

Olympia: The History of the Olympic Games on Film

By

Stephen D. Mosher

University of Massachusetts

Olympia - Festival of Nations and Festival of Beauty. Leni Riefenstahl's film record of the 1936 Olympic Games, remains today one of the most-talked-about-yet-seldom-seen motion pictures of all time. Because of the strong emotional and political feelings surrounding Riefenstahl and her film art, many misconceptions about *Olympia* have arisen and flourished during the past forty years. The purpose of this paper is to discuss from a critical point of view the entire *Olympia* film (as film on its own terms) in order to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments that propose *Olympia* to be (1) propaganda, (2) documentary or (3) art; and to offer the explanation that the film must be considered art, the function of which is to present a vivid, living picture of the Olympic spirit as it evidenced itself to Riefenstahl.

Olympia as Propaganda - Perhaps the most emotional arguments concerning *Olympia* revolve around the issue of its supposed propagandization of the Third Reich. There is little doubt that the opening prologue is a masterpiece of subliminal propaganda as it makes the successful connection between the ancient Greek spirit and the modern German spirit. The scenes of the equestrian events depict the uniformed Germans as calm and competent as they ride to victory while the other riders fall and stumble in a highly stylized form of slapstick comedy. Yet, only one German (Gisela Mauermayer) receives singular attention. The heroes of *Olympia*, if there are any, are Jesse Owens (a black American), Kitei Son (a Korean marathoner) and Glenn Morris (an American decathlete). Indeed, Riefenstahl takes great pains to avoid the overexposure of the successful German athletes to the point of unfairness.

Olympia as Documentary - The most obvious achievements attained by *Olympia* are in the area of technological aspects of film. Up to 1936 sport documentaries merely recorded action from long distances. *Olympia* makes the use of creative camera angles, slow motion, cameras under the water, cameras in the air, cameras on horses, cameras on boats, cameras everywhere. *Olympia* strives to transcend that actual documentation of the events of the Olympic Games at Berlin to achieve the universal timeless truth that is the Olympic spirit. In order to attain this end, *Olympia* quite naturally exceeds the limits of documentary to reach the level of art.

Olympia as Art - From the beginning *Olympia* is a surprise. Riefenstahl has said of her film, "I had the whole thing in my head. I treated the whole thing like a vision. I was like an architect building a house. The vision of *Olympia* is not that of wonderful performances of athletes as revealed in times and distances, but of athletes simply performing wonderfully. Riefenstahl's vision is the archetype of sport. During the *Festival of Beauty* the film seems to say, "Forget about the records and look at the important thing." The important thing is shown most clearly during the famous diving sequence that ends the film. It is quite clear that Riefenstahl's vision is a timeless one, locked into no particular history, no single era. The four elements of the ancient Greek universe - earth, fire, water and air - have been joined with the two elements of the modern universe - time and space - to result in the universal reality - the human condition. Man is not meant to fly. Man is not meant to be god. Man must fall. And yet, man must always try.

Conclusion - Certainly, never again in film history, will athletes be treated so lovingly as in *Olympia*. The greatness of *Olympia* rests in its own ability to transcend the trivial and mundane purposes of propaganda and documentary. *Olympia* even transcends itself and ends in a fiery death of self-consumption. It is appropriate that *Olympia* fulfills its own vision of sport, of history, of reality. *Olympia* is unmistakably art. *Olympia* is unmistakably true.