

Art, documentary or propaganda of the human form?

**A historiographical perspective on Leni Riefenstahl's
*Triumph of the Will***



Triumph des Willens

- Nazi-party funded film of the 1934 Nuremburg rallies but it was distributed to cinemas as a documentary.
- The paper does not argue that the film itself was public relations but that it had elements of a public relations approach, including a rhetorical dimension to political communications

“The greatest propaganda film ever made, for which a sense of informed historical context continues to be a major problem.”

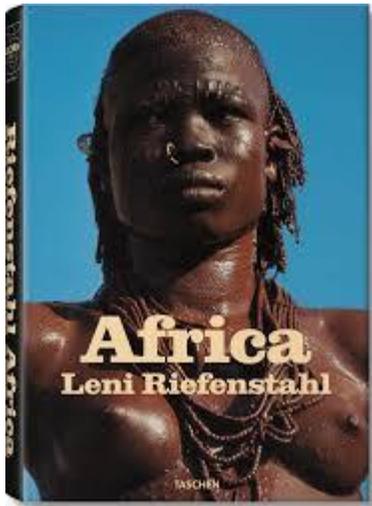
(Culbert, 2004)

Leni Riefenstahl

- One of the 20th century's most controversial women as well as the greatest woman director and "quintessential articulator of the Nazi film aesthetic."
(Schulte-Sasse, 1991, p. 124)
- Riefenstahl combined creative force, visual sense, physicality and commercial shrewdness







Literature review: Historiography

- “Historians who identify themselves disproportionately with their specialities risk cutting themselves off from some of the larger currents of the discipline” (Banner, 2012, p. 46)
- In an area of inquiry in which there has not been “much comparative history so far” (Bentele (2015, p. 21) the paper also attempts to include developments in Russia and England in the period, promoted by Watson’s call to include “comparative studies across nations, cultures and organisations” (2014, p. 876).

Literature review: Documentary film making, propaganda and public relations

- Filmic scholars have confronted definitional issues familiar to public relations historians, with Taylor (1998, p. 210) drawing a line between:

“Entertainment pure and simple” and film propaganda with a “conscious purpose to lull the audience in order to manipulate its opinions for political ends.”

Literature review: Documentary film making, propaganda and public relations

- Film in promotional communication has been a focus of public relations historical scholarship for over 10 years:
- L'Etang (2004), Moloney (2006) and Anthony (2012) mention John Grierson in the context of public relations, “promotional documentary” and Empire Marketing Board respectively.
- Case studies on individual films include Girona & Xifra on Frank Capra's *Why we Fight* documentary (2013), St. John and Arnett (2013) on *Your Town*.
- More recent theoretical, rhetorical and discursive considerations addressed by Quintana and Xifra (2016, p. 288) as “propaganda and public relations discourse.”

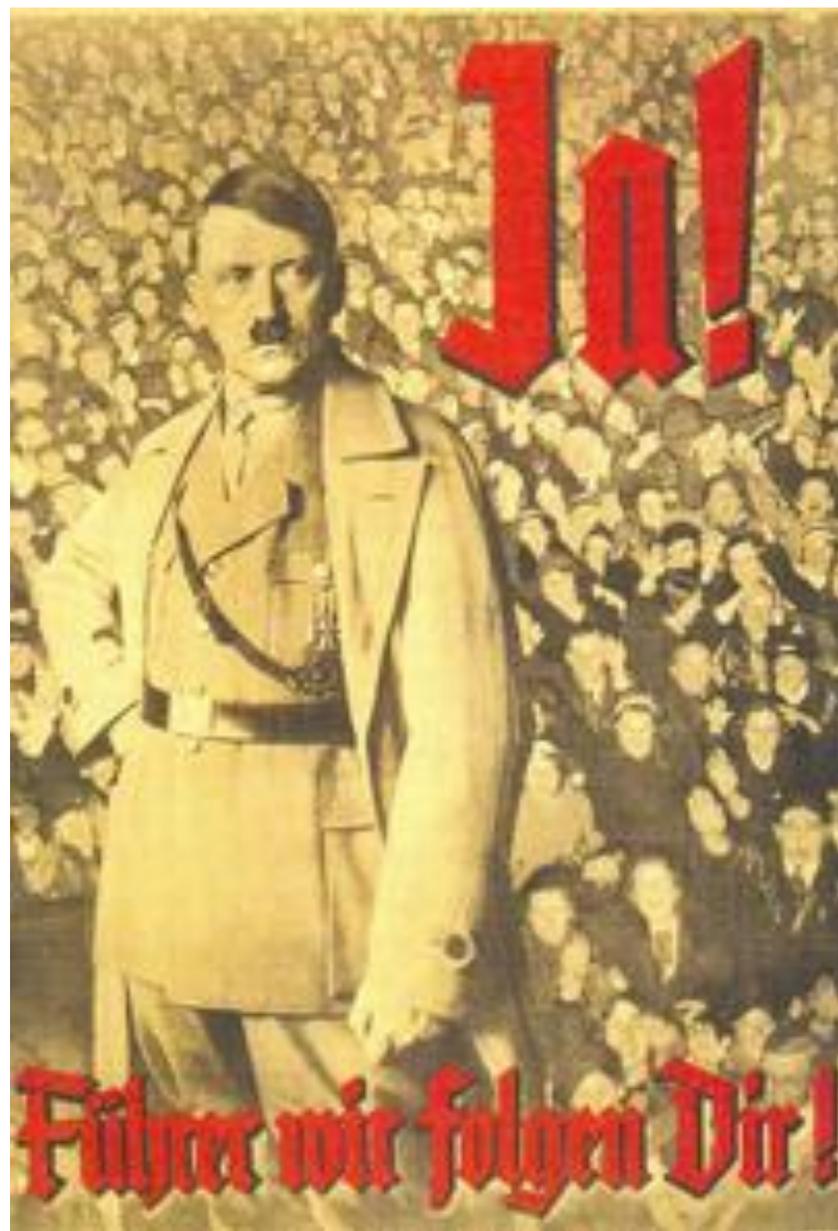
Research questions and methodology

1. What discourses of cinematic promotion were used by Leni Riefenstahl in *Triumph of the Will*?
2. How do appraisals of Leni Riefenstahl and *Triumph of the Will* relate to the historiography of public relations, propaganda and documentary?

Triumph of the Will

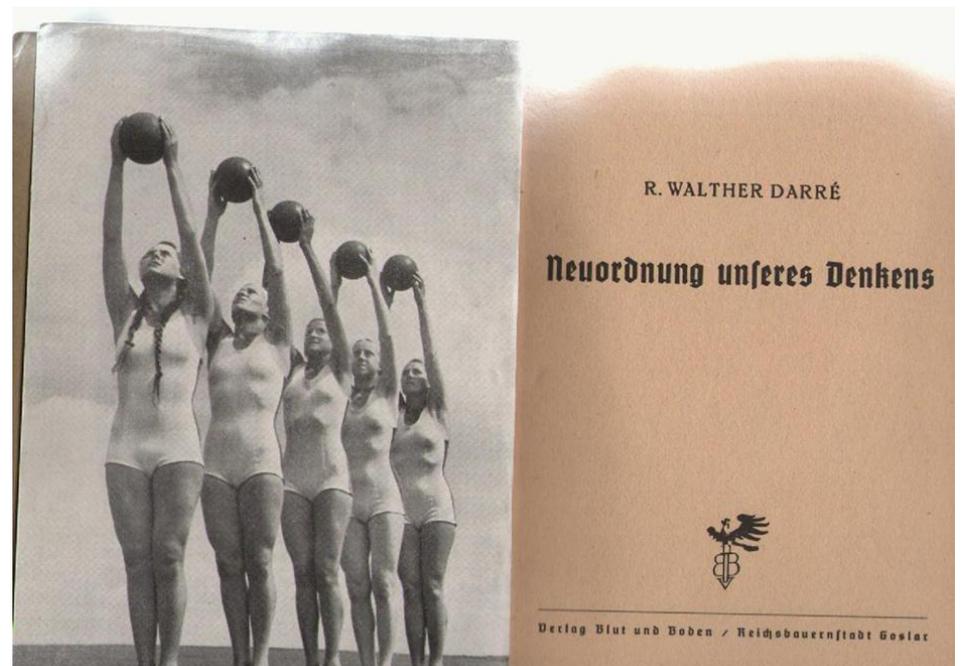
- “A literal documentary narrative” albeit one which deployed spectacular “visual compositions” used to create a Wagnerian sense of epic (Welch, 2001, p129).
- Sir Richard Evans (2005, p. 126) classified the film as “documentary propaganda” and that as the only film about Hitler it “said all that needed to be said and did not need to be followed by another.”
- Goebbels, a reluctant supporter, described the film as a “magnificent cinematic vision of the Fuhrer” (cited in Welch, 2001, p. 134).





Women and physical culture





Discourses of promotion in *Triumph of the Will*

- A sensualised propaganda of the human form
- A visual and cinematic manifestation of an idea (Nazism)
- The promotional discourse is a corporealisation of the ideology
- Athletic bodies and massed community idealise *volksgemeinschaft*
- This interpretation affects how we theorise public relations discourse in film and the functionality of the human form as a piece of propaganda in itself and a promotional vehicle
- Body replaces documentary tools such as voiceovers, captions and interviews to let events speak directly to the audience

Discourses of promotion in *Triumph of the Will*

On her 100th birthday, Leni Riefenstahl commented on the film:

“I do not see anything political (*poleitische*) in *Triumph of the Will*. I see it as a film and I see all films in the same way. I regard *Triumph of the Will* as a documentary film (*documentarisch*).

And from that point of view, it is just like *Olympia* or *The Blue Light*. I don't see it as political. It was all documentary that film. There was nothing political about it.” (Maischberger, 2002)

Historiographical implications

- Cinema historiography offers PR historians options for future methodological directions to appraise propaganda artefacts and the enduring historical propositions relating to Nazi communications.
- Challenge narrow categorisations and has called the “neat taxonomy” of fascist and non-fascist material (Linda Schulte–Sasse, 1991, p. 124)
- Commonalities can be explored across national practices rather than forcing into separate typological containers, similar types of persuasive communications that share “strategic intent” of public relations (Lamme and Russell, 2015).

Historiographical implications

- Filmic historical investigation – and the institutions and distribution systems of political communications - offers a path for understanding the nature of propaganda and the art/propaganda nexus.
- *Triumph of the Will* was ostensibly documentary, for example, but represented a major annexation of the entertainment industry for propaganda purposes, that was not so different from the case of Capra's *Why we Fight* in the USA, numerous wartime UK feature films and arguably continues in *Top Gun* and others more recently.

Historiographical implications

- Discourses in *Triumph of the Will* raise questions that go beyond the art/propaganda nexus to the continuum of public relations-promotion-propaganda in documentary cinema
- Documentary format widely characterised as socially purposeful role of public relations that delivers an educative element, but applied only to material produced by the victors of World War II.
- Visual discourse of the film offers lessons for current public relations and political campaigns on the role of audiovisual promotion and the content motif of the perfect body for didactic purposes.

FIFTEEN CENTS

February 17, 1936

TIME

The Weekly Newsmagazine



Marie Perle

Harper's BAZAAR

AUSTRALIA August 2013

FABULOUS
AT EVERY
AGE

24 hours with
**VICTORIA
BECKHAM**

Plus
**CHRISTY
TURLINGTON
COCO ROCHA
JERRY HALL**

**CAN YOU
CHANGE YOUR
BEAUTY
DESTINY?**

ETERNALLY CHIC
*your perfect
wardrobe*

The
BODY
AT FIFTY

**COCO
PEREZ**

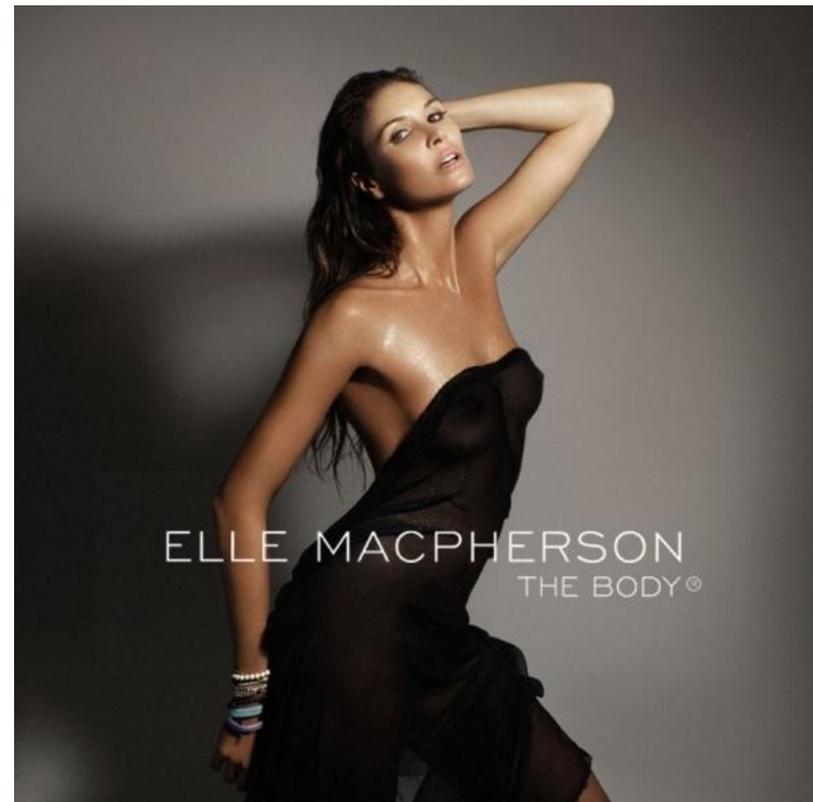
Harper's BAZAAR AUSTRALIA

**THE
BODY
ISSUE**

**EXCLUSIVE
ELLE'S
POST-BABY
DIET**

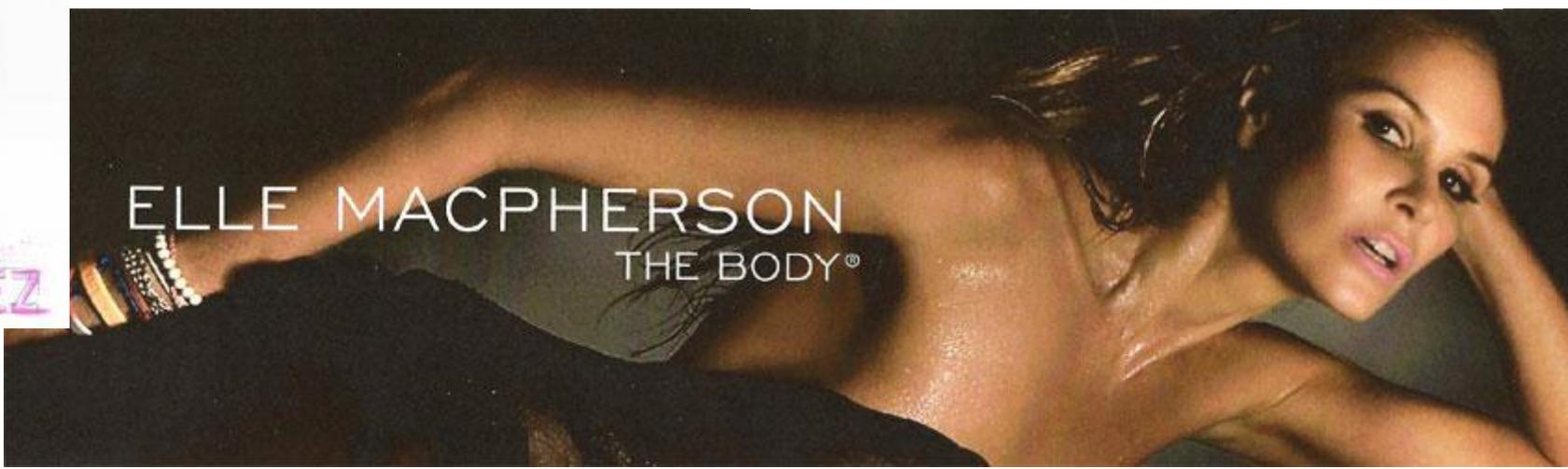
**GET SET
FOR SUMMER**

SEXY SWIMSUITS, SUNGLASSES & STILETTOS



ELLE MACPHERSON
THE BODY®

ELLE MACPHERSON "The Body" Collection



ELLE MACPHERSON
THE BODY®

KARDASHIANS

Kim Kardashian Works Her Slimmed-Down Postbaby Body in a 'Wife of Pablo' Swimsuit

June 13, 2016 @ 10:55 AM By [Rose Walano](#)

