

Joseph Garncarz

Olympia – Teil 1: Fest der Völker, Teil 2: Fest der Schönheit (Olympia – Part 1: Festival of the Nations, Part 2: Festival of Beauty, Leni Riefenstahl, 1938)

The XIth Olympic Games of 1936 in Berlin were a media event. For the first time the Olympic Games were broadcast on the radio internationally, with live comments by 105 reporters. It was also the first time that TV participated: the moving images were transmitted live to 28 public TV rooms in Berlin, Potsdam and Leipzig, for around 160,000 spectators. However, film was still the dominant medium for moving images at the time, with approximately 33,000 cinemas in Europe alone.

Before 1936, most reports on the Olympic Games in the form of moving images were integrated into newsreels, but in 1936, a feature-length, two-part documentary film was made: *Olympia*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl. *Olympia* cost 2,8 million Reichsmark, which was eleven times the average budget of a German production of the time. With an enormous investment in labour and logistics, 240 hours of film were shot, mostly during the 16 days of the Olympic Games, and it took 1 1/2 years of post-production to assemble the 217 minutes of the finished film.

Olympia was realised upon Adolf Hitler's personal request, financed with public funds and produced by the Olympiade-Film GmbH, which was founded in 1935 to cover up the Nazi-regime's backing. Hitler allowed Riefenstahl total artistic and organisational control, which already during shooting she exploited for her self-presentation as artistic genius. She suggested that the film should premiere on Hitler's birthday, 20 April 1938, in Berlin; subsequently, it was distributed in Germany through 120 copies, a very large number at the time. Riefenstahl had established herself with the Nazi regime through her films of the *Parteitage der NSDAP* ('conventions of the Nazi party'). Especially *Triumph des Willens (Triumph of the Will, 1935)* on the convention of 1934 in Nuremberg demonstrated that she knew how to film a political mass event in accordance with the regime's concepts and aims.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) had chosen Germany as site for the XIth Olympic Games in 1931. The Nazis, who came to power in 1933, passed more than 50 laws that eliminated Jews from Germany's public sphere, before the systematic genocide was begun in 1941. Hitler recognised the Olympic Games as an opportunity to 'raise foreign currency as well

as our international standing' (Picker 1993: 305). At the Olympic Games Nazi Germany presented itself as a cosmopolitan and peaceful country, e.g. some Jewish-German athletes were allowed to participate, and anti-Semitic propaganda temporarily disappeared from public view. Victor Klemperer, a professor for Romanic languages and literature, who had lost his position at the Technische Hochschule Dresden due to his Jewish background, recorded in his diary on 13 August 1936: '[T]he silver medal in fencing that went to Germany was won by a Jew, Helene Mayer (I do not know where the greater shamelessness lies: in her appearance as a German of the Third Reich or in the exploitation of her achievement by the Third Reich). ... Nazi chants are forbidden (for the duration of the [games of the] Olympiad) and agitation against Jews, warmongering, everything offensive has disappeared from the newspapers until 16 August; but also until that day, everywhere, day and night, swastika-flags are hissed. In articles written in English it is endlessly pointed out to "our guests" how peaceful and joyous our country is, while in Spain "communist hordes" commit robbery and manslaughter.' (Klemperer 1999: 122-3).

For the Nazis the Olympic Games of 1936 were a major political event. A film of the Olympic Games that explicitly transported the Nazi's ideology by glorifying the 'Aryan race' as superior to others would have been detrimental to the aims described above. Instead, the film's propagandist function would be furthered by depicting athletes of all nations and ethnicities in a free and fair contest. And the more this was elaborated aesthetically, the more culturally civilized the 'new Germany' would look, and the more prestige it would acquire.

In Germany, *Olympia* became the second most successful film of the 1937/38 season (the top hit was the comedy *Der Mustergatte* [*Model Husband*, 1937], with one of Germany's top stars, Heinz Rühmann). *Olympia* was banned in the USA and GB for reasons external to the film, after the so-called *Reichskristallnacht* on 9 November 1938, when the Nazis destroyed Synagogues, robbed Jewish shops and murdered many Jews. However, in the countries in which the film was shown, it was seen by large audiences and favourably received by many critics. In the foreign market it made more money than all German films of 1938 in total. International critics celebrated it as a 'masterpiece' and as the greatest sports film of all time (Trimborn 2002: 267). It won many international awards - in Fascist countries such as Italy (*Coppa Mussolini* at the Venice film festival) as well as democratic countries such as Sweden (Polar Prize). How can this international success of a film that was financed by the Nazis and that celebrated an event that was of great political significance be explained?

Concerning the basic understanding of documentary filmmaking, *Olympia* does not

significantly differ from other documentary films of the 1920s and 1930s. Like Robert Flaherty with his films *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1934), Riefenstahl was not a distanced observer, but a creative constructor of reality. 'Legitimate' devices included staging of events as well as post-produced sound. For example, Riefenstahl used material filmed during training for the representation of competitions, such as the shots of the rowers from the perspective of the coxswain. With the exception of Hitler's opening speech, the film's voices and sound effects were completely dubbed in the Berlin sound studios. Two of the best-known German radio reporters of the day, Paul Laven and Rolf Wernicke, commentated. The music by Herbert Windt is in a style between late romanticism and early expressionism, which dramatises the events.

The film is formally divided into clearly separated segments. Most of the segments present competitions of the various Olympic disciplines. Others visualise concepts, such as the prologue of Part One on the origin of the Olympic idea and the apotheosis of Part Two on the beauty of athletic achievement. The film only presents a selection of the official 19 sports and 119 disciplines. Significantly, this selection is not based on representing the countries according to their rank in the medals table. Germany was the top-ranking country, followed by the USA, Hungary, Italy, Finland, France, Sweden, Japan, the Netherlands and the UK. The selection is based on the principles of showing the 'classic' disciplines, e.g. the 100-metre-sprint, the marathon and the decathlon, as well as those disciplines that particularly display the beauty of athletic bodies. The order does not follow the chronology of the Olympic Games, but is an arrangement according to aesthetic and dramatic principles.

The aesthetic innovations of the film can be more fully understood by comparing it with previous newsreel reports. Newsreels only showed a selection of competitions in static shots, because there was no material available with which to represent the drama of the events. The main reason for this was that before 1936 only a few cameras were allowed on the site of the Olympic Games, and their positions were strictly regulated. According to the official report on the Olympic Games of 1932 in Los Angeles, only '[f]our News Reel concerns were permitted to have one motion picture camera each on the fields or platforms of the various Stadiums where competitions were being held. Inasmuch as most of the motion picture film was taken in sound, and the necessary equipment could not easily be moved from place to place, these pictures were mainly taken from fixed positions agreed upon in advance of the Games.' (Xth Olympiad Committee of the Games of Los Angeles 1933: 172).

In contrast to the feature-film on the Olympic Games of 1936, which was shown 1 1/2 years after they ended, the newsreel films reported on the events contemporaneously. However, on the order of the Ministry of Propaganda, the newsreel companies accredited for the Olympic Games, Ufa, Tobis-Melo and Fox, were supervised by Riefenstahl - and of course she privileged her own camera-team in the competition for the best positions. Riefenstahl did everything to obtain a myriad of extraordinary images. She shot almost all of the scenes without sound so that she could use light, mobile cameras. She demanded the development of new devices, e.g. a camera on tracks for parallel movements along with athletes, a tiny hand-camera for shots from the perspective of athletes, and an extreme telephoto lens for unobtrusive filming of athletes and spectators. Furthermore, Riefenstahl chose a multitude of highly unusual camera positions, for which she often fought bitterly with the IOC and the local organizational committee. She used steel towers, cranes, captive balloons, and zeppelins for shots from above, and trenches were dug for shots from below. Last but not least she employed dozens of cameramen. There were six head cameramen, Hans Ertl, Walter Frentz, Guzzi Lantschner, Kurt Neubert, Hans Scheib and Willy Zielke, and at least 38 cameramen (as far as are known by name) working under them. Riefenstahl perfected the efficiency of the team by delegating specific tasks to each division: Ertl was the specialist for underwater shots, Frentz and Lantschner for the hand-camera, Neubert for slow-motion shots, and Scheib for telephoto shots; Zielke filmed and edited the prologue.

Thus, Riefenstahl obtained many types of images that were new to the audience then – but that have become common in TV sports reports today. Such images include the faces of athletes before the competition, close-ups of the competitions themselves, travelling shots parallel to runners, circling shots around discus-throwers, underwater shots of divers, the cheering audience and overhead-shots of the stadium.

But these unusual images were only the material on which the even greater aesthetic innovations of *Olympia* were based: Riefenstahl created an experience of presence for the film audience, which was previously reserved for live audiences of the Olympic Games. In contrast to the newsreel-reports, which focused on results, Riefenstahl's film was process-oriented, in order to recreate the drama of the competitions. Thus, even when the results of the competitions were already known, the spectator could become emotionally involved in the events. For this purpose, Riefenstahl used techniques established in narrative, fictional films to promote identification with athletes and build suspense. The 100-metre-sprint may serve as an example. Three qualifying runs and the final run are shown. From the beginning, suspense is built by the comment that 'the

USA's fastest runner, Jesse Owens' is among the athletes. We see him achieve a world record in a qualifying run, but it is revoked because of tailwind. The emotional involvement is promoted through shots of the concentrated and nervous faces of the athletes, whose names and nationalities are stated. We see the phase of preparation, the signal-giver, the athletes on their marks, but also failures such as a false start – and then the climactic final run.

Riefenstahl not only dramatised the sports events, but also idealised the Olympic Games as a 'Festival of the Nations' and a 'Festival of Beauty' (the subtitles of the two parts). In contrast to the fictional films of the Third Reich, in documentaries, including *Olympia*, swastika-flags, the political leaders, especially Hitler, and Germans giving the Hitler-salute are shown. In contrast to *Triumph des Willens*, in which Hitler is idealised as a 'saviour', in *Olympia* he mostly appears as an individual who freely expresses his emotions. Hitler is shown as an easygoing, average sports-fan, who cheers the Germans' successes and is disappointed in their failures – an image connoting *Mitmensch* ('fellow human being') rather than *Übermensch* ('super-human').

Some sequences do not deal with the competitions between nations, but stress the commonalities of the athletes, e.g. the morning training at the beginning or the apotheosis at the end of Part Two, which shows divers without mention of national origins or results. The divers seem to transcend gravity when their feats are composed into movement-images in the style of 'abstract films'. Such images do not convey competition, but the beauty of athletic prowess for its own sake. Riefenstahl's depictions of athletic, strong and beautiful bodies may be fascist in their context, even though they were common before and beyond the Third Reich. The functionalisation of these 'body aesthetics' for fascist ideology is a frame of reference not made explicit in the film and therefore dependent on the spectator – thus, these aesthetics could also be appreciated by others with a different frame of reference. Whereas Riefenstahl's technical innovations and semi-fictional devices had a lasting, international influence on sports reporting, this was not the case for her distinctive aestheticisation of the body inspired by abstract film.

To enable the film's success in as many foreign countries as possible, several versions in different languages - French, English and Italian - were produced. The German version was not only shown in German-speaking countries, but also exported to countries speaking none of the other languages. Only the Italian version was produced in the Cinecittà studios in Rome; the other versions were made in Berlin.

Furthermore, the different versions were not just linguistic translations: the presentation of the Olympic Games was 'nationalised' for different contexts. Mostly, the same film material

was used, but significant replacements and additions were made. In newsreels produced by the different countries themselves, orientation towards local preferences had always been the rule: they predominantly reported on the athletes of their own country, favourite sports etc. Such variations had usually been the result of different producers, but for the Olympic Games of 1936 total control over the different versions lay in the hand of one person - Riefenstahl.

For several years after the introduction of sound in 1929, the production of 'multiple language versions' (separate films with more or less the same story, but with local actors, sometimes different settings etc.) was a common and successful practice for exporting fictional films, because it made domestic productions more understandable, culturally acceptable and popular abroad. Smaller countries subtitled films, but several larger countries - e.g. Germany, France, GB, Italy and Spain - produced versions, which was more expensive and only economically viable for large markets. For example, since national audiences of the time favoured their own stars, using local actors made these versions much more popular than dubbing would have. Similarly, the export versions of *Olympia* employed the sports reporters of the respective target countries as voice-over commentators. The reporters also appear on-screen: they are shown commenting in actual presence at the Olympic Games, which gives the 'nationalised' reports a feel of authenticity.

The export versions partly show different events and partly show the same events differently. Competitions won by the target country were given priority in the respective export version. For example, a sailing regatta and a fencing match that the Italians won is shown in the Italian, but not the German version. The Anglo-American version does not include fencing at all, because neither the British nor the Americans won any medals in that sport. Disciplines especially favoured by certain countries are shown only in the versions made for them, e.g. wrestling in Greco-Roman style is only included in the Italian version. Athletes who did not win any medals are usually only shown in the version for their country of origin.

However, the nationalisation of the versions never went so far as to contradict the internationality of the Olympic idea. On the contrary: the versions all present their local athletes more prominently than the other versions do, but all of them have in common that the American athletes Jesse Owens and Glenn Morris are featured as the top stars, because they won the most medals. For example, Glenn Morris' triumph at the decathlon is elaborately presented as a dramatic individual struggle against his countrymen Bob Clark and Jack Parker. Furthermore, Afro-American Jesse Owens is given 'star treatment' in the presentation of the 100-metre-sprint,

in which he won the gold medal. From the 19 competitions, Riefenstahl selected four, among them all three in which Owens participated. She shows the events not in chronological order, but in a dramatic progression, suggesting that Owens steadily improved with every event. Not only is his status as favourite emphasised verbally from the beginning, he is also portrayed in a higher number of close-ups than any of the other runners. The only event without Owens that is shown is the one in which a German, Erich Borchmeyer, qualified (he came in fifth in the final, a fact the film does not mention). Compared to the film, even when taking into consideration its racist remarks, the local German radio reports much more blatantly portrayed the 100-metre-sprint as a fight between races (black vs. white) and worlds (USA vs. Europe) (Radio report on the 100-metre-sprint, 3 August 1938).

How successful this international marketing strategy of *Olympia* was can be demonstrated by the reactions of Luxemburg critic Evy Friedrich in the daily newspaper *Escher Tageblatt* (Lesch 2002: 127). At first (17 June 1938) he vehemently complains about the second part of the German version: '[S]everal sports are completely missing, including bicycling, wrestling and heavy athletics. That is all the more deplorable, because France is not given the opportunity to show its achievements. Thus, we must observe what we did not believe was the case a week ago in first part, that a certain tendency was smuggled into the film, namely the clear tendency to present Germany once again as the best and strongest country, at least of Europe' – which it was, at least in the medals table. One month later (15 July 1938) Friedrich changed his opinion: 'Some time ago we observed here that in the two *Olympia*-films all the competitions that the French won were missing. That was true for the original German version. But recently, first in Brussels, then in Paris, the French version, called *Les dieux du stade*, was shown. Behold: in this version, not made for Germany, all the competitions that the French won are included.' Friedrich goes on to recommend that the Luxemburg exhibitors should show only the French version.

Riefenstahl's *Olympia* is propagandistic in a manner that is frequently underestimated - especially by the critical theorists of the 1960s and 1970s, who criticised their parent generation for their role in Nazism and rejected all films of the Third Reich as symbolic representations of Fascism. No matter how one interprets and judges *Olympia* regarding Nazi ideology, the film's two main aims were to 'raise foreign currency as well as our international standing' (as Hitler put it). To achieve this, Riefenstahl adapted two strategies from fictional films for her documentary. Firstly, she developed aesthetic devices that were innovative, compared to prior filmic reports of the Olympic Games, and that gave spectators the feeling of being present at the dramatic events

by involving them emotionally. Secondly, export versions catering to the preferences of the target countries were produced, which nationalised the presentation of the Olympic Games, but also represented the Olympic idea of a fair international contest. Since *Olympia* earned more money on foreign markets than all other German films of 1938 put together, Riefenstahl clearly reached the first aim. Whether the film also achieved its second aim, i.e. to internationally disseminate an image of the XIth Olympic Games that made Nazi Germany look like a cosmopolitan and peaceful country, is more difficult to estimate. The ‘success’ of the film in this respect depended on contemporary spectators, and thus varied with different contexts and individuals. While the film probably did not change Germany’s image with spectators who knew what was happening in Germany and were opposed to Fascism, spectators who were oblivious of Nazi politics may have come to believe that all was well in the state of Germany.

Translation by Annemone Ligensa

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