

Olympiad (1938; reissued 1995). Directed and produced by Leni Riefenstahl. Distributed by Timeless Video Inc. 212 mins.

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Film criticism and sports journalism share a weakness for hyperbolic blurbs and blathering superlatives. Even a middling performance by a player in either arena generates a cascade of wild exclamations and five-star ratings. Best, then, when merging the two crafts and ruminating over a sports film, to stifle the exuberance, rein in the rhetoric, and stop bellowing like a bare-chested football fan with his torso painted in the home team colors.

Or maybe not: Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympiad* (1938) is the greatest sports documentary ever made—period, full stop, end of discussion. As a purely artistic achievement, it executes a perfect 10 for sports spectacle and cinematic style; as a historical document, it chronicles the most meaningful of all Olympic moments; and as a template for the genre, it cast the mold and still sets the standard for athletic filmmaking. In the entire wide world of sports on screen, there is nothing quite like it. This is not necessarily a compliment.

Like the 1936 Berlin Olympics Games it enshrines, *Olympiad* was staged to showcase Germany renascent, a nation reborn out of the flames of the Great War and the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty, a fatherland on the march, its children virile and fit, superhuman in physical prowess, and ready to compete at the top of their game for a thousand years. In image and ethos, the Olympic ideal and the Nazi ideal are at once spiritually linked (in the quest for physical perfection) and diametrically opposed (in the unity of man and the peace of nations): that tension (and connection) between Nazism and the Olympics makes for a uniquely hypnotic and repellent spectatorial experience. Perhaps it is really not inappropriate that the most memorable of all Olympic films should be produced under the aegis of the Third Reich.

As befits its epic dimensions, the production was planned with the precision of a military campaign and trusted to a battle-tested field marshal: Leni Riefenstahl, the thirty-four-year-old director who had risen to fame in the 1920s as an actress playing the ethereal Teutonic ideal in the high altitude "mountain films" of Arnold Fanck, and to infamy in the early 1930s as the auteur of *Triumph of the Will* (1935), the chilling celebration of the 1934 Nazi Party Congress rally in Nuremberg. Over the objections of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, always her bitter rival for Hitler's favor, Riefenstahl was given the plum assignment of showing the world what the Nazis were made of as gracious hosts and fierce opponents. "After completing the 'set exercises' [of *Triumph of the Will*], Leni Riefenstahl could finally turn to the free programme," quipped film historian Ranier Rother.¹

Herself an accomplished dancer and athlete, Riefenstahl began training for the main event in the summer of 1935. To capture the simultaneous actions of a series of live competitions permitting no retakes required a pre-production regimen as rigorous as any Cecil B. DeMille spectacle. Supervising a team of thirty-four cameramen and a crew of 140, she

photographed the action from six permanent sites on the field, from dozens of points around the stadium, and wherever else she could finagle a camera set-up—alongside bikers and marathoners, in swimming pools and rowboats, under and over pole vaulters, shot putters, and discus throwers. Not satisfied with the aerial shots of the Olympic Stadium taken from the Hindenberg Zeppelin, she sent unmanned cameras aloft in balloons with instructions to finders to return the exposed film by mail. In the documentary *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (1993), director Ray Muller brings the grand dame back to stroll through the Olympic Stadium, where she exhibits total recall of every focal length, lens, and camera set-up she used over half a century earlier. "I wanted to make a liaison of sports and the cinema," Riefenstahl told *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1965. "It was the fusion of static shots, rhythmic shots, and shots animated by technical movement that gave the film its life, its rhythm."²

Of course, sports coverage had been a regular feature of the newsreels since the dawn of cinema. Even more than straight news stories, the public appetite for sports footage had helped spur technical innovations in motion picture photography. The development of lightweight 35mm cameras and telephoto lenses and the deployment of slow motion, reverse action, and freeze frames—the techniques that ABC's Roone Arledge would later bring to television sports coverage—were pioneered in the 1930s for the newsreels.

Riefenstahl advanced the art exponentially: *Olympiad* plays like a primer on what the motion picture medium was capable of in 1936. Merging the traditions of the unchained camera of German Expressionism, the jagged rhythms of Soviet montage, and the crackpot mythos of Fritz Lang's version of *Die Nibelungen* (1924), Riefenstahl orchestrated a Wagnerian symphony of sports that kept time to a cinematic beat.

The production phase marked only the opening laps of the director's own marathon. After filming, she spent over eighteen months editing hundreds of hours of raw footage, painstakingly modulating pacing and calibrating motion to fit film style to Olympic event. Riefenstahl wanted the cinematic grammar to pulsate like a heartbeat, to capture the rhythms and strain of the athletes in harmony with the demands of the event—the lateral movement of the camera as it pans with the javelin toss, the agonizing "slo-mo" of the pole vaulter willing himself up and over the bar, and the step-by-step cutting and dissolves that render the weariness and endurance of the marathon runners. In tune with the visual conceit, the sound track was woven into the fabric of the whole with equal care during an elaborate post-production mix: crowd roars, partisan chants, national anthems, and the evocative musical score by Herbert Windt. Though sports commentators offer discreet play-by-play in voiceover, the film can play virtually without language.

Olympiad is divided into two acts: Part I ("Festival of the People") showcases the track and field events, and Part II ("Festival of Beauty") focuses on the pentathlon, the decathlon, and swim meets. Due to its unwieldy running time (220 minutes) and the vagaries of international distribution, prints of *Olympiad* exist in many different versions, with abbreviated running times and spoken commentary in different languages. Moreover, after the war, the film circulated widely in bootlegged prints. In the mid-1960s, however, Riefenstahl reestablished her copyright control and Janus Films began distributing an auteur-approved version. Astonishingly—and to many, shamefully—she earned royalties on *Olympiad* until the day she died. An authorized DVD has yet to be released.

The opening sequence is a classic of Nazi *kitsch*: from the misty cradle of civilization in ancient Greece, marble statues morph into the perfectly sculpted bodies of flesh and blood athletes. The Olympic torch is passed from one sinewy, loin-clothed runner to another sinewy loin-clothed runner until a modern Hermes enters the Olympic Stadium in Berlin, presided over by Adolf Hitler, the torch passed from the glory that was Greece to the glory that is Nazi Germany.

Then, as now, a garish and glacial parade of athletes under flags of many nations must be endured before the starting gun fires. As fresh-faced Olympians stream past the führer, an alarming number cheerfully pay homage with the upraised arm of the Nazi salute (to their credit, Team USA puts hands over heart). The cutaway shots to the crowd in the stands reveal a well-dressed, well-fed, and seemingly nonpartisan swarm of sports fans: nationalist fervor overcome by an open-armed embrace of athletic accomplishment regardless of race or nation. The glimpses of the talismanic icons of Nazism—the swastika, the eagles, the banners, the uniforms, the salutes—are startling but set in relief against Riefenstahl's other masterpiece, *Olympiad*, are more palatable if only because athletes parading in sports uniforms have replaced SA troops marching in lockstep.

As self-contained units, all of the sequences repay repeated viewing, but the pole vaulting interlude is exceptionally beautiful: first, close up shots of the athletes preparing to run, strain and concentration etched on their faces and then low angle shots of their bodies silhouetted against the night sky, floating over the bar. Another highlight is the marathon montage that closes Part I, a famous set piece where a herd of undifferentiated runners telescopes by attrition into a single man, Sohn Kee Chung, who wins for Japan.

Part II opens with the dappled chiaroscuro of golden hour cinematography. During a training session in the Olympic village, gorgeous young men swim, run, bathe, and engage in roughhouse shenanigans. As a director, Riefenstahl was always more smitten with the male than the female form, and her camera caresses the lithe bodies of the athletes with an affection that is almost homoerotic. For the most part, the events of Part II—yacht racing, rowing, the pentathlon, the decathlon, polo, and soccer—do not possess the dramatic intensity of the *mano a mano* dueling of the track meets, which may be why Riefenstahl pulled out all stops for the climax, the most flamboyant of all her montages: shot after shot of graceful, gravity-defying divers, propelled from spring boards, twirling and gliding through the air, more aviators than athletes. As a kind of coda, beams of light streak through the sky: the arena for the body is now a cathedral of the spirit.

Of course, no figure on the field matches the screen charisma of the number one fan in the stands. But where *Triumph of the Will* bowed before Hitler-the-God, descended from the heavens, haloed in sunlight, *Olympiad* unveils Hitler-the-Man, a more human leader, who, like any devoted sports fan, vicariously participates in the action on the field. To watch him clutch his knee nervously, lean forward eagerly, stand up excitedly, smile easily and laugh aloud at German victories is to recognize the man within the monster. With Göring and Goebbels jostling for pride of place at his side, der Führer could be a generous CEO rewarding his top executives with a weekend outing in the company skybox.

On April 20, 1938, Hitler's forty-ninth birthday, *Olympiad* was honored with a gala premiere at the Ufa Palast am Zoo, the theater garlanded with Greco-Nazi finery for the occasion. Thereafter, it was released internationally with commentary dubbed in the ap-

propriate native tongue. Throughout much of Europe, the director was fêted as a genius, and the film was acclaimed as a masterpiece. At the Venice Film Festival, it won the Mussolini Cup, beating out, to the consternation of American film critics, Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

In November 1938, Riefenstahl traveled to the United States to publicize the film and negotiate stateside distribution, but within days of her arrival the Nazi pogrom known as *kristallnacht* erupted in Germany. Thereafter, she was treated as a pariah. The Hollywood Anti-Nazi League rallied against her, and the major motion picture chains refused to book the film. In 1940, however, a specially edited version, polemically sanitized and narrated by a British commentator, played in New York. "Adolph Hitler is glimpsed for about fifteen seconds," commented the *New York Times*. "Americans will enjoy watching the numerous victories of our representatives in the track and field events."³

True enough: for Americans the man to watch remains the great African-American track star Jesse Owens, who despite not being a member of the blue-eyed, blonde-haired master race, won four gold medals. When Owens leaps past *ubermensch* poster boy Lutz Long in the long jump, one can almost hear the führer gnashing his teeth from up in his stadium box. (The oft-told tale of an infuriated Hitler then "snubbing" Owens by refusing to shake his hand is only partially true: informed earlier by the Olympic Committee that he would have to greet all champions or none, Hitler dispensed with private audiences for all the winning athletes rather than be sullied by an encounter with a non-Aryan victor. "I never much regretted not shaking Hitler's hand," Owens later remarked.)⁴ In retrospect, many of the races in the 1936 Olympics seem to be as much about race as speed, and not just for the Nazis. "Williams is a beautiful mover—he's a black panther!" exclaims the British announcer when Archie Williams moves up to defeat British runner Godfrey Brown in the 400-meter race. "That Negro's dangerous!"

No wonder *Olympiad* still has the power to outrage and unnerve. Like D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), it forces audiences to wrestle with the tension between aesthetic beauty and repugnant context. "A great lyric spectacle," marveled film critic Pauline Kael. "Despite Hitler's Aryan myth [Riefenstahl] knew beauty when she saw it: in the throbbing veins of Jesse Owens's forehead . . .; in the lean Japanese swimmers; in the divers soaring in flight so continuous than they have no nationality."⁵ Less kindly, critic Susan Sontag viewed *Olympiad* as very much of a piece with *Triumph of the Will*, another fascist primer on the cult of the body beautiful. Riefenstahl's embrace of non-Aryan racial types was generous as long as the racial types were in perfect shape. "Fascist art displays a utopian aesthetics—that of physical perfection," Sontag wrote, but even she admitted that "Riefenstahl's promotion of the beautiful, it must be said, was much more sophisticated. . . . She appreciated a range of body types; in matters of beauty she was not a racist."⁶ Ultimately, aesthetics not eugenics framed Riefenstahl's cinematic vision.

For her part, Riefenstahl always steadfastly denied that the film was commissioned as Nazi propaganda, but documentary evidence, not to say common sense, refutes her defensive ploys: a free agent would not have been given such access, equipment, and deference. She and Joseph Goebbels may have squabbled over the final cut, but they saw eye-to-eye on the high concept.

Today, the visual legacy of *Olympiad* can be spied everywhere in a culture with its own fetishistic devotion to the cult of the body beautiful: in the biceps-bulging heroes and sleek

cyborgs of Hollywood cinema, in the buff specimens on the catwalks and Stairmasters, in Calvin Klein ads and Nike commercials, wherever a fit figure is needed to sell and seduce. The film has outlived even its long-lived auteur, who on September 8, 2003, died at the age of 101, and whose own once-beautiful body is featured in the prologue to *Olympiad*—nude, arms upraised, a statue come to life, the Greek marble form made pure Aryan flesh.



¹Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl: The Seduction of Genius*, trans. Martin H. Bott (London: Continuum, 2002), 78.

²Michel Delahay, "Interview with Leni Riefenstahl," *Cahiers du Cinema* (1965), reprinted in Andrew Sarris, ed., *Interviews With Film Directors* (New York: Avon Books, 1967), 462, 464.

³"At the 86th St. Garden Theatre," *The New York Times*, 9 March 1940, p. 19.

⁴The myth—later embroidered by Owens himself—is persuasively debunked in William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 90-91.

⁵Pauline Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies: A Guide from A to Z* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1982), 427-428.

⁶Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," reprinted in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 40.