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From Athens to Berlin: The 1936 Olympics and Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*

Michael Mackenzie

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In 1931, two years before the National Socialists seized power in Germany, Berlin was announced as the location of the 1936 Olympic games. The appointment to host the Olympics was for the Nazi state a problematic, burdensome inheritance from the Weimar Republic era. The ideologues of the Nazi party rejected the Olympic movement for its internationalism and pacifism, and, at first, it was uncertain that the Berlin games would actually take place.¹ Yet when the 1936 games did take place as scheduled, the National Socialist bureaucracy hosted the Olympics on “a lavish scale never before experienced”² and turned the games into a spectacle meant to show the world that the new Germany was—despite the remilitarization of the Rhineland—

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1. See Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (Urbana, Ill., 1992), pp. 53–55.

2. William Shirer, entry for 16 Aug. 1936, *Berlin Diary*. The full passage is as follows: “I’m afraid the Nazis have succeeded with their propaganda. First, the Nazis have run the games on a lavish scale never before experienced, and this has appealed to the athletes. Second, the Nazis have put up a very good front for the general visitors, especially the big businessmen.” In 1941, Shirer wrote that, “Hitler and his Nazi thugs had succeeded in making the XIth Olympiad the most colorful in history and, what was more important, had used the Olympics to fool the world into believing that Nazi Germany was a peaceful, civilized and contented nation” (quoted in Alfred Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games* [Champaign, Ill., 1999], p. 65.)

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a decent, friendly, peace-loving nation.³ The public presentation of the Olympics in 1936 sought to accommodate the image of the athlete, and modern athletics in general, to a conservative *Weltanschauung* for which these things were anathema. Leni Riefenstahl, the unofficial film auteur of the Nazi Party, was engaged to make what would be a powerful documentary of the games, a film in two parts that won international prizes before the outbreak of the Second World War. These films were probably commissioned by Carl Diem (1882–1962), the General Secretary of the German National Olympics Committee, a sports educator and an official in the government athletic bureaucracies of the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, and the Federal Republic. Diem's choice of Riefenstahl may have been backed up by Hitler himself; the films were funded indirectly by the regime.⁴

Leni Riefenstahl's films are controversial today because, while they are enormously powerful and groundbreaking accomplishments in the art of film, some of them were made more or less directly in the service of Nazi party propaganda. This is clearly true of her most notorious film, *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary of the 1934 National Socialist Party rally in Nuremberg, and only the most blinkered of Riefenstahl's apologists are not skeptical of her insistence that this film should be understood strictly as art and not as propaganda. Her documentary film of the Olympics is another matter; it is less clearly propagandistic and was made to document games in which Germany's athletes could not and did not always win. Indeed, although by the usual unofficial reckoning the Germans "won" the games, Riefenstahl's film does not exult in or even directly communicate this victory. (The Inter-

3. It is the consensus among historians that this was the intended result and that it was for the most part successful. See especially Richard D. Mandell's book on the XIth Olympiad, *The Nazi Olympics* (1971; Urbana, Ill., 1987), the first and most important critical history of the 1936 games; hereafter abbreviated NO.

4. The facts concerning the appointment of Riefenstahl to make the film, and the film's funding, have been the focus of a great deal of debate. Riefenstahl and Diem have both maintained that the film was commissioned by Diem. Cooper Graham has argued that Riefenstahl also had Hitler to thank, unofficially as well as officially; see Cooper C. Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (Metuchen, N.J., 1986), p. 18. Graham has also demonstrated with documentary evidence that Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda funded the project indirectly through a shell corporation, an assertion that contradicted those made by Riefenstahl to that date. Although she gave an account in her memoirs, published the following year, which essentially agrees with Graham's documentary history, it has since been a truism in the literature that Riefenstahl denies Goebbels's indirect *financial* control of her film. Riefenstahl's claim that she maintained *artistic* control of the project has never been substantively challenged. See Leni Riefenstahl, *A Memoir* (New York, 1995), p. 176.

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national Olympic Committee, and the “Olympic Ideal” of which it is the custodian, disallows the reckoning of overall winners and losers among the various competing national teams.)⁵ But the aesthetic of *Olympia* is closely related to that of *Triumph of the Will*, a fact that seems to demand our attention.⁶

Strictly speaking, *Olympia* is sports coverage, but it is as different from the kinds of sports coverage we are used to seeing as is imaginable. It suppresses the details of the various competitions, in some instances even the final scores, in favor of highlighting the grace, poise, and strength of the athletes. Important, telling moments of the various competitions are shown, but just as often the interest seems to be more visual than documentary; striking compositions and camera angles, dramatic framing devices and backdrops of cloud formations behind the heads of athletes filmed from below predominate. Riefenstahl, over long months of editing some 1,300,000 feet of exposed film, structured the whole movie in its two parts not so much as the narrative chronology of the competitions but much more as a montage of short segments that gathers momentum, building tension and excitement over the course of three and a half hours, propelled by the Wagnerian score of Herbert Windt to which rhythms the images are closely matched. The documentary did not even premiere until two years after the games were over, halfway to the next Olympics, which in any event were cancelled because of the war. But sixty-three years later, it is still far more gripping than any contemporary sports coverage, despite the fact that it concentrates almost exclusively on the athletic events themselves to the exclusion of any personal interest in or narrative of the athletes as individuals. It is riveting and engrossing because it is beautiful; or it is art; or it mobilizes some very effective visual rhetorics and poetics; or what have you. It is sports coverage intended even, or maybe especially, for people who do not really care all that much about sports, and this fact will not be incidental to my argument.

The 1936 Olympic games have come to be commonly referred to as the Nazi Olympics, beginning with Richard Mandell’s groundbreaking book of that title.⁷ This insinuates that not only the German athletes but also the American, British, and French, as well as, say, the Colombian, Indian, and even the Greek athletes had been duped into making propaganda for a Na-

5. See *NO*, pp. 257–73, and Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games*.

6. The most recent commentator on the film, Rainer Rother, has reduced this aesthetic to a formula: flags, hymns, camera movement. See Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl* (Berlin, 2000), p. 101.

7. Most recently, an exhibition at the Spertus Museum in Chicago, organized and sponsored in part by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, bore the title, *The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936*, 13 February–15 August 2000; see Susan D. Bachrach, *The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936* (Boston, 2000).

tional Socialist racial and political ideology of the strong Aryan body. We cannot dismiss this notion out of hand; activists in America at the time vehemently protested the exclusion of Jewish athletes from the German team, and the American Athletic Union threatened at one point to boycott the games (see *NO*, pp. 75–77). The paternalistic president of the American Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage (who emerged from this internal struggle as president of the American Athletic Union also), at first dismissed these concerns and then extracted a promise from the German Olympic Committee that *all* qualified athletes would be allowed to compete; in some instances this promise was kept, and in some it was broken (see *NO*, pp. 69–82).⁸ In any event, Riefenstahl's documentary, with its formal similarity to *Triumph of the Will*, has permanently shaped our impression of the 1936 Games, the so-called Nazi Olympics. Perhaps it is now impossible to determine to what extent our sense of her film as more or less ideologically tainted comes from the fact that it is a document of Games held under questionable circumstances and to what extent it derives at least in part from the shape Riefenstahl gave them on film.

Olympia is, if nothing else, a document of the false grandeur of Nazi pageantry. Indeed, it partakes of that false grandeur. Mandell has written that the Berlin games in 1936 “were an important episode in the establishment of an evil political regime” and that “much of the success of the 1936 Olympics was due to the pursuit by the National Socialists of supremacy in mass pageantry” (*NO*, p. xxiii). Those sports historians and film theorists who have criticized the film have done so from the point of view that it “is an intensely political film. It was set up for political motives, it described an immensely political event.”⁹ Revisiting the question on the occasion of the republication of *The Nazi Olympics*, Mandell said that “to portray the Berlin Olympics to the world in 1936 as a nonpolitical festival was not only deceptive but a political act as well as a lie” (*NO*, p. xvii). Indeed, Mandell, like others before him, claims to see a “fascist aesthetic” in *Olympia*: “The beautification of mindless, masculine physical power is, in fact, highly supportive and perhaps a part of totalitarian ideology” (*NO*, p. xvi f.).¹⁰ Other

8. The two athletes of mixed Jewish-gentile parentage who competed on the German team were Rudi Ball, ice hockey, and Helene Mayer, the champion fencer who had competed at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles and had stayed there to attend college. Margarete Bergmann on the other hand, whose parents were both Jewish, was not allowed to compete, even though she had broken the German record in the high jump in June of 1936; see especially Arnd Krüger, “Once the Olympics are through, we’ll beat up the Jew”: German Jewish Sport 1898–1938 and the Anti-Semitic Discourse,” *Journal of Sport History* 26 (Summer 1999): pp. 353–75.

9. Taylor Downing, *Olympia* (London, 1992), p. 91.

10. More recently Rother has suggested that what troubles critics is not the possibility that the film is dissembling about its own political agenda but rather the sense that a film which was so clearly useful to the Nazi regime must in some way exhibit a “fascist aesthetic.” Rother, however, remains unconvinced by this logic; see Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl*, p. 94.

attempts at defining this putative fascist aesthetic have focused variously on the claims that Riefenstahl describes and glorifies symbolic acts of self-sacrifice¹¹ or that her camera “clings to the aesthetic lines of athletic figures and the pulsating muscular forms of individual limbs, . . . deploys movement and dynamism in the film’s visual aesthetic . . . [and] downplays the real effort and strain in the tense but smoothly photogenic bodies” of the athletes, and, like fascism, it uses people as “mere models and extras for political, athletic and cultural display.”¹² “The ‘unbeautiful’ side of competitive sports,” one critic has agreed, “agony, suffering, and physical pain, are simply edited out or are themselves aestheticized.”¹³

The case for a fascist aesthetic in *Olympia*—and all of Riefenstahl’s work—was made most forcefully by Susan Sontag in an influential 1974 essay entitled “Fascinating Fascism.” For Sontag, Fascist aesthetics

flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain. . . . The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force. . . . Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death.¹⁴

Riefenstahl has always claimed that Beauty was her sole guide in making the Olympics documentary, but for Sontag this claim is just a smokescreen or worse, a form of aesthetic duplicity and moral seduction. Behind the beauty lurks self-abasement and death. Following Sontag, Hilmar Hoffmann has isolated beauty as one of the film’s most objectionable characteristics.¹⁵ More recently, Linda Schulte-Sasse has revisited the question of a fascist aesthetic, which she defines, drawing on Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, as the “attempt to break down the boundaries between the aesthetic and real life and the mobilization of technology for this purpose.”¹⁶

11. See Daniel Wildmann, *Begehrte Körper: Konstruktion und Inszenierung des “arischen” Männerkörpers im “Dritten Reich”* (Würzburg, 1998), p. 110.

12. Hilmar Hoffmann, *Mythos Olympia, Autonomie und Unterwerfung von Sport und Kultur* (Berlin, 1993), pp. 115, 130.

13. Thomas Alkemeyer, *Körper, Kult, und Politik: Von der “Muskelreligion” Pierre de Coubertins zur Inszenierung von Macht in den Olympischen Spielen von 1936* (Frankfurt, 1996), p. 483; hereafter abbreviated KKP.

14. Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York, 1981), p. 91. This essay first appeared as a review of Riefenstahl’s book of photographs, *The Last of the Nuba* (and made that book infamous), in *New York Review of Books*, 6 Feb. 1975.

15. See Hoffmann, *Mythos Olympia, Autonomie, und Unterwerfung von Sport und Kultur*, p. 109.

16. Linda Schulte-Sasse, “Leni Riefenstahl’s Feature Films and the Question of a Fascist Aesthetic,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 18 (Spring 1991): 125; hereafter abbreviated “FA.”

This method of analysis can too easily become ahistorical, so that the concept of a "fascist aesthetic" and, by implication, a fascistic ideology behind it can be stretched to include nearly any cultural production. Indeed, Sontag's essay criticized *Olympia* only in passing; her immediate target was Riefenstahl's book of still photographs of Nubian tribespeople, first published in 1973, and she warns us that fascist "art is hardly confined to works labeled as fascist or produced under fascist governments," naming Disney's *Fantasia* and Stanley Kubrick's *2001* as examples. Likewise, Schulte-Sasse comes to the conclusion that "fascism, if understood in its structural sense, may be alive and well in American political discourse . . . and in many other phenomena in contemporary societies currently discussed as features of postmodern societies."

Sontag's condemnation of Riefenstahl's work is essentially *ad hominem* and assumes that if the filmmaker, who undeniably moved among the highest levels of the Nazi regime, was herself a convinced Nazi (which is far from clear), then the product of her art—all of it—must have a fascistic content. Sontag discusses not only her postwar work, her photographs of the Nuba, as of a piece with her propaganda, but also labels her earlier work, including her 1932 film *The Blue Light*, following Kracauer, as proto-fascist.¹⁷ Riefenstahl has not helped her own case with her stubborn refusal to admit that even her film of the Nuremberg party rally might be reasonably seen as propaganda, insisting that as an artist she is detached from all political interests.¹⁸ But she does seem to sense that the guilt or innocence of *Olympia* will be decided by her guilt or innocence as an individual, which is undoubtedly why she has argued, not least in her self-serving memoir, that she was not only free of direct political entanglements with the Nazi party and the propaganda ministry specifically, but that she was in fact actively harassed and impeded, especially in the filming of the Olympics, by Goebbels's henchmen and because she had rebuffed his routine sexual advances, no less.¹⁹

There have always been those who insinuate that Riefenstahl had been Goebbels's or Hitler's lover and owed to such liaisons her remarkable success as a filmmaker under the Nazis, who were officially committed to denying *any* professional career to women. And so the *ad hominem* arguments

17. Not only has Sontag made this claim, but also Schulte-Sasse, who investigates this film and *Tiefland* at length in "FA," and Eric Rentschler, "Fatal Attractions: Leni Riefenstahl's *The Blue Light*," *October*, no. 48 (Spring 1989): 47–68.

18. Riefenstahl rehearsed this argument in self-dramatizing fashion on screen in Ray Müller's documentary film, *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, dir. Ray Müller (New York, Kino International, 1993).

19. See Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*.

about Riefenstahl come to circle with seeming inevitability around her gender: her status as a woman, and a beautiful, physically vital woman. This is true in part because she featured herself as the object of cinematic desire in two of her feature films, *The Blue Light* and *Tiefland*. Schulte-Sasse has cautioned that it is “tempting to overstress the notion of a conscious *decision* behind Riefenstahl’s self-fetishization,” but nonetheless she maintains that “an internalized acceptance of woman’s role as object permitted her narcissistically to enjoy fetishizing her own body” (“FA,” pp. 123, 148). With regard to her career *behind* the camera and her reception, bell hooks has written that, on the one hand, “by seducing men throughout her career, Riefenstahl used her body to mediate patriarchal authority,” and on the other that “the power of feminine masquerade is reinscribed in contemporary attempts to rehabilitate Riefenstahl, to represent her solely as a genius obsessed with her work.”²⁰

Meanwhile those who are more sympathetic to Riefenstahl and *Olympia* rehearse the tale Riefenstahl herself tells of the Nazi Propaganda Ministry’s resistance and the impediments that Goebbels himself placed before her²¹ and have asked if it is not unfair to judge a film without *overt* political content as though it were propaganda simply because its author had previously made a propaganda film.²² In the U.S., Riefenstahl’s claim for the political innocence of her aesthetic is increasingly warmly received. The suspicion that the vague American admiration for her is linked somehow to her femininity is strengthened by the curious tendency of generally sympathetic authors writing in English to infantilize Riefenstahl by referring to her almost exclusively by her first name. At the same time, it increasingly seems as though her supernumerary age (100 at the time of this writing) lends her side of the story its own legitimacy, at least for the American popular press.²³

I want to make it clear at the outset that I think the category of a fascist aesthetic is a red herring, an unfixed set of stylistic signifiers the most con-

20. Bell hooks [Gloria Watkins], “The Feminazi Mystique,” *Transition*, no. 73 (1997): 158, 160; hooks, like Sontag, is concerned to link Riefenstahl’s photographs of the Nubians to *Olympia* as an “engagement with a colonizing patriarchal white supremacy” and a celebration of “the tyranny of the phallic masculine” (pp. 160, 162).

21. This is a central theme in Riefenstahl’s own account of the making of the *Olympia* film. See Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*, pp. 184–223.

22. The most recent sustained sympathetic—although not uncritical—examinations of *Olympia*, and of Riefenstahl in general, are Audrey Salkeld, *A Portrait of Leni Riefenstahl* (London, 1996), and Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl*.

23. This trend in the American reception of Riefenstahl and her films began perhaps with an essay by Frank Deford, “The Ghost of Berlin,” *Sports Illustrated*, 4 Aug. 1986, pp. 50–64. The trend continues today; see for example the photographs of her in *Vanity Fair*, Jan. 2001, and *Leni Riefenstahl, Five Lives*, ed. Angelika Taschen (Cologne, 2000).

sistent of which, beauty, strength, an exclusive focus on the physical and on above-average physiques, and the camera's fascination with the athletic body, cannot be differentiated in any meaningful way—on stylistic grounds—from subsequent sports photography. Even more troubling is the fact that little appears on our own television and movie screens, in sports coverage or elsewhere, that a critic could not say conceals or falsifies through omission the class and race relations of present-day America and Europe.²⁴

The supposed morphological structure of cinematic expressions of fascistic desire and the notion that it lived its own formalist existence on screen originated in Kracauer's study of Weimar-era German film. Kracauer identified that desire as one for unity through self-subjugation with an all-powerful father-figure, and he believed that he could see this fascistic desire to a greater or lesser degree in most films of the pre-Nazi period—indeed, that these films were proto-fascist.²⁵ Hoffmann, one of the most bitter critics of *Olympia*, has even mobilized Paul Virilio's critique of the cinematic apparatus itself to suggest that Riefenstahl's film exploits its very nature as film to enact a fascistic discipline of the masses.²⁶ Kracauer was also the author of another formal category that is frequently mobilized in critical analysis of *Olympia*, the "mass ornament"—the organized deployment of groupings of bodies. Again, Kracauer felt that this stylistic signifier was freighted with a desire for symbolic self-subjugation to a technocratic discipline.²⁷ In analyses of *Olympia* and of the pageantry of the Berlin Olympics, "mass ornament" is used to describe variously the crowds in the stands, or the columns of marching athletes, displays of mass gymnastics, and theatrical festivals that formed the opening ceremonies.²⁸ Again, with the exception of the mass gymnastics demonstrations (about which I will say more below) little differentiates such images in *Olympia* from contemporary televised Olympics coverage except the context and the sophistication of the filming and editing. Although Kracauer's study of a proto-fascist film aesthetic in Weimar-era film, with its pre-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, has little cur-

24. That the spokesmen of Nazi Germany themselves cynically countered protestations against the Nuremberg laws and bans against participation of Jewish athletes in German sports by pointing to American racial segregation does not invalidate the criticism.

25. See Sigfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of German Film* (Princeton, N.J., 1947). Kracauer's film history culminates in *Triumph of the Will* but neglects to even mention *Olympia*. Audrey Salkeld has argued convincingly that Sontag depended heavily on Kracauer's book for her own analysis of a fascist aesthetic in Riefenstahl's work; see Salkeld, *A Portrait of Leni Riefenstahl*, p. 260.

26. See Hoffmann, *Mythos Olympia, Autonomie und Unterwerfung von Sport und Kultur*, p. 110.

27. See Kracauer, "Ornament der Masse," *Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main, 1963).

28. See especially KKP and Hoffmann, *Mythos Olympia, Autonomie, und Unterwerfung von Sport und Kultur*.

rency in contemporary film criticism, the term “mass ornament” enjoys a comfortable authority in the critical literature on Riefenstahl. Both formal categories, as deployed in *Olympia* criticism, are vested with meaning by the extra-stylistic framework of the context, the sponsoring evil regime that sought to legitimate itself in the eyes of the world through a normalizing international event and its aesthetically sophisticated presentation by Riefenstahl. Neither category can derive the film’s—or its author’s—supposed propagandistic intentions from the film’s intrinsic form.²⁹ Although Schulte-Sasse has argued the impossibility of “understanding fascism without addressing its structural tendencies, without examining modes of address in its artistic and ‘political’ texts” (“FA,” p. 124), I would argue that for most postwar critics the aesthetic of *Olympia* derives its meaning entirely from a context that includes (as it must) the Second World War and the Holocaust; the aesthetic does not generate its meaning out of itself. Can one speak, therefore, of an aesthetic in *Olympia* that is “fascist” on its face? But if the film does not display a fascist aesthetic, is it then merely or only aesthetic? What would this mean?

I also want to pause at this point to make it equally clear that I do not agree with Riefenstahl or her apologists that *Olympia* is only a work of art, that it is somehow apolitical. I hope to demonstrate that the film expresses, visually and aesthetically, a profoundly conservative, politically dangerous ideology of the body. In order to translate that ideology into words, however, it will be necessary to recover the debates about the body in which Riefenstahl’s visual rhetoric intervened. The terms of those debates were by no means identical to Nazi ideologies of the body. Before we can do this work, however, we must examine further the categories within which the film has been received and criticized.

2

The controversy around *Olympia* began in 1958 when Riefenstahl attempted to get the film screened again in West Germany. On 9 January, the German office of the Voluntary Self-Censorship of the Film Industry, or FSK [Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft], in Wiesbaden, West Germany, rejected the screening of the films. *Olympia* bordered too closely in the FSK’s opinion on Nazi propaganda for a screening to be safely allowed; self-censorship was called for.³⁰ On 25 January, Riefenstahl wrote a letter to Carl Diem, probably the man who originally commissioned the

29. Hoffmann suggests, with reference to Levi-Strauss’s structuralism, that for him Riefenstahl’s form is content; see *ibid.*, p. 134.

30. See Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, p. 23.

Olympia films and then director of the German Sports College in Cologne. In the letter, Riefenstahl defends herself and her film, looking for support in her struggle with the censorship board. She relates some aspects of a conversation she had in person and off the record with the head of the working committee of the censorship board, a certain Herr Lipmann, in which Lipmann gave some indication of the board's reasons for denying her permission to revive her film with a public screening:

In a conversation with the *Jewish* head of the most recent working committee, Herr Lipmann, he went so far as to say to me that it was especially the connection made in my film between Greek culture and the Olympic games that gave the opposition cause to forbid my film, because in the Greek prologue the Olympic Games in Berlin were elevated above the Masses.

That is to say, the films were criticized by the censorship board for celebrating a superhuman beauty, a criticism that would be made regularly in the future. Riefenstahl continued her gloss on the board's decision: "In other words, dear Dr. Diem, the gentlemen [of the censorship board] would have preferred it if I had shown how the athletes (please forgive the realistic expression) picked their noses instead of their radiant joy in victory as heroes."³¹ Carl Diem, who had been the General Secretary of the German Olympic Committee for the 1936 Olympics, wrote the desired letter to the board on 27 January, in which he submitted what could be called the circumstantial evidence in her defense and incidentally in the defense of the Berlin Olympics as a whole; he pointed out that the German Olympic Committee had been a legally independent organization in 1936 and that Berlin had been chosen for the games in 1931, two years, that is, before the Nazi rise to power; he named the German-Jewish athletes who had been allowed to compete and even Dr. Lewald, the president of the organizing committee, who was also of "non-Aryan" blood.³² The censorship board denied permission again on 30 January. But eventually the FSK did reverse itself, and the film had its second, postwar premier at the Venice Biennale in 1959.

In Riefenstahl's verbal exchange with Lipmann, as recounted in her letter to Diem, the issue of Nazi racial ideology, and whether it was expressed in the film, was directly raised in connection with the prominence in the film of Jesse Owens, the black American track star: "Herr Lipmann went so far as to take the fact that I photographed Jesse Owens and the other Negroes

31. Riefenstahl, letter to Carl Diem, 25 Jan. 1958, collected correspondence of Carl Diem, Carl Diem Archiv, Deutsche Sporthochschule, Cologne; my emphasis in first quoted passage.

32. Diem, letter to the Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft, Wiesbaden, 27 Jan. 1958, Carl Diem Archiv.

so often and so beautifully, and to twist it around into the claim that I did it only to create the impression that there was no racism in Germany.”³³ Riefenstahl’s rhetoric may smack of paternalism and tokenism, but it is undeniable that Owens dominates the film, at least the track and field segment, as he dominated the event in real life; he is filmed beautifully, and his athletic performance, captured for posterity by Riefenstahl’s cameraman in a now famous sequence, is magnificent. Owens has often functioned as Riefenstahl’s alibi. Mandell, who is otherwise critical of the film and its author, maintains that “the very fact that so much of the love . . . of the film is devoted to Jesse Owens and to Kitei Son [the Korean runner who competed under the Japanese flag], both non-Aryans, should indicate that Riefenstahl was at least offhand about the racial proscriptions of the Nazi hierarchy” (*NO*, p. 270). And Frank Deford, arguing for a complete disconnection between the propaganda of *Triumph of the Will* and what he sees as the pure sports enthusiasm of *Olympia*, writes that, “in *Olympia*, Hitler makes little more than a cameo appearance, and if there is a single individual who draws the most attention, it is a black American, Jesse Owens—the symbol, the personification of all that contradicted Hitler and his theories of a master race.”³⁴

What for some has been Riefenstahl’s alibi is for others damning evidence, a central argument for reading the film as a work of political and race-theory propaganda. This reading of the film claims that it serves up a beautiful rendition of the strong athletic physique in order to fetishize and promote a supposed Nazi ideal of the Aryan body. The most sustained analysis of the film, and of the Berlin Olympics in general, in terms of its staging of an Aryan male ideal body is by the German scholar Daniel Wildmann.³⁵ This claim is invariably bound up with the notion that the neo-classicism of the Berlin Olympics foregrounded by Riefenstahl was itself inherently fascistic, or at the very least an abuse and perversion of a classical heritage. So Peter Wollen writes that “the Berlin Olympiad of 1936 was designed as a massive festival in celebration of the human body, as idealized by the Nazi ideology: the body of the sportsman in harmony with nature, disciplined in the quest for unsurpassed achievement, hardened by struggle, recapturing the grace, beauty, and strength of the bodies of antiquity.”³⁶ The importance for German culture of an image of ancient Greece is famous and has been since the early art historian J. J. Winckel-

33. Riefenstahl, letter to Diem, 25 Jan. 1958, Carl Diem Archiv.

34. Deford, “The Ghost of Berlin,” p. 62.

35. See Wildmann, *Begehrte Körper*.

36. Peter Wollen, “Tales of Total Art and Dreams of the Total Museum,” in *Visual Display: Culture beyond Appearances*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Wollen (Seattle, 1995), p. 165.

mann held up ancient Greek art and culture and the Hellenistic ideal of the body as a model for modern-day artists in 1756. Winckelmann inaugurated what has been called the tyranny of Greece over Germany. The Greek ideal is ubiquitous in German culture. Even so, with the importance of the classical Greek tradition for German culture over the last two-and-a-half centuries in mind, Hoffmann, in his critique of the Berlin Olympics in general and Riefenstahl's *Olympia* in particular, writes that,

The [use of] classical formal vocabulary is . . . essentially a recoding, an authoritarian appropriation of a 'world language' in which the fascistic is defined more generally, more functionally, and more multivalently than simply German-national, cultural and regional-tribal, namely, it is defined as fundamental, racist, and global-Darwinist.³⁷

The influential late scholar of German racial ideology George Mosse cogently argued, in a series of lengthy studies, for a specifically fascistic ideology of the idealized, strong, and well-trained male physique. Mosse was troubled particularly by the use of the Greek ideal in German athletics in general and worried that the Nazi image of the "hardened, lithe male body" was idealized beyond attainability, too armored against any threat or weakness.³⁸

It is my contention that claims to the effect that Riefenstahl's fixation on the beautiful body and the classical are inherently fascistic, like the claim that the film exhibits a fascist aesthetic, are focused on the wrong issues. It is far-fetched to imagine that this filmmaker, who was uninterested in National Socialist ideology and unread and unschooled in its written expressions, intuitively formulated, over the course of three and a half hours of film shot on location under arduous circumstances and without the possibility of directing her actors, with black and Asian as well as white athletes, a visual equivalent for the convoluted, vague, and illogical racial theories of National Socialism. It is much more likely that her imagery was formed by her own ideologies and the cultural debates and theories that had characterized her own background. That background was in the Expressive Dance (or *Ausdruckstanz*) movement of the 1910s and 1920s, with its own murky ideology of the body. I do not mean to suggest that Riefenstahl's film is innocent of all political ideology or that she does not share in some way the responsibility for promoting a system that led Germany in short order to

37. Hoffmann, *Mythos Olympia, Autonomie und Unterwerfung von Sport und Kultur*, p. 32.

38. George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York, 1975), p. 128. See also Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964) and *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York, 1996), and John Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin, 1984).

world war and genocide. Like other analysts of *Olympia*, I am convinced that beneath the mesmerizing rhythms and strikingly beautiful images of strong, graceful, athletic bodies there are subcutaneous enunciations of radically conservative import, enunciations about the body and the *Volk*. But I also think that they are not, or are not primarily, congruent with National Socialist racial ideology. Rather, they are a belated, final intervention in earlier debates about the body, debates that raged between conservative anti-modernists and promodernists (themselves not necessarily liberal or politically progressive) during the 1920s. *Olympia* was an attempt to reconcile conservative ideologies of the body to modern sports long after the problem had ceased to be open to debate. When examining this film of the 1936 Olympics, we should be looking back to the debates of the 1920s and the specter of mechanization and Americanism (as it was called) that haunted them. Riefenstahl's films are an attempt to reconcile the distaste, deeply ingrained in conservative German culture, of modern athletics and its obsession with record-breaking achievement with her assignment to celebrate these things in a documentary of the Olympics. At the same time, we should keep vividly in mind the moral responsibility incumbent upon anyone meddling in the public discourse of the body in a fascist state predicated on racist ideology.

3

As Carl Diem pointed out in his 1958 letter to the German film censors, Berlin was announced as the location of the 1936 Olympic games in 1931, and Diem, who had spent the greater part of his professional life up to that point trying to bring the Games to Germany, knew only too well what that transfer of power could mean for German participation in the Olympics. The Olympic movement represented everything the Nazi ideologues detested about the Weimar Republic; it was intended to promote the ideals of internationalism and pacifism, and the National Socialist ideology and political program openly rejected those ideals.³⁹

Pierre de Coubertin created—he would have said revived—the Olympic movement at the end of the nineteenth century. De Coubertin was a French aristocrat and a man who combined a lifelong and passionate enthusiasm for modern, specifically English sports with a reformist effort to mitigate the chauvinistic and belligerent attitudes that characterized European na-

39. See Winfried Joch, "Sport und Leibesübung im Dritten Reich," in *Geschichte der Leibesübungen*, ed. Horst Überhorst, vol. 3 of *Leibesübungen und Sport in Deutschland vom Ersten Weltkrieg bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1981), pp. 727–28.

tionalism. De Coubertin came to espouse pacifist and internationalist ideals only later in life; he was himself quite chauvinistic in his youth.⁴⁰ The Olympic revival was his scheme to combine these two passions. The ancient Greek associations expressed by the name and the plan of holding international competitions every four years, as the Greeks had done, was an afterthought, as was the idea of holding the first games in Athens in 1896.⁴¹

De Coubertin had in mind not an antiquarian re-creation of the actual contests held by Greek youths of the classical age but rather the international standardization of modern games so that the skill and ability of youths from around the world could be measured and compared in fair competition. The sports historian Allen Guttman has argued that it is just this process of standardization and comparison that in part comprises the modernity of modern sports—a characteristic first contrived by the British and introduced by them onto the continent and America and thence the world.⁴² The neoclassicism of the Olympic trappings that would play such an important role in the domestication of the Olympic Games for fascist ideology in Berlin in 1936 began in Paris in 1894 as a thin veneer of classical pedantry over a very modern cultural practice.

The Germans had their own athletic tradition, which bore no resemblance to modern sports as we understand them, but was more like a cross between gymnastics and military drills.⁴³ These athletes were called Turners; the Turner clubs had first been formed by Ludwig Jahn at the time of the Napoleonic occupations and were organized at first as militias for what the Germans call their wars of independence from France. Over the decades, the Turners had maintained as important aspects of their identity nationalist chauvinism, hatred of the French, and martial training and preparedness.⁴⁴ In the context of Riefenstahl's film it is perhaps equally important that their athletic activity was noncompetitive and instead stressed group drills and

40. See Guttman, *The Olympics*, pp. 7–20; Mandell, *The First Modern Olympics* (Berkeley, 1976); and John MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago, 1981).

41. See Guttman, *The Olympics*, p. 14, and Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games*, p. 21.

42. See Guttman, *From Ritual to Record* (New York, 1978).

43. See Überhorst, "Leibesübungen bei den Germanen," *Geschichte der Leibesübungen*, pp. 26–46, and Michael Krüger, *Leibeserziehung im 19. Jahrhundert: Turnen fürs Vaterland* (Schorndorf, 1993).

44. The Turners and their organizations are well researched; recent scholarship has concentrated on their conservative political orientation before World War I, and their anti-Semitism; see especially Krüger, "Das Turnen als reaktionäres Mittel": Wilhelm Angerstein und die Disziplinierung des Turnens," *Sportwissenschaft* 23, no. 1 (1991): 9–34, and Hartmut Becker, *Antisemitismus in der Deutschen Turnerschaft* (Sankt Augustin, 1980).

sometimes mass drills, even extending to regional and all-Germany mass displays of coordinated, rather than competitive, athletics.

When the first Olympic games, which were to be primarily modern, competitive sports, were announced for Athens in 1896, Germans, far from being in the forefront of the movement, boycotted the event. For the next two Olympiads those German athletes who went to the games were expelled from their Turner clubs and from the national umbrella organization. (Germans nonetheless won fourteen medals in Athens in 1896 and thirteen in St. Louis in 1904.) During the 1920s, membership in the Turner clubs plummeted as a craze for modern sports swept the youth culture of Germany, generating even more enthusiasm than it did elsewhere in the world.⁴⁵ Sports dominated not only the free time of the German youth, with a whole new infrastructure of sports clubs and leagues, it also dominated art and literature. It seemed to be the very embodiment of modernity and, as some cultural historians have argued, the democratic principles of the Weimar Republic.⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, the remaining Turner clubs became a harbor for deeply conservative, antidemocratic, and antimodern resentment, and there was a great antipathy between the remaining Turners and the athletes. The claim has been made by Sontag and others that there is an emphasis on regimentation and mass drills in Riefenstahl's *Olympia*; in fact, it is the Turners filmed in a mass drill demonstration outside the stadium on the assembly field, rather than the Olympic athletes, who demonstrate these qualities and who openly valued the militaristic and revanchist aspect of their peculiar form of athleticism. The appearance of these politically conservative bodily values is an irruption of an older, specifically German physical exercise into a film and an event that otherwise efface that tradition.

Thus the Olympics were anathema to the *Weltanschauung* of the National Socialists and also to their less ideological yet equally conservative constituencies in broader German society, but not to the broader German public. When the National Socialists came to power, they had a specific ideological stake in canceling the Berlin games. Yet the party leadership could often put the pragmatics of mass politics above ideological purity, and by 1933 the huge popularity of modern sports in Germany could not be wished away. Indeed, there was even a pro-Olympics movement within the party, and by 1930 some Nazi theorists, flush with the success of the German team at the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, had already begun to

45. See vols. 2 and 3 of *Geschichte der Körperkultur in Deutschland*, ed. Wolfgang Eichel (Berlin, 1964), and, more recently, Christiane Eisenberg, *"English Sports" und Deutsche Bürger: Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte 1800–1939* (Paderborn, 1999).

46. See Frank Becker, "Amerikanismus in Weimar: Sportsymbole und politische Kultur 1918–1933" (Ph.D. diss., University of Münster, 1992).

publish pro-Olympics articles in the *Völkische Beobachter* (the Nazi party newspaper), although that paper continued to publish the usual anti-Olympic articles, too (see *KKP*, p. 237).⁴⁷ Rather than canceling the 1936 Games, the Nazi party leadership transformed them into a self-representative mass spectacle. This transformation was effected in the public realm of visual discourse primarily through two closely coordinated means: a new emphasis on the previously vague Greek associations of the Olympics, with an all-out use by Carl Diem of neoclassical sets and properties in the stage-production of the Berlin games; and Riefenstahl's *Olympia*.

The most famous and lasting example of the wholesale reintroduction of neoclassical references or pseudo-references into the mass spectacle of the Olympics is the torch relay, in which runners carried the sacred flame from the archaeological site at Olympia in Greece to the titanic ritual tripod overlooking the stadium, thus linking classical Greece and modern Germany through the mystical symbolism of flame. Still reenacted every four years and widely assumed to be an authentic element from the ancient games, the torch relay was actually invented by Diem in 1936 and staged, with enormous publicity and using modern mass media, as a pastiche of ancient ritual in vaguely neoclassical garb.⁴⁸ The torch-lighting ceremony was performed by young girls in costume to the strains of (again invented) music performed on replicas of ancient instruments, broadcast live on radio, and filmed by Riefenstahl; the torch bearers were outfitted for their relay with 3,000 stainless steel-and-chrome magnesium torches manufactured by Krupps; and a parabolic mirror made by Zeiss, the optics manufacturer, was used for igniting the Olympic flame with the concentrated rays of the sun.⁴⁹ The torch-lighting ceremony and relay was, like the 11th Olympic Games themselves, a modern, technological, mass-media event masquerading as an authentic reenactment of ancient Greek ritual. It comes as no surprise to learn that this simulacrum was itself restaged by Riefenstahl for filming because she had determined that Diem's staging was hopelessly unphotogenic.⁵⁰ Diem himself, upon seeing the film, conceded in his jour-

47. The Germans brought home thirty-one medals in 1928, second overall in points.

48. On Diem's invention of the torch relay, see *NO*, p. 130; Walter Borgers, "Vackelläufe bei Olympischen Spielen: Vorgeschichte und Bedeutung," *Olympischen Lauffeuer* (Cologne, 1994); and Hajo Bernett, "Symbolik und Zeremoniell der XI. Olympischen Spiele 1936," *Sportwissenschaft* 4:357–97. The ritual and relay were also described by Erich Mindt, "Zwölf Tage olympischer Fackelstaffellauf vom Tale in Elis nach Berlin," in *Olympia 1936 und die Leibesübungen im Nationalsozialistischen Staat*, ed. Friedrich Mildner, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1934–36), 2:19–24. Credit for inventing the torch relay was also claimed by Minister Haegert of the Propaganda Ministry; see *KKP*, p. 386.

49. On the details of the theatrical production and properties, including the torches, see *NO*, p. 130.

50. See the eyewitness account of Heinz von Jaworsky in *Film Culture* 56–57 (Spring 1973): 122–61.

nal that she had been right to do so, as the spot where he staged the event could have been anywhere, while her choice of setting effectively conveyed a sense of the ancient site at Olympia.⁵¹

Certain audiences could be targeted by less technologically mediated public events. One such event, organized to stress the putative Hellenic background of the Olympics, was an exhibition of classical art and artifacts entitled “Sport der Hellenen.” This exhibition opened on the eve of the Games, 29 July 1936, in the Deutsches Museum in Berlin. It was within the context of this exhibition that the museum acquired a copy of Myron’s *Discobolos*, which Riefenstahl would feature prominently in the first prologue of *Olympia*.⁵² “Sport der Hellenen” reiterated for the museum-going public the supposedly close link between the German enthusiasm for athletic competition and the Greek ideal. For Thomas Alkemeyer the exhibition “Sport der Hellenen,” like the torch relay, “documents . . . the commitment of the National Socialist state to the Greek ‘racial heritage’ and classical ideal” (KKP, p. 329).

The exhibition catalog lists Carl Bluemel as curator and the author of the catalog text.⁵³ But, in actuality, the man who conceived of this exhibition, who organized and curated it and wrote the catalog text was not Bluemel but Alfred Schiff, an archaeologist who had worked under Ernst Curtius in Greece. He was profoundly interested in sports, both ancient and modern, was a founding member of the German National Olympic Committee in 1904, and, together with Diem, helped found the German Sports College in Berlin in 1920. But Schiff was also of Jewish descent and so was forced out of all administrative duties in 1933.⁵⁴ Diem was able to keep him marginally employed by paying him small amounts out of discretionary funds, and he was able to continue with his plans for the exhibition *Sport der Hellenen*. This exhibition, which has served Riefenstahl’s critics as an example of the objectionable connections that she worked to establish between modern Germany and ancient Greece in service to Nazi race theory was actually conceived and curated by a Jewish archaeologist who was forced at the last minute to leave his name off of every published document and instead allow a Gentile functionary to take the credit. Certainly this complicates the easy

51. Diem, entry for 10 Mar. 1936, diary, vol. 10, Carl Diem Archiv.

52. See Barnett, “Der Diskuswerfer des Myron: Geschichte eines Idols in Wechsefällen der Politik,” *Stadion* 17, no. 1 (1991): 27–51.

53. *Sport der Hellenen: Ausstellung Griechischer Bildwerke im Deutschen Museum zu Berlin* (exhibition catalog, Deutsches Museum, Berlin, 1936).

54. I am grateful to Walter Borgers of the Carl Diem Archiv for making me aware of this fact and of the relevant documentation in the Alfred Schiff estate, held in the Diem archive.

elision between the German dream of ancient Greece and the fascist ideal of the Aryan body.

4

Olympia is divided into two halves, each of which opens with a set piece, a prologue not immediately related to the actual athletic competitions. The prologue to the first half of the film is a fifteen-minute sequence filmed by Willy Zielke and edited like the rest of the film by Riefenstahl herself, entirely dedicated to emphasizing a link to Greek antiquity. It is this sequence that includes the restaged, filmic version of Diem's torch relay. The sequence opens with a cinematic tour through the ruins of the Acropolis and then presents several well-known classical sculptures (the Medici Venus, the Barberini Faun) wrapped in the misty and penumbric formal vocabulary of photographic pictorialism. In fact the entire opening sequence uses the dramatic chiaroscuro, rich coloristic tonal ranges, and shallow depth of field that characterized art photography at the turn of the century (rather than the "New Vision" photography of the twenties or thirties) and that carried with it connotations of introspection, profound aesthetic delectation, non-rational association, in a word: *Kultur*. The play of shadows emphasizes the well-muscle physiques of the male figures or the beauty of their features; the rhetorical gestures of pictorialism serve to emphasize ideal male beauty. Presently, Myron's Discobolos appears and is transformed before the viewer's eyes into a modern discus thrower, also nude, the decathlete Erwin Huber, who begins to rock back and forth, turning, spinning, finally launching the disk (figs. 1 and 2). From this point on, the prologue showcases the graceful motion of javelin throwers and shot-putters, and also of nude female expressive dancers and rhythmic gymnasts, whereas up to this point it had only presented motionless architecture and sculpture. The film proceeds to the torch relay, which in turn links this sequence, and its Arcadian dreamscapes, to the actual, modern-day events of the Olympics, its mass-spectacle opening ceremonies and athletic competitions. The transformation of Myron's classical statue into the body of the modern athlete, effected at the editing table, forms the lynchpin between these incommensurate elements. At precisely this point Riefenstahl's use of film editing to give *Olympia* and the neoclassical trappings of the Games in Berlin the appearance of coherent meaning is foregrounded. She accomplishes this not through the modernist means of collage but through the illusion of a seamless transition, so that irreconcilable, heterogeneous elements seem to become transparently identical.

Riefenstahl's film represents the athletic body as an image of several val-

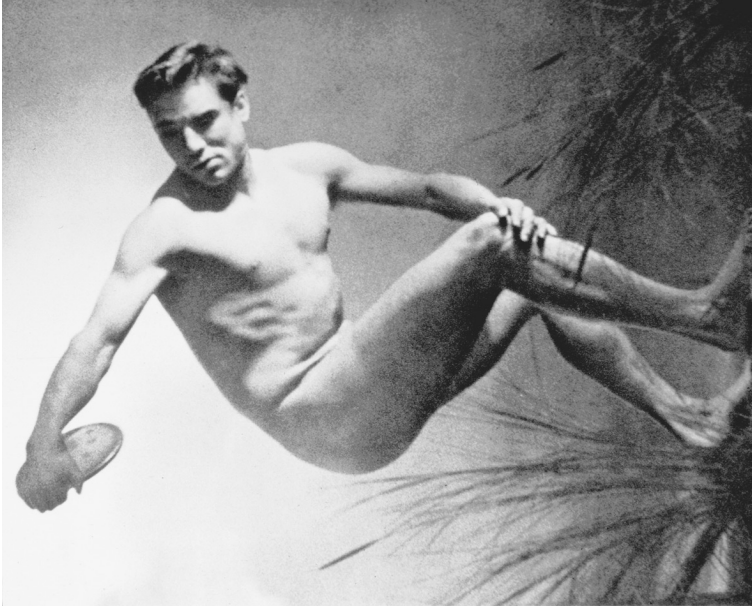


FIGURE 2. Erwin Huber, German decathlete posing in the first prologue of Riefenstahl, *Olympia*, p. 27.

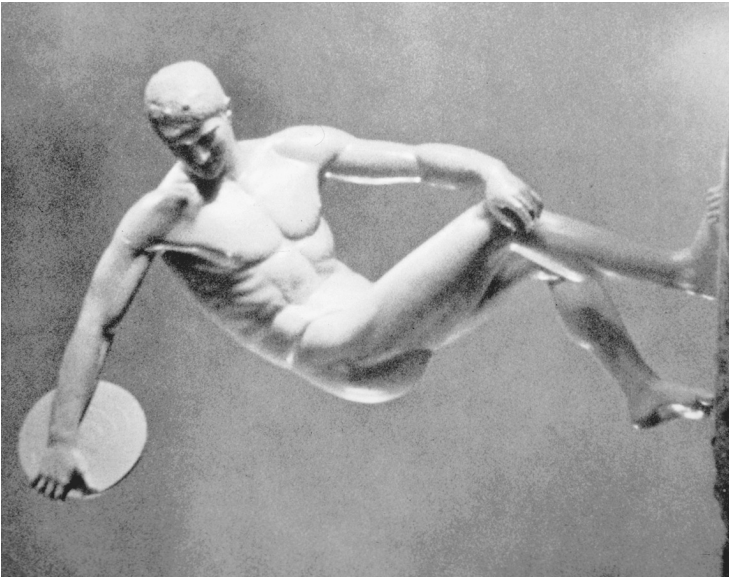


FIGURE 1. Myron's Diskobolos, as used in the first prologue of *Olympia*. From Leni Riefenstahl, *Olympia* (1937; New York, 1994), p. 26.

ues of cultural-conservative discourse. I identify these values as organic connection, rhythmic expression or *Ausdruck*, and eros. Organic connection suggested the connection between body and soul and between individual and racial community. Rhythm signified life and vitality.⁵⁵ And eros, as distinct from the merely erotic, connoted, like the organic, the German body's mystical, inward connections to the racial community. The term *eros* was introduced into this discourse by Adolf Halfeld in his 1927 jeremiad against the perceived erosion of German culture by modernity, *Amerika und Amerikanismus*. Halfeld identified eros with a healthy, organic culture fed by deep, mystical sources (and, with reference to Nietzsche, a Dionysian spirit), while the erotic exemplified a decadent, dead social form, materialist, rational, and mechanical. Conservatives called this mystical inwardness *Kultur*, a term they opposed to *Zivilisation*, which, as Norbert Elias has recounted, was originally associated with the French Enlightenment and later with Anglo-American pragmatism.⁵⁶ In America, Halfeld wrote, "Eros is destroyed to make way for the *Maschinenmensch*."⁵⁷ Cultural conservatives like Halfeld considered *Kultur* by contrast to be healthy, natural, creative, fed by tradition, and incompatible with Western democracy.

Prior to the Olympics film, these conservative values of *Kultur* were associated not with sports but with *Ausdruckstanz*, or expressive dance. Specifically, the formal vocabulary of Riefenstahl's prologue—the combination of the female body, sea, and sky; the lateral symmetry of the doubled poses; and the spiral symmetry of single figures—would have been familiar to German audiences from the highly conventionalized genre of expressive dance photography of the 1920s (figs. 3 and 4). Expressive dance was conceived of by its theorists as being, in many ways, the antithesis of modern sports and opposed to everything modern; it was *Kultur* rather than *Zivilisation*. It was also primarily practiced by women. Before she began starring in, then directing movies, Leni Riefenstahl was trained and performed as just such an expressive dancer.

The first prologue is one of the key moments of the film, in which Riefenstahl smuggles her own commitment to *Ausdruckstanz* into a film celebrating modern athletics; it not only signals her background, training, and sympathies, but attempts a kind of resolution between German *Kultur* and modern, mechanized *Zivilisation* within the context of a Hellenizing se-

55. See the writings of the vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages, who was closely associated with the *Ausdruckstanz* movement, and his follower Rudolf Bode, who, after studying with Jacques Dalcroze, formed his own dance school in Munich.

56. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford, 1978).

57. Adolf Halfeld, *Amerika und Amerikanismus: Kritische Betrachtungen eines Deutschen und Europäers* (Jena, 1928), p. 227.



FIGURE 3. Expressive dancers strike a pose given the title “Poise” in the first prologue of Riefenstahl, *Olympia*, p. 32.



FIGURE 4. Students from the Hertha Feist expressive dance school striking a pose given the title “Harmony” [Gleichklang], c. 1929. Photograph by Gerhard Riebicke, Hertha Feist estate, German Dance Archive, Cologne, published by Deutsche Tanzarchiv.

quence. This contrasts sharply with Schiff's curatorial principle for the "Sport der Hellenen" exhibition, which emphasized classical representations of athletic games to the nearly complete exclusion of dance imagery. "The religious rootedness of Dance and its connection to music places it in a special relationship," Schiff wrote; he was convinced that "too many representations of dance would only mystify [*verdunkeln*] the basic conception of the exhibition."⁵⁸ Just this mystification of the basic concept of the Olympics is in fact exactly what Riefenstahl accomplishes in this sequence.

The first prologue works to *deny* an opposition between modern sports and noncompetitive expressive and rhythmic dance, the irreconcilable antagonism at the heart of the discourse of the body during the Weimar era. I resist interpreting the representation of the athletic body in Germany in 1936 along the axis of healthy, overweening Aryan body versus the sickly, abnormal, subjugated, or Jewish body, an opposition that would allow us to regard the exploitation of the Olympic contests and modern sports in general by the Nazi regime as natural or inevitable, or even to suggest as some have that modern sports spectacles tend towards fascism. I am trying to show instead that the representations of athletes commingled with expressive dancers and neoclassical figures are working to overcome and deny the very different discursive split, determinant in the Weimar era.

There is another aspect of the female expressive dancers in the first prologue that cannot be overlooked—the fact that, in contrast to the athletes, these women are filmed in the nude. This is of course a reference to the FKK or nudist movement of the Weimar era. But the deeper significance of this imagery is its evocation of the principle of eros and its repression of the merely erotic. The women shown here in the nude are imbued with spiritual depth through their rhythmic motion and are associated with the unimpeachability of classical sculpture through the visual syntax of the film.

According to Hans W. Fischer, one of countless writers on the subject of nudist photography in Weimar Germany, "the physical beauty [*Körperschönheit*] of man is determined by his goal-oriented strength, that of woman by the soul's expression."⁵⁹ Physical beauty, *Körperschönheit*, like eros, occupies a position in the discourse distinct from the eroticized; Fischer, for example, rejected nude photographs *unless* they depicted trained dancers or athletes: "It is not an artistic coup, but merely an insult, to represent disrobed bodies that can neither walk nor stand correctly, because

58. Alfred Schiff, "Die für die XI. Olympischen Spiele Berlin 1936 geplante Ausstellung 'Leibesübungen im Altertum,'" 12 Jan. 1934, unpublished typescript, Alfred Schiff papers, Diem Archiv. "Leibesübungen im Altertum" was an earlier, working title for the exhibition.

59. Hans W. Fischer, *Körperschönheit und Körperkultur: Sport, Gymnastik, Tanz* (Berlin, 1928), p. 7; hereafter abbreviated SGT.



FIGURE 5. Horse dismount, still from Riefenstahl, *Olympia*, p. 203.

they do not possess the natural freedom and unaffectedness of movement” of the physically fit (*SGT*, p. 11). In contrast to this he holds up classical Greek sculpture as the ideal of nude physical beauty.

Working from this distinction between eros and the erotic, I would argue that physical beauty and strength, when represented in *Olympia*, carried with it connotations of organic life and connection to community, as opposed to the mechanical forms that had been so firmly associated with modern sports.

And eros certainly suffuses these films. The opening prologue works to elide the eros of classical sculpture and expressive dance with modern sports. Throughout the film, the camera consistently presents the figures of the athletes in the most glamorous light and framing—shot from below, against a backdrop of stormy skies (fig. 5). Athletes are shown, quite often, abstracted from the context of the contests themselves: we watch one shot-putter after another launch his heavy sphere; we see how each gathers his concentration; we see their graceful turns and lunges in slow motion, but we never see where the shot lands or how far it’s gone. Precisely those elements that constitute the modernity of the game—the distance measured and compared, the goal reached, the contest—have been edited out. Even

the brutal dynamism of the shot-putter's gyration—or the hurdler's, or the diver's—has been replaced by the undulating grace and rhythm of slow motion—a pace much closer to expressive dance. The documentary purpose of the film is consistently sacrificed to the principle of eros.

But the film can only represent eros as long as it does not descend into the erotic, and as these are somewhat arbitrarily defined discursive terms, not immanent in the athletic bodies themselves, this is a difficult distinction to maintain.⁶⁰ It is a central problem in *Olympia* because the notion of eros carries so much weight. It is precisely this problem that is addressed by the sequence that opens the prologue to the second half of the film, which is titled the "Festival of Beauty."

The second prologue, which (nearly) exclusively features men, opens with the Finnish team jogging around a pond in the Olympic village in early morning mist.⁶¹ Alongside the pond is a sauna built specially for the Finnish team. The scene changes to the interior of the sauna, where the Finns bathe in the nude, seemingly unaware of the camera. They rub each other down, sweat, laugh, and frolic. Their athletic bodies, beautiful and strong, are displayed for the camera (fig. 6). Yet lest anybody get the wrong idea about the nature of this beauty or the camera's intentions, the men take advantage of the pond for a brisk, refreshing swim. In fact, they seem to take several swims; the editing continuously cuts back and forth between interior scenes of the sauna and dives into the pool. Without it becoming obvious, the film seems to want to reassure us that these brisk swims, the frequent dousings with cold water in the sauna, the cold showers, even the chill morning air of the opening scenes, guarantees the chastity of the proceedings. In this manner, and in this key sequence that establishes the mood for the rest of the film, the necessary distinction between eros and the erotic is maintained so that a larger distinction between eros and the mechanized body can be established.

5

The importance of sports, athletics, expressive dance, and other forms of physical exercise in Weimar culture is impossible to overestimate. I would

60. See Guttman, *The Erotic in Sports* (New York, 1996).

61. It is worth noting that this was the second time such an Olympic Village was built, the first being in Los Angeles in 1932, and the village and its architecture had in itself a representative value for the Third Reich. The architecture of the houses, with their pitched roofs, comfortable but modest proportions, and familiar spatial relationships was an example of *Heimatsarchitektur*, a high-profile rejection of modernist housing projects like the famous Weissenhofsiedlung. It was a model community and an architectural revival, as well as a demonstration that the new Germany was capable of both outclassing America in the organization of the Olympics and mastering such social problems as housing shortages.



FIGURE 6. A member of the Finnish team in the sauna, still from Riefenstahl, *Olympia*, p. 146.

like to pause at this point to clarify what I mean by modern sports and why they represented such high stakes to cultural conservatives. Modern sports include team sports such as baseball, basketball, field and ice hockey, and the British games of soccer and cricket; they include physical contests that involve the modern fascination with speed and machines, such as bicycling and rowing; and there is boxing, once the quintessentially British sport, but closely identified in the 1920s with the brutality and tempo of American culture. Elemental physical contests—running, jumping, and throwing—were also transformed into modern sports by standardization and by the precise measurement and recording of achievement. It is a defining characteristic of such forms of play that the goals to be achieved, the obstacles to their achievement, and all the rules be the same for both teams or all contestants. In other words modern Anglo-American sports are characterized by the principles of the level playing field and fair play, and it is certainly no coincidence that these terms also identify the self-professed Anglo-American values of liberal economics and democracy. This is part of the reason why conservative German culture critics rejected Anglo-American

sports and the Weimar coalition government with the same defiant wave of the hand.⁶²

To German conservatives, Anglo-American sports and its techniques represented everything that they rejected: Western, enlightenment thought, along with economic and political liberalism, rationalism and science, technological progress and urbanization. Against these, the bipolar conception of conservative German cultural criticism privileged irrationalism and vitalist modes of thought and understanding rooted in the soul. Modern sports were also still closely associated with England and, especially after the First World War, America.⁶³ Conservative cultural criticism in Germany found its object, its own bodily practice, in the discipline of *Ausdruckstanz*.

The discourse of *Ausdruckstanz* attracted especially loquacious speculative thinkers, romantic antimodernist theorists such as Ludwig Klages and Rudolph Bode, influential in their own day but long since forgotten. The literature they produced is vast, but the terms they used were consistent, as were the broad antitheses with which they structured their discourse.⁶⁴ Hans W. Fischer, who was relatively ecumenical in his embrace of the full spectrum of early twentieth-century physical activity, from dance to sports, wrote a kind of compendium of physical disciplines, *Körperschönheit und Körperkultur: Sport Gymnastik Tanz*. This compendium can be taken as a guidebook for the project of recovering the vitalist discourse of the body.

Fischer's omnibus of sports and physical exercise, exhaustively illustrated with photographs, is organized along a spectrum that ranges from those disciplines most centered on expression or *Ausdruck*, through gymnastics and light athletics, to team sports, all the way to those physical activities that center around machines and mechanized motion: bicycle races and rowing, racecar driving, airplane flying. Although the categories of this spectrum seem to shade one into another, the spectrum is divided symmetrically along an axis that cuts between expressive gymnastics and athletic gymnastics, dividing these two seemingly allied disciplines into two essentially opposed activities. Expressive gymnastics goes to the conservative, anti-modern side, where it is allied with *Ausdruckstanz*, while athletic gymnastics is made to participate in the essence of modernity, along with sports training

62. As just one example of a conservative writer who explicitly makes this connection, see the essay by Bruno Malitz, the athletic director of the S.A., "Die Leibesübungen in den herrschenden Weltanschauung der Neuzeit," in *Olympia 1936 und die Leibesübungen im Nationalsozialistischen Staat*, 1: 239–44.

63. See for example Karl Planck, *Fusslümmelei: Über Stauchballspiel und englische Krankheit* (1898; Münster, 1982), and Herbert Schöffler, *England, das Land des Sportes* (Münster, 1935).

64. Herbert Schnädelbach has observed that it is a defining characteristic of cultural-conservative *Weltanschauung* that it operates with simple and sweeping antithesis; see Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge, 1984).

and light athletics, team and mechanized sports. The difference between expressive and sports gymnastics may seem vanishing, but Fischer bolsters it all the more with a host of polarities: sport versus dance; goal-oriented activity versus expression; directed movement versus expressive movement; rhythm versus rationality. Fischer's entire structure of a semiotics of physical exercise turns on the fine distinction between varieties of gymnastics. "Sports gymnastics increases *overall* strength and health, dance gymnastics increases these specifically in regard to the capacity for expression. The former intends to bring the body into accord [*Einklang*] with itself, the latter creates the possibility of bringing the soul into harmony [*Harmonie*] with the body" (SGT, p. 12). *Einklang* and *Harmonie* are made to seem distinct in this formulation, although it is impossible to think their difference rationally, physiologically, without reference to the soul—and this is entirely to the point.

The series of polarities culminates, perhaps not surprisingly, in female versus male, the one aligned with dance, the other with sports (see SGT, p. 11). Although Riefenstahl's *Olympia* film does not repeat this gendered polarity—she was quite concerned to show the "physical expressiveness" of the male athletic body and its "physical beauty"—it is ordered by another set of dichotomies that pervades Fischer's work and the German discourse of physical culture, a polar distinction between expressive motion (*Ausdrucksbewegung*) and goal-oriented motion (*Zweckbewegung*), and, symmetrically, between rhythm (*Rhythmus*) and cadence (*Takt*). "Goal-oriented motion," Fischer theorizes, "comes from the brain, it neither needs nor knows rhythm, but is ruled by measured time according to practical needs. When it is repeated, it promotes a uniformity as complete as possible; one counts it out and holds a specific cadence. Cadence and not rhythm . . . rules the motions of work" (SGT, p. 169). Cadence is associated with intellect and practical needs and above all with work; Fischer here has in mind specifically the work of machines, modern industrial work. "Rhythmic movement," by contrast, "always arises from the play of living forces, because rhythm is fully bound to organic life and its processes" (SGT, p. 168). Rhythm, for Fischer, following the thinking of the conservative vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages, is a natural force and a natural law.

Everywhere living fluids flow, they regulate themselves rhythmically. We know from watching the growth process of plants . . . that it does not proceed evenly and uninterrupted, but in fits and starts, with a specific growth rhythm. . . . We sense, no, we feel clearly, that a law is at work here which we admittedly do not and possibly never will fully describe numerically. [SGT, p. 168; my emphasis]

The philosophically and even politically significant terms that are here brought into connection with rhythm are fluidity, organic growth, and the irrational, specifically that which evades and will always evade empirical, numerical measurement.

The opposition of rhythm and cadence in precisely these terms did not originate with Fischer but with Rudolf Bode, a student of the expressive dance instructor Jacques Dalcroze and later the director of his own school of *Ausdruckstanz* near Munich. Bode was particularly influenced by Klages's vitalist thinking, which privileged the irrational, and his central difference with Dalcroze was to fault what Bode saw as Dalcroze's confusion of rhythm with cadence. For Bode, rhythm is a vitalist principle while cadence is intellectual; rhythm is qualitative, cadence is quantitative.⁶⁵ The language becomes increasingly romantic:

Rhythm is irrational, that is, it does not avail itself of the judging, comparing, measuring function of reason. As rhythm it can only be *experienced*. . . . All forms that owe their creation to the totality of life are rhythmic. Yet again, however, totality cannot be grasped by reason. The totality of life is irrational and all forms, insofar as they are determined by this totality, are irrational. *All rhythm is bound up in the stream of life.* [R, p. 7]

Bode expresses his central anxiety—that the Germans are sacrificing their rhythmic connections to the community for the sake of modern technology—in the vocabulary of racial ideology:

an age that seeks its salvation only in the successes of technology and science must be alienated from rhythm. That the process of derhythimification [*Entrhythmisierungsprozess*] is already quite advanced is indicated by the degree to which the natural ties of life, race, folk, ethnicity, family, are disappearing, while the ethical feelings that are tied to them, racial pride, national pride, family pride, lose their [formerly] enormous strength, and Internationalism spreads. [R, p. 15]

The Will, he points out, cannot overcome this process of destruction; one cannot will rhythm. And lest the modern German be fooled by the common expression “the rhythm of the machine,” Bode makes it clear that, in his conception, rhythm is actually that which is destroyed by quantitative rationality and its evil fruit, increased production as an end in itself. “The intelligence that is oriented towards the quantitative not only created the machine out of economic interest, it turned man into a machine by—again

65. See Rudolf Bode, *Der Rhythmus und seine Bedeutung für die Erziehung* (Jena, 1920), p. 9; hereafter abbreviated R.

in the interest of quantitative use-function—robbing him of his rhythm” (R, p. 14). Bode combines a vague racial ideology with an equally vague anticapitalist romanticism.

Bode was an influential theorist among other expressive dance instructors and in particular those of Riefenstahl’s own instructors, Jutta Klamt and Mary Wigmann, both of whom exhibited their own sympathies for radical conservatism in various ways. Other writers in the milieu of physical culture espoused similar racial doctrines. J. M. Seitz, for example, promoted the moral edification of nudism and physical beauty [*Körperschönheit*] not least because it led to the healthy, “informed” selection of mating partners, in a perverse ideal of racial hygiene. “Degenerate persons have such a repelling effect when they are naked that normal persons never pay attention to them when choosing a spouse.” Despite his emphasis on purity and morality, Seitz’s dream of nudist communities takes on a sinister racial aspect when he informs the reader that “through nudist culture man will be purified in ethical and aesthetic relations; in other words, through nudist culture the foundations of a coming race of purified man [*Edelmenschen*] will be created.”⁶⁶

As we have seen, there was also in Germany a community of supporters of modern, Anglo-American sports. These athletic modernists privileged objectively measurable physical achievement over vague notions of rhythm and race. Central to the practices and techniques of athletic training and increased physical performance (*Leistungssteigerung*) was the scientific analysis of motion and the production of the body as a kind of machine that could be disarticulated and reassembled according to rational plan, an idea borrowed from the physiologists of work. This disarticulation was often accomplished with the help of technology: photography, film, and other electromechanical recording and measuring devices. Bodily motion was measured, calculated, numerically described—the very processes that Rudolf Bode had theorized would kill rhythm, replacing it with cadence. An array of imaging technologies represented the body as a machine, a *Maschinenmensch*, and analyzed its motion as mechanical processes, pulling it apart to be plotted as separate arcs measuring motion through time and through space as separate quanta. Bode had been alarmed by just this strategy of representation, warning that “all rhythm is both spatial and chronological together, because our experience is a continuum in space and time together. If I *separate* space and time, then I am immediately outside of life,

66. J. M. Seitz, *Die Nacktkulturbewegung: Ein Buch für Wissende und Unwissende* (Dresden: Verlag der Schönheit, 1923), p. 118 f. Seitz was but one of many such racial theorists of nudism; Richard Ungewitter and Hans Surén are today more well known.

outside of rhythm. Because every *separation* is the activation of the rational function. The undestroyed unity of space and time is thus a basic condition of rhythmic experience" (R, p. 7).

To the conservative cultural critics, Anglo-American sports and their bodily techniques were also characterized by an emphasis, seen as American, on objectively quantifiable measurement and an obsession with record-breaking achievement.⁶⁷ The loathing with which cultural conservatives viewed the fixation with records and record breaking cannot be overemphasized.⁶⁸ At the same time, those who welcomed modernity in the Weimar era also welcomed the *Maschinenmensch* as its harbinger.⁶⁹ Artists represented the man-as-machine as a new physical ideal to which they aspired, partly as a response to an anxiety about the fate of the organic body in the dangerous, mechanized landscapes of the war and the postwar city. George Grosz and Willi Baumeister also emphasized the connection between the athletic body and the mechanized body (figs. 7 and 8).

For cultural conservatives such as Bode, the *Maschinenmensch* posed a threat and evoked its own anxieties about the body. They feared that the organic German body with its mystical connections to racial community would be Americanized. The image of the *Maschinenmensch* stood for everything conservative cultural critics rejected: industrialization and technology in the service of capitalism; materialism; and the destruction of a supposed organic link between individuals and their community and traditions, their work, their bodies, and each other, and its replacement with dead, mechanical forms. The mechanical was in conservative theory hypostatized into an irreducible category, a single plastic image of cultural decay. During the 1920s Anglo-American sports, and especially the mania for record breaking, was understood as a concrete expression of this mechanization of the body. When Diem, a lifelong promoter of modern forms of sports and training, sought to domesticate the Olympics, he did so by

67. An important example is that of Alfred Baeumler, "Sinn und Aufbau der deutschen Leibesübungen," *Männerbund und Wissenschaft* (Berlin, 1934) and "Die weltanschaulichen Grundlagen der deutschen Leibesübungen," *Sport und Staat* (1937). Baeumler is discussed at length in *Körper, Kult, und Politik* as well as in *Nationalsozialistische Leibeserziehung*, ed. Hajo Bernett (Schorndorf, 1966), and Winfried Joch, *Politische Leibeserziehung und ihre Theorie im Nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main, 1976).

68. This position continued to be propounded in the writings of some cultural conservatives who identified themselves with the Nazi party. See for example Bruno Malitz, "Die Leibesübungen in den herrschenden Weltanschauung der Neuzeit" and *Leibesübungen in der nationalistischen Idee* (1933), *Nationalsozialistische Bibliothek* (Berlin, 1934), 46:14; cited in KKP, p. 234 n. 21. For Alkemeyer this book is characterized by "einen fanatischen Antisemitismus" (KKP, p. 234 n. 19).

69. I discuss the image of the *Maschinenmensch* in German art and in the science of the body in Germany in my dissertation, "*Maschinenmenschen: Mechanical Bodies and Athletic Bodies and Images of Man as Machine in Weimar Germany*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1999).

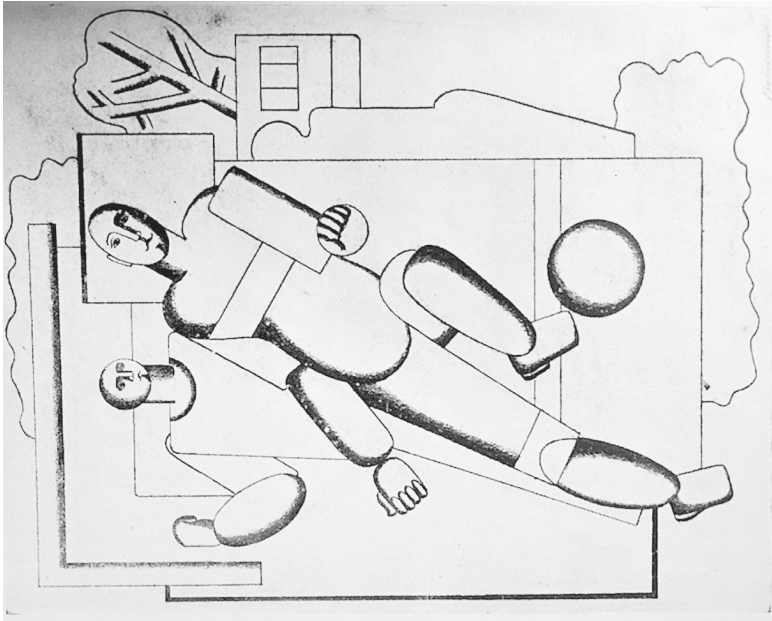


FIGURE 7. Willi Baumeister, *Soccer Players*, 1926, lost. From Dietmar Ponert, *Willi Baumeister: Werkverzeichnis der Zeichnungen, Gouachen und Collagen* (Cologne, 1988), no. 274.

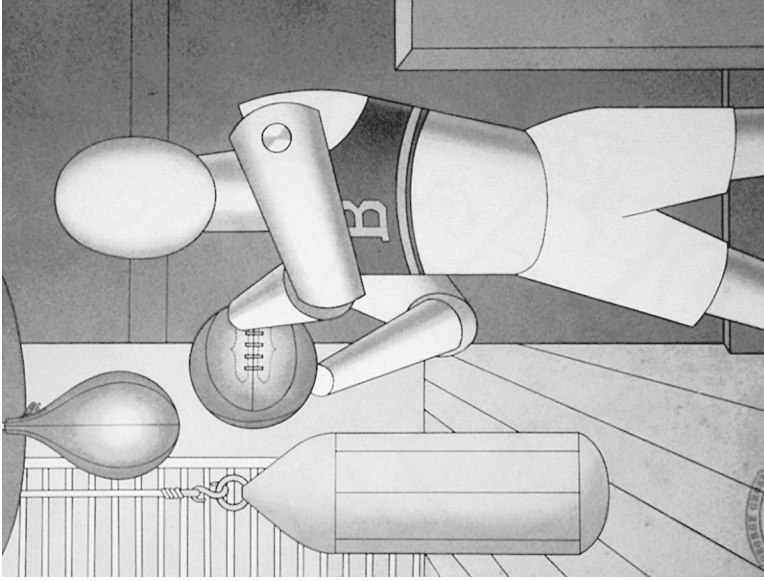


FIGURE 8. George Grosz, *Athlete*, 1922, lost. From Peter Kühn, *Sports: A Cultural History in the Mirror of Art* (Dresden, 1996), p. 299.

playing on the philhellenism that was such an integral and ingrained element of educated German society.⁷⁰ For Diem, who never joined the Nazi Party, the associations of modern sports with *Leistungssteigerung*, technology, industrialization, and even the Enlightenment were positive ones, but he nonetheless grasped that its associations with British, French, and American *Zivilisation* were a liability if the Olympics were to serve as a self-representation of the Third Reich.⁷¹ Diem worked hard in his many essays on the value of modern sports to overcome this association with *Zivilisation* by making use of the dominant cultural-critical metaphors of depth and interiority.⁷²

6

The two prologues of Riefenstahl's film can be read as a bulwark against the Americanism of modern sports, even as the film links modern athletes with classical Greece through the image in the first prologue of Myron's Discobolos morphing into the discus thrower Huber. The aesthetic of the entire film, however, is determined by the qualities of rhythm and Eros or *Körperschönheit*, which resonate so significantly with the cultural-conservative discourse from which Riefenstahl herself emerged in the 1920s. The film's score, a lushly romantic, neo-Wagnerian opus to which Riefenstahl's editing is closely wed, structures the rhythm and pacing of the images; Bode's theories of dance as the physical expression of musical rhythms is translated to athletics, transforming in effect athletic competition into expressive dance. Riefenstahl essentially worked to recuperate modern, Anglo-American athletics, the very image of modern, capitalist, liberal, Western civilization for an anticapitalist, antimodern, romantic cultural discourse. She was working hard to accomplish this recuperation not because it was her assignment for the Propaganda Ministry or because the National Socialist regime needed this cultural work done in order to promote modern sports to the German public; Germans were at least as wild as the rest of the world for modern sports anyway. Rather, she was working hard to accomplish this recuperation because she wanted, as she has always maintained, to transform the Olympic Games into art, and her conception of art, which was formed in her youth in the 1920s in the small, elitist *Aus-*

70. It should be borne in mind that among the *Volkstümliche* segment of the party—that is, the same segment that opposed modernity in every form—the Hellenistic or “southern European” associations of the Olympics continued to offend. Alkemeyer refers to Spengler, Rosenberg, Schultze-Naumburg, and Hubert Schrade in this regard; see *KKP*, p. 238.

71. See Diem, “Wesen und Wert des Sports,” *Olympia 1936 und die Liebesübungen in Nationalsozialistischen Staat*, ed. Friedrich Mildner (Berlin, 1936), pp. 111–18.

72. Diem, “Die Geschichte der Olympischen Spiele,” *Olympia 1936*, pp. 56–70.

druckstanz milieu, was culturally conservative, antimodern, and centered around a romantic bodily discourse of *Körperschönheit*. When Riefenstahl even today insists that in making the *Olympia* film she was only interested in beauty—a claim rejected by Sontag, Hoffmann, and others as prevarication—the contemporary viewer should keep in mind that she means something very specific by this term: eros, *Körperschönheit*, as opposed to mechanization and modernity.

It seems important at this point to examine the ways, if any, in which the bodily discourse informing *Olympia* differs from the racial discourse of the body espoused by the National Socialists in whose interest it was made. To the extent that critics of *Olympia* have connected it to the conservative German physical culture of the 1920s at all, the result has been to label that earlier discourse proto-fascist. This does not seem historically sound or entirely accurate. Conservative theorists of physical culture in the 1920s were anxious that the innate qualities of rhythm and organic connection to the racial community were being eroded by and lost to an encroaching technological, industrial modernism with its mechanical, “cadenced” modes of bodily experience. The racial ideologues of National Socialism swept such older conservative anxieties away by making essential, innate qualities of Germanness and non-Germanness inalienable and unalterable. A German was a German and by the same racial logic a Jew was a Jew, and these facts—now located in biology rather than irrational, mystical identity—could not be altered. This is no minor point, of course, and we know the consequences. This alteration in conservative racial theory accomplished something important for the National Socialist program; it preserved racial thinking while at the same time clearing the way for an embrace of the technological, industrial state that would be needed to secure Germany’s place as overlord of the Western world.⁷³ The National Socialists simply legislated away the conflict between a cherished notion of a German bodily experience and the modern, industrialized capitalist state. Such cynically instrumental manipulation of received conservative ideologems was a standard operation as National Socialist ideology passed over into corporatist governmental policy.

The discourse of the body that structured the cultural-conservative physical culture of Bode, et al., was paternalistic in its attitude towards “non-Aryan” races, clearly and self-evidently placing them below western Europeans in a hierarchy of race, but nonetheless making a place for them to operate within their own cultural forms. The National Socialist discourse

73. See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984).

of the body, by contrast, could not tolerate even the image of its nonwhite Other. Thus, whereas Nazi discourse is structured by an antithesis between Aryans and non-Aryans, the sight of whom Nazi policy was already working to suppress in 1936, *Olympia* works to validate the rhythmic, beautiful body by suppressing the image of the mechanical, transforming the goal-oriented motions of the athletes into expressive ones by eliminating, wherever possible, the sight of the goal being reached, the measurement being taken, or the winner being identified. Riefenstahl was operating with a distinction that no longer concerned her patrons, and this helps explain her glorifying images of Jesse Owens, so often introduced as evidence that she, and the film, are free of *any* racial discourse of the body.

To expect that Riefenstahl would have suppressed the image of Owens, or of the other nonwhite athletes, would be to misunderstand the nature of her conservatism and her cultural-conservative background. To return briefly to Fischer's compendium of physical culture from 1928, the dances of African tribesmen and the Javanese find a place alongside German folk-dances under the rubric of dance and are placed alongside German *Ausdruckstanz* on his spectrum of physical culture. In this discourse, "primitive" dance did not achieve the level of cultural expression (*Kultur*), but perhaps more importantly, it was also free of the deadening effects of modernity (*Zivilisation*) (see *SGT*, especially the unpaginated photo section). According to this theory, Africans, Javanese, and other "primitive peoples" (*Naturvölker*) have, at their own subordinate level, their own rhythmic expression of physical life and their own organic community and organic connection to nature. Indeed, while they are understood as less developed spiritually than the German soul, they are also in less immediate danger of losing their organicism and connectedness. Africans and Javanese may be labeled primitive in the racist, colonialist discourse of cultural conservatism, but their bodies signify their own specific virtues in that discursive system. This is significantly different from the racism of National Socialism. And these virtues could be transferred from the dancers of Africa and Java to the athletic figure of Owens; even before the Berlin games took place, a German supporter of modern athletics could argue that "it doesn't matter whether a competitor has German or American citizenship, but rather whether or not he has German or other blood. . . . The Negro is given by nature a much better physical build to be a boxer than a German. We know this and willingly acknowledge it."⁷⁴ In this discourse, then, Owens would have represented the natural rhythm of a primitive, as opposed to the ca-

74. Hans Geisow, "Der Sport in völkischen Staate," in *Olympia 1936 und die Leibesübungen im Nationalsozialistischen Staat*, 2:232.

denced, mechanized American athletic body. This is distinct from the position of the National Socialist racist, who held that “there is nothing for Negroes at the Olympics. . . . The ancient Greeks would turn in their graves if they knew what modern man had made of their holy national games. . . . The next games take place in Berlin in 1936. . . . The Blacks must be excluded.”⁷⁵

The representation of Owens as a “primitive” is itself racist and colonialist; it is also the same image that Riefenstahl would later make of the Nuba tribespeople, which is informed, I think, by the same structuring notions of rhythm, expression, and eros. And, of course, such racist ideologies must surely have helped pave the way for the more virulent and violent racist ideology of the National Socialists. Nonetheless, it is clearly different from that latter ideology, and it is certainly significant from an ethical point of view that while it may have been paternalistic and colonialist, it was not self-consciously genocidal. To suggest that the earlier, cultural-conservative racial ideology was proto-fascist is surely to diminish the reality of actual fascism, its political programs and public policy.

75. *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 Aug. 1932, cited in Arnd Krüger, *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936 und die Weltmeinung* (Berlin, 1973), p. 33. I am using Graham’s translation from *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia*, p. 5.