

BOOK REVIEWS

Mythos Olympia by Hilmar Hoffmann (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1993) and *Körper, Kult und Politik* by Thomas Alkemeyer (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1996). Reviewed by Allen Guttmann, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

The “Nazi Olympics” of 1936 were and probably still are the most controversial in the entire history of the modern games and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1938) remains the most controversial of Olympic films. Indeed, *Olympia* may be the most controversial documentary film ever made. These two books, *Mythos Olympia* and *Körper, Kult und Politik*, complement each other. Hoffmann has a good deal to say about the games themselves in his book on the film; Alkemeyer includes a discussion of the film in his book on the games and their *Inszenierung* (a useful word for which “staging” is an unsatisfactory English equivalent).

Hoffmann, who is a specialist for media studies, contextualizes *Olympia* (and also Riefenstahl’s overtly propagandistic *Triumph des Willen*) within a tradition of German films glorifying the human body. In his analysis, there is a direct line from the film *Wege zur Kraft und Schönheit* (1925), by Nicholas Kaufmann and Wilhelm Prager, to *Olympia*. Of the earlier film, Hoffmann writes, “Antiquity’s physical culture is placed next to the initiatives of modern physical culture, which reaches its apogee in the comparable achievements of famous dancers and outstanding athletes” (53). The film’s uncritical worship of strength and dexterity and its relentless critique of modern industrial civilization are, in Hoffmann’s view, “preparation for Hitler’s National Socialism” (53). Thirteen years later, *Olympia* “instrumentalizes sports for the political goals of the Third Reich” (136). Riefenstahl was “Hitler’s ideological courtesane” (107). Her relentless glorification of physically perfect bodies contributed to the Nazis’ program of “annihilation” aimed at the elimination of “the unworthy” (70).

Like Hoffmann, Alkemeyer analyzes the prologue to Riefenstahl’s film and its attempt to portray Berlin as the heir to Olympia, but Alkemeyer is more subtle and more effective than Hoffmann, whose overheated rhetoric can occasion reader bum-out. Alkemeyer contextualizes the film not only within the German tradition of physical culture, which begins in the late eighteenth century, but also within the tradition of Olympic philhellenism that began with Pierre de Coubertin and the Sorbonne conference of 1894. What Alkemeyer shows, conclusively, is that the Berlin Olympics and the film that documented and celebrated them were neither nonpolitical (as claimed, for instance, by Leni Riefenstahl and her many admirers) nor were they simply an expression of Nazi propaganda (as claimed by critics such as Ulrike Prokop and Jean-Marie Brohm). There were important similarities between Olympism and Nazism; there were also important differences.

Alkemeyer’s account of these similarities and differences is lengthy, theoretically sophisticated, complex, richly inclusive, and occasionally digressive. (The notes I

took *before* I decided to review the book run to eleven single-spaced pages.) The early chapters of *Körper, Kult und Politik* provide, among much else, an analysis of Europe's *fin de siècle* crisis, brought on by the stress and strain of modernization. The main focus of the first half of the book is on Coubertin's long search for a way to overcome the crisis.

Everyone knows how the search concluded, with the quadrennial celebration of what Coubertin himself referred to as *une religion de muscles*. For him, the Olympic athletes were -- in Alkemeyer's words -- "the quintessential earthly representatives of [Coubertin's] religion of muscles." Olympians were "the incarnation of a utopian image of humankind" (183). Between 1896, when the almost exclusively European athletes marched with impressive ceremony into Athens' refurbished stadium, and 1936, when the torch relay from Olympia to Berlin was first performed, Olympic ritual became increasingly elaborate. In Alkemeyer's view, Coubertin's dream of international reconciliation was less important than the form in which he sought to institutionalize it. "The Olympic idea," writes Alkemeyer, "never existed apart from its concrete manifestations" (214), which is why Alkemeyer spends as much time as he does on *Inszenierung*.

If Coubertin is, not surprisingly, the central figure of the first half of *Körper, Kult und Politik*, Carl Diem is, no more surprisingly, the central figure of the second half. Diem, who served as executive secretary of the organizing committee for the 1936 games, was unquestionably the man whose vision most shaped the ritual form given to these games. Diem, about whom German historians continue to come to shouts if not blows, was never a member of the Nazi party, but he was, in the 1920s, an extreme nationalist of the sort represented in German politics by Alfred Hugenberg.

His most significant contribution to the "Nazi Olympics" was probably the multimedia pageant, *Olympische Jugend*, on which he worked for years. The premiere, which took place on the evening of the opening day, involved thousands of performers, some of them famous, such as the dancers Mary Wigman, Gret Palucca, and Harald Kreutzberg. The composers Werner Egk and Carl Orff wrote the music to Diem's text. The first scene, performed by 3,400 boys and girls aged eleven and twelve, was entitled "Kindliches Spiel," but "childish play" gives way to (female) adolescent grace and then to youthful (male) heroism. In the climatic fourth scene, "Heldenkampf und Totenklage," young men enact a battle to death and are mourned by young women who play tribute to their sacrifice. Diem's text (426) is chilling:

Allen Spiels
heil'ger Sinn:
Vaterlandes
Hochgewinn
Vaterlandes höchst Gebot
in der Not
Opfertod!

(Literally: "Holy meaning of all play, Fatherland's great profit, Fatherland's great commandment, in time of need, sacrificial death!")

The emotional power of Diem's pageant and of the sports contests that followed was enormously enhanced by the architecture of the *Sportfeld*. In addition to the massive stadium, designed by Werner March, there were nude statues by Arno Breker, Josef Thorak, and other celebrants of the heroically athletic body. There were other enhancements: the *Führerturm*, the belfry of which housed a huge iron bell inscribed with Olympic and Nazi symbols (One hears and sees the bell in Riefenstahl's film); the *Langemarckhalle*, a mausoleum devoted to the (falsified) memory of German soldiers who fell in World War I; and the stadium for swimming events and a huge field upon which thousands gathered for displays of gymnastics. The aesthetics of this complex and its presumed impact on the spectators are masterfully analyzed by Alkemeyer. It is, however, a pity that this book which does so much with architecture and the visual arts has no illustrations. On this score, and this alone, Hoffmann's *Mythos Olympia* is the better book.

Through the *Marathon*, into this grand *Inszenierung*, marched Adolf Hitler. He may not have been "the object of every wishful identification" (481), which he sometimes seems to be in Riefenstahl's film, but he certainly appeared to be the recipient of international homage during the entry procession of the various national teams. (The "Olympic salute" given as the teams passed the *Führer's* box was not easily distinguishable from the *Hitlergru*.)

That Hitler would be there to receive the homage was by no means a foregone conclusion in the first weeks of his chancellorship. In the early 1930s, Nazi spokesmen had published many articles criticizing the Olympics as a liberal, individualistic, rationalistic, internationalist, multiracial phenomenon utterly foreign to the essence of the German *Volk*. Alkemeyer discusses this ideological opposition, which was best expressed by the Nazi theorist Alfred Baeumler, and he describes Hitler's unexpected decision to allow the organizing committee to continue its work despite the fact that Olympism contradicted the spirit of *Volkstum*. Hitler's motives were obvious. The games were a splendid opportunity to showcase the new regime and to demonstrate the physical prowess of a revitalized Germany. Hitler's sudden enthusiasm for the games rendered irrelevant Baeumler's elaborate critique of modern sports as the alien product of "the rationalistic spirit of positivism" (251).

No one doubts that the games and the film that documented them were a propaganda coup for the regime in that they seemed -- and to a considerable degree they *were* -- free from overt Nazi propaganda. Alkemeyer quotes Goebbels on this: "The best propaganda is that which is not perceived as such" (13). Nonetheless, it is a simplification and a distortion to describe the propaganda and conclude that the games were "misused" to support a totalitarian dictatorship. There were, as Henning Eichberg and many other scholars have shown, *formal* similarities between the ritualized staging of the Olympics and the ritualized staging of Nazi festivals, but one must consider content as well as form: "Next to the *how* of the *Inszenierung*," writes Alkemeyer, "one must also consider *what* has been staged" (422). Men and women can march, sing, and wave flags in the service of racist repression; they can also parade on behalf of human solidarity. If one examines the *what* as well as the *how*, one observes many similarities between Coubertin's *religion de muscles* and the Nazis' glorification of "Aryan" physicality, but the ideological similarities are by no means the whole story. The International Olympic Committee's invitation to

compete in Berlin went out to all the world's athletes, including many men and women whom the Nazis, quite literally, were to murder. Riefenstahl's worship of athletic bodies was color-blind. Jesse Owens is unquestionably one of the heroes of *Olympia* (much later the Nuba of the Sudan became the objects of Riefenstahl's adoration).

At the end of Alkemeyer's book -- the best of dozens devoted to the 1936 games -- one is left with a difficult ethical problem. Critics like Hoffmann assert that the glorification of the strong, by Coubertin and by the Nazis, is an implicit criticism of the weak. We can take their argument to its logical conclusion and say that the glorification of *any* human talent -- the artist's and the composer's, the physicist's as well as the athlete's -- is an implicit critique of those who lack the talent. This does not mean, however, that those of us who can't dance or understand Goedel's theorem or win an Olympic medal should be humiliated or -- in the worst of cases -- sent to our deaths. Coubertin's humane answer to the ethical problem of unequal talents was to accept inequality and to urge emulation. Olympism asks us to honor the victorious athlete, not merely as an individual but also as a symbolic representative of human achievement. As John Donne said (almost): No man is an island unto himself....Ask not for whom the flag waves; it waves for thee.