Stylistic Analysis of Disinformation in the Editing of Early Propaganda Films

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Abstract

Introduction and Purpose of the Study: *This study examines how editing techniques in early propaganda films produce disinformation. Taking D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation (1915), Sergei Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin (1925), and Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will (1935) as its objects of analysis, it asks how the formal organization of images through editing constructs ideological meaning and disseminates disinformation. The analysis attends to editing strategies: parallel editing, montage, shot-reverse-shot construction, and rhythmic patterning, examined scene by scene rather than at the level of theme or content.*

Literature Review / Background: *Scholarship on propaganda cinema has concentrated on ideological content, historical context, and social reception, while the formal mechanisms through which editing produces ideological conviction have received comparatively little attention. Franklin's (1979) examination of The Birth of a Nation as historical propaganda, Carter's (1960) analysis of its "plantation illusion," and Lennig's (2004) account of its production and reception all treat the film's distortions as a matter of narrative content. What is missing is a formal account of how the editing itself, rather than the depicted content, generates the persuasive force of disinformation. This study takes that formal dimension as its central concern.*

Methodology: *The analysis is qualitative and case-based. Each film is examined scene by scene, with sustained attention to editing strategies. Filmmaker statements and contextual documents are referenced only where they clarify a formal choice that might otherwise remain ambiguous. The films themselves are the primary evidence. This approach follows Byrne's (1965) account of stylistic film analysis as the close reading of formal devices for their communicative function.*

Findings: *All three films construct ideological authority through editing rather than through content alone. Griffith deploys parallel editing and visual contrast to produce a narrative in which white supremacist violence is aesthetically coded as rescue and heroism. Eisenstein's intellectual montage in Battleship Potemkin generates revolutionary meaning through juxtaposition, making ideological propositions appear as logical conclusions drawn from the images themselves. Riefenstahl's Triumph of*

Özgün Araştırma Makalesi (Original Research Article)
Geliş/Received: 24.07.2025 **Kabul/Accepted:** 11.06.2026
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the Will integrates rhythmic editing with orchestral sound and low-angle cinematography to transform political spectacle into something that appears inevitable and organic.

Conclusion: *Propaganda, as these three films make clear, is not a property of content that can be added to or removed from images, but is produced through the formal organization of images in time. Editing, the primary formal operation of cinema, is therefore the primary mechanism of cinematic disinformation. Attending to these formal patterns distinguishes a stylistic analysis of propaganda from an ideological critique, and that distinction has direct implications for media literacy and the critical analysis of visual culture.*

Keywords: *Propaganda Films, Film Editing, Disinformation, Ideology, Visual Culture*

Erken Dönem Propaganda Filmlerinin Kurgusunda Dezenformasyonun Stilistik Analizi

Öz

Giriş ve Çalışmanın Amacı: *Bu çalışma, erken dönem propaganda filmlerinde kurgu tekniklerinin dezenformasyon üretiminde nasıl kullanıldığını sorgulamaktadır. Bir Ulusun Doğuşu (1915), Potemkin Zırhlısı (1925) ve İradenin Zaferi (1935) gibi örnekler üzerinden, sinemanın ideolojik manipülasyonda nasıl işlev gördüğü ve kurgu yoluyla hakikatin nasıl çarpıtıldığı araştırma sorusu etrafında ele alınmıştır. Araştırma, propaganda filmlerinin yalnızca tarihsel belgeler değil, aynı zamanda stilize edilmiş dezenformasyon araçları olduğunu ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.*

Kavramsal/Kuramsal Çerçeve: *Çalışma, dezenformasyonun görsel anlatıdaki biçimsel izlerini analiz eden kuramsal yaklaşımlara dayanmaktadır. Griffith, Eisenstein ve Riefenstahl'ın çalışmaları, sinema tarihinde propaganda amacıyla kurgu tekniklerinin kullanımı açısından önemli birer örnek teşkil eder. Mevcut literatürde bu filmler genellikle ideolojik içerikleriyle ele alınırken, bu çalışma estetik biçimlerin dezenformasyon üretimindeki rolünü odağa alarak önemli bir boşluğu doldurur. Bu yönüyle, sanat ile propaganda arasındaki sınırların sinemasal kurgu üzerinden nasıl kurulduğunu analiz eder.*

Yöntem: *Bu çalışma nitel ve vaka temelli bir biçimsel analizdir. Her film, yalnızca anlatıya değil, biçime odaklanarak sahne sahne incelenmiştir. Yönetmen beyanları ve tarihsel belgeler, yalnızca belirli bir biçimsel tercihin yorumlanmasını güçleştirdiği durumlarda başvuru kaynağı olarak kullanılmıştır. Temel kanıt filmlerin kendisidir. Bu yaklaşım, Byrne'in (1965) stilistik film analizine ilişkin yöntemsel önerisiyle örtüşmektedir.*

Bulgular: *Üç film de ideolojik otoriteyi içerikten değil, biçimden üretmektedir. Griffith, paralel kurgu ve görsel karşıtlıkla beyaz üstünlükçü şiddeti estetiğin diline çevirir. Eisenstein'ın entelüktüal montajı, kurgusal karşıtlıklar aracılığıyla devrimci anlam kurar ve ideolojik önermeleri görüntülerden çıkarsanmış mantıksal sonuçlar gibi sunar. Riefenstahl'ın İradenin Zaferi ise ritmik kurgu, orkestral ses ve aşağıdan yukarıya çekim açılarını büntünleştirerek siyasi gösteriyi kaçınılmaz ve doğal görünür kılar.*

Sonuç: *Propaganda, bu üç filmde de açıkça görüldüğü üzere, görüntülere sonradan eklenip çıkarılabilecek bir içerik değil, görüntülerin zamansal örgütlenmesiyle üretilen bir biçimdir. Kurgu, sinemanın temel biçimsel işlemi olarak sinemasal dezenformasyonun da temel mekanizmasıdır. Bu ayrımı görmek propaganda eleştirisini salt ideolojik bir yorumdan ayırır ve görsel kültürün eleştirel analizi için somut bir perspektif sunar.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Propaganda Filmleri, Görsel Kültür, İdeoloji, Film Kurgusu, Dezenformasyon*

1. Introduction

The origins of propaganda films can be traced back to the early twentieth century, with such important examples as D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935). These films not only reflect the evolving stylistic innovations of their time but also serve as case studies in the intersection of art and disinformation strategies. While *The Birth of a Nation* redefined cinematic storytelling through its pioneering editing techniques, it simultaneously propagated white supremacist ideologies. Similarly, *Battleship Potemkin* and *Triumph of the Will* reveal the power of visual rhetoric in shaping public sentiment. The question of whether propaganda films qualify as disinformation rests on their intent and on their manipulation of truth, as some cultivate outright falsehoods while others frame events selectively to serve ideological ends. Examining the stylistic evolution and influence of these early propaganda films is essential for understanding how disinformation, often cloaked in artistic mastery, operates in cinema. This foundational analysis provides the tools to recognize such strategies in films beyond propaganda, and points to the enduring influence of these early works in the broader history of media and persuasion.

Before we begin analyzing the films, it is important to distinguish between disinformation and misinformation. Misinformation is the unintentional conveyance of incorrect or false information, while disinformation involves knowingly informing someone with false information. The phenomenon is often associated with Stalin's black propaganda during the Soviet era. Roy Godson argues that the term was coined by Josef Stalin as *dezinformatsiya*, given a foreign, French-sounding form so that it would not appear rooted in Russian culture (Shultz & Godson, 1984). This etymology is contested, and some lexicographers hold that the Russian and the Western terms developed in parallel rather than from a single act of coinage. There is nonetheless a certain irony worth marking: the word for the deliberate spread of falsehood is itself said to have been disguised as foreign.

My aim in this article is to offer a stylistic analysis (Byrne, 1965) of editing in three propaganda films and of how they convey information, often blending half-truths with exaggerated falsehoods to produce what Hitler described as "the big lie" (Hitler, 1999). The logic of the big lie is that a falsehood presented on so large a scale, and with such unwavering confidence, tends to be believed because ordinary people cannot imagine that anyone would fabricate something on so grand a scale. This exploitation of the audience's susceptibility to projected confidence is precisely what propaganda films capitalize on: the

visual and rhythmic organization of images produces a conviction that no single image, on its own, could generate.

Riefenstahl famously claimed that she was unaware of Hitler's involvement in antisemitism, the concentration camps, and war crimes (Ebert, 1994). She maintained that she knew Hitler only as he appeared in the film itself, and that her film was a true and real documentary. Yet to test this claim, all we have to do is a stylistic analysis of the film itself, to see whether the director's comments fit the film's style, because the style shows us how something or someone is portrayed in a certain light, and this gives us almost all the information we need. Even if one were to insist that the filmmaker did so deliberately, this would not finally interest the viewer, because the film itself is all we know and see. Even if she did not intend to portray someone or something in a certain way, if that is how it is shown, then that is how it will be for the audience. In the context of the whole film we may use stylistic analysis to determine whether our interpretation is supported, since we can point to specific instances of portrayal. Riefenstahl, in the end, may not have intended to portray Hitler in the way she did, but if we compare the shots of him with shots of other people and other things, it is easy to point out the discrepancies with her statements. The only thing we can be absolutely sure of in this case is the work itself, and I believe the truth about the works discussed in this article is best studied in terms of their editing style. The views of viewers may change with perspective, but the film itself is the one thing that stays the same. Let us, then, point out things as they are and see whether this claim holds true.

2. Stylistic Characteristics

So what, then, is common among these films? We will be exploring three types of film: fiction, half-fiction, and non-fiction. Yet all three employ dramatic editing techniques that originate in fiction films, beginning with Griffith. When we compare these films, it becomes evident that their editing tropes align more closely with the fiction genre than with the nonfiction genre, which allows for an analysis framed within that perspective. These editing techniques share a common juxtaposition of close-ups with crowds of people and with symbolic objects, flags, or flagbearers.

Editing is, of course, only one of the aspects that connect these films, but exploring all of them would be too much for a single paper. D.W. Griffith was the one who began using a distinct style of editing in his work. Before him, the use of close-ups together with parallel editing was not widespread, and even when it appeared, it was not used in the way Griffith used it in *The Birth of a Nation* and later in *Intolerance* (1916). Eisenstein and Riefenstahl did something similar in their own respective films. For this reason, in this article I will focus on the films themselves, largely disregarding anything outside the works.

Propaganda films during this period thrived on grandiosity, largely because audiences were untrained in media literacy. The early twentieth century was a time when film techniques were still novel, and the public had limited exposure to the sophisticated visual and narrative strategies of cinema. Media, including film and journalism, was in its infancy, and propaganda filmmakers exploited this by employing exaggerated and overt techniques. This bold and theatrical style suited the era, particularly the interwar years, when propaganda's purpose was to evoke strong emotions and mobilize the masses. Some members of the audience could not, as the saying goes, differentiate between images and reality. It is reported that at a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* a man shot at the screen "in an effort to rescue Flora Cameron from the clutches of her black pursuer" (Rylance, 2005).

As the century progressed, propaganda techniques became subtler, evolving into methods such as astroturfing (Kovic et al., 2018), the dissemination of disinformation through intelligence channels (Ferreira, 2008), and, more recently, the creation of internet echo chambers (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022) and the spread of conspiracy theories (Recordare et al., 2024). The early decades of the twentieth century, however, represent a unique period in which propaganda relied on spectacle and direct emotional appeals (O'Shaughnessy, 2004). Films like *Triumph of the Will* demonstrate how these techniques operated at their peak, offering a window into how disinformation functioned at a time when audiences were particularly vulnerable to its effects. By studying these films, we can better understand the foundations of propaganda and disinformation, as well as their enduring impact on media and society.

For instance, in *The Birth of a Nation*, the Ku Klux Klan is portrayed as heroic defenders of the United States, and the film attempts to reframe their actions as misunderstood. The narrative glorifies the Klan's ideology, prioritizing the "truth" the film wishes to convey over the morality of their actions. In *Battleship Potemkin*, the narrative revolves around the Bolshevik Revolution and its disruption of the social classes. Although the film depicts acts of violence and cruelty, it frames these as necessary sacrifices for a greater good, the liberation of people from capitalist oppression. The idea of revolution and its moral justification outweighs the specific actions depicted (Brown, 2018). Finally, in *Triumph of the Will*, the narrative exalts the individual as an embodiment of greatness, focusing on who the subject is rather than on what he is doing. The film glorifies Hitler as a larger-than-life figure, not through his actions but by presenting him as an ideal to be admired before the crowd of people who come to see him. He is not shown in his daily life at home, but always at work, in full uniform. Similarly, the means of achieving this ideal, however brutal, are framed as secondary to the greatness of the ideal itself. This approach is present in the former two films as well, where the focus is on the revolutionary ideal rather than on the individual actions of the Bolsheviks.

In these films, editing and narrative work together to subordinate individual action to ideology and grand narrative, an operation that produces the characteristic effect of

propagandization whether or not it is deliberate. The central idea is that these figures act not for personal gain but for an ideal, which positions them as heroes beyond the comprehension of ordinary people.

2.1. The Birth of a Nation (1915)

It is plausible that, had D.W. Griffith denied any involvement in propaganda or propaganda films, we could still ask how and why we classify certain information as propaganda. Since this information amounts to the knowing circulation of a misunderstanding, propaganda fits the description, because propaganda disseminates false or exaggerated information about individuals, groups, or entities such as a state (Sproule, 2005). In *The Birth of a Nation*, for instance, it is suggested that the United States was founded on the principles of white American families and values, and that the nation united against those who deviated from these, that is, against Black people (Franklin, 1979). This narrative aligns with the creation myth propagated by Griffith, who portrayed false information about the lives of African Americans and about the justification for their enslavement.

Roger Ebert famously deemed it a great film:

> "The Birth of a Nation is not a bad film because it argues for evil. Like Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will, it is a great film that argues for evil. To understand how it does so is to learn a great deal about film, and even something about evil" (Ebert, 2003).

Franklin's analysis establishes that the film's historical falsifications are not incidental but structural: Thomas Dixon Jr.'s source novels were designed to rehabilitate the Confederacy, and Griffith translated that rehabilitation into the new language of cinema (Franklin, 1979). Everett Carter identifies what he calls the "plantation illusion" as the film's central myth, the idealization of the antebellum South and the framing of Reconstruction as catastrophe (Carter, 1960). Arthur Lennig's account of the film's production and reception adds a further dimension: the White House screening, the commissioned musical score, and Griffith's own aspirations for the film as serious art all belong to the same effort to make racist propaganda credible through the markers of high cultural legitimacy (Lennig, 2004). What these accounts share is the recognition that the film's power as propaganda depends on its formal sophistication: the more convincing the filmmaking, the harder the ideology is to identify and resist.

Alan Casty's analysis of Griffith's style in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* focuses on the connection between Griffith's formal innovations and the racial and ideological climate of early twentieth-century America (Casty, 1972). Casty traces parallel editing and dramatic close-ups as techniques that served both artistic and propagandistic ends simultaneously, arguing that Griffith's moral absolutism and melodramatic emotionalism are not incidental

features of the style but constitutive of it. The same formal choices that made the film an artistic landmark also made its white supremacist ideology emotionally convincing.

In terms of editing, Griffith was a pioneer, though not necessarily the inventor, of parallel editing and the use of close-ups (Gunning, 1994). He was among the first directors to use editing and close-ups to create an emotional atmosphere that had been largely, though not completely, missing in earlier filmmaking.

Karel Reisz, in his well-known *The Technique of Film Editing*, discusses Griffith and his film in detail (Reisz, 2010). Reisz explains how Griffith's groundbreaking use of editing in *The Birth of a Nation* works, particularly in comparison with Edwin S. Porter's earlier methods. While Porter's approach, as seen in films like *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), prioritized simple action continuity, Griffith developed editing into a refined tool for building dramatic tension and guiding audience emotions. The excerpt Reisz gives as an example illustrates how Griffith broke down the assassination of Lincoln into a series of short, purposeful shots, cutting between multiple narrative threads involving Lincoln, his bodyguard, John Wilkes Booth, the theater audience, and the actors on stage. Each group is integrated into the scene through carefully established transitions that maintain continuity while heightening suspense.

Griffith's editing choices were motivated by drama rather than by physical necessity, a significant departure from Porter's technique. The sequence involving the bodyguard, for example, shows his impatience, presents the stage as the source of his distraction, and traces his eventual abandonment of his post. Griffith also intercuts static, anxious shots of Booth to emphasize his presence and build tension while the audience remains unaware of the impending assassination. This strategy creates suspense by juxtaposing the audience's ignorance with Booth's intent. The use of close-ups, such as Booth preparing his weapon or Lincoln adjusting his coat as if sensing danger, deepens the psychological and emotional texture of the scene.

Griffith further manipulates the pacing by delaying critical moments, cutting to the stage instead of immediately showing Lincoln's assassination. This deliberate interruption sustains suspense and underscores the tragic inevitability of the event. Moments such as Elsie pointing toward Lincoln's box but failing to notice Booth, or Lincoln's subtle gesture of discomfort, add layers of dramatic irony and foreshadowing. Griffith's method demonstrates the camera's role in shaping narrative meaning by selecting and sequencing shots to highlight specific details at the right moments.

What Griffith accomplished was not merely technical innovation. By fragmenting the assassination sequence and rebuilding it through cuts motivated by dramatic logic rather than spatial necessity, he demonstrated that editing could work as rhetoric: it could assign guilt, build suspense, and organize sympathy without any of this being stated in an intertitle. This is

the discovery that makes *The Birth of a Nation* a founding document of cinematic disinformation.

The film's racism is not incidental to its formal achievements: it is structured by them. Adapted from Thomas Dixon Jr.'s novels The Leopard's Spots and *The Clansman*, *The Birth of a Nation* portrays the Civil War and Reconstruction within what Carter (1960) calls the "plantation illusion," the myth of the antebellum South as a harmonious society disrupted by Northern aggression and Black political agency. Griffith encodes this mythology through editing: the Klan appears in rescue sequences that deploy the same parallel-editing and accelerating-rhythm devices he refined in the Lincoln assassination sequence, so that the formal vocabulary of heroism attaches to white supremacist violence.

The "Gus stalks Flora" sequence makes this formal logic visible. The lighting renders Gus as shadow and threat. The cross-cutting between his pursuit and Flora's flight applies the same rhythmic structure as the assassination sequence, assigning the same moral valence to a different ideological target. The effect is not only emotional but cognitive: by the time the Klan arrives, the editing has already organized the viewer's perception so that the rescue appears self-evidently necessary and just.

Griffith's use of point-of-view shots and associative editing does not merely present racial stereotypes but recruits the viewer into experiencing the film from within them. The Klan's framing as saviors and Black characters' framing as either servile or threatening belong to the same formal system, one that Magowan (1999) has analyzed in terms of the "Black Beast" trope and its function in the politics of racial liminality. Griffith claimed to be making history rather than fiction (Lang, 1994), and that claim is itself part of the disinformation: the conventions of drama and those of documentation are incompatible precisely because drama organizes meaning while documentation, on the theory Griffith invoked, is supposed to record it. As Leyda (1949) observed, the film's success as art and its success as propaganda are the same success.

Toward the end of the film there is a famous sequence in which the Klansmen rescue a white woman, Elsie, from Silas Lynch, a half-Black corrupt politician depicted almost as a monster. The sequence begins with Elsie screaming out the window, refusing to be forced into marriage with Lynch, which alerts one of the Klansmen's spies, who "summons the Clans" in response. Here we see Griffith's masterful parallel editing between the riding of the Klansmen and the monstrous Lynch, which creates a contrast of good versus bad, or human versus non-human. Through the juxtaposition of shots, we are led to conclude that the Klansmen are mighty and courageous warriors out to save Elsie from the murderous and monstrous Lynch. Lynch's actions in the sequence are cowardly and directed toward a "helpless Southern woman," while the Klansmen ride as fast as they can with their burning crosses, in the end

destroying the town and saving Elsie. Since the optical technology of the time could not zoom in closely enough on the actors' faces, Griffith devised a way to overcome this limitation, by means of extreme vignetting in post-production and by cutting between wider shots and close-ups to make the close-ups look more extreme than they were. This technique helped him create a sense of emotional closeness to the characters. Through editing, we are led to empathize and sympathize with the Klansmen and Elsie, whereas if the Black characters had not been so cartoonish, and if the editing technique had been reversed, the Klansmen could have been depicted as the villains. Griffith, then, was one of the first directors to discover the extreme power of editing.

2.2. Battleship Potemkin (1925)

Sergei Eisenstein, like Griffith, was a pioneer in cinema, and he coined the term *intellectual montage* to describe his methodology (Eisenstein, 1949). He was both a theorist and a practitioner, and his theory was that editing worked psychologically and philosophically. What I mean by this is that, while shots on their own could depict whatever their subject matter is, we may achieve different, higher, more complex ideas when shots are combined. The meaning is created between the shots and not only through the shots themselves. Unlike Griffith, what Eisenstein wanted to achieve was a pure form of ideology, rather than emotions pertaining to ideas, that could be conveyed to the audience through editing techniques. This helped him create new meanings. Combined with camera movement, angles, and the overarching narrative, Eisenstein truly was one of the forerunners of propaganda filmmaking. If Griffith's work could be classified as a piece of fiction propagandized without the complete involvement of the director, Eisenstein took the same logic to its most extreme form in his time.

Intellectual montage in *Battleship Potemkin* is not primarily a storytelling device but an instrument for generating philosophical propositions through the collision of images. What Eisenstein means by intellectual montage is that the juxtaposition of two shots can produce a concept that neither shot contains on its own. In the Odessa Steps sequence, the rhythmic march of soldiers intercut with the panicking crowd does not merely show soldiers firing at civilians. The editing insists that these events have the character of deliberate, systematic oppression rather than of military action in a conflict. The baby carriage careening down the steps, isolated from any individual who releases it, becomes a figure for the revolution itself: momentum outrunning control.

The maggot-infested meat works differently from the Odessa Steps montage. It is not a juxtaposition but a sustained image, held long enough to become intolerable, so that the sailors' refusal to eat it reads as the beginning of a moral argument rather than of a mutiny. The lion statues edited to appear as if rising are Eisenstein's most explicit demonstration of his thesis: by cutting between a sleeping lion, a crouching lion, and a rearing lion, he produces the

concept "rising" from three images that individually show nothing of the kind. Where the meat was held so that its meaning becomes unavoidable, the lions move too fast for critical attention to engage, and the concept slides through before scrutiny can begin.

The film's refusal to individualize its protagonists is a formal commitment as much as a political one. Where Griffith's parallel editing always resolves into a named figure rescued or identified, Eisenstein's montage disperses agency across a group, so that the revolution appears as something that happens through the collective rather than as an action attributable to any individual. This is how the film constructs its particular disinformation: by making the Bolshevik Revolution appear a spontaneous popular uprising, the editing suppresses the question of who organized it and to what ends.

Now let us take a closer look at the famous Odessa Steps sequence, where the beginning of the revolution is symbolized in all its grandeur, cruelty, and desperate hope. The sequence is in fact a continuation of the previous one, in which sailors are saluted happily by the crowd at the shore. With an intertitle card displaying "AND SUDDENLY" in all capitals, the sequence begins. The first four rapid shots are of a woman screaming, her hair covering her face, her hands looking like claws. The next shot is of a man without legs descending the stairs quickly on his hands. Then we see a woman with a white umbrella covering her torso, the same woman seen happily welcoming the sailors in the previous sequence. This shot ends with the umbrella getting closer and closer to the camera until it covers the entire screen. Then we see a series of shots of people descending the stairs, running away from the Tsarist soldiers who will begin firing at them. What is interesting here is that Eisenstein alternates between the soldiers, seen from behind at a diagonal angle, and the crowd seen from the opposite side facing us, with various close-ups of faces, body parts, and objects such as a statue at the top of the stairs. The stairs look like television static from a distance. Falling people are cut together in sequence, as are most of those running. There is also a unique tracking shot of the people descending the stairs from an angle similar to the one through which we see the soldiers in an earlier shot. Jump cuts, match cuts, matching-action cuts, soldiers firing, and close-up faces of people in agony create a sense of urgency, despair, and desperation. The violence rises as a child is shot in the head, crying for his mother, with the mother realizing what has happened. This scene cuts between the mother's close-up face in shock and her dying child on the ground, whose body people later run over. This is Eisenstein's distinctive use of the shot-reverse-shot technique, which is usually reserved for dialogue or for the moment a character notices something. As he says in his book, he never cuts without a reason, and when he cuts without the motivation of an action, that means there is a motivation of meaning that will emerge in the end. Yet none of it is real, and everything is exaggerated to the point of an extreme manipulation of emotion. Like Griffith, Eisenstein had realized and harnessed the power of editing.

2.3. Triumph of the Will (1935)

Leni Riefenstahl claimed that her film was nothing but *cinéma-vérité*, that there were no reconstructed scenes, and that everything was the "truth" (Thomson, 2010). This is the core idea I am proposing in this article: even if the images themselves show events that actually happened as depicted, the way those images are put together, through editing, is what makes them untrue, half-true, or pure disinformation, the knowing conveyance of false information. It is not only important to convey the truth, the way we convey it determines the result.

What *Triumph of the Will* accomplishes formally is the production of inevitability. Close-ups of Hitler are consistently followed by wide shots of the crowd, so that the editing establishes a rhythm of particularity and totality: the individual face is the ground from which the mass emerges, and the mass is the evidence that the individual face was worth attending to. Low-angle shots place Hitler below the horizon of the sky rather than below the viewer, with the camera looking up at him from ground level, not from a position of power, which means that the viewer's gaze is always that of the crowd, always participating rather than observing.

Riefenstahl learns from Eisenstein's montage but uses it differently. Where Eisenstein's editing produces concepts through collision, Riefenstahl's produces atmosphere through accumulation. Soldiers marching, crowds cheering, flags moving, aircraft flying: each shot adds to a rhythm that never breaks and never resolves into a specific argument, because the aim is not to persuade the viewer of anything particular but to induce a state of participation in something overwhelming. This is what Benjamin (2008) means by the aestheticization of politics: not that politics is made beautiful, but that the aesthetic experience itself, the feeling of belonging to something larger than oneself, becomes the political content.

Benjamin (2008) diagnosed fascism as the aestheticization of politics: not the introduction of politics into art, but the introduction of aesthetics into political life, so that a political rally becomes an aesthetic event and the feeling of participating in it substitutes for political thought. *Triumph of the Will* is the fullest cinematic realization of this diagnosis. Sontag (1975), in "*Fascinating Fascism*," extends Benjamin's point by analyzing how the film's formal pleasures, its beauty, its rhythm, its sense of controlled power, are not merely instrumental to fascist ideology but constitutive of it: to find the film beautiful is, in a certain sense, to undergo fascism rather than to observe it.

Now let us look more closely at one of the important sequences in the film, the opening. The opening Nuremberg sequence begins with the title cards fading into a point-of-view shot from the cockpit of the plane Adolf Hitler is in. The camera slowly pans to the left, showing the clouds out of the windows. Then a jump cut takes us to the clouds themselves, from another angle within the plane. We see various shots of the city below as well as of the plane up above. Soldiers are marching, and people are gathering in anticipation of Hitler's arrival. A dizzying pan

shows the crowd saluting the plane as it lands. Then comes a series of shots of the motorcade, with Hitler standing on an open car top, tirelessly saluting everyone back, as though they were witnessing the coming of a savior from the heavens. Hitler is depicted as strong, sharp, and upright, at times with a smile and hope in his face. The opening shows us that there is an almost unanimous support of the leader. The soldiers are always framed and cut alongside the crowds, as if they were part of a line stretching toward the horizon from which Hitler himself has emerged. This opening sequence ends with Hitler saluting everyone one last time from his hotel room window, and then the screen fades to black.

For the first eleven minutes of the film, we see nothing but clouds, sky, the plane flying through the air, the huge motorcade sifting through the crowd, soldiers forming part of unending lines that seem to get lost in the horizon, and people shown as if they were attending the greatest concert ever, hands extended toward Hitler, who always salutes back without ever wavering. There is a sense of perfection in his arrival. Riefenstahl is correct that there is nothing untrue in this scene as such, but the way the shots are juxtaposed and framed creates a different meaning between the shots rather than within the shots themselves.

3. Conclusion

The three films analyzed here share a formal logic that their ideological differences cannot conceal. Each uses editing to do what no single image can do: to make an argument feel like a perception, to turn a selection of images into evidence of something that the images themselves do not contain. Griffith's parallel editing assigns heroism to the Klan. Eisenstein's intellectual montage generates the concept of systemic oppression from shots of sailors and meat. Riefenstahl's rhythmic accumulation produces the feeling of historical inevitability from shots of people standing in formation. In each case, what is constructed is not merely a narrative but a mode of seeing, and the viewer who accepts the editing accepts, without necessarily knowing it, the epistemological premises of the ideology being advanced.

The connection between early propaganda cinema and contemporary disinformation is not merely historical. Astroturfing, echo chambers, and algorithmically generated filter bubbles (Kovic et al., 2018; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022; Recordare et al., 2024) operate through different media but by an analogous formal principle: they organize perception so that what is constructed appears given, and what is selected appears to be the whole. The formal problem is the same across these very different historical and technological contexts: making a partial view appear complete, and making an argument feel like evidence.

The question of intention is worth raising here, particularly in the case of Riefenstahl, who consistently denied propagandistic intent and claimed to be making a documentary of events that actually happened (Thomson, 2010). The stylistic analysis pursued in this article suggests why that claim fails as a defense. Intent may explain the presence of a camera at the

Nuremberg rally, but it cannot explain the editing choices made afterward: the selection of shots, the rhythm of cuts, the decision to follow a Hitler close-up with a crowd wide shot rather than another close-up. Those choices produce meanings regardless of what their maker intended, and it is those meanings that constitute the disinformation.

What a stylistic analysis of editing offers, beyond any particular film, is a method for reading images that does not depend on assumptions about a filmmaker's honesty or intentions. The formal question is always the same: what does the arrangement of these shots, in this order, at this rhythm, produce in the viewer that the images individually do not contain? That question, once posed, does not stop at early propaganda cinema. It is the question one needs to ask of any moving image that presents itself as showing the world rather than arguing about it.

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