

## OLYMPIA: A looming war

Set against an era of looming war the film Olympia will be analyzed in the contextual setting of the late thirties whose dominant themes revolved around military issues. This is a historical military essay and will be linked and interpreted through the images and symbols of Olympia.

## OLYMPIA

Olympia was set against an era of looming war. The film was a historical document in that it represented both the present and foreshadowed the near future. The contextual meaning, composed of military related events, are the basis for extracting interpretations from the film and will serve in explaining how and why Olympia was shot the way it was. The military events that relate to the context of this film were composed of; the pacific war between China and Japan, the mounting tensions between the U.S. and Japan, the Spanish civil war, and the transformations leading ideological trends in German society in the thirties. In sum this essay will attempt to analyze Olympia in the contextual setting of the late thirties whose dominant themes revolved around military issues. This is a historical military paper and will be linked and interpreted through the images and symbols of Olympia.

For purposes of clarity, therefore, this essay will be divided into issues, which occurred within Germany, and issues that occurred on the international scene. Several links will be made between military events and Olympia, without necessarily being able to support it with written documented proof other than links that will be made to the images provided in the film. The reason being is that there is no historiography on a link between military issues and Olympia therefore the thesis and discussion of this essay is a first!

## THE CONTEXTUAL ISSUES WITHIN GERMANY

The events that formed German thought, from 1933 leading up to the making of Olympia influenced Riefenstahl's subconscious decision making in choosing what to shoot during the Olympics. The time period from 1933, Hitler's seizure of power, up to and including the two years it took to make Olympia, was important because this

era was the setting of what is perhaps the greatest propaganda campaign of all time. This was an era that Leni Riefenstahl was a part of and, whether provable with written documented proof or not in the context of this essay, its teachings will have had an effect on her subconscious thought as that is what propaganda is designed to do. Leni Riefenstahl's boss, Joseph Goebbels, propaganda minister in Germany, had a lot of say in the manner that the film portrayed German athletes. The Nazi party made it its business to control every facet of the media to assure that only the right type of information was released for both the Germany public and foreigners. In fact Hitler wanted Olympia to be so lavish that he gave Riefenstahl a blank check to make the film. Hitler hoped that Olympia would bring many prizes to the Aryan race demonstrating the racial inferiority of their competitors. Olympia's end result was that it succeeded in impressing Hitler's opponents to an extent where even the people who opposed the Nazi regime were approving of the lavish job that Riefenstahl had done.

The film opens with a pan shot, providing an ironic panoramic view of Ancient Greece, where the camera carefully guides us through the city's ruins. What makes this scene ironic was Germany's love of antiquity. Due to Hitler's love of antiquity, Greece was one of the only war zones in Europe that was not bombed at his strict orders. Furthermore, in Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series on World War II, we are shown a dive bomber that carefully glides over the city similar to Riefenstahl's opening panoramic shot in the opening scene. The opening scene in essence foreshadowed how Greece was saved from the destructive fate that all of Europe and Russia cities experienced. The following scene also used irony when it juxtaposed statue's faces and filmed them in a rhythmic repetitious manner. These images paralleled the lack of feeling on soldier's faces when they were being marched into submission with a conditioning process, called the "goose step". The opening scene also included a ballet of arms arranged in true Busby Berkeley fashion, which treated people like objects. Its treatment of people as objects foreshadowed the lack of humanity that German soldiers were going to convey in their war crimes. One could go further and suggest that the lack of humanity, in representing humans as objects, represented all of mankind during the destructive phases of World War II. The opening scenes, in terms of issues occurring inside Germany, provided a broad insight into Germany's views towards antiquity, which simulated the lack of humanity in Germany's future wartime actions.

Olympia's links from its opening scenes to the actual Olympics were quite vivid in their imagery linking both the devastation of war and the Nazi war camps. Following the rhythmic ballet sequence, after the establishing scene, a fire appeared which created an illusion as though people were set on fire. This scene provided a graphic illustration of irony, which could be paralleled, to the Jews who were sent to the incinerators where they were, in some cases, literally burnt alive between 1942-1945. We then travel the Olympic torch's journey from Greece to Germany during

which we saw series of maps illustrating all the nations leading to Germany. However the maps that appear on the film also trace Germany's invading armies to Greece six years later. In the scenes, which linked the establishing scenes and the actual games, Riefenstahl used the image of the swastika, which slowly dissolved to a cheering crowd in the stadium in Berlin. Essentially this imagery juxtaposed evil, represented by the swastika, and good represented by the unity and global community of the Olympic games. Ironically, both the Olympic and nazi salutes were similar which worked in favor of the nazis as the opening scenes illustrated a crowd which seems to be saluting Hitler, when in reality they were saluting the Olympic games. The cheering crowd also suggests that while people were enjoying themselves, Germany was successfully putting them to sleep by providing false images of it self while it cynically prepared for war.

The individual competitions in themselves provided a demonstration of the different talents that each country possessed which could be interpreted in their military usefulness. We can see, through these events, the various strengths that each country possessed as well as the rivalries that were taking shape. Germany had been rearming and re-training for a future war and therefore its strengths could be interpreted through the viewing of Olympia. An example is the disc and hammer throwing competitions requiring strength for throwing objects at a distance, which became relevant to military exercises when paralleled with the skill of throwing hand grenades. Furthermore Germany was very successful in the pistol competition, boating, and horses back riding events. Boating was obviously important during world war II as the control of the seas, particularly the Atlantic, meant that one could cut off supplies and essentially win battles, as was the case, in the Pacific ocean battles, the Crete campaign, and the African campaign. Horse back riding was important, on the other hand, because of Germany's warfare technique called Blitzkrieg or lightening warfare which implied a quick thrust into enemy lines whose aim was to catch the enemy by surprise therefore creating chaos on the opposite front. Blitzkrieg meant that one had to advance quickly regardless of the losses and therefore horseback riding became an important skill which helped foot soldiers keep up to the armored divisions.

The technique of blitzkrieg was highly dependent on the coordination of both land and air units. Germany, which was the first to develop using both air and land forces in the same operations, called, this technique of warfare, blitzkrieg. Therefore Germany put a lot of importance into developing their air force, which was an integral part of Blitzkrieg, and this influence filtered down into society. Riefenstahl, who was one of the people who was influenced by the pride of blitzkrieg, produced images in the diving and gymnastics events, which demonstrate this pride. Both these events focused on filming the athletes from low angles to create the illusion of being suspended in the air. These events, especially the diving sequences, have received acclaimed attention in the film industry.

The reason for emphasizing the creation of “suspension in the air”, other than the aforementioned, stems from Germany’s pride in rebuilding its air force. The Germans, because of the chaos and fear that their Zeppelins bombing raids caused in World War I, were prohibited from maintaining or building an air force under the Versailles treaty. This meant that starting in 1935 Germany had to rebuild its airforce and re-train pilots for the Luftwaffe. Frank Capra described the process of training and rebuilding a new air force in the following manner:

They did this by creating an after school activity where they would give children paper airplanes to play with. Then the planes got more sophisticated and eventually led to gliders. As the students got older they were given life size gliders to fly around in. Then finally they were admitted into pilot school, which caused a high level of enrollment. This process was infiltrated throughout society and was one that required training children, from a young age, to be air-minded.

This air mindedness and pride of the new air force, which became by far the largest at the beginning of the war, was a prominent ideology which influenced Riefenstahl to focus on air minded shots especially in the diving sequences.

Similar to Germany’s rebuilding of the air force and its emphasis on being air minded Germany instated regimentation on Germany society, which imposed repetition and rhythm. In this light rhythm is well worth mentioning in the parallel between military issue and Olympia. German society ever since World War I had been through a series of chaotic economic episodes which gave a leader like Hitler the chance to rise to power. However once Hitler enforced his rule he imposed a strict diet on Germany’s society which stressed long working days. Thus society geared all of its energies towards the building of war materials and therefore everything became dictated and controlled by the state. The most obvious was the goose step, the German military march, which every male in Germany had to learn. Every male had to join the Hitler youth, which is the equivalent of our boy scouts, and was drilled into the goose step. The goose step was renowned across the world for its ability to regiment an army into submission. Therefore all of this control which weaved in and out of various aspects of society may have influenced Riefenstahl to emphasize rhythm and the human body. Germany cleansed its armies to make sure that only the fittest and biggest males were accepted. Therefore the human body, focussing on issues of fitness directly related to Military exercises, and its importance in German society, was a key issue in the years leading up to the war. The focus on rhythm and regimentation paralleled Riefenstahl emphasis on close ups and slow motions of human bodies throughout this film. These were fine images of the athletes, especially German athletes that pleased the German propaganda

ministry very much. However Riefenstahl's emphasis on Jessie Owens raised a series of complicated questions involving racism and propaganda. Jessie Owens was just the tip of the iceberg as there was a wider issue of racial discrimination involving Jews.

The coverage of Jessie Owens sparked numerous discussions on racial discrimination and its relation to Olympia. On September 15, 1935 Germany began to restrict the Jews of their freedom by passing the Nuremberg laws which deprived them of their citizenship thus reducing them to subjects. This was important for the context of Olympia because Germany succeeded in convincing the world that nothing was wrong by inviting as many foreigners as possible into Germany. They also removed all of the Jewish hate signs, which had been a part of Jewish life, which dated back to Night of the Broken Glass where many Jewish businesses were looted and confiscated. Therefore by hosting the Olympics in 1936 and by providing a look at everyday life, of which Olympia was part of, Germany succeeded in putting the world to sleep and undermining the issue of Racism to a minimum. Thompson Bordwell believes that the footage on Jessie Owens helped undermined the film's propaganda where in reality it did the opposite, it created propaganda by giving the world a false sense of security by presenting Germany as a friendly nation. Hitler's strategy, enabling him to invade all of Europe, was his ingenious use, in the prewar years, of this image of false security which enabled him to conquer one country at a time without raising too much alarm. In relation to the film, false images of Germany and Riefenstahl's footage on Jessie Owens was used to convey a message that stated, nothing was wrong, when in fact racism was alive and well in German society.

Riefenstahl, whether knowingly or subliminally, was influenced by the dominant ideology of the era. Military thought and the preparation for war consumed this ideology and therefore, Riefenstahl, under direct scrutiny from the propaganda ministry, made a film that reinforced this dominant ideology. This ideology which composed the context of the making of Olympia, was the basis for observing the trends leading up to the making of the film to analyze how it was shot.

## MAJOR INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

However there were other issues, which influenced Riefenstahl, from outside Germany, which dealt primarily with military orientated issues, which also, influenced the film. These outside events were prominent enough to influence Riefenstahl, which led her to successfully foreshadow most of the upcoming events and battles in World War II. Riefenstahl in essence created ironies in the context of the late thirties, which quickly became reality in the early forties.

The imagery and symbolism of present and upcoming events, which influenced Olympia, were apparent within the first ten minutes of the film where we notice a swastika being superimposed over a liberty bell, which, in the near future, would represent the classic opposing forces in World War II. In fact the liberty bells were symbols that were used to finance the American war, as Americans were encouraged to buy "liberty bonds". Whereas the swastika, which represented Germany, dominated and succeeded to the proceeding image, which foreshadowed Germany's quick and easy victories in the beginning of the war. In fact the images that proceeded the German swastika demonstrated the illusion of German moral as the crowd seemingly cheers as the swastika dissolved into the panoramic view of stadium. German moral was an important factor in its society because it was the single most important factor which led to its easy victories in the first years of the war and helped German believe that it could conquer the world on its own. In fact Germany's easy victories, as the situation for the allies got worst, helped create panic and confusion among the allies which devastated their moral for much of 1940 and 41. This panic and confusion was named the era of the phony war whereby no wars were fought with the exception of a war of nerves which eroded the Allies moral while they searched for a plan to beat Germany.

Perhaps the best ironies of the coming war years was Riefenstahl's montage of the competitive events which emphasized Japan's rising power verses that of the United States. These competitions foreshadowed the events that were occurring in the Pacific at the time as well as what was to come. Japan in 1936 had been locked into conflict with China for 4 years. The conflict was spreading as Japan, as part of its co-prosperity sphere, aimed at invading all of China to use its manpower to produce the necessary military goods to rule the Pacific. However when Japan began seizing islands and making advances on China American interests were at stake which led to rising tension beginning in 1936 the same year when Olympia was shot. America's supply lines were being cut off by Japanese navel forces which led America to use diplomatic and trade threats to influence Japan to stop its advances in China. Americans at this point were supplying Japan with all of its iron and oil, which Japan, in turn, used to wage war on America's allies. That was the situation in 1936 when Olympia was being filmed. However Reiffenstahl's competitive events foreshadowed the island hoping battles that composed the pacific war. Japan would be locked in a war from about 1942 when America began launching its offensive, beginning in New Guinea, to 1945, America's victory. Both these powers fought some of the most difficult campaigns composed of ambitious assaults, which combined land, air and sea force, and sea battles. Japan won the first Olympic competition, which foreshadowed their first attack on the United States at Pearl Harbor. Then Japan lost the second event which could represent the battle for Midway, and finally Japan wins the last event which could represent its victory over

the Burma Road. The competition, which occurred between Japan and the United States, are ironically the only scenes, which featured dramatic music in the film.

Music was an important symbol throughout the film because it marked an ongoing struggle between the United States and Japan. Furthermore, music was only used in the competitive events where U.S. and Japan were in direct competition for medals. Riefenstahl could have predicted this struggle between the United States and Japan because the struggle was current in 1936 and steadily got worse as she entered the editing stages in 1937 and 1938. Furthermore, Japan was already involved in war in 1936 and one could only suspect that she chose to give Japan more emphasis by including most of the musical score during Japan's main appearances. In contrast, Germany's victories in the Olympic games were filmed without music, which in should have been emphasized. However, Germany's preparation for war was undertaken in complete secrecy as they stockpiled their military hardware and it would have been in Goebbels' best interest to avoid linking war & Germany in the film altogether. However, the avoidance of linking war and Germany, failed and as a manifestation of it. In this contextual light, we hear dramatic music three times in the first film, which occurred during the long jump, javelin, and 26-mile marathon competition. These events were marked by very vivid images relating to Japan's military dominance. The three times that Japan and the U.S. appear together, as was mentioned above, was usually because a struggle for medals ensued.

Japan wins the first competition, which is followed by images of the rising sun amongst the clouds. The sky is then clouded over which is followed by a shot of the Japanese flag in a very low angle, which served to create the dominance of Japan over America. The U.S. won the second event, which brought Japan and the U.S. into direct competition, and the third event was the marathon race, which the Japanese won. The symbols, which surrounded these events, were simple and were often only composed of clouds, which plunged the images into darkness and directly represented the rising sun of Japan.

The competitiveness, which we saw occurring between the United States and Japan, on the international scene, was paralleled by another event on the other side of the globe, which developed in Spain. The main issue, and particularly relevant to this film, concerning Spain was the Spanish Civil War which was beginning in 1936. This war put republicans and fascists into conflict in Spain. In its progression the war came to involve all of the major powers such as Germany and Italy who joined the fascists' side by supplying equipment and France and Britain aided its side the republicans. This setting, with all of the major powers cautiously involved, set the stage for the testing of new war materials that each of the powers had developed since World War I. This war foreshadowed the greatest air battle in history, the

battle of Britain, as both Britain and Germany were anxious to test their new planes. All of the super powers were afraid of committing land troops in the fear of alienating the other side, so the major countries decided to send equipment instead.

The above contextual information was important because the equipment that the countries were eager to use were their new airforces which they correctly interpreted to be the new, and many times, deciding factor in the wars that would be fought in the future. Spain would become the ultimate testing ground for the modern weaponry of World War II. Riefenstahl's emphasis on being suspended in the air in her diving scenes and Germany's pride in its airforce, as previously discussed, makes the Spanish Civil war directly relevant to Olympia. Air supremacy in World War II played a new major role in warfare because World War II was the first war to be fought where campaigns could be won or lost in the air. Riefenstahl's emphasis on the way that her diving scenes were shot, and the effort that was put into developing under water cameras, is justified by the importance of "air", in terms of airforce, in the ideology of the times. One battle, which could best describe the importance of the airforce in World War II, was the battle of France as described in Frank Capra's Why We Fight documentary Series.

The battle of France's was simple, the Germans attacked with a small army in the low countries rightfully anticipating that the French would think that it was their only entrance into France and that it would therefore be Germany's main thrust. The rest of France was protected with a long defensive wall called the Margot Line, thus leaving only a heavily wooded area called the forest of the Ardennes which was believed to be unpassable to armored vehicles by the French military strategists. The problem was that the German artillery, which are big guns used to bomb the enemy while armored, motorized, and infantry divisions made their advances, were out of range over the forest. This meant that advancing German armies were unprotected if they attempted any advancement through the forest. However the Germans developed what they called a dive-bomber which was a replacement to artillery. These dive-bombers therefore provided Germany with the artillery it would need to build bridges across the forest with the bulk of their forces while the planes occupied the forces across the forest. The dive bombers, therefore enabled Germany to move the bulk of it's forces through the forest which surprised the enemy by and ended the largest battle to date in history, involving 4 million men, 4500 plains, and 5000 tanks, in less then 20 days.

The above example was provided to suggest how important planes and the notion of being air minded was in 1936 in Germany. It also makes it understandable that Riefenstahl should be fascinated with the concept by pouring so much effort into developing techniques to capture the images for her renowned diving scenes.



Perhaps the final scene of interests to the military discussion of Olympia was the opening scene of Part II that juxtaposed a host of athletes against nature's quiet background. The irony of the scene suggests that Riefenstahl was comparing tranquility, represented by nature, to a seeming chaos of athletes who all represent opposing countries in a struggle to win. The military discussion and pride in Germany in 1936 worried people because the world had just rejuvenated from the last Great War and therefore people did not want to go through it again. Riefenstahl's scene of the athletes in the second part sets them in a more intimate environment as we observe a group of athletes as they are taking a shower. The irony of the scene is that the athletes could have easily been soldiers because there was no indication, in the opening scene, as to where we were or who these people were. The scene created the illusion as though nature was being invaded by marching shadows. We can observe people marching in from the dark while sound, of their discussion and footsteps, simultaneously rises as the shadows became clearer and clearer. This image foreshadows the method by which Germany attacked neighboring countries with no warning. An example of one of Germany's surprise attacks was the invasion of Denmark in 1940, which occurred within the time frame of one afternoon. The campaign was well thought out and therefore was effortless to carry out. Before people could comprehend what had just happened, a German headquarters were set up in Denmark. Therefore these opening images in Olympia's part II symbolize and remind us of how quickly nature can be interrupted without warning.

We are then treated to images of athletes in training which spark some funny ironies. We saw athletes of what was to become the axis powers and allies who were practicing very different activities in their spare time. The allies were playing basketball and just laughing and having a good time. Whereas the axis are practicing fighting techniques. One irony was that the American athletes didn't seem to care what was happening, as they were merely reflecting American society at the time, which adopted isolation from any future conflict in Europe. Whereas Germans, Japanese, and Italians were practicing fighting motions which was a reflection of their societies at the time, which were militarily orientated. One funny image presented an Italian athlete who was shadow boxing with himself. Its funny because all Italian armies did in World War II, was shadow box. They were pathetic soldiers and lost most of the battles they fought including the fact that they outnumbered their opponents two to one in these battles. For example, one raid in 1940 by 21 obsolete British planes crippled the entire Italian fleet or the battle for Egypt in 1940 where the Italian army of 200 000 strong attacked a force of 36 000 English and Indian troops and lost! The only battle they won was against Ethiopia in 1935. Once again these images can be particularly funny from a military standpoint but does present a window into the thought of these athletes as one observes the different activities that they were practicing in their spare time.

In conclusion, this very different interpretation of Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia set out to analyze the film from a military standpoint. It set out to demonstrate how Olympia could be viewed upon as a reflection of the military dominated ideology of the late thirties. The essay's main concern was to illustrate the symbolism and ironies, which the film conveyed, which reflected the present or foreshadowed the events to come. These symbols and ironies were illustrated in images, camera angles, and the use of juxtaposition, to name a few. Therefore in providing sufficient military background, links were made to illustrate the parallels between Olympia and the era's militaristic ideology in the late thirties and early forties.

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