

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 26 (2011)

**Artikel:** Hitler goes pop : totalitarianism, avant-garde aesthetics and Hollywood entertainment  
**Autor:** Bronfen, Elisabeth  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-283963>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 31.03.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Hitler goes Pop: Totalitarianism, Avant-garde Aesthetics and Hollywood Entertainment

Elisabeth Bronfen

This essay takes Susan Sontag's concept of fascist aesthetics as its point of departure to explore similar structures and themes in Hollywood films. Reflecting on the murky interface between the totalitarian political projects of the 30s and early 40s and avant-garde aesthetics, this essay proposes a cross-mapping of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* with Busby Berkeley's musical *Dames* and Walt Disney's cartoon *Bambi*. While Hitler's speeches on art offer a historical context for my discussion, the close analysis of key scenes of these three films serves to illuminate both the analogy in visual form and narratives, even while foregrounding seminal differences. Not only do these three directors differ in their intentions. Rather, both Busby Berkeley and Walt Disney consciously undermine the very fascination for a totalitarian aesthetic, which they also celebrate in their joyous enactment of mass body formations. I claim that it is not only fruitful but critically necessary to bring a film language, which in the case of Leni Riefenstahl explicitly served the purposes of a totalitarian political system, to bear on the films Hollywood produced at the same time, even if American visual culture emerged from a social order that was precisely not totalitarian but rather aggressively democratic.

In her essay "Fascinating Fascism," Susan Sontag describes how, in 1939, Leni Riefenstahl, after returning from a visit to Hollywood, where she had been the guest of Walt Disney, accompanied the invading German Wehrmacht into Poland as a uniformed army war correspondent with her own camera team. The photographs she took to document these atrocities seem not to have survived the war, though an image exists of her shocked face while witnessing one of the public executions.

*The Visual Culture of Modernism*. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 26. Ed. Deborah L. Madsen and Mario Klarer. Tübingen: Narr, 2011. 85-104.

Her filming of the National Socialist Party Convention in Nuremberg in 1934, as well as of the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, in turn, have influenced a cinematic language Susan Sontag calls fascist aesthetics. At stake in this art form, she explains, is the extravagant staging of “the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force” (91). Fascist dramaturgy, she goes on to argue, revolves around an orgiastic transaction between powerful forces and those who enact them. It alternates “between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, ‘virile’ posing. Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death” (91). At the same time, Sontag insists that her concept of fascist aesthetics is not confined to art labeled as fascist or produced under an explicitly totalitarian regime. Rather, certain formal structures and themes of fascist art can be found in films such as Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*, Busby Berkeley’s *The Gang’s All Here*, or Kubrick’s *2001*. The concept can, however, also be applied to the allegedly documentary films made by Leni Riefenstahl, who throughout her life vehemently protested against the charge that she had made propaganda films for the Nazi Party.

The fact that one can detect a similarity in cinematic language for such diverse directors as Riefenstahl, Berkeley and Disney, as well as a common narrative about the dissolution of the individual into the technological sign, belatedly sheds light on the way in which German fascism always also understood itself as a cultural movement. Not only political goals were to be perpetrated. A particular concept of what it meant to be a German person was to be disseminated as well, and connected to this the idea that the individual was to become part of a mass body, unequivocally subjected to the will of the political sovereign. Bringing both art and mass entertainment in line with the ideological goals of the Nazi Party was decisive not only for the way in which the new German people were to change the world, but also for the different interpretation of political culture this political party sought to install along with their belligerent actions. At stake, however, was not only the ideology of a people (*Volkskörper*) united under a charismatic leader, but also the manner in which this collective body, cleansed of all racial and class difference, came to be visualized as a political entity, so as to sustain narrations about the strength and greatness of the new German nation brought into cultural circulation from the early 30s onwards. At the same time, the formal as well as thematic similarities between Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary films, financed by the Nazi government, and the animated films as well as the musicals that were produced at the same time by Disney Studios and Warner Brothers in Hollywood, draw our attention to a somewhat more vexed connection joining together

European and American modernism with the cultural praxis of totalitarian movements such as the Nazi Party.

In his preface to Hitler's *Speeches on Art and Cultural Politics*, Robert Eikmeyer suggests that this relation is too complex for us either to declare that the classic avant-garde ended in 1933 (so as to allow it to resurface untainted by all political events in 1945), or to assume that the avant-garde was seamlessly subsumed into the totalitarian movements of the 30s. Is it a question of intention, of style or of the transported ideologies, which makes this connection noteworthy? Should we address the manner in which culturally pressing issues come to be visualized and aesthetically resolved, and in so doing inscribe themselves into the political imaginary, as Susan Buck-Morss has shown for her comparison of American and Soviet mass utopias in the 30s? (see also Schivelbusch). Or should we rather focus on the political consequences that follow from artistic works, so that at stake is their material usage as propaganda? So as to explore the uncanny interface between aesthetic innovation, pop culture and totalitarian art projects at the acme of modernism, I want to offer a crossmapping of the three film directors Susan Sontag mentions as examples for what she calls fascist aesthetics. All three transpose the spirit of the totalitarian movement into the domain of cinematic mass culture in the period leading up to and moving into WW II. My comparison of the documentary film *Olympia* (1938), the musical *Dames* (1934) as well as the animated film *Bambi* (1942) focuses on the manner in which the cinematic language of all three directors rearticulates some of Hitler's seminal political concerns within the visual tropes of pop culture: the celebration of the immaculate, triumphant body, able to perform supreme physical feats; the production of a new human as emblem for an intact social body (*Volkskörper*), immune against decay; the construction of an artificial world, which promises to ward off all dissolution of time and space.

However, to draw attention to the analogy both in the visual form and the narratives of these three films necessarily also means foregrounding their seminal differences. Not only do these three directors differ in their intentions. Rather, both Busby Berkeley and Walt Disney consciously undermine the very fascination for a totalitarian aesthetic, which they also celebrate in their joyous enactment of mass body formations. I claim that it is not only fruitful but critically necessary to bring a film language, which in the case of Leni Riefenstahl explicitly served the purposes of a totalitarian political system, to bear on the films Hollywood produced at the same time, even if American visual culture emerged from a social order that was precisely not totalitarian but rather aggressively democratic. At the same time, to insist on a connection that leads from Busby Berkeley and Walt Disney to Leni Riefenstahl not only

means sharpening our sensitivity for totalitarian analogies, as these came to inscribe themselves in very different political imaginaries. Rather, it also means taking note of the manner in which art and cultural visions triumph along the lines of what Nietzsche called the emergence of moral judgment. A set of values, he argues, gain dominance by re-interpreting the cultural values already in existence, by confiscating them, reformulating them so that they might serve a new purpose, and by virtue of this appropriating, redirecting them.

If such diverse directors as Berkeley and Riefenstahl stage the technical mechanization of the human body, we must also ask: how far can one make any analogy between the way in which they re-interpret and re-formulate the relation between the modern subject and her or his reification? At what point must one insist on a decisive difference between these cinematic projects? As Bazon Brock argues, at the heart of totalitarianism lies the claim that it consists in a force, which insists on realizing its ideas by transforming them into political reality (“Kunst auf Befehl?”). Following this definition, I suggest that the difference between diverse artistic expressions fascinated with totalitarianism might well reside in the way we evaluate the reality they produce on screen, which is to say the reality they transform into a world of visual signs: is it aimed at political consequences, at commercial success, or does it unfold as a self-reflexive play of signifiers.

If we turn to the ideas to which Hitler, in his speeches on art and cultural politics, ascribes the force of producing reality, the following schema emerges. Ways of viewing the world (*Weltanschauungen*) shape cultural life in so far as poets can sing of precursor poets only if heroic times allowed these to emerge. Unheroic times, in turn, force heroes to descend into the lowly ordinary of everyday existence. For this reason a permanence of the heroic (in the sense of a transhistorical energy) must be pitted against the possibility of the decay of the concrete world vision of any particular cultural moment. With this claim for the survival of the spirit of the heroic, Hitler has recourse to a belief in the eternal value of the ideals of antiquity, prevalent in the writings of cultural critics at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. In his essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” Matthew Arnold had already foregrounded the notion of *disinterestedness* in relation to “all questions of practical consequences and applications” as the quintessential mark of the good critic. According to him, the work of both the poet and the critic should instead consist in knowing “the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas.” In short: “to produce fruit for the future” (18).

What is, however, idiosyncratic in Hitler's schema of the resilient afterlife of cultural ideals of perfection, is the fact that he locates the permanence of the heroic in the immutability of racial inheritance, using as his example the cultural survival of classic ideals of beauty. The material appearance of paintings and sculpture from ancient Greece testify to the immortality of these past ideals, do so, however, only – and that is the decisive point – as long as people with a similar hereditary predisposition (because they share a similar racial descent) continue to exist. As future spectators they will recognize the sublimity of this art from the past and attest to its eternal value. Hitler's rhetorical trick consists in the claim that the preservation of the ability to appreciate artistic expressions of the heroic is tantamount to its production in relation both to the past and the future. On the one hand, a contemporary artistic practice based on esteeming heroic values must bridge the gap to the equally heroic times of the past. On the other hand, Hitler's notion of culture is aimed less at art works themselves. Rather, his concern is for the production of a future spectatorship, which will subsequently recognize the heroic times represented by the Nazi period. The wager of contemporary art and cultural practice is that in retrospect, future spectators will attribute to the art works of the past an ideal perfection, even while, in so doing, they actually come to produce this heroic quality as an aftereffect of belated artistic appreciation. The rhetorical gesture celebrates the future perfect: these art works will have been perfect.

In his critical comments on Hitler's writings on art, Boris Groys notes that the totalitarian art work seeks above all to produce a corporate body of spectators, who as future art consumers will guarantee the survival of a heroic hereditary predisposition adopted from antiquity (in Eikmeyer 25-39). This future audience, which contemporary art is to bring forth, defines itself as a group based on the affective responses it shares with the immortal achievements of antiquity. It identifies with their past ideals, which have, however, survived primarily owing to their externally recognizable and material appearance. The translation of this cultural energy into tangible paintings and sculptures allows the spirit of the past to affect an audience long after the culture that produced these artifacts has ceased to exist. Race, taken to be the innermost, constant kernel of cultural transmission, thus emerges as the cipher for a successful transhistorical transfer of cultural values and cultural knowledge. According to Hitler, hereditary predisposition allows cultural taste to survive genetically, and thus serves as a safeguard that a future body of spectators will retrospectively be able to recognize the cultural achievements that a past people was able to produce (Groys, in Eikmeyer 25-39).

In his speeches on art, Hitler is not concerned with the present and its particular economic and cultural demands. In the sense of Matthew Arnold's *disinterestedness* he, instead, develops a mythical notion of culture, which explicitly seeks to disengage itself from the inconstancy of real historical times. Contemporary art is to appropriate the immortal spirit, to confiscate and re-interpret it. *In* the present it is to create *for* the future an artistic materialization of the immortality of ideal perfection postulated by art critics. It is, thus, only logical that Hitler emphatically rejected all notions of style, declaring all new fashions to be an untenable threat to the healthy development of humanity as he saw it. In contrast to Ezra Pound, enthusiastic supporter of Italian fascism, who appealed to his fellow artists to "make it new," Hitler's art politics was not concerned with what was novel, innovative and indeed, up to that historic moment unheard of. Unwittingly walking in the footsteps of the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold, he sought instead to draw attention to the best that a past culture had always already thought and created. Caught up in a rhetorical short circuit, his totalitarian logic claims that the heroic proves to be a cultural value that has always already been in existence and will always continue to exist, precisely because one and the same racial kernel bridges the past, the present and the future. At the same time, one will only be able to determine belatedly whether a particular historical moment was able to produce immortal heroic achievements, namely when, owing to the persistence of such a racial kernel (which will allow future audiences to recognize past aesthetic ideals) the best that can be thought and created will have been preserved from decay, demise and oblivion.

In his speech at a conference on culture during the Nazi Party Convention in Nuremberg on 1 September 1933, Hitler explained, "even if a nation is extinguished and its people fall silent, the stones will speak, as long as there are other people who have a similar understanding of culture" ("Kunst verpflichtet sich zur Wahrhaftigkeit," Eikmeyer 53). In the temporal loop, in which the present produces the conditions, which will allow the past to have a cultural survival and thus effect the future, the spiritual *energia* of art meets its pure materialization. Everything depends on the survival of a material artifact, conceived as the bearer of a given set of cultural values, as well as the survival of an aesthetic taste, which will guarantee that this perfection will always be recognized by those who share it. A particular understanding of culture is eternal, because it has survived a catastrophe and is able to resurrect itself out of its ashes. But one could also say, only the catastrophe, which must be outlived, actually allows one to recognize what was beautiful and perfect in the past. The demise of a particular culture emerges as the precondition for determining that its ideals have, nevertheless, survived. The re-

silience of a particular cultural effect is predicated on this loss. In his speech on 5 September 1934, also given at a conference on culture in Nuremberg, Hitler proclaimed that the dimensions of a cultural will to power can only be understood belatedly, namely as force “that had been great, because it undertook to create the greatest things possible” (Hitler in Eikmeyer 77). Boris Groys poignantly notes that the eternity Hitler bespeaks is “the eternity of the ruins,” which have remained after a given civilization has been destroyed (in Eikmeyer 27).

Leni Riefenstahl begins her opening sequence of *Olympia* with a cinematic rendition of the time after the demise of one of the West’s most significant cultures, ancient Greece. Her images of a temple in Olympia can be understood as an illustration of Hitler’s theories of art. With the help of her signature montage technique, Riefenstahl enacts the survival of the spirit of antiquity by focusing on the way it has lived on in its material monuments. Her camera captures the spirit of past ideals of perfection, and reanimates what has remained of the great architecture and sculptures of Greek culture, even while documenting the fact that these ruins are eternal. She uses superimposition to move from a close up of the fresco painting of two athletes to the clouds moving across the sky above the temple, then pans along the stony relics of this ancient cult site. So as to foreground the eternity of these ruins, Riefenstahl juxtaposes different visual perspectives of this sacred building. Her montage enmeshes diverse external views of the walls and columns, overgrown with grass and bushes, with views of the interior of the temple, while the panning movement of the camera visually underscores the transhistorical continuity of the space. At times her camera glides along a façade, then again it traverses the interior, circling around a column, only to move outside and depict the external structure of the temple as a long shot. The first longer camera pan ends as Riefenstahl moves into an extreme close-up of one of the columns, thus dissolving this antique cult site of worship into its pure materiality; into the stone that has outlasted all historical changes. After all, her aim is to use her film language to make these stones speak.

A second superimposition draws our attention to the sculptured bust of a man, standing in one of the rooms of the temple, as though it had been extracted from the stone surrounding it. Initially Riefenstahl’s camera cautiously approaches this stone head, seemingly standing alone in the open interior. Then the director changes her *mise-en-scène* and, panning along several columns inside the temple, once more glides her view upwards into the sky, heralding the beginning of a new sequence of images: the superimposition of several close-up shots of statues, meant to illustrate the eternal value of antique ideals of beauty. Once more her camera pans along these externalized embodiments of the spirit of an-

tiquity, while her montage juxtaposes the individual marble bodies into one visual unity. One has the impression that they all flow together into one image body, produced by virtue of her editing technique. Faded into the background we see clouds moving across the sky, signaling that the nebulous spirit, which eternally envelopes this ruined cult site, has been incorporated into Riefenstahl's cinematic reanimation of antique stones. As in the first sequence, which captures the external walls and interiors of the temple, the camera once again pans toward the stony materiality of the deceased Hellenic culture, so as to move around the individual statues. Only in contrast to the establishing sequence, the space is no longer filled with sun light. Instead, the individual statues, which owing to the superimpositions used to depict them seem to be dissolving into each other, appear as though exhibited on a dark stage, beyond any real location in time and space.

In this artificial exhibition space, where Riefenstahl comes to enact her gothic reanimation of the past, the statues, enveloped by a cloudy fog, appear to have come alive again. They speak to us with a ghostly presence. What the montage calls forth are not individual figures, but an embodied corporation as form, which is to say, a group of figures combined into one cinematically produced image body. At the same time, the effect of the montage is to add spiritual reanimation to the illusion that an arsenal of cultural artifacts has been spared from the inevitable force of transience and decay. The gliding movement of the camera produces the impression that the statues, which its spirit seems to have reanimated, are now themselves moving on the screen. Riefenstahl visually underscores her appropriation of the immortal spirit of the past by virtue of the spatial design of this sequence, namely the dark background, the *chiaroscuro* lighting, as well as the fact that she continues to superimpose foggy clouds onto the individual statues. Indeed, her reanimation is tantamount to an embodiment of the eternity of a particular cultural value, namely that of ideal beauty and perfection. The internal racial kernel Hitler praises in his speeches on art, meant to guarantee a hereditary predisposition to recognize and create the best and greatest in the future, thus finds its materialization in the sublime statues that, having outlived the downfall of antiquity, are recognized and commemorated by this modern Germanic director.

Once her camera has reached the sculpture of a discus thrower, Riefenstahl shifts to a corporeal embodiment of the spirit of antiquity. Seamlessly stone turns into bodies made of flesh and blood, as though the two were interchangeable materialities. After all, decisive is merely the transmission of a hereditary predisposition. Statues draw on the energy of the past to produce the perfect body of the contemporary German athlete, and he, in turn, generates a cascade of images. In the same

manner in which, in the previous sequence, one individual statue brought forth the next one, so too, in this sequence, one sport gesture engenders the next: The discus thrower transforms into a spear thrower, who in turn becomes a runner, until these muscular men are replaced by female gymnasts, performing their morning exercises. Out of the rhythmic body movements of these naked women, who in turn come together to form one monumental formal corporation (or totalized body unit), the Olympic fire is finally brought forth, and with it the mass entertainment spectacle of the torch race, which Joseph Goebbels thought up for the Olympic Games of 1936 in Berlin.

The bodies of the German athletes, reduced to their hard corporeal materiality, serve to bridge the lighting of the Olympic fire and the immortal spirit of the past, whose belated recognition makes for any contemporary recognition of the heroic in the present. In Riefenstahl's popularizing cinematic language, eternity comes to be enacted as the visual transformation of stone into flesh and then fire, which, with the help of montage and superimposition, welds everything into one totalizing image body. What emerges is precisely the synthesis between appropriateness and beauty, which Hitler praised in his speech at the Nazi Party Convention in Nuremberg in 1934:

We are happy enough to know that between the Greek alphabet and the runic characters of our forefathers a visual correspondence exists in their great sense of style. Once more we look in admiration upon the great people of antiquity, upon their achievements in the domain of human culture and particularly in art. As a people they are far removed from us, as members of the Indo-Germanic racial community, however, we see them as for ever close. ("Kunst," in Eikmeyer 77)

Riefenstahl's montage offers a perfect illustration of the compromise Hitler demanded of art between a sober assessment of pertinence and the intimation of perfection. As Boris Groys notes, for Hitler the art work was primarily "a form in the world of forms." He conceived art "not as a message, but rather as a body, engendered by another body, namely the body of the artist," only to be appreciated and consumed by yet another body, namely the implied spectator of the future ("Das Kunstwerk," Eikmeyer 33).

\*\*\*

One issue Hitler's claim for a persistent cultural valorization of perfection raises is the fact that the artificial engendering of bodies is often negotiated over the notion of an eternal feminine beauty. This brings me to my second example, the musical *Dames*, directed by Ray Enright. A young, ambitious songwriter Jimmy Higgins (Dick Powell) wants to put on his first Broadway Show, with his beloved Barbara Hemingway (Ruby Keeler) playing the lead part. Her uncle, a millionaire, who is to fund this enterprise, is initially against it. Jimmy, however, uses the visually spectacular optical illusion of the final show number "I only have eyes for you," to beguile him. The ruse works, the millionaire gives the necessary money, the songwriter gets his break on Broadway and can marry his beloved. The show number decisive in bringing about this happy end, directed by Busby Berkeley, begins with Barbara aka Ruby Keeler, picking Jimmy aka Dick Powell up from work. Together they walk to the subway, while his song, explicitly calling his love for her "an optical illusion," charms the world around them and transforms it into a transhistorical site, divorced of all material transience. It is a virtual space of desire, comparable to the dark exhibition site in the inaugural sequence of Riefenstahl's *Olympia*.

The singer only has eyes for the woman he loves, even while he is self-consciously aware of the visual enchantment into which he draws his beloved by virtue of his enthusiastic song. After the two lovers have sat down in the subway, all the other passengers disappear. A fantasy scene of uncanny intimacy is about to begin. The two lovers share a world of enchantment, whose charm consists in the fact that it explicitly screens out reality. Barbara, the object of the loving gaze of the singer, soon falls asleep. Jimmy, who continues to sing, moves his charmed eye away from her, and in so doing, transfers the beautiful body of his beloved to the advertisement for a cosmetic article hanging in front of him on the other side of the subway car. As his eye moves from one poster to the next, he repeatedly reproduces her images, even while he uses this illusion to sing the eternal value of his own poetic creativity. Suddenly all the other advertisement posters, which he looks at through his love bedazzled gaze, reveal the only face he has eyes for. From all around him the woman, sleeping at his side, is smiling back at him as a consumer commodity. We must, however, ask ourselves, who is actually dreaming the following show number: Barbara, who has indeed fallen asleep, or Jimmy, staring around himself in utter enthusiasm, as though her spirit had taken over his imagination?

What is about to unfold before our eyes is, of course, the birth of the glamour star Ruby Keeler, namely as the commercial fabrication of a thoroughly cosmetic, not natural, beauty idea. The boundary between the young woman and the reproduction the poet's love for her inspires, has become fluid. We encounter a cinematic enactment of the world of visual forms, in which bodies incessantly engender new bodies, as though they were on a conveyor belt in Hollywood's image factory. Decisive, however, is the direction which the power of the singer's idea, seeking to realize itself, takes in Busby Berkeley's staging of the eternal value of feminine beauty. This musical enactment of an endless reproduction of the feminine body explicitly claims for itself that it is aimed only at a world of aesthetic forms, and at an optical illusion to boot. The advertisement image transforms into a multiple reproduction of Barbara's (Ruby Keeler's) face. The enchantment, which unfolds before our eyes as a visual infatuation, goes in tandem with a fragmentation of her body, as well as a screening out of the real models, whose faces were initially on the advertisement posters. Instead one face, recalling Ruby Keeler's face, turns into many, super sized faces, which suddenly appear in front of a black background, and – staying with the gothic tone – begin spectrally to move on their own. Only after a while do we recognize that a multitude of show girls, whom we don't initially see, are holding these masks of Ruby Keeler's face, and are thus the actual motor behind this visual spectacle. Slowly one layer of mask faces, which screens out the actual bodies of the show girls, is peeled away to reveal a second layer, until in one grand movement all masks are tilted forwards, producing a multitude of tulle skirts.

Only now do we actually come to see the corporation of show girls, all resembling Ruby Keeler. Each one is now holding a detail of the total glamour image, advertising a star, underneath the front part of her skirt, swinging both the cloth and the image it now covers back and forth. Individualization and reification replace and supersede each other, because all the show girls are part of a totalizing body geometry; materialized image bodies we can only recognize as external figurations. At the same time we are dealing with what Sigmund Freud came to call the uncanny, given that Busby Berkeley explicitly plays with a fluid boundary between the animated and the deanimated woman, between the image and the body, as well as between individual singularity and a mass or corporate totality, drawing all separate bodies into one unity. In the midst of the anonymous show girls we repeatedly see the individual star Ruby Keeler, before she once again dissolves into the total body of all the dancers, as well as the totality of the staging. Busby Berkeley's brilliantly composed optical illusion thus reveals two sides. On the one hand, his show number elevates the individual actress into a glamour

star, and in so doing guarantees her immortality. On the other hand this performance reduces the individual woman to a part in his choreographed glamour body machine.

The high point of the show number is the moment, in which all the show girls once more raise their skirts, covering their faces with this part of their costume. Busby Berkeley's camera captures this moment as a top shot, so as to reveal a monumental reproduction of the face of the musical star, for whom alone the singer has eyes. The birth of the glamour star is complete, even while it emerges as a puzzle image, the amalgamation of many different fragments. In this spectacular transformation, a multitude of anonymous show girls engenders the glamour image of the female star. Owing to the uncanny oscillation between musical performer and image body we have seen unfold on the screen, the star Ruby Keeler proves to have a double origin. She is the product of the charmed gaze of the love enthused singer, but she is also the product of the technologically perfect choreography performed by the other show girls. The birth of the glamour star, onto whom everyone's attention is now drawn – on stage, off stage, and on screen – is revealed to consist in the mechanical transformation of many women, each carrying one detail of the total image in front of their faces, into a super sized image body. These show girls, coming together into a unified body image, collectively engender this glamour image, even while they have also been subsumed by it. They are no longer in the picture, even while their bodies are literally holding the picture.

However, not only the individual bodies of the show girls are dissolved into the totalizing gesture Busby Berkeley deploys to celebrate the birth of his glamour star. The star image itself is immediately transformed. Once more revealed to be nothing other than a fabricated picture, it engenders a new cycle of show girls resembling it. Busby Berkeley not only turns the screw of his optical illusion one notch further by self-consciously pointing to his game with commercial media images. After his camera has panned forward into an extreme close-up of the pupil of the puzzle image of his glamour star, a new chain of reanimations sets in. Phallically Ruby Keeler emerges from her own super sized eye, painted on cardboard, only to be immediately transformed again into an image; to be precise a mirror reflection. After we see the back side of the mirror she is holding in her hand, we are suddenly back in the subway with the sleeping beauty, whose face inspired the entire optical illusion. First we see the two lovers from the front, then from behind, shadows on the screen, and thus a cipher for the game of light and shadows, which is the magic of cinema itself.

The stylistic similarity to Riefenstahl can hardly be overlooked. A chain of feminine bodies, engendering themselves, formally opens up on the screen, and as a corporation (*qua* embodied unity) takes on the status of an immortal, explicitly cosmetically produced ideal of feminine beauty. Many bodies come together to form one perfected body, which, because it is declared to be special, rises above them, even while it is incessantly reappropriated by the group. At the same time, the oscillation between totalization and fragmentation seems to have been taken to the extreme. The poet, his art work (the show number), and his audience have also come to be united into an affectively charged incorporated body, which shares its enthusiasm for this optical illusion. The cultural value of the eternal has been confiscated in the sense that with this show number, the song writer is propagating his art form, even while he anticipates his commercial success on Broadway.

But the refiguration Busby Berkeley celebrates unfolds an interminable loop, welding together self-advertisement and artistic creation. His art, rather than giving voice to a past ideal of beauty, speaks of the transferral of the beautiful feminine body into a glamour image, which ultimately inundates the entire stage. As such, it serves as propaganda for itself; for the show number promoting the film *Dames*, as well as for this particular musical film promoting the musical genre as well as mass entertainment in the 30s in general. And it is propaganda for a transhistoric process, resisting the laws of fugacity and transience. In his sonnet 18, Shakespeare claims that his poetry has the power to immortalize his beloved: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." It is this trust in the eternal value of the art form, which Busby Berkeley attributes to the musical genre. As long as there is a cinema audience, willing to enjoy his idiosyncratic formalization of feminine beauty, this scene of the birth of a glamour star will be attributed to his choreographic genius, and as such will survive the ephemeral world that brought it forth. In retrospect, one will recognize the greatness of his idiosyncratic staging of show girls in the fact that the body images he came to design and choreograph have continued to affect our cultural imaginary.

If on the level of style, a visual analogy to fascist art theory unfolds, one must nevertheless insist on the following difference. Hitler's actual politics stood in contradiction to his ideas on art when it comes to precisely the point I have sought to trace in my discussion of Busby Berkeley's choreography. Stéfani de Loppinot correctly points to the fact that his career with the US military (six years in a military college close to New York City, three years as second lieutenant and trainer in WW I) greatly influenced the way in which he came to direct his female troops on Broadway and in Hollywood after the war. At the same time, she

emphasizes that “the bodies of the show girls, lined up like tin soldiers, embody a situation of passage, a united body which keeps changing, and which suddenly swerves off in unexpected curves” (33). In short, what Busby Berkeley reveals to us is a gigantic optical illusion, in which an embodiment of the idea of eternal feminine beauty and its mechanical transformation into cinematic “image-bodies” implicate and replace each other. The totalized body that subsumes individual show girls into a united corporation remains in constant movement. The only message Berkeley’s grandiose choreography transmits is one concerned with an untiring pleasure in partaking in the oscillation of seductive feminine bodies and their visual formalization. Fascist politics, by contrast, was acutely concerned with a message, whose consequences were horrifically real. What followed upon the reification of the individual and his dissolution into the united body of the willing subject, which Riefenstahl filmed at the Nazi Party Conventions and transformed into montaged sequences at her editing table, was an irrevocably and unquestionably real dehumanization and extinction of human beings on the battle field and in concentration camps.

How these two sites relate to each other remains an open question. To show that the formalization of unified body figurations (where individual bodies become part of one embodied corporation) was one of the seminal concerns of modernism is the heuristic gain of the crossmapping I am proposing. At the same time, by confronting Riefenstahl’s fascist aesthetics with Berkeley’s choreographies I am equally concerned with drawing our critical attention to the fact that in the arena of politics, the gesture of totalization *must* be judged to be fundamentally different than in the arena of art. The transferral of bodies into the pure materiality of the artistic sign *cannot* be seamlessly equated with the dissolution of the human body into an ideological message, as this was performed in sites of mass extinction. Modernism was concerned not only with endowing art forms with materiality. Rather, it was equally concerned in thinking both the dissolution of the body into an aesthetic sign, as well as the extinction of the artistic sign in pure abstraction (such as Malevich’s black paintings) as the logical consequence of an aesthetic project of artistic auto-poesis. For this reason, the vexed interface between avant-garde innovation, popular culture and modernism leads ever more deeply into a self-reflexive mediality, even if there can be no doubt that these virtual sign systems had cultural effects and ideological implications. Hitler, by contrast, held his last speech on art on 16 July 1939, at the opening of the Exhibition of German Art in Munich (*Die Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*). After this he sought to enforce a different, extra-aesthetic reality by transposing his notion of the totalized art work (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) into his politics of destruction and cul-

tural demise. Perhaps this explains why he had nothing more to say about art after 1939.

\*\*\*

Let us, however, return to Walt Disney, whom Riefenstahl left that year, in order to work as a war correspondent in Poland. On 8 December 1941 his studios were taken over by the American war department. During the next four years Walt Disney supported the war effort with countless training, educational and propaganda films for the Armed Forces, made to help raise money for the war and at the same time boost the morale of the American people (see Laqua and Gabler). Indeed, during the war years, he depicted Snow White's seven dwarves selling war bonds and Donald Duck's nightmare visit to Hitler's Reich in *The Führer's Face*, with the distorted language of dreams offering a caricature of fascist politics. My interest in exploring the murky interface between entertainment culture, avant-garde film language and totalitarian politics, will however, be played through with a different film, whose morally uplifting sentimentality can also be ascribed to the war effort of the Disney Studios. In *Bambi*, made one year after the attack on Pearl Harbor, another analogy between Hollywood's image production in the 30s and Hitler's speeches on art can be found, precisely because it also makes the claim that a hereditary predisposition serves as a guarantee for the successful transmission of eternal cultural values. The scene, in which Bambi meets his father for the first time, revolves around the idea that a taste, inherent to a racially more perfect creature, will serve as the binding and trustworthy bridge between the generations. As young Bambi and his female playmate watch the more mature deer practicing their athletic jumps in the meadow below, they intuitively recognize the beauty and strength of this display of physical prowess. Without quite knowing why, indeed as though he had instinctively recognized gender difference, Bambi suddenly sends away his female playmate. Propelled by a genetically inherited ability to imitate what is great in others, he in turn tries, albeit timidly, to copy the noble leaps of the older deer.

Decisive about this scene, conceived as a *rite-de-passage*, is, however, the fact that owing to the affective predisposition, which Bambi has inherited from his father, he is also able to instinctively recognize the greatness of the Prince of the Forest, even before he discovers his actual blood relation to the leader of his community. Initially, he had sought protection from the wild leaping of the other deer, hiding inside a hollow trunk of a tree. When, however, they had suddenly stopped in their gleeful exercising, he had followed them onto the meadow. There we

see a rather frail Bambi, standing next to a small bush, close to but not part of the unity, which the older deer have come to form. All gazes are aimed at the approach of the figure of paternal authority, although, in contrast to the others, Bambi is shown to be astonished. Significant about the scene is, once again, the choreography. While the older deer were exercising, Disney had shown them jumping and running in various individual groups. Once their leader descends from the forest and approaches them, however, they come together to form a closed embodied corporation, recalling the phalanx of a fighting unit of troops. Now, only their heads move in perfect unison, their united gaze tracking the movement of the Prince of the Forest as he passes by them silently. He approaches his son, looks at him intently, as though in recognition, and, without uttering a word, returns to the forest.

The movement of the deer, cipher *par excellence* for the medium of animation film, has come to be arrested into a tableau, in which two figures, who are not part of the group formation, foreground the closed unity of the embodied corporation precisely by virtue of being outside it. Disney thus offers a visual enactment of one of the core themes of the story of *Bambi*. A taste or affective predisposition, which can instinctively recognize what is beautiful and noble, be it the celebration of athletic prowess or the sovereignty of a figure of authority, testifies to the successful transmission of a racial kernel. When Bambi was born, all the other animals of the forest had immediately recognized in him their future leader. In a meeting between Bambi and the Prince of the Forest later on in the film, the preservation of a political embodied corporation will, in turn, once more be portrayed as the transferral of power from one generation to the next. This political inheritance requires, thus Disney's claim, a discursive formation of leadership predicated on an embodied group unity of subjects, who accept the authority of their sovereign. Put another way: on the level of biology, the community of deer assure their survival by virtue of a procreation of their race, on the symbolic level, however, by virtue of the difference between phalanx and leader. It is along this line of demarcation that the heroic can be passed on from father to son in a two-fold manner. In the scene in the meadow, Walt Disney conceives of both as figures that are separate from precisely the group, which gains both its visual and narrative meaning only in its relation to them. The leader, for whom alone all those surrounding him have eyes, as though he were the glamour star of this scene, anticipates the position, which Bambi will assume at the end of the film. Owing to the monumental stillness of the other deer preceding the approach of the Prince of the Forest, Bambi, in turn, immediately recognizes his symbolic mandate, even if at this point in his story he can not yet articulate in words that he is destined to be the next

leader. After the Prince of the Forest has once again departed, he can merely tell his mother, who has come to him, in awe: "He stopped and looked at me."

Within the first year of the American military involvement in WW II, Walt Disney thus creates an encounter between a leader and his athletic troops (as well as between the leader and his chosen successor), in which the symbolic body of the sovereign comes to be engendered by the unity of his subjects. Only by virtue of individual bodies coming together to form a single, unified political body, can the figure of paternal authority be produced on the screen. Furthermore, *Bambi* also pits a notion of immortality against the particular death all the animals of the forest are threatened with on the diegetic level of the film. As Bambi discovers from his mother, all the other deer respect the Prince of the Forest, because his courage and wisdom have helped him survive the dangers of the forest longer than any other animal living there. Indeed, it is he who, in a later scene, will help his son escape from the meadow minutes before the hunters begin to unleash their gun fire. At the same time, however, it is the pure materiality of this animated figure, which is to say the fact that it consists only of lines and colors applied to paper and brought into motion by virtue of the film projector, which preserves the cartoon figure Bambi against precisely the inescapable transience of the world his story unfolds and whose affective kernel is the death of his mother. Apodictically put, the drawn lines and colors that appear on screen outlast the fictional world, which the art of animation raises so fleetingly before our astonished eyes; much as the cartoon figure Bambi has been able to sever itself from his film story, so as to become one of the most resilient cultural icons of America.

In Walt Disney's work, the gesture of totalization, which turns individual figures into objects, only to subsume them into a formal unity at whose center we find a figure of paternal authority, thus undergoes a significant refiguration. The survival of this community of deer on the diegetic level of the film, as well as the survival of the cartoon figure Bambi as a star, who will continue to have an audience in the future, is not limited to the transmission of a racially inflected hereditary predisposition. It also involves the transferral of a symbolic mandate of leadership from one generation to the next, which explicitly celebrates a democratization of political power. In the final scene of the film we see the wise old deer sharing his position of power with his son. Together they look down on the meadow, before the father quietly leaves the scene. On the extradiegetic level of the film, however, the eternal cultural resonance of both the Prince of the Forest and his son Bambi, is assured by virtue of the animated line drawing. It is, of course, only logical that all of the animated figures should ultimately dissolve into the

totalizing formal language, which can only rely on the external, material appearance of the characters it creates and brings to the screen. However, these animated figures are also preserved for any future audience watching this film, precisely because of the animated lines and colors that gave and continue to give body to them.

What does it mean that 30s popular culture chose to appropriate totalitarian art concepts so seamlessly, so creatively but also so idiosyncratically? And what does it mean that fascist concepts of art could be confiscated and re-figured so unproblematically? The Marxist literary critic C. L. R. James has suggested that the neuralgic issues in twentieth-century American culture are not to be found in modern literature, but rather in Hollywood films, jazz and comic strips. According to James, the murky interface between the aesthetic concerns of avant-garde art and modern entertainment culture results from the fact that with the emergence of a commercialization (and thus also a radical popularization) of mass entertainment, a decisive enlargement of aesthetic premises took place. These had to include artistic products, which had been explicitly produced for a mass audience as well as for business people. In *Dames*, Busby Berkeley explicitly addresses the way in which financial backing influences the Broadway musical shows that can be put on. At the same time, the star body he gives birth to, even while the show uses it to promote itself and make a profit, is radically different from the athletic bodies Riefenstahl celebrates in her film *Olympia*. While she focuses our attention on the transmission of cultural values by superimposing stone, bodies and fire, Berkeley actually produces a new image body by fusing individual show girls into one unified albeit uncanny body sign, which incessantly oscillates between an animated advertisement image of a beautiful girl and a dissolution of her multiple reproduction into pure visual form.

Put another way, Riefenstahl enacts the notion of eternal cultural values Hitler postulates in his speeches on art as a pathos gesture, which can be passed down from antique sculptures to the modern German athlete. The survival of this spirit of ideal beauty is, however, predicated on the actual demise of the culture that produced these artistic artifacts. Berkeley's choreography, by contrast, opens up a completely ahistorical art site, along with the self-consciously fugacious visual magic he unfolds at this scene. The star body, rendering the spirit of feminine beauty immortal, is not a fixed entity, but rather as much an optical illusion as the love the song writer feels for his beloved. If Ruby Keeler's appearance as a glamour star arises from an advertisement poster, it turns into a silhouette at the end of the show number, signifying unequivocally that all was but a play of light and shadow. In Walt Disney's world of animation an ironic appropriation of Hitler's claim for a he-

editary predisposition for taste, which makes for an intuitive recognition not only of what is great and beautiful, but more importantly of the sovereign leader as well, attributes these eternal values to a cartoon figure; a creature of even less substance than the advertisement poster of a young musical star, because there is no actual reference to this figuration. What in Riefenstahl's cinematic illustration of Hitler's notions of the cultural survival of classic ideals comes to reveal itself in the Germanic athlete's body, is reduced in Disney's imaginary world to drawn lines, which only the film projector sets into motion.

Thrown back to the surface of the film image, we find ourselves affected by mere image effects of the monumental. What moves us are image traces, which flicker on the screen before they disappear again into pure light. Fugacity is inscribed into the medium of film as much as the spectral haunting, which allows us to trust in the survival of cultural values and to speak about the eternal value of ideal image forms. In the arena of the art of cinema, all totalizing unities irrevocably dissolve again before our eyes. To turn our critical attention once more to the murky interface between totalitarian art forms and the avant-garde concerns of modernity means to insist on the decisive differences that are contained in a fascination, which, in the 30s, American popular culture had for the transferral of bodies into monumental formal designs. Perhaps it also means reminding ourselves what we should once more – and always again – pay attention to.

## References

- Arnold, Matthew. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." *Essays in Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.
- Brock, Bazon and Achim Preiß, eds. *Kunst auf Befehl? Dreiunddreißig bis Fünfundvierzig*. München, 1990.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2000.
- de Loppinot, Stéfani. "Hot Parades." *Exploding. Revue d'analyse de l'expérimentation cinématographique* (July 2003, no. 19): 27-35.
- Eikmeyer, Robert, ed. *Adolf Hitler. Reden zur Kunst- und Kulturpolitik 1933-1939*. Frankfurt am Main: Revolver Verlag, 2004.
- Gabler, Neil. *Walt Disney. The Triumph of The American Imagination*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006.
- Greenblatt, Stephen, ed. *The Norton Shakespeare based on the Oxford Edition*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.
- James, C. L. R. *American Civilization*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
- Laqua, Carsten. *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel. Walt Disney und Deutschland*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1992.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Zur Genealogie der Moral. Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe Band 5*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Munich: DTV, 1980.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *Entfernte Verwandtschaft. Faschismus, Nationalsozialismus, New Deal 1933-1939*. Munich: Hanser Verlag, 2005.
- Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism." *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992.