

*Triumph of the Will* forces its modern audience to grapple with the reality that a historically evil political event is simultaneously a beautiful execution of art. Mary Devereaux masterfully recounts the production of *Triumph of the Will*, a film documenting the 1934 Nuremberg rally. *Triumph of the Will* revolutionized the documentary genre with its dynamic camera angles, strong story-line structure, and seamless editing. However, problematic to its acceptance in the art world is its morally dishonorable glorification of Nazism. According to Devereaux, the film *Triumph of the Will* raises the central question: how do we evaluate this film as a great artistic achievement when it promotes morally wrong images?

Devereaux suggests three possible methods of evaluation: formalism, sophisticated formalism, and nonformalism. Formalism separates aesthetic and moral content. It evaluates art based on formal terms alone, such as structure and style. The moral content does not influence in any way the quality of the art. Sophisticated formalism is a slight derivation of standard formalism. It follows the structure of formal evaluation; except it takes into account the moral content. Still, the moral content is evaluated solely on how effectively the message is translated to the audience, and not of the actual message. Nonformalism evaluates the aesthetic, but does so by incorporating the moral content, message and all, into its analysis.

Devereaux finds weaknesses in the formalism. She holds that the problem with all degrees of formalist thought is that they “fail because they bracket the very components that make the film morally objectionable (i.e. its content) and it brackets its essence as a work of art—its vision of National Socialism.”(247) Nonformalist perspective is ideal to Devereaux because she considers the moral message of the art as important as its structural components.

In an attempt to answer the question of the artistic integrity of *Triumph of the Will*, Devereaux applies a nonformalist method to evaluate the film's intrinsically beautiful and evil nature. Devereaux prefers nonformalism because it allows for aesthetics to incorporate more than just beauty and form. This "route" places what she personally cares about (moral rightness) within the role of aestheticism; giving a more encompassing evaluation of art. Devereaux notes that the film's formal beauty is a given and that its effective translation of its message is admirable. Yet to fully claim it as artistically exceptional, Devereaux tries to uncover beauty from the film's vision. Through nonformalism she creates a divide between the "concrete vision"(249) of the film and the "ideals of National Socialism"(249). This concrete vision is Riefenstahl's creation of "a benevolent leader, a unified people"(249) and a prosperous nation. Devereaux's division allows her to appreciate the film's moral vision as beautiful beyond formal analysis. Devereaux claims this vision is very different from National Socialism's hegemonic, and "abstract doctrines"(249). Devereaux concludes that with the distinction between the film's altruistic vision and the morally evil goals of National Socialism she can properly judge *Triumph of the Will* as artistically noteworthy. Through her nonformalism she is able to appreciate the vision without "endorsing" the evils of National Socialism; however, Devereaux understands this is not a perfect evaluation.

I agree with Devereaux's assertion that art is only fully evaluated when both aesthetic and moral contents are analyzed. When analyzing controversial artistic work nonformalism allows for the greatest depth of evaluation. However, I disagree with Devereaux's application of the nonformalist format in two specific instances: her distinction between the film's vision, and her characterization of *Triumph of the Will* as flawed.

Devereaux mistakenly creates a distinction between the “concrete vision” of the film and the evil vision of National Socialism. She fabricates this distinction so she can make a morally sound evaluation of the film’s artistic greatness. The visions are undeniably related and cannot be severed. Riefenstahl’s vision was born from that of National Socialism. Riefenstahl was a vocal supporter of the party, and Hitler—the image of National Socialism—commissioned her to document the event. By separating the two visions, Devereaux neglects its tragic historical context and significance. In judging morally we cannot forget that this film was used to mobilize the German people towards the sole goals of the party. This vision was blatant propaganda because it glorified a misleading nature of Hitler. Arguably, the popular success of the film resulted in the success of one of the most lethal modes of political thought.

Devereaux’s division uproots her own theory that within beauty evil may reside. By dividing the literal vision from its ideals she does not come to terms with the message. Instead, she de-evilizes the art by eliminating the morally offensive aspects. She ignores true nonformalism by dividing the vision when it should be looked at as a complete body. In addition, I also find fault with Devereaux’s claim that “*Triumph of the Will* is flawed [...] because its vision is flawed”(250). I do not believe she has the authority to critique the film in this way. The vision may seem flawed to us, but we cannot call it or the art inherently flawed because it is exactly as Riefenstahl, the creator, intended it to be. Devereaux does not assume a complete nonformalist mode of evaluation and thus is incongruent in her argument.

Why cannot ugly, immoral art be great? In *Triumph of the Will* beauty and evil do exist. It’s evil nature should not eliminate its importance. In fact, the film’s vision is a large part of its greatness. Luckily the fear of Nazism is not as debilitating as it was in previous decades.

Modern audiences are able to watch this film and take its twisted vision as a stimulus to evaluate the dialectic between beauty and evil, generate artistic, intellectual, and social debate, and for over all social growth. Art needs to be judged on aspects beyond formal, and informal beauty. Art is as much about “beauty” as it is about the reveal. An analysis of great art should include what is revealed to the audience, what it awakens within them. *Triumph of the Will* is beautiful on the exterior, but through its beauty it reveals fear. This fear forces the viewer to examine and question his morals. *Triumph of the Will* unintentionally leads its modern audience to greater self awareness. Thus, art can be exceptional even if its moral implications are frightening. Art is more than the aesthetic—it is a vehicle for self reflection.

*Triumph of the Will* poses a question that is vital to all artistic endeavors: how can I claim art as impressive and beautiful when it contradicts my morals? Through Mary Devereaux’s complex analysis on the beauty of art, I created my own evaluation of art based on art’s revealing factor. I am able to categorize *Triumph of the Will* as an artistic masterpiece because its once threatening morals have lost their lethal character and become a source for poignant human reflection.