu umetničkih postupaka, estetskih dostignuća, žanrovskih odrednica i istorijskih podataka, naglašavajući potrebu da se razume složenost ovog slučaja. Ovakva detaljna analiza pruža novo čitanje filma, ukazujući na to da njegova nemoralnost u velikoj meri zavisi od pozadinskog znanja, istorijske distance i perspektive publike. Shodno tome, rad zaključuje da, iako je *Trijumf volje* moralno i politički problematičan, obimni zahtevi istraživanja i interpretacije čine njegovu upotrebu kao temeljni primer u raspravama o nemoralnoj umetnosti problematičnom i pozivaju na veću kritičku nijansiranost.

Ključne reči: *Trijumf volje*, Leni Rifenštal, nemoralna umetnička dela, etička kritika umetnosti, debata o interakciji vrednosti, propagandna umetnost, istorijski kontekst, umetnička name-ra, estetska i moralna vrednost