BODIES REPRESENTED IN LENI RIEFENSTAHL’S OLYMPIA:

THE FASCIST AESTHETICS OF AUSDRUCKSTANZ AND ATHLETICISM

Stephanie Viggiano
German Senior Thesis - Senior Seminar B399
Advisor: Professor David Kenosian

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INTRODUCTION

_Ausdruckstanz_ and the theme of athleticism is seen and symbolically placed in Leni Riefenstahl’s _Olympia_. Both of these topics are fundamental representations of bodies within the film that house a fascist aesthetic. Fascist aesthetic is the essence of art, propaganda or design that perpetuates the goal of an authoritarian regime. Fascist aesthetics were alive and well in Italy (fascism’s birthplace) and newly spread to Germany during the 1930’s due to the effects of the Great Depression. It is important to establish that the fundamental principles of fascism include: nationalism (an extreme form of patriotic efforts), imperialism (unequal distribution of wealth, property and socio-cultural governance), totalitarianism (where nearly every part of the government is completely under control by one source) and total social control.

Michael Geyer, in his piece _The Stigma of Violence, Nationalism, and War in Twentieth Century Germany_, makes a valuable mention about how fascism might have come to be in Germany. Prior to Hitler’s ascension to power, Germany was involved in World War I, which changed how Germany functioned as a nation. According to Geyer, “War as embodiment of the nation established identity” (78). The nation’s level of unity mirrors whatever is happening in its own social realm. Essentially “…definitions of what
is German politicized domestic, cultural, and social divides and thus molded German domestic life.” (Geyer 78)

Geyer also describes the advent of aesthetic culture (also known as the Kulturbewegung) into Germany. The Kulturbewegung was the introduction to the “aesthetic avant-garde” culture in German society (Geyer 84). German citizens began to appreciate a modern sense of lifestyle, including an appreciation for the body. Naturally, Ausdruckstanz is an appropriate example of Kulturbewegung.

Ausdruckstanz is a form of expressionistic dancing that was very popular around the early to mid 1900’s in Germany. The Expressionist movement, which housed Ausdruckstanz, was a vast artistic movement that sought out a more emotional, personal connection to the physical world (in other words, a very modern movement). Because Ausdruckstanz was an exemplary product of the Expressionist movement in the 1930s and used in events of the Third Reich--as we will see later, it can be seen that Ausdruckstanz can be a representation of fascism. Mosse says that fascism’s “...power had to express itself visually.”¹ Susan Manning mentions that, “...German dance is the bearer of German culture and embodies the spirit of the new German life.” (Manning 185) Ausdruckstanz was, in no doubt, a representation of a Nazi fascist aesthetic, which will be further explicated in the film analysis.

Leni Riefenstahl was born Helene Bertha Amalie Riefenstahl in Berlin during the turn-of-the-century. She was born to a successful family that a mother that supported her endeavors in whatever she wished to explore and a father that wanted her to continue the

family business of installing heating and ventilation systems. Adhering to her mother’s belief in her, Riefenstahl began her career of dancing at a young age of sixteen. She attended the Grimm-Reiter Dance School in Berlin and excelled in her dancing curriculum. According to Jürgen Trimborn, “Leni Riefenstahl’s choice of dance was an obvious one. Dance offered a logical synthesis of her love of movement and physical training, and her strong drive for self-presentation and for an intense physical expression of her emotions, something she had already sought in sports.”

Riefenstahl mastered classical ballet and then explored the art of expressionistic dancing. It comes to no surprise that Riefenstahl included the Ausdruckstanz performances in Olympia, as she attended Ausdruckstanz classes taught by the dance prodigy, Mary Wigman, in 1923. She was soon captivated by the power of film, as she eventually arranged a meeting with Arnold Fanck, a film director she admired, who was famous for his mountain-films (nature-themed documentaries, usually set in the German Alps). Fanck met with Riefenstahl at a coffeehouse and interviewed her; he immediately loved her and cast her in his next film to be produced, titled Der heilige Berg (The Holy Mountain).

After making a few more mountain films with Arnold Fanck, Riefenstahl made her debut as film director in her feature film, Das blaue Licht (The Blue Light). She had practice editing film when helping Arnold Fanck with the editing-process of Der heilige Berg, and in-turn was heavily inspired by his filmmaking. Riefenstahl directed two more films (Der Sieg des Glaubens-Victory of Faith, 1933 and Tag der Freiheit: Unsere Wehrmacht-Day of Freedom: Our Armed Forces, 1935) before she got to her piece-de-resistance, Triumph des Willens (Triumph of the Will).

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3 Ibid. 15.
Riefenstahl’s most famous film release, was a Nazi propaganda film that chronicled Hitler’s arrival to Nuremberg and the Nazi Party Congress in 1934. Just three years later, *Olympia* was released.

Riefenstahl wrote, directed and produced *Olympia*, the first-ever documentary of an Olympic games (the 1936 Summer Games in Berlin). *Olympia* was a cutting edge film of its time; Riefenstahl employed film techniques that had not yet been seen (such as running a motorized camera down a track while athletes were running, very up-close-and-personal shots, high and low-angled shots, to name a few). Riefenstahl first got involved in making a film about the Olympics with help from her friend, Professor Carl Diehm, who loved her prior film *Triumph of the Will*. Diehm was a friend to the chairman of the International Olympics Committee, and set up the initial meetings to put the film-to-be (*Olympia*) in the works. The Nazi party funded *Olympia* without restriction on Riefenstahl’s creativity, enabling her to have free reign on all aspects of production.

The film is separated into two parts: *Fest der Völker* (Festival of the People) and *Fest der Schönheit* (Festival of Beauty). *Fest der Völker*, the first of two parts of the film, is dedicated only to track and field events as Riefenstahl considered those “the heart of the Olympic Games.” (Hinton 50) The second part of the film, *Fest der Schönheit*, documents the decathlon and remaining athletic events. Herbert Windt and Walter Gronostay wrote the soundtrack of the film. The music embodied feelings of joy, honor, meekness and celebration; the music was always strings and at times included choruses of male and female voices (in the closing scenes of the *Fest der Völker*, they were singing exuberantly, “Olympia! Olympia!”

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It is notably the first Olympic Games in modern times and first film-documentary to showcase the passing of the torch and lighting of the Olympic Flame. Interestingly, the tradition of the torch run was not an ancient Greek tradition in the Olympic Games. It was suggested and created by the organizer of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Carl Diem, to have young Aryan men create a spectacle (almost a ritual—as it now is, or ceremony) by running with lit torches in a procession to the Olympic Stadium. Almost as if Hitler and the Nazi party were looking to the Greeks for inspiration on how to successfully reign their own empire, just as the Greeks thought that fire was a sacred, natural element, the Nazis embraced this as well in the opening ceremonies of the games. With regard to the fascist aesthetic element in Olympia, Riefenstahl used bodies dancing and engaging in athleticism to fuel the fascist movement.

Before the analysis begins, it is important to consider the relationship between fascist aesthetics and the body in the Nazi regime. Returning to George Mosse’s piece, *Fascist Aesthetics and Society*, he explains that in a fascist society, the structure of the body mirrors that of the structure of the mind. The ideal citizen under the fascist regime, like the Nazi regime, must aspire to attain the classical form of beauty. In Aryan culture, the fit, beautiful male is idealized as the quintessential symbol for the Nazis. The male is modeled after Greek sculptures (of course, seen in the opening minutes of *Olympia*, especially seen in the overlay transitioning the statue of Myron’s *Discobulus* to the live moving body of the real-life discus and track & field athlete, Huber. Mosse very eloquently describes how the Nazis politicized the body in German society. They used the aesthetics of the human body to nationalize their masses. By exhibiting ideal bodies in films like *Olympia* and in their realist art, like Greek statues—staying true to the
human form, they are essentially advertising the desired human model for their Aryan race. It is important to mention the Nazis often use the “Counter-Type” tactic (or foiling, so to speak) to showcase their ideal Aryan human form. To quote from Mosse, “Through the counter-image we obtain the greatest clarity of what our own ideals should be.” (Mosse 249) Nazism’s use of the “other” was one of the most effective ways of alienating certain desired and undesired social populations.

The Nazis also heavily utilized other sorts of symbols besides the human body. They were very much influenced by mysticism in ancient traditions, particularly Grecian ones, and they thought that it aided in the spirit and aesthetics of their movement. In Braun’s article, Expressionism as Fascist Aesthetic, the art of the expressionist movement (like Ausdruckstanz) indeed did support the mystical German spirit. (Braun 273) It is important to mention as well that the Nazis, as quick as they were to use Ausdruckstanz and other expressionistic forms of art to their advantage, they also took that away from their party’s persona. Soon after they accepted and used Ausdruckstanz, they targeted expressionism as a ‘degenerative art’ and instead encouraged and enforced realism in the arts.5

OLYMPIA AND AUSDRUCKSTANZ

In Olympia, there are scenes of women jubilantly dancing naked with their bodies accentuated by the angles of Riefenstahl’s camera. Soon to be elaborated upon in this section, Riefenstahl often shows close-ups of naked or barely clothed dancers to pay

homage to the beauty of the human form. These close-up shots signify her appreciation for the human body and the fascist appreciation for what the perfect Aryan body is. George Mosse makes a great statement about the fascist aesthetic: “The ideal of beauty was central to this aesthetic, whether that or the human body or of the political liturgy.” In plain terms, all that was beautiful was considered good and great. Ausdruckstanz embodies this fascist aesthetic and is exemplified in Olympia.

To give a bit more background of the innovators of Ausdruckstanz: Among the most well known of the Ausdruckstanz pioneers are Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban. Mary Wigman was a dance visionary in early 20th century Germany. At the old age of 27 (remarkably old for dancing), she enrolled in a dancing school and started developing her skills, maturing how she conveyed emotion to her audience and within herself.

Wigman formed the Dresden Central School for modern dance where she taught methods that allowed her pupils to reach their peak of dancing through personal expression. She also participated in countless festivals, Dancer’s Congresses and conferences. The first Dancer’s Congress, in which Wigman was in attendance, was in Magdeburg in 1927. At the Dancer’s Congress, dancing professionals met to discuss the future of their discipline and what issues faced them at the time. After Germany’s joining of the League of Nations in 1926, both Mary Wigman and Gustav Stresemann, ex-Chancellor and Foreign Minister of Germany, wanted to further the influences of art in their nation. For Stresemann, this meant to expand the borders of Germany’s influence using performance art as a vessel. For Wigman, it meant saving her art of

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7 Ibid. pg 33.
dance, criticizing dance forms and discussing methods of teaching. Wigman fully
embraced the Nazi body politic in order to receive subsidies for her dancing schools.
Professionalization of dance soon came to be in the Third Reich (after the Dance
Congress of 1930), and dancers were chosen if they proved they were from an Aryan
background. Not only did the Nazi regulation and funding of dance control the people
that could join the dancing profession, but basically controlled the entire dancing
industry. Dancers that were formerly unemployed could find a job in public schools or
Nazi-sanctioned organizations (like the Association of German Girls). (Manning 172)
Susan Manning suggests that Wigman stayed and participated in fascism because of
“…opportunism combined with ideological sympathy in their support for the Third
Reich.” (Manning 173) In defense of her own and other artists’ involvement in the Third
Reich, she wrote,

“We German artists today are more aware of the fate of the Volk than ever before.
And for all of us this time is a trial of strength, a measuring of oneself against
standards that are greater than the individual is able to fathom. The call of the
blood, which has involved us all, goes deep and engages the essential.” (Manning
192)

Mary Wigman’s teacher and dance mentor, Rudolf Laban, which she described as
a “great wanderer”, heavily inspired her dance and her career path. Laban showed her
the ways of letting go (letting her mind relax and open expression to pervade) and ways
of truly expressing herself in dancing. In his style of pedagogy, he hardly criticized his
students, which allowed for the development of expression.

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8 Manning, Susan. Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of

Rudolf Laban led his own dance movement; he was particularly interested in how the body moves and its relation to the space around it. Laban was born in Bratislava, Hungary in 1879 and lived quite an exciting, intellectually stimulating life; as he was developing his craft, he traveled between France, Germany and Switzerland. When he was younger, he studied painting in Paris and spent time sketching the human form. Laban became involved in the theater. Particularly, he became interested in how actors changed from tableau to tableau in a performance. Laban considered the idea of leaving the curtain open while the actors changed places as the music plays. Upon trying this new idea, it seemed that he had created a dance. Laban, then, was very taken by dance and steered his focuses away from painting and into dancing and choreography.

Laban is most well known for his creation of a special form of dancing notation. The notation, known as “Labanotation”, is very similar to musical notation and in fact, can accompany it, so that everything can be read together. Laban was a great supporter of dance under the Nazi regime and was appointed Director of the Deutsche Tanzbühne in 1934. His leadership as a dance leader during the Nazi times shows us how he really embodied the furthering of his love and commitment for dancing in the Volksgemeinschaft. Laban had planned a rather large dance spectacle for the 1936 Olympics. Interestingly enough, Laban’s highly anticipatory dance was canceled after

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11 See Figure 1 in Appendix for an example of Laban’s Dance Notation.

12 Volksgemeinschaft: “a racially unified and hierarchically organized body in which the interests of individuals would be strictly subordinate to those of the nation, or Volk.” From: "Volksgemeinschaft." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web
both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels watched the dress rehearsal. Still, Laban’s dance choreography, along with Mary Wigman’s made an impact on the Nazi party and their aims to spread and attract those to their fascist movement. Using this fascist aesthetic through an art platform like Ausdruckstanz is something that became important for their success for a mass spectacle during the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

In Mary Wigman’s own words, “[as you dance,] you carry the blazing torch which emits the spark jumping from the “I” to the “we”. In this, Wigman means that Ausdruckstanz is essentially the vessel that brings the people in touch with their community (Gemeinschaft). In keeping with the idea of the fascist community, this would essentially put the people in touch with their Volksgemeinschaft. Ultimately, this added another dimension to the way that Nazi party supporters could help build their movement. Ausdruckstanz pioneers Wigman and Laban, again, both actively supported the Nazi party from 1933-1936 and aimed to create pieces of performance art that embodied the Nazi body politic.

One of the largest contributions that Mary Wigman worked on for the Nazi regime was her choreography of the Olympische Jugend (Olympic Youth) piece for the opening festival of the Olympic Games. Screenwriter Carl Diem and director, Hans Niedeckenh-Gebhard were the chief coordinators of the opening ceremony piece, “Olympic Youth.” Over ten thousand dancers were assembled in order to create a mass spectacle, achieving what the Nazis intended for their image. It, of course, is interesting

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to note the relationship between the Third Reich’s intent on producing a very nationalistic scene to further their fascist image and the internationalism of the Olympic Games.

Susan Manning couldn’t have phrased the dichotomy of nationalism and internationalism any better. She writes,

“…Olympic Youth epitomized the fusion—and confusion—of nationalism and internationalism commentators have noted in the games and in Riefenstahl’s documentary. Displaying the symbols associated with the games—the interlocking rings of the Olympic flag, the parade of flags from all nations, the Olympic bell, and the Olympic torch—the spectacle seemingly reflected the international spirit of Olympic competition. At the same time, the production fulfilled Goebbels’ ideal of ‘invisible propaganda,’ staging the body politic of the Third Reich…In other words, Olympic Youth functions as a metaphor for the Volksgemeinschaft.” (Manning 195)

As evidenced by the commentary Manning is providing, Mary Wigman did indeed support the ideas and art forms conducive to creating an ideal Volksgemeinschaft.

The performance itself was very diverse. The performers included not only professional dancers, but also young girls and boys of the Nazi movement. The girls and boys were placed in the middle of the field of the Olympic stadium, standing in the shape of the Olympic rings. The youth collectively dances and sings the following lyrics,

“Kampf der Kräfte, Kampf der Künste, 
Kampf um Ehre, Vaterland, 
Friede, Freude, Fest der Jugend, 
Fest der Völker, Fest der Tugend, 
Ewiges Olympia”\textsuperscript{15}

Translated, this means, “Fight of powers, fight of arts / Fight for honor, fatherland, / Peace, joy, festival of youth, / Festival of peoples, festival of virtue, / Eternal Olympia.”\textsuperscript{16}

These lyrics, without any hesitance, are representative of German nationalistic mantras

\textsuperscript{15} Program, Olympische Jugend Festspiel, Berlin Olympic Stadium, 1 August 1936, 9, MWA.

\textsuperscript{16} Translated from Susan Manning’s “Ectstasy and the Demon”, page 198.
regarding fighting for the Fatherland, while also exhibiting pieces of internationalism—‘festival of peoples’.

In another part of the dance piece, entitled *Heldenkampf und Totenklage* (Heroic Struggle and Death Lament), a “mock war” is staged and the following song is sung,

„Allen Spiels
heil’ger Sinn;
Vaterlandes
Hochgewinn.
Vaterlandes höchst Gebot
in der Not:
Opfertod!“

When translated, this means “All games / divine purpose; / fatherland / greatest win. / Fatherland’s greatest command / in need: / Sacrificial death!” (Manning 199). This song also describes strongly the nationalistic tone used by the Nazis. Sacrificing oneself for their own country is ideally the biggest contribution one can make to the Volksgemeinschaft.

In Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, amidst the plentiful scenes of athletic prowess and international symbolism, there were scenes of Ausdruckstanz. Riefenstahl’s inclusions of these scenes and the choreography of the Ausdruckstanz exhibit the dance industry’s perpetuation of the fascist aesthetic that the Nazis aimed to create.

During the first eight minutes of *Fest der Völker* (starting at 00:08:30, DVD #1)\(^{18}\), the scene changes from a male athlete throwing the shot-put ball back and forth in the air—his arms and hands stretching above his head, moving from side-to-side. A close-up

\(^{17}\) Program, Olympische Jugend Festspiel, Berlin Olympic Stadium, 1 August 1936, 11, MWA.
appears on his hands maneuvering the shot-put; a quick overlay appears and on top of his hands are multiple arms and hands in the air of female dancers. Their hands and arms are moving back and forth in the same rhythm that the athlete was moving. The scene cuts to another frame of women throwing balls back and forth in the air, jumping rope, and stretching with hoops. Women are dancing naked, surrounded by plants and natural bodies of water. The scene cuts to another frame of multiple women dancing, at times in symmetry and as mirroring images as well. The Ausdruckstanz scene ends with three women (one facing the camera, one at left and one at right—opposite each other) who are bending down to the earth and then back up with their arms and hands reaching up to the sky. The frame then changes to their arms going back and forth, mirroring each other. Their moving arms and hands are soon replaced by an overlay of fire. It can be ascertained that their hands and arms are symbolic of the Olympic Flame.

This scene is representative of the fascist aesthetic because the dancers used are professional dancers, chosen for how Aryan they are (as was mentioned prior). This scene of Ausdruckstanz is a representation of Volksgemeinschaft as the Nazi fascist aesthetics according to Lutz Koepnick, the Nazis “…suture[d] disenfranchised individuals into an an-encompassing spectacle of homogenization, an aesthetic simulation of community.” (Koepnick 1) Bodies in motion essentially embody the fascist aesthetic; “it is the soul of which builds the body…the outward form of the body was a silhouette of its inner life.” (Mosse “Mystical” 83) The nature present in the scene (the water, wind blowing the grass reeds, etc.) takes its audience back to a place where only the naked human and raw nature can be seen. Nazi fascist aesthetic in this Ausdruckstanz piece not only exhibits the general signs of the fascist aesthetic but also the more mystical ones as
well. The bodies in motion that we see, coupled with the natural elements in this scene, show us that nature is the life force for the fascist spirit—the body and mind feed off of spiritual and bodily strength.\textsuperscript{19} This scene also mirrors another comment by Mosse—that aesthetic of the human body is used to nationalize the masses. (Mosse “Fascist Society” 251) This dancing was meant to inspire others and incite a feeling of unity.

In \textit{Fest der Schönheit}, (located at 00:32:20 on, DVD #2), there is another \textit{Ausdruckstanz} dancing scene. It is similar to the first scene in that it includes women dancing—but this time clothed. Women are lined up on the playing field, in the center of the stadium. The women are dressed, waving their arms in a circular motion—very much in harmony. Their arms are reaching up to the sky and back down to the earth. Batons were used as props in their dancing. Thousands and thousands of dancers were lined up on the field, performing at the Olympic Games on the field.

This appears to the part of the Olympic Youth performance where \textit{Ausdruckstanz} is put on center stage as mass spectacle. This exhibition of \textit{Ausdruckstanz} “drew upon the notions of social and racial hygiene…considered the necessary foundation for the ‘new society’.” (Gordon 187) Their arms reaching up and down from the sky to the earth, symbolize their appreciation of nature—as if they appreciated a ‘back to basics’ sort of lifestyle. Keeping with the notion that the Nazi party was seeking to tap back in to their pure Aryan roots, this dance choreography and its setting can be interpreted as a calling back to their natural being—to being the ideal Aryan.

\textit{Ausdruckstanz} was without a doubt a powerful force in exhibiting the Nazi ideals of a mass, unified, pure-race, which is embodied in a fascist aesthetic (that of dancing).

When thousands of Mary Wigman’s dancers performed at the Olympic Festival, Olympic Youth, they engaged the entire audience with mass spectacle. They showcased unity of the movement and projected an image worthy of promoting the Nazi party through art. This projection without a doubt assisted the general feeling of nationalistic pride and unity in the Volksgemeinschaft.

OLYMPIA AND ATHLETICISM

Another kind of representation of bodies in Olympia is Riefenstahl’s use of ancient Greek statues and close-up shots of the human body diligently performing as athletes. This, indeed, showcases her appreciation of athleticism, sport, and what exactly a perfect Aryan body is. Sport and fitness of bodies has been an aspect of a fascist aesthetic that supports the Nazi political ideology.

Riefenstahl wasn’t a stranger to the athletic scene. She was a very sport- and athletic-oriented person. Growing up in the countryside, she spent many hours exploring outdoors and harnessing her physical strength. She loved nature and sought to include all-aspects of nature in her films. (Trimborn 8) Riefenstahl was excited by athletic games; as a child she liked to organize races (both running and swimming) and enjoyed climbing trees. Her love for sport and the fit body not only pervaded her own life, but also agreed with the fascist Nazi body politic. It is important to mention as well, that even though Riefenstahl was a supporter of the Third Reich and fully embraced the Nazi body politic, she didn’t make Olympia a discriminatory film. She showcased athletes of all races, notably the famous Jesse Owens race where he took away the gold.
medal. Riefenstahl clearly shows us that she appreciates the human body in its fit, athletic form.

In the very opening scene of *Olympia* (located at 00:01:20, DVD #1), Riefenstahl takes the viewer on a tour, seemingly back through time, through ancient Grecian ruins. Nature is abundant next to these abandoned relics of a time and a people past. Only grass and trees are seen beside and the around the Grecian architectural wonders. Countless columns are seen in panning shots, shots looking from low to high of the ancient structures. The Parthenon, the Poseidon Temple and the Ereichtheon at the Acropolis were displayed. The sky, plants and grass are shown. Very powerful, commanding and seemingly honorable orchestral music is playing while the viewer sees these clips. Shortly following the initial scene opening the viewer to ancient Grecian ruins, Riefenstahl continues her exhibition of ancient Greek tradition with close-ups of human statues (located at 00:04:00, DVD #1). A close-up appears on-screen of a male bust. Statues of men and women are displayed; some are naked, some are clothed. But what all of these statues have in common is that they are very fit representations of human bodies. While some are male and female, there is an androgynous statue that appears in the lot of statues shown in this exhibition. These statues, while seemingly human, are representations of Greek gods.

Continuing on (located at 00:06:32, DVD #1), fog rises behind a statue of a fit, young male. The screen then fades to the statue of Myron’s *Discobulus*. The viewer sees Myron’s statue for a few seconds, and then an overlay of another frame occurs. The new

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frame we can see imposed over the statue of Myron’s *Discobulus* is a live, human man that appears to be a real, living-breathing, human embodiment of *Discobulus* himself. The man is Erwin Huber, a German track and field athlete that actually competes in the Olympic games. Huber begins to move with the discus in the proper form. Riefenstahl’s shot composition in this scene accentuates the muscle definition in Huber’s body (see Figure 3 in Appendix). Riefenstahl employs low-angle shots, which showcases Huber’s very idealistic, Aryan body to the film audience. Like the statue of *Discobulus* that Huber was initially modeling after, Huber is standing in the middle of a beautiful, field thriving with natural plant-life. He isn’t in an arena, but in the setting of pure nature.

This scene is representative of Nazi fascist aesthetics due to the display of the human form and setting in nature. Also, it is important to consider the fascination with the ancient Greek roots that the fascist Nazis idealized very much. The fog that rises (at 00:06:32) is a representation of the mysticism of the fascist aesthetic. The statues in this prologue of the film are literally brought to life. Bridget Peucker makes a cohesive comment about this scene’s ‘bringing-to-life’, composition and meaning, saying, “Both the camera’s powers and the mode of editing are regenerative, bringing to life a culture that lies in ruins. Since the bridge to that culture is created via the body, its images serve to substantiate…that the Aryan race originated with the Greeks.” (Peucker 287) It is imperative to reiterate when discussing these ‘perfect bodies’ that “the body is the core of the Nazi political anthropology. The body of the Aryan is the tangible and vital evidence of racial virtue, of the ‘new human type’ that National Socialism had brought into being.”

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21 Further reading on the topic of Nazi Mysticism: George Mosse: “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism”
By using these bodies seen in *Olympia*, the Nazis essentially added an aesthetic to their politics;

“it attempted rather to let the aesthetic become ‘reality’ by breaking down traditional boundaries and turning the political experience into an aesthetic experience of the community (which is by nature aesthetic). …trying to turn ‘life’ into a work of art.” (Schulte-Sasse 22-23)

Another scene where Riefenstahl shows more of an athletic representation is the famous diving scene housed in *Fest der Schönheit* (located at 01:21:00, DVD #2).

Riefenstahl follows divers as they make their descent into the water. The form the divers take before they breach the water is very graceful. As soon as the divers take a leaping jump off of the ricocheting diving board, they shoot into the air, fold and turn their bodies gracefully before gravity brings them down to the water of the swimming pool.

Riefenstahl follows these divers almost seamlessly with her camera. The camera soars down from the diving board with them, so that it is almost possible to imagine that these fit, athletes are suspended in space.

This camera effect, without any doubt, evokes an appreciation of the body to the audience. Riefenstahl gracefully takes the audience away from the sport itself and just focuses on the body at work. She is conveying to her audience what the ideal Aryan is; she has defined for us in her film, *Olympia*, what in fact the Nazi body politic truly represents. In John Hoberman’s *Sport and Political Ideology*, he says, “The constant reiteration that the true German must have a beautiful body repeats the worship of the Greek models.” (Hoberman 164) Hoberman continues his point with another comment that the cult of the body in fascist Nazi Germany rests at the highest point of the hierarchy of values. Hoberman views his as “a kind of aesthetic myth.” (Hoberman 164)
Although not athletic in nature, this next scene to be described shows audience more proof of Riefenstahl’s subscription to Nazi body politic and mysticism. Shortly after the last event (diving) is covered in Fest der Schönheit, the viewer is taken back to the Olympic stadium for a display of world flags and a last look at the full stadium of spectators (located at 01:27:00, DVD #2). After this, the screen cuts to a shot of the large flame that has been burning in the Olympic stadium since the procession of the torch that initially introduced the games. The shot shows the torch burning at full height for its last time. Slowly, the flames are being put out and smoke starts to rise from where the flame used to rise. The smoke from the extinguished fire rises to the sky. Riefenstahl’s shot composition makes this smoke appear as if the Olympic games were a conclusion to a ceremony or religious service. The smoke still rises and slowly the camera pans upward to the sky. A little while longer and the viewer cannot see the smoke anymore. Now, the viewer is met with a look at the sky, where the sun appears big and bright, and almost star-like.

This last scene speaks volumes to the mysticism of the Nazi fascist aesthetic with the smoky offering to the sky. The reason for Nazi mysticism brought purpose for the followers of their movement and motivated them. Nazi mysticism, “transform[ed] Germans into artists” which in turn provided a long-needed renewal for their nation.

CONCLUSION

Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympia has shown us how bodies are used in multiple styles (through dancing and sports), to perpetuate the Nazi fascist aesthetic. While Olympia wasn’t meant to be a propaganda film and was purely a documentary, it still exhibits the fascist aesthetic of the time. By screening Olympia, we are observing the Third Reich as
it hosts the 1936 Olympics in hopes of showcasing a very strong, unified Germany to the world. Unification in this film is seen in the fascist aesthetics of the body.

John Hoberman, again has a vital point in his book about fascist sport ideology:

“But in a racial community, the body (Leib) is, as Baeumler puts it, *ein Politicum*, a public rather than a private entity; the *Volk* itself is a ‘collective body’ (Gesamtleib). Physical exercises (Leibesübungen) are ‘a public matter.’ It is Baeumler’s emphasis on ‘the political education of the body’ (die politische Leibeserziehung) which compels him to resist the apotheosis of the body *athleticum* in favor of the body *politicum*: ‘Recognition of the political character of our bodies rules out any absolute conception of the body…The honor of the body is one part of the collective honor of the nation.” (Hoberman 163)

*Olympia* very much represents the model, ideal Nazi body politic. We have explored how this fascist aesthetic body politic is seen through *Ausdruckstanz* and pure athleticism seen in the sporting events of the Olympic Games. We have seen how *Ausdruckstanz* represents the full exertion of the self in expression; when this is multiplied on a mass-scale with thousands of dancers, the fascist aesthetic is effective and shows the Olympic audience a great spectacle of unification. We have also seen how athleticism and mysticism have played large roles in the Nazi fascist aesthetic regarding the body. The perfect Aryan body is shown to the viewer countless times throughout the film. That perfect body is lean, fit and athletic. Through these representations of bodies in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, the fascist aesthetics of the Nazi culture come to the surface as we have looked at their plan of social renewal and her own love and embracement of the human form.

“I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living. I seek harmony.”

-- Leni Riefenstahl
**Figure 1**

Example of Labanotation

Source: http://wapedia.mobi/thumb/7ef4502/en/fixed/470/200/Zorn_Cachucha.jpg

**Figure 2**

Labanotation – Kinetography

Source: http://www.balletformeandyou.com/storage/BodyNotation.jpg
Figure 3

Comparison of Myron Statue to Athlete, Huber

Source: http://metamedia.stanford.edu/imagebin/riefenstahl_olympia.jpg


