While Hollywood sought methods to make crowd emotions supportive of personal emotions, filmmakers in collectivist countries—the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in particular—experimented with ways to make life in the crowd more important, more trustworthy, and even more real than personal life. The results were films in which the presence of the crowd thoroughly eclipses moments of interpersonal conversation, films in which individuals hardly exist, and films in which elements that Hollywood firmly places in the private sphere—including sexuality and gender—are revised into public forms.

The valuing of crowd emotions over individual consciousness runs throughout communist and fascist political commentary. We can see an early version of this preference in *The Communist Manifesto* of 1857, in which Karl Marx laments what capitalism has done to the crowd passions of earlier social orders: “The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand . . . has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.”

Marx wishes to restore the “ecstasies” and “enthusiasm” that were felt before capitalism. He even sees the most virulent expression of such emotions—riots—as a crucial motivating force that will bring about the workers’ revolution:

With the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength
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grows, and it feels that strength more. . . . The workers begin to
form combinations (Trades’ Unions) against the bourgeois. . . .
Here and there the contest breaks out into riots.

Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time.
The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but
in the ever-expanding union of the workers.2

Marx describes riots as bearing “fruit,” which he describes as the
growing feeling of strength and unity among workers. Riots are fre-
quently invoked in accounts of crowd psychology, but Hollywood
filmmakers and Marx interpret the “fruit” of riots quite differently. To
Hollywood filmmakers, riots show the loss of moral resistance to sugges-
tion; to Marx, they show the growth of a new proletariat morality.

Hitler similarly calls for the replacement of the “wavering” individual
with the mass body, saying that when a person enters a

mass demonstration . . . and has thousands and thousands of people
of the same opinions around him, . . . he is swept away by three or
four thousand others into the mighty effect of suggestive intoxica-
tion and enthusiasm, . . . then he himself has succumbed to the
magic influence of what we designate as “mass suggestion.” The
will, the longing, and also the power of thousands are accumulated
in every individual. The man who enters such a meeting doubting
and wavering leaves it inwardly reinforced: he has become a link
in the community.3

Hitler praises just what Hollywood, in the Hays Code, feared, the magi-
cal power of “mass suggestion” to replace the “mass resistance” of indi-
vidual consciousness.

Early Soviet and Nazi filmmakers sought intense emotional moments
that would disrupt normal, individualist thought processes. Sergei Eisen-
stein aims quite directly at getting audiences carried away; he describes
his films as built of “attractions,” moments which are as powerfully trans-
portive emotionally as amusement park rides. He creates powerful emo-
tions through what he calls montage, a distinct alternative to Hollywood
continuity and realism. Montage is built of sequences of images that,
Eisenstein says, conflict with each other, requiring the viewer to engage
in a dialectic process to find syntheses and transcend the conflicts. At the
lowest level, the perception of physical movement is a synthesis of one
image followed by another that is slightly different. For example, we see
a man with his legs together, then the same man with his legs slightly
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apart. Since the two images are projected on the same space, but cannot coexist, we interpret them as “movement”: the man moved his legs between the two stills. From two conflicting stills to “movement” is a small step of dialectic. Going that far, film creates a stronger reality effect than still pictures. But Eisenstein considers that small step the beginning of a dialectic that then goes beyond reality. If we can create a sense of physical “movement” from two conflicting still images, then we can create other kinds of “movement” from other kinds of conflict. For example, what he calls “emotional dynamization,” or movement of emotions, arises when two intercut sequences of film have an “emotional” conflict; he gives as an example a still, quiet scene intercut with a violent one, which might not even be connected to the first “in reality.”

More complex is his description of a three-step process leading to intellectual “movement”: “Conflict within a thesis (an abstract idea)—formulates itself in the dialectics of the sub-title—forms itself spatially in the conflict within the shot—and explodes with increasing intensity in montage—conflict among the separate shots.”

Let me give a small example of this process: in The Battleship Potemkin, one of the subtitles is “Of Men and Maggots,” after which we see a scene in which sailors complain of the maggots in their meat. At one point, we see the sailors from very high up: they are all in white, circling around the officers in black. The shot has no clear and obvious meaning. But then there is a close-up of the maggots in the beef, which are white worms crawling all over the dark meat. The similarity between the shots of maggots and of men suggests that we have not merely been watching a reproduction of real events, but rather have been seeing quite staged arrangements. The parallel shots interact with the title to create a fairly clear double meaning: not only are the men complaining about maggots, they are being treated as maggots. But once we have passed such a moment, everything in the film becomes more than merely “real,” and when a stone lion “stands up” because three different stone lions have been cut together in sequence (one lying, one crouching, one standing up), we are ready to read such an “event” as something other than “reality.”

These are fairly simple examples. In October, Eisenstein produced a much more complex montage, as a way of commenting on a counterrevolutionary military action led by General Kornilov. Here is Eisenstein’s description of the sequence in the film:

Kornilov’s march on Petrograd was under the banner of “In the Name of God and Country.” Here [in the film] we attempted to
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reveal the religious significance of this episode in a rationalistic way. A number of religious images, from a magnificent Baroque Christ to an Eskimo idol, were cut together. The conflict in this case was between the concept and the symbolization of God. Maintaining the denotation of “God,” the images increasingly disagree with our concept of God, inevitably leading to individual conclusions about the true nature of all deities.⁶

Eisenstein thus creates a text requiring a complex method of reading based on dialectical steps, designed to create “movement” in the minds of viewers. It is not a process of establishing an ideology (through, say, defining some particular reality), but rather a process of constantly breaking through each attempt at ideological synthesis. As Eisenstein summarizes, “It is art’s task to make manifest the contradictions of Being.”⁷ Eisenstein compares the dialectic within his movies to the historical dialectic as Lenin defines it: a process of “deepening human perception” until things no longer seem what they were (a process of “negation”), followed by a return to the “old,” but transformed, way of seeing (a “negation of the negation”).⁸ This is not a process of establishing a reality or an ideological synthesis, but rather of refusing to settle on any single schema of perception. Bill Nichols argues that Eisenstein’s greatest contribution to cinema is his requiring the audience to recognize their involvement in constructing history, constructing reality. Nichols traces a line from Eisenstein’s films to Errol Morris’s Thin Blue Line and Oliver Stone’s JFK in terms of movies that use various “fictionalizations” of reality in order to leave viewers with the task of constructing some new kind of reality.⁹ These movies remain unstable, even years after they are made, and not merely because they disrupt the preconstructed realities of Hollywood clichés as, say, Godard movies do. Eisenstein’s movies engage us in the process of interpretation, but not as independent individuals; rather, they seek to “move” us to join together in a social process of constructing meaning.

If Eisenstein rejects the construction of a stable reality and of individual characters, it should be fairly obvious that he will have trouble constructing a traditional narrative, since the basic form of such narratives is the conflict or growing union between two individuals. Eisenstein instead constructs in Potemkin a story of the conflict and union of collectives, represented as sets of anonymous bodies and ships. Eisenstein states quite directly his goal of developing a new form of narrative:
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Discarding the individualist conception of the bourgeois hero, our films . . . made an abrupt deviation—insisting on an understanding of the mass as hero.

No screen had ever before reflected an image of collective action. Now the conception of “collectivity” was to be pictured. Eisenstein is not only stating a political goal, but also describing a narrative strategy: beginning his films with the “discarding” of what appears to be an individual hero, then passing through an “abrupt deviation” into seeing the “mass” as hero.

Consider how this works in the film The Battleship Potemkin. The movie begins with a conflict between oppressed sailors and evil officers during which a leader of the sailors emerges, Vakulinchuk, who brings them to open rebellion. The rebellion roughly follows Hollywood sequencing, climaxing in an individual battle between Vakulinchuk and one of the officers. However, this fight between hero and villain does not occur at the climax of the whole movie, but instead less than a third of the way through, and with a surprising result: Vakulinchuk is killed, yet the sailors’ rebellion succeeds. After the battle, there is an interlude during which Vakulinchuk’s body is put on display in a rough-hewn shrine in the harbor. Crowds gather to view it and various speakers emerge to encourage rebellion. The end of this sequence is a special effect: after an intertitle says, “Sunrise. There is an uprising,” a dissolve makes it appear that an empty staircase is magically filled with people, all moving together upwards. This “uprising” of the people seems one with the “sunrise” and hence a natural phenomenon, a part of the turning of the earth and other vast motions. The odd thing about the movie from this point on is that no further leaders are created or identified; indeed nobody in the movie ever has a name after Vakulinchuk dies. Equally odd, the wicked officers (who also had names before the rebellion) never appear again. The fights from then on are between masses of anonymous “people” and masses of anonymous soldiers and sailors loyal to the never-again-seen officers.

What Eisenstein has staged, then, is the mutual elimination of individuals on both sides. The final confrontation pits the rebel sailors on the battleship Potemkin against a fleet of ships loyal to the czar. But no battle occurs; instead, after pointing cannon at each other, the two sides join together and sail off toward revolution. That joining is signaled by flags, but we never see any leaders or even any individual sailors on the czarist ships making the decision to join the rebels. We never even have a close-up of any czarist sailors. One can imagine a Hollywood version of these
same events: there would be intense focus on the czarist sailors and their tough decisions, presented in terms of individual moral quandaries which would be resolved by someone becoming a leader and persuading all the rest. Instead, we have two masses of sailors agreeing to join together, filmed largely in long shots so individuals blur together into crowds.

The movie does show the persons in it experiencing strong emotions, but there is always an equation between the presentation of such emotions and images of mechanical processes. Hence, the rising anger of the men is reflected in the boiling of the soup in large bowls; the anxiety of the night before the confrontation with the czarist ships is represented by pistons pumping and arms moving repetitively. Interspersed through these mechanical processes there are numerous close-ups of individual faces, but never in small conversations that would reveal the “private” thoughts in those minds. Further, the close-ups are not structured to repeatedly come back to the same face (or to a few faces), so we never get to “know” any particular persons or their individual reactions. Eisenstein is known for his close-ups of faces, but the faces do not thereby define private interpersonal spaces: rather the faces are presented as parts of a complex process involving machines. Each face reveals an emotion that is derived not from the character of the person but from the material surroundings. The film does not collect together the emotions of one person, but rather what Marx would call the emotional “sublimate of material processes.”

Eisenstein thus enacts within his movie the transcendence of the traditional theatrical premise that all conflicts ultimately resolve into two individuals confronting each other or one individual struggling with an internal conflict. The first third of the movie is in a sense a standard Hollywood plot, but it is followed by a very non-Hollywood extension that undermines the premises of the Hollywood plot—that individual character is the basis of good and evil, and that morality is ultimately a mental state found in the minds of the best people. In this movie, good and evil are presented as crowd effects, the results of social structures, and the very notion of individual character is presented as an illusion that must be overcome to achieve a good end.

Eisenstein’s film challenges what has become a commonplace of ideological analysis since Althusser: the notion that ideology works by the “creation of subjects.” Film theorists such as Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey follow out the logic of the ideological construction of subjects to conclude that the only filmic way to challenge Hollywood’s ideological effects is to produce movies that are essentially devoid of character.
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not structured as plots, and thus experienced as “unpleasure.” For them, discarding the individual would destroy the movie experience, while for Eisenstein, it brings forth a crucial part of the movie experience, by making visible the crowd or the mass, an element of movie structure that film theorists ignore. Eisenstein’s films demonstrate that there is—and has been throughout most of film history—an alternative to Hollywood structure that does not simply disrupt and reject the involvement of the audience. Indeed, Eisenstein’s films are built very much on bringing the audience to an intense state of involvement, as an audience, a crowd, not as isolated “subjects” or spectators.

Eisenstein seeks to construct intense emotional experiences that are not seen as residing inside individual bodies or directed at individual characters. To do so, Eisenstein has to counter two central elements of “normal” film experience (normal to us because they are fundamental to Hollywood films): the gaze and the structure of gender. The gaze of the camera in Hollywood films functions to define gender differences, and to divide up all collectives into private pairs. Eisenstein, in contrast, uses the gaze of the camera and the structures of gender to unite private individuals into large social bodies.

We can see this process in the Odessa Steps sequence in Potemkin. The sequence seems first to borrow traditional gender roles in showing women being attacked by the palace guards: the women appear defenseless, as women stereotypically are, and the guards purely aggressive and violent, stereotypically male. There are elements, however, in the scenes of attack which complicate these stereotypes. For one thing, it is women who stand up to the guards, stopping the general flow of people down the steps and away from the guards. An elderly woman stands and suggests trying to talk to the guards, leading a small group of people up the steps; another woman whose child is shot carries the body towards the guards, saying, “Let me pass, my child is ill.” The woman with the dead child is shot and falls in a Christ-like position. The elderly woman doesn’t seem to reappear until the very end of this episode, when a Cossack swings a sword and then a woman who looks very much like that elderly woman is shown with blood pouring out through her broken glasses. This final episode is very oddly cut together: we see multiple swings of the sword but they are clearly a single shot repeated multiple times, so that a single act becomes excessively vicious rather than seeming a part of a sequence of strokes. The woman’s wound, though, is clearly not made by that swinging sword: she has a puncture wound, not a gash. This small sequence thus does not define any kind of shot/reverse shot
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of the woman and the Cossack; unlike a Hollywood confrontation, it does not join the two together in a one-to-one relationship. Rather it summarizes all that we have seen before, to provide a powerful emotional climax of the forces in the episode. What is placed together in this moment is the conflict between the two shots, one highlighting a male with a sword, and one a female with glasses that have been punctured. The gender of the characters seems to be repeated by the sword and glasses, and it is unclear how to interpret this repetition. Does the sequence suggest a perverse form of sexuality? Or does the mismatch of the movement of the sword and the wound suggest that the two individuals we are seeing have not interacted at all, but rather the sequence represents the interaction of two groups: males/soldiers attacking females/anonymous people?

The notion that the glasses and the sword label the two individuals as parts of two different groups is supported by the design of the overall scene: lines and circles define the conflicts between male and female throughout this episode. The women who oppose the guards are seen in close-up, often with their mouths open, often with glasses: round faces, round mouths, round glasses, curved shoulders and hips. The guards are all lines: guns with bayonets held rigidly at an angle or all pointed together; legs marching down stairs together, sharply jointed at the knees so they seem stick-figures. Behind both the men and the women, the lines of the stairs themselves define a backdrop that conflicts with both: the guards create a series of lines crossing the lines of the stairs; the women create circles over the lines of stairs. The baby carriage is mostly seen as its large wheels, circles moving across the steps. The final two shots, of the Cossack’s swiping sword and the woman’s face, summarize these opposed shapes: the sword is a line moving across the screen, like the lines of the marching guards; the face in horror with a wound in the center is all circles and curves and unmoving. Through the associations set up in this sequence, gender become abstracted from individual bodies, in a way that almost never happens in Hollywood movies. Instead of wondering which individual woman and which individual man are paired (say in a man defending some woman he loves or some guard facing the crisis of having to attack a woman he has known in everyday life), the structure of the scene makes us gradually feel that gender has divided groups so completely that there are no interpersonal relations here at all, no individuals looking at each other, no gaze and reverse gaze, just “genders” facing each other abstractly.

A Hollywood film would take this occasion of women being slaughtered as a motive for the good men—led of course by some powerful
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hero—to become ultraviolent, to wipe out the guards. But the plot after this episode moves in a very different direction. The sense of a large power able to counter the guards does appear, but not as a hero or a contrary group of men, but rather in the form of the ship, which is seen immediately after the Cossack and the woman with broken glasses. The shot of the ship is very odd: it is taken from straight on, with a wide-angle lens, creating a triangle whose base is defined by two cannon which seem to point out to the sides due to the fish-eye effect of the lens; the top of the triangle is the superstructure of the ship. The ship appears large, mountainous, but what dominates the shot are the strangely elegant curves of the decks. This is not a rigid, disciplined source of power like the guards and Cossacks, but rather something organic, related in its curves to the women in the previous sequence. The two prominent guns are ominously pointed directly at the camera, but because of the lens they seem to point out to the sides, and the circles on the ends of the guns are emphasized. In the center of the ship’s superstructure is a lifesaving ring, so that the triangular structure of the shot is marked by three similar-sized circles: two gun barrels and a lifesaving ring. The ship comes to save the lives of the people, so I do not think it is accidental that gun barrels are equated in this shot to lifesaving. Further, there is a peculiar sense of the ship as a single human body looking at us, so that the circular guns swelling out to the sides give an effect of breasts—or eyeglasses (fig. 12).

In other words, what comes to save these women is a kind of superfemale which is created out of machinery and a large number of men. The ship’s guns that will counter the guns of the guards do not carry with them the same connotations of extreme masculinity because the ship’s guns are most prominently circles, not lines.

The ship fires on the steps and what we see then are various stones and walls and statues blowing up—never any guards being killed. The emphasis on architectural destruction suggests that the ship is not against the people (not even against the guards), but against the architecture of the state, against the palace. The movie goes to great lengths, in fact, to deny that the revolution is a conflict between humans; it is rather a conflict of institutions. Thus, when the guards face the women, the guards have been transformed into repeated straight lines, which, besides suggesting masculinity, also suggest utter uniformity and unnaturalness; the guards are not humans attacking humans, but pistons and rods being pumped by the machine of the state. The women resisting the guards are not individuals, either, but simply “humanity” as curved flesh and
questioning eyes. When the humans caught up in those institutions end up killing each other, it is tragic because humans don’t have to do that: if the institutions could be altered, the humans could join together.

That is of course what ends the movie, in its most non-Hollywood sequence. The movie follows the ship as it goes out to sea, until it faces a convoy of the czar’s ships. The confrontation is defined through shots and reverse shots, but not of individuals: we see the Potemkin, and then the other ships, back and forth. The shots are long shots, and the men on the Potemkin in particular never appear in perfect disciplined order: rather they are massed on various decks, in chaotic crowds, with the strange curved shapes of the decks shaping them not into militaristic lines but into a sense of an organic social body. The entire episode ends up repeating the act that the elderly woman performed in the Odessa Steps sequence: asking those employed by the government to “Join Us.” As these words are signaled by flags, we see quick shots and reverse shots from ship to ship; never from individual face to individual face. The camera finally focuses on the Potemkin’s guns, which swing straight toward the lens. This swinging motion makes the lines that define the size of the guns shrink and almost disappear as the circles at the ends of the barrels become prominent. One barrel then raises and the camera
angle subtly raises with it, until we have dead center in the screen a perfect circle and nothing else. This creates a fearful effect in the audience, as we await a shot coming out of that circle right toward us. But it also fills the screen with the shape from the Odessa Steps episode that was associated with women and with the desire to unite and be family rather than to kill and divide. And just when the gun becomes this perfect circle, word flashes back that the czar’s ships will join the *Potemkin*. The confrontation does not end in battle but in union; the men on the czar’s ships have reversed the direction their ships are going, so they now accompany the *Potemkin*. Humans have transformed their institutions, making opposed institutions into joined ones. The gun barrel becomes a wedding ring, uniting two collectivities of people in the marriage that is the revolution (figs. 13, 14, and 15).

Eisenstein represents the revolution as the freeing of humans from conflicts created by their institutions.

It might seem that aligning women with unity, peace, and curves is a sexist association, but the entire movie implies that the revolution has to bring men around to assuming some of those female characteristics. The stereotype that aligns men with guns and lines and women with circles and peace is precisely a social institution that has to be altered. The movie further alters the traditional associations of gender by showing men in between their moments of fighting in poses that in Hollywood movies would be associated with voyeuristic views of women’s bodies: the men are shown half-naked, sleeping in hammocks. Bill Nichols writes of the “homoerotic languor of Potemkin’s sailors in their hammocks.”13 The homoeroticism of these scenes prepares the audience for the final merger of the opposed ships full of men: the revolution will bring men who are set to kill each other to realize that they can love each other instead.

We could say then that the resolution of the movie involves the overcoming of traditional gender roles. Eisenstein converts a gun at its most dangerous to a ring, redefining the gun not as that which repels and expels and keeps at a distance, but as that which unites, an opening, an invitation, a hole through which others can reach and create bonds. Eisenstein suggests that even the human body and the mythic associations with gender characteristics (male organs expel and push out, female organs accept) can be redefined by institutional change, by revolution. Neither the individual nor the gender nor the body itself exists before and outside of vast social structures. It is this sense of radical disruption of the seeming structure of individual human bodies and of the very structures of private life via revolution that is Eisenstein’s most radical challenge to Hollywood.

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closing in; . . .

a gun becomes a ring.
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Besides modifying gender dichotomies, the movie also modifies the gaze that film theorists have analyzed so well. We can see the movie’s modification of the gaze in that final movement of the gun barrel. When the barrel is tilted up, we understand it entirely as an object that shoots and kills, and so as an object that defines a battle over the gaze: who will look and who will be looked at? When the barrel drops to its end-on view and becomes a circle, it becomes ambiguous, and in particular ends up recalling another set of circles besides the ones associated with women and baby carriages: the circles highlighted as glasses at the very beginning of the movie. The first glasses we see are on the officer inspecting meat, and these glasses are clearly identified as distorting and contributing to the lies promulgated by the officers; those glasses are symbols of ideology in operation. At the end of the first battle on the ship, they are seen hanging uselessly on a part of the ship, disconnected from any face. At that point, the movie suggests that their lies have been overcome. They are not shown as broken and destroyed, but only as hanging on the metal ship. I would suggest that this hints at the idea that they can be used again, that the movie is going to move towards a new point of view, a new lens to look through. Glasses proliferate during the Odessa Steps sequence on the faces of numerous persons, men and women, who look back at the guards. Repeatedly such glasses are destroyed, with bullets and swords crashing through them. But then the circles appear again as elements of the ship itself—the guns and the rescue ring hanging above and between the guns. I suggest that the circles of this ship provide an alternative to the glasses that proved so fragile in opposition to guns and swords. And when the gun becomes at the end the circle uniting all the men, it does not represent the disciplining of all the chaos of the sailors hanging off the ship into a rigid unity; rather the “yes” that signals that the enemies will join together sets off celebrations of men loosely lying about all the ships in another scene of “homoerotic exuberance,” as Bill Nichols puts it. Nichols contrasts Eisenstein’s presentation of a happy crowd with Hollywood’s, saying that there is “none of that sterile posing that freezes people into mythic icons, none of that studied iconography of desire that renders actors into stars, none of that condensation of action and agency into the individuated figure of psychological realism that defines bourgeois narratives of fiction and documentary alike.”

Eisenstein’s vision of the social as something other than a collection of individuals was shared by many early Soviet filmmakers. Another well-known movie, Man with a Movie Camera, by Dziga Vertov, uses somewhat different methods to accomplish much the same purpose. The
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Movie has as prologue a manifesto rather like Eisenstein’s: Vertov declares that he is going to challenge all the traditional notions of drama, to tell a story without characters, without plot, and without “intertitles” (i.e., without dialogue). The movie has a double structure: it is partly following an entire city during one day, showing people waking, going to work, and then playing in the evening after work. But surrounding the view of a day is another sequence: people watching a movie. This sequence starts with the seats folding down by themselves, people filing in, the projector beginning, and then the movie appearing, the very movie we are watching. The double structure of the movie equates the experience of going to the movies and the experience of going through a work day. Throughout the film, there are moments which also parallel the process of moviemaking and various other processes of daily life (such as opening windows or working in a factory). The movie is, as its title says, about the relationship of man and the movie camera, and what it seems to suggest is that the movie camera is not so much an addition to life as already present in every part of human life: each man has a movie camera, in several senses. Eyes opening are paralleled to shutters on windows opening and to the shutter inside the movie camera: everyone is cutting the world up into shots every day. The assembling of “shots” is then paralleled throughout the movie to various other kinds of work—packaging cigarettes, filling bottles, putting on makeup. The experiences that make up the day in this movie are almost entirely experiences of “construction”—of objects, of people, of movies. The movie becomes a part of an overall process of construction, which produces the entire social system as well as the consciousness of each individual in it.

In creating this vision of the daily construction of reality and self, the movie rather thoroughly undermines the structures which are used to organize and make meaningful a Hollywood movie, in particular the interaction of individuals who learn about each other’s characters. The movie gives us no characters, no personalities and no conversations; indeed there is only one body that we see often enough to even begin to recognize, and that is the body of the “man with a movie camera.” But he never develops into a personality; rather he is either a voyeur of the experiences everyone else is having or simply part of the overall process of construction, and his body seems as much a part of the passing scene as something he owns.

The movie also includes within it a short sequence that in effect presents in one compact package the elements that make up the essence of Hollywood film narratives: love and death. This short sequence tracks
through all the “vicissitudes” that are the central defining structures of standard narratives, whether in Hollywood films, novels, or dramas. In the “love” part of this sequence, we watch very briefly a couple signing a marriage license, then immediately see a very similar scene of a couple signing divorce papers. We only obliquely see the faces of the people signing these papers: what we see mostly are the counter and the papers. Soon after this sequence we see someone else giving birth. In other words, the movie does include those events that traditional narratives say define individual lives—love, marriage, birth, breakup—but it includes them as very small parts of the overarching structure of society, and parts that operate in no distinctive way and with rather less emotional effect than such things as doing one’s job or playing in the ocean. The relative emotional weight of love and work in this movie reverses the relative weights in Hollywood films. Further, by having birth appear after the combination of marriage and divorce, the movie disrupts the usual sequence of traditional plots and leaves out what Hollywood would say is the center of that world: love. Marriage, divorce, and birth do not appear events in “private life”; rather they are parts of the overall process of construction of the social order which occurs every day.

The sequence about marriage, divorce, and birth moves directly into a similarly short sequence about violence—an ambulance carries someone who has been injured, the camera focuses in enough to show the bloody body and then cuts abruptly to a funeral procession. We do not see the way the individual who faces violence or death feels, nor do we see the sequence of events that led the person to such bodily suffering, nor the results of that suffering on anyone else. Violence and death seem to be simply events which occur sometimes in every day in a city, and there are mechanisms for structuring those events—ways to move injured or dead bodies so as to maintain the general flow of social construction.

By putting the main emotional elements of traditional drama and Hollywood films into two short, rather unemotional sequences, and surrounding those sequences with much longer and much more affecting sequences about work, movement, play, and the methods of making and projecting movies, the movie recasts the emotional core of life. Life does not, this film says, consist of the movements toward marriage, birth, and death; rather, it consists of the rhythms of work and play. The “vicissitudes” of traditional narrative are not even beginnings and endings of anything much; they are just random events that mix into the overall flow of each day in the city. There is of course a certain irrefutable logic
to what this movie presents, strange as it is: most of us spend much more of our time doing our jobs and engaging in play than we do pursuing love or facing violence and death. Indeed, this movie suggests that Hollywood films distort people’s senses of what matters so that they overlook how much of their life is controlled and shaped by vast structures and how little is devoted to such things as love and death. Vertov spoke of trying to change the image of the average person “from a dawdling citizen via the poetry of a machine to a perfect electric man. A new man, freed from weight and clumsiness, with the exact and light movements of a machine.”

The Man with a Movie Camera is a movie about two machines having a relationship to each other, the man and the movie camera. Vertov seeks to present both of these mechanisms in terms of the motions they perform over and over again, not in terms of any set of desires or emotions which supposedly highlight certain acts (such as marriage) as giving meaning to everything else. As another theorist of the era, Vladimir Voloshnikov, summarizes this view, “The individual consciousness not only cannot be used to explain anything, but, on the contrary, is itself in need of explanation from the vantage point of the social, ideological medium.”

This movie also provides an alternative to some commonplace methods of recent critical theory and cultural studies. The movie’s claim to be a documentary, a version of history, certainly does not lead it to adopt the “pregeneric plot structures,” which Hayden White says are “conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings.” Nor does the film create “reality effects” or focus on those elements of texts and movies usually studied by cultural critics, which Stuart Hall summarizes as “culture, ideology, language, the symbolic.” Verlov’s movie implies that focusing on such elements, even if one’s goal is to analyze how they are illusions, leads to ignoring the overarching structure of society, which are not much related to “representations” or “the symbolic.” Rather remarkably, the movie even implies that ideology—the process which creates “subjects” and “meaningful discourses”—actually functions in only a small part of the social structure.

Such a view may of course be taken as an “old Marxist” view, before the New Left discovered the textuality of everything, but there seems something more: the movie implies that focusing on psychology and love and death and family, as in New Left analyses of ideology, maintains the basic way that capitalist ideology works, maintaining the overemphasis on the individual and the familial and leaving untouched all the time
and structure devoted to work and play. In other words, the movie says, we do not have to deconstruct ideology in order to escape it; we can look past it to see how completely everything else is structured—where we walk, what we do when we wake up, how we get dressed, and the ways we view socially produced images in such institutions as the movies. Vertov follows Marx’s view that ideology is simply an illusion: “The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence.”19 Movies are usually treated entirely as ideological processes; to consider that a film might function to ignore ideology is a very strange notion.

The usual way to deal with films that have no narrative, no character, and little about love or death is to classify them as avant-garde or experimental, and that is certainly how Vertov’s movie has been treated. Political and aesthetic critics alike characterize Man with a Movie Camera as essentially an act of disruption, and what is being disrupted is the capitalist West. I have partly joined this way by emphasizing how the movie counters Hollywood structures. However, Vertov and Eisenstein did not conceive of their own films as struggling to disrupt a social order in which they were entrapped; rather they made their films to support what they viewed as the mainstream elements in their country, the early Soviet Union. These movies were not intended to be countercultural performances, but rather to create unity and support for the state. The relatively minor role played by “morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness” in these movies may be a result of the filmmakers’ belief that ideology and metaphysical conceptions are no longer operating in the postrevolutionary Soviet Union.

Film theory seems to imply that it is simply not possible to escape ideology: all one can do to counter the effects of ideology is try to create self-deconstructing works that counter themselves. It may very well be that Eisenstein’s and Vertov’s movies cannot do what they are representing themselves as doing, but it certainly seems that Eisenstein and Vertov believed that they could construct movies free of ideology, free of “unconscious” forces that will shape the thoughts and the reactions of their audiences. Their beliefs stand in direct opposition to what I have been trying to show have been the beliefs of Hollywood filmmakers, who have endlessly struggled with “ideological” effects not easily controlled.
or ignored. I would suggest then that “film theory” is in many ways congruent with the beliefs which underlie Hollywood films, and that such theory is rather unrelated to the conscious efforts of some noncapitalist filmmakers to create movies that are not capitalist.

Vertov and Eisenstein thus present a conundrum for recent theorists: these filmmakers seem to be trying to support a state and its hegemonic discourse without creating ideological effects. Film and cultural studies theories say that is impossible. We could preserve the tenets of recent “theory” by saying that Eisenstein and Vertov are not really trying to support a government, but rather a revolution. Such art may seem to support a government, but only during a period when that government itself is seeking revolution and rapid change. In other words, this anomalous art is just as challenging to any social order as film theory suggests anti-Hollywood filmmaking must be, and only appears to support a government during a period when the government itself seems to be challenging the social order as well. Once that government settles down, there will again be subjects, reality effects, narratives, and everything upon which cultural studies methods focus. This is a thoroughly plausible idea, and Eisenstein’s later works under Stalin do seem to restore subjects and reality and classical narrative structures. But then we have this disturbing thought that the methods of cultural studies analysis are applicable only during periods of settled cultural order. Perhaps they do not function during periods of revolution, when art forms actually change. Does this suggest that cultural studies analyses, even though they may talk of resistance and the deconstruction of hegemonic forms, are somewhat conservative in the sense that they are not relevant to the possibility of a revolution, but only to changes within a relatively stable ideological system? If that is so, then film theorists are fundamentally in agreement with Hollywood filmmakers and not in agreement with Vertov and Eisenstein.

I suspect that film theorists would not be very disturbed by the notion that Eisenstein and Vertov provide better ways to counter capitalist ideology than what critical theories advocate. Eisenstein and Vertov clearly share the Marxist tradition that led up to the recent critical methods. The political alternative to Hollywood would still be found on the Left. Much more disturbing to the tenets of film theory—and to cultural studies in general—are some early Nazi films, which show that breaking free of Hollywood forms might lead to fascism. Leni Riefenstahl performs a “discarding” of the individual nearly as complete as Eisenstein’s, but with a very different political conclusion. Russell Berman describes fascist art as marking a “transition from a bourgeois age of subjective interiority,
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the site of a literary culture, to a postindividualism of visible power.”

In looking beyond the subject, Riefenstahl does not find the swirling energetic masses of Eisenstein and Vertov, but rather the highly disciplined and monumental formations of marching bodies which unify into a single social “body,” which somehow is identical to the body of a dictator. Siegfried Kracauer describes the process as one that turns “an amorphous body of anonymous, fragmented particles”—all the separate individuals—into a “mass ornament” which then undergoes a “monumental mating” with the “heroic body” of the leader, creating a “megamyth.” This process, as we will see in Riefenstahl’s films, is as clearly based on a rejection of capitalist ideology as Eisenstein’s and Vertov’s films.

It might seem, however, that the ultimate focus on a dictator, a single leader, suggests that fascist theory restores a strange form of “individualism.” And the title of Riefenstahl’s most famous film, Triumph of the Will, seems to point to an internal quality of the individual psyche, will, as the focus of the movie. The notion of will or even “personality” does have an important role in fascist theory, and Hitler writes in Mein Kampf about this quality as crucial in distinguishing fascism from communism:

The folkish philosophy is basically distinguished from the Marxist philosophy by the fact that it not only recognizes the value of race, but with it the importance of personality, which it therefore makes one of the pillars of its entire edifice.

Hitler may sound as much an individualist as John Stuart Mill in advocating a state based on personality, but fascist “personality” has nothing to do with focusing on the “personal” interests of each one in society, and certainly nothing to do with having society run to support various individuals’ self-interests. Quite the contrary: Hitler identifies the ideal folkish personality with “the self-sacrificing will to give one’s personal labor and if necessary one’s own life for others.” He argues that it is this quality that marks the greatness of the Aryan race: “The Aryan is not greatest in his mental qualities as such, but in the extent of his willingness to put all his abilities in the service of the community.” In contrast to this Aryan self-sacrificing “personality,” Hitler describes the worst influence on the state as self-interest, which he labels a Jewish trait: “In the Jewish people the will to self-sacrifice does not go beyond the individual’s naked instinct of self-preservation.” Having no ability to devote themselves to the community, “The Jews possess no culture-creating force of any sort.”
We might then distinguish Hitler’s notion of personality from the liberal notions which underlie Hollywood filmmaking by saying that Hitler wants a “cultural personality,” a personality that perhaps paradoxically becomes most evident when the individual loses or “sacrifices” all idiosyncratic qualities and becomes instead the embodiment of what is deeply common to the entire community. The ideal personality then is one that is completely identical to the community, and in effect there can be only one such personality. In some ways this gets represented as the identical appearance of long rows of persons who gather in geometric arrangements and appear to act and think identically, but it is most completely represented by the one body which is declared identical to the state in the repeated cheer, “Hitler is Germany! Germany is Hitler!” Hitler argues that the culmination of personality is the elimination of democracy: “the folkish state must free all leadership and especially the highest—that is, the political leadership—entirely from the parliamentary principle of majority rule . . . and instead absolutely guarantee the right of personality . . . the decision will be made by one man.”

If we examine the movies of Leni Riefenstahl and a few other Nazi filmmakers, we can gain an understanding of how this concept of “personality” is quite unlike that found in Hollywood films. For one thing, the “best” person in Hollywood movies is usually the one we get to know the best: the audience develops a “personal” relationship with the hero; we watch the leader talk with his buddies, we understand his feelings, we identify with his emotions. Further, we see stars in multiple movies taking different roles, so we separate the “person” from the role, in a kind of transcendence of idiosyncratic qualities and “personality traits” over particular acts or decisions or relationships to communities. The Hollywood star can enter any community and become a central figure in it. Hitler is represented as emerging from and being the center of exactly one community, the Aryan nation. Hollywood stars bridge the private and the public; Hitler submerges the private, redefining personality as an entirely public phenomenon. Hence we never see Hitler talking to one or two people in Riefenstahl’s documentary, and we do not learn about his humor or his pleasantness; indeed his “private life” seems utterly irrelevant to his role as “personality” in the folkish state. Hitler is a monumental “star” of a rather different kind than Hollywood creates.

And Hitler is not the only person to acquire this peculiar “public” personality which replaces private idiosyncrasy. The documentary Olympia traces a similar process occurring in the construction of athletes’ “personalities.” In that movie we do get to see athletes in their off-stage
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moments: warming up, acting rather funny, relaxing between events. But when they enter their performances as athletes, they shed these off-stage personas and become statuesque. In Riefenstahl’s recording of athletic performances, bodies lose their oddities and become instead “beautiful.”

A way to understand the nature of beautiful bodies in *Olympia* is to note that the film is divided into two halves, “The Festival of Beauty” and “The Festival of the People.” The distinction between the two halves is not a distinction between private life, where beauty functions as it does in Hollywood love stories, and public life, where the people reign. Rather, beauty is the physical embodiment of the “people”; beauty is created by individuals suppressing their private oddities, “sacrificing” their selves in the name of athletic perfection. Beauty is that which makes a single body serve as the focus for a wave of emotion in the crowd: the athlete transforming the human body into a statuesque perfection elicits and reflects the joy of the crowd cheering. In *Olympia*, we watch how ordinary persons become “beautiful” through the disciplinary process of athletic practice, a process that bears considerable similarity to what Vertov shows in *Man with a Movie Camera*: the repetition of certain motions constructs the essence and value of a person far more than any “psychological” quality.

In *Triumph of the Will*, the creation of beauty is somewhat more mysterious. Hitler is the very definition of “beauty” in that movie even though his body is not in any obvious sense “beautiful.” Hitler transcends not only whatever private, idiosyncratic character traits he might have, but even the distinctive features of his physical body and the peculiar gestures and rhythms of his speech. *Triumph of the Will* shows the “culture-creating” personality emerging in some mysterious way without actually being visible: what Hitler calls “personality” can only be shown in the repeated flips back and forth between the leader and the crowd response. The entire movie is structured to balance the crowd against the images of Hitler’s body, and to lead us in the audience to that perspective from which we are seeing or trying to see (since it remains invisible) the “culture-creating personality,” not the individual characters and bodies we are familiar with from everyday life. The Nuremberg rally creates from the collection of bodies of individual people this larger, transcendent perspective, and then places as the core of our experience of transcendence the body of Hitler.

We can trace the way that Riefenstahl places Hitler’s body in this transcendent position. The opening images are of clouds seen through
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plane windows, presented via a camera that pans part way around, almost turning back inside the plane, then cutting to other clouds. The series of shots never has a reverse shot to show us the plane or the person who is looking at the clouds, and we become eager to find the person who can provide such a heavenly perspective. Eventually, the camera descends through the clouds to buildings, seen from above, and finally we have a reverse shot of the plane: this then seems to be the view of the buildings, of the structure on the ground, looking at the structure in the sky, and still there is no single body through whose eyes we might be looking. The first people we see are dots on the ground, which soon coalesce into very sharp lines, particularly in one shot of marchers turning a right angle, viewed from almost directly above. The movement from clouds to buildings to people suggests metaphoric interpretations: descent from heaven; gradual construction of Germany from “nothing” (white clouds) to architectural arrangements (buildings, streets), inserting people as a collective, architectural feature. When we finally see individual faces, they are presented as details of the lines of people who have been marching, now stationary, but with their hands outstretched in salutes, so that the faces appear as part of a vast array of diagonal lines. Individual faces blur together as we pass by them, becoming part of the sequence of repeated shapes. The titles preceding these shots describe Germany as having undergone a “passion” and a “rebirth,” so the opening sequence traces the descent from heaven of a reborn nation and a reborn God: an incarnation mimicking Christ’s passion and resurrection. When Hitler finally reveals himself, the camera keeps sliding off of him to the crowd cheering, implying that he is not separate or self-contained: the worshiping crowds are the defining quality of his body. Hitler is godlike because he creates worshiping crowds, not because of some quality in his body itself. We follow his body for about as long as we first remained in the heavenly perspective, so that the body of Hitler gains the “volume” of screen time and space to fill the heavenly perspective.

The opening sequences could be considered an unusual version of what suture theory ends up speculating about: the opening in the sky sets up a very strong sense of the “Absent one,” the implied controller of what we are allowed to see. According to suture theory, the sense of an “absent one” creates anxiety because the absent one seems to have much more power than “we” do as we watch. In Hollywood practice, according to suture theory, a reverse shot relieves this anxiety by revealing that there is no controlling cameraman. The world is “sutured” by this reverse shot, stitched together into a seamless whole controlled by no one.
and thereby giving us a sense that “we” are the privileged ones allowed to see everything. Riefenstahl’s opening sequences take a different tack. When we see Hitler, we get a whole series of shot/reverse shot pairs, always from his one set of eyes to the thousands of eyes of the crowd. Unlike the sequences in Hollywood movies, Riefenstahl’s sequences do not stitch the world together in the two reversed points of view: rather the two remain unequal and seemingly different in kind. One is the single, unified gaze of Hitler; the other the multiple gazes of the crowd. We are too strongly identified with the crowd to have any doubt which of these two kinds of gazes we share. We are drawn to Hitler’s eyes, wishing we could look through them, but the only way to do so is to join the crowd and look at him.

Hitler’s eyes then represent a kind of gaze that we can only dream about. He occupies the position of the “Absent One” and thereby “has all the attributes of the mythically potent symbolic father: potency, knowledge, transcendental vision, self-sufficiency, and discursive power.”

The opening from the sky sets up the perspective of “transcendental vision” and vast knowledge, and Hitler’s head and arm create a sense of potency and self-sufficiency: he can stand alone against and equal to all the crowds of people he passes.

Riefenstahl’s opening sequence does not then operate according to the mechanisms specified by suture theory: the anxiety created by the sense of our vision being controlled by someAbsent One is converted into a desire to be controlled by a godlike person. Instead of being released into a “reality” in which everyone is roughly free to have their own perspective in a reality “sutured” together and so be free of the Absent One who seemed to control us, we are drawn into a desire for the joy of worshiping just such a controlling personality. In his final speech, there is even an odd sense that he is surprised by the powerful response his words are producing—his control over the crowd is beyond his own individual understanding. He is not a person in the sense that a character in a Hollywood movie is a person, and his “personality” is not inside him, but rather a monumental construct of his relation to the crowd. Viewing this face does not take us into his head as faces do in Hollywood films; rather viewing this face puts us into the crowd, and gives us the “pleasure” of having our vision given to us, the pleasure of being controlled, by this person whose body is the marker of a superhuman perspective that transcends even the mind inside that body.

Triumph of the Will orchestrates the experience of becoming part of a far greater “body” than any individual body and aims to convey that
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experience as crucial: it aims at conveying what Hitler describes in Mein Kampf as crucial to the formation of the mass emotions that support his regime:

The man who is exposed to grave tribulations, as the first advocate of a new doctrine, absolutely needs that strengthening which lies in the conviction of being a member and a fighter in a great comprehensive body. And he obtains an impression of this body for the first time in the mass demonstration. When... he steps for the first time into a mass meeting and has thousands and thousands of people of the same opinions around him, when, as a seeker, he is swept away by three or four thousand others into the mighty effect of suggestive intoxication and enthusiasm, when the visible success and agreement of thousands confirm to him the rightness of the new doctrine... then he himself has succumbed to the magic influence of what we designate as “mass suggestion.” The will, the longing, and also the power of thousands are accumulated in every individual. The man who enters such a meeting doubting and wavering leaves it inwardly reinforced: he has become a link in the community. 30

The concept of a “great comprehensive body” is crucially connected to the notion of “personality” as Hitler defines it: there is an organic wholeness to the masses when they come together in the fascist regime that makes them “one body” with one personality, a complete reflection of the one leader. Riefenstahl throughout her filmmaking career focused on the body, but never as an indicator of individual differences; rather as that which can be a representation of the whole.

I suggest that Riefenstahl was exploring a rather different answer to the same question Griffith was exploring, as we saw in Chapter 2: how to deal with the demise of the royal body in the individualist state. Fascist theory restores such a body, but without the peculiar ways that family defined it in the monarchy: Hitler is the body that can accept all desires but not because his family is identified with the state, but rather because his mind and soul, his “personality,” is identified with the crowd reaction. Hitler’s body is not defined by being gazed at by a lover—as were the idealized leaders in Griffith’s movies—but rather by exchanging gazes with a crowd and with the transcendent Reich embodied in symbols. The rebirth of Germany, which is the subject of Triumph of the Will, is the rebirth of the imperial center, reborn not through transcendent sexuality that generates kingship, but through a transcendent vision that relies
on public desires expressed between the leader and the crowd. This transcendent vision is itself made visible by public performances of crowds and leaders, which create something that is supposed to replace individual identity. One of the most influential fascist writers, Ernst Junger, theorized the process of creating such replacements of identity, calling for an “overriding Gestalt of authority” that could “organize the masses and abolish private identity.” Fascism claims that the multiplicity of identities of citizens is an illusion created by the fragmentation of modern society, an illusion to be overcome by fascism.

*Olympia* traces a similar sense of modern Germany as a rebirth of an ancient monumental body that was once scattered, broken apart. The film begins with opening shots of clouds as well, then moves to ruins scattered over fields, to pillars, and then to the whole Acropolis: from the formlessness of clouds to a destroyed structure to a relatively complete structure, as if the architecture of Greece were reassembling itself. As in *Triumph of the Will*, the structures of architecture allow the emergence of ideal bodies. From the Acropolis, we cut to a single pillar, which the camera pans down, and a statue’s face emerges behind it, tilted sideways with an arm going straight up and bending to the head, so that we have a sense of human form continuing the architecture. Then we get a series of dissolves of statue faces, which are animated to move across each other. This opening is in effect showing the effort to assemble body parts that have been separated. But what is assembled is not one distinctive body, as it would be in a Hollywood movie; body parts here are not presented as “part” of a single whole individual, but are rather assembled with other similar body parts. Faces dissolve into other faces, and later, hands into hands, and in the events of the athletic competition that we later watch, one straining arm into another, one churning leg into another, so that we see each “individual” athlete as part of an athletic event created by multiple bodies. The individual striving for athletic perfection becomes impersonal, joining others also striving for such perfection, who all become pure forms, each separate peculiar human transformed into a common ideal formal structure.

The statues crossing each other climax in two faces, one in profile, one full front, with the profile slowly moving across the other until it almost merges, the edge of the profile fitting into the shape of shadows across the full front, almost creating a Picassoesque dual face, half-profile, half-frontal. This strangely mixed face dissolves into a statue of a discus thrower, which appears to rotate and then dissolves into a living discus thrower. This transition from a statue made to seem as if it were moving
to a human actually moving implies, as *Triumph of the Will* did, that Riefenstahl is tracing the emergence of the human body as the extension and development of rigid, unmoving stone, not as the contradiction of stone. As the fascist theorist Junger puts it, the new body created by the new regime is “more metallic, its surface is galvanized, the bone structure is evident, and the traits are clear and tense. The gaze is steady and fixed . . . a new landscape where one is represented neither as a person nor as an individual but as a type.”

This transition from fragments to a structural whole also suggests the very form of film itself—the creation of motion from the assembling and precise structuring of a series of still shots. As human bodily motion “evolves” from the artificial animation of images of statues, we gain a sense of human motion as a series of still positions, a series of poses. Athletics is perhaps a kind of reversal of the action of film: the shaping of fluid bodily motions into a series of “stills,” so that the body at every moment is a photograph of an ideal form. Athletics is the shaping of reality, of fluid Euclidean space, until it is for a time geometrically perfect. Hollywood films usually seek to find within the rigid structures of society small spaces where individuals can fluidly express their idiosyncratic and relatively ungeometric personalities. Riefenstahl seeks to eliminate those moments of unstructured fluidity and thereby convert the private “personality” in all its idiosyncrasy into the public structure, into the type.

A crucial part of the construction of the human body in *Olympia* is the creation of a peculiar and non–Hollywood sense of gender. First the movie continues through a series of parallel shots of male bodies: throwing a discus, throwing a shot, throwing a javelin. Then a shotput is thrown and seems to be caught, and we move to a montage of hands waving back and forth—all male bodies. Then there is a similar array of female bodies, but they are using hoops, which are large circles that they wave about rather than propelling away from themselves. Then three nude female bodies perform what appears to be a ritual that appears more dance than athletics: seated in a triangle, they press their palms together, forming a circle of human bodies, hands waving apart then pressing together. It might seem odd to have sexualized, naked dance numbers in Nazi films, but actually they were quite common. Herbert Marcuse notes that Nazi Germany instigated a “new cult of nudity in art and entertainment,” which combined with repressive social policies about sexuality in private life to “connect released sexual desire to an external state end.” Nazi musicals often feature female dance troupes but, Terri Gordon
notes, unlike American musicals, “the deeper meaning of the [Nazi musicals] lies not in the romantic life of the girls but, rather, in the communal ethos that binds them together.”

The communal ethos in Riefenstahl’s sequence is represented by the merging of the three women into one body with six arms, a Hindu goddess. Then a flame appears at the bottom of the screen, from the off-stage loins of the goddess (figs. 16, 17, and 18).

This flame eventually takes over the screen, and from it there appears a man holding a torch. The rest of the opening of Olympia traces the running of the torch from Greece to Germany to finally light the cauldron of flame that opens the Olympic Games. The opening thus presents the flame of the ancient Olympic spirit as something first “lit” by a collective female body which is represented in terms of circular, fluid motions, from which emerges a man in phallic rigidity topped by the fluid flickering flame. The small light which males carry from Greece to Germany in this movie derives from a much larger female flame which is the origin of the Olympic spirit. We might read a reference to Riefenstahl’s own role as a female filmmaker in this image of light provided by females and in the sense that from that female light is created the sculpted fascist man.

There is another moment that also provides a sense of the origin of the flame, but this time from a light spread out across the ocean. This moment occurs as the runner takes off. First there is a cut to a shot of the ocean with a line of light on it stretching from the horizon, from a sun or moon just out of sight, to the shore. A runner with the torch appears at the edge of this shot as the scene gradually dissolves to a scene of him running along a different shore. The line of light remains until he just about reaches the bottom of it on the screen, at which point the dissolve is completed, so his torch replaces the line of light from the heavenly body across water. Then there is a triple superimposition: the runner along the shore, now at the top of the screen; the line of light across the water, now stretching out below his torch; and over both of these, images of waves breaking. The light seems then to be breaking through the waves, creating formal order out of the natural chaos and the natural power of the moving water. I would suggest that the shot creates a sense that the light that organizes human striving (athletics, politics) comes from the oceanic divine, and the oceanic is symbolically associated with the mother. We might even see a hint of early film technology in this shot: to allow the fire to be projected without burning everything up, we need to shine the light through water, as the water lens allowed the
Figs. 16–18. Dancing female bodies . . .

merging . . .

to give birth to the Olympic flame.
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early projectors to work without burning up the film. Riefenstahl’s movie thus opens with the necessity of merging the fluid and circular with the linear and statuesque, the female with the male, to create the spirit of athletic ideals. The fluid and circular does not constitute an image of an “individual” or a private woman but rather represents a collective source identified with divine goddesses.

The end of the film returns to this imagery of light connecting heaven and earth, and reverses the sequence from feminine circularity to male linearity. In the last sequence, shots of male divers are cut together, so that we see one after another a series of divers leaping off the same diving board into space. The camera is placed to the side and below these bodies, so that the divers seem to be moving up and sideways, never down, as if they are leaping up to fly into the clouds. Finally one diver remains suspended horizontally across the clouds as light increases behind him, becoming so bright that his body turns into a black silhouette, then fades out. The divers, each striving to more perfectly become an idealized form, together achieve flight, ascension back to the clouds from which the spirit and light and flame of the Olympics descended. The divers repeating the same motions in effect become one body ascending, as the runners at the beginning of the movie replacing each other become one runner going farther than any single body could go: each becomes a “link in the community,” part of the “great comprehensive body” that is the Olympics.

The continuation of the movie after the diving sequence reverses the progression of the opening sequence: this time the linear motion which was created by males turns into a circular many-armed figure, reminiscent of the opening female goddesses. This final progression is presented as an overview of the whole stadium, taken entirely in long shots. First the camera starts looking out at the clouds (the realm into which the divers disappeared), and then descends to the stadium, from which rows of searchlights turn on, creating a pillared structure like the Acropolis, made of projected light: the Greek structure recreated by modern technology, by the very technology that allows filmmaking. The pillars of light bend together and the camera moves up them so we expect something to be illuminated by them all, a center revealed. But instead of reaching that center in the sky, most of the pillars of light dissolve and we see through the space they occupied the cauldron of flame with smoke all around it: the vertical individual lines of light, like erect humans, dissolve into the fluid and flickering collective flame which was the original divine source of the Olympic spirit.
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The cauldron dissolves into an image of a row of pikes with flags on them bending to have wreaths placed around them, a merger of linear/phallic and circular/feminine. Then the pillars of light reappear through the smoke and once again bend together, but this time we move up them all the way to a center. There, where we would expect to see something illuminated by all these lights, a vision of what belongs in the spotlight, we get a strange reversal: the lights join together creating a brilliant confluence of whiteness that fills almost the entire screen. The lights seem no longer then to be shining into this center, but rather to be radiating from it, like a sun (figs. 19 and 20).

This sun is an impossible result of searchlights shining up from the ground: no matter how many lights are focused on the same spot in the sky, they will not join in a central starlike radiance unless there is something there to reflect them—a screen. What is in effect revealed then by following the lights up is a screen that reflects back on us, creating the illusion that it is the source of light. This final effect makes what we are seeing identical to the structure of projection and screen reflection that occurs in the theater: light is radiating out of the projector lens behind us, which we never look at, but the screen at the front of the theater converts light into a star that shines on us (even blinding us) and seems to be the light source in the theater. If the screen is only the reflection of the real source of light hidden in the projection room above and behind us, similarly, the light that seems to shine from the Nazi state, from the leader (the light that seemed to radiate from the stage in Triumph of the Will as Hitler spoke) is only a reflection of some hidden source, of a projector of light that creates the images that we see as Hitler and as the fascist light. That hidden source is both the sun of a divinity and the filmmaker, who runs projectors to create the images before us. The image of a sun also returns the linear pillars to a circular shape with multiple “arms” radiating from it, recalling the image of the woman with many arms radiating in all directions, a goddess figure, from which the fire emerged that lit the torch of the Olympics. This ending thus returns to the suggestion of the opening sequence that there is a female origin of the light which creates the phallic power of men.

The beautiful male bodies which permeate Riefenstahl’s films do not then give phallic origin to the state: rather they gain their beauty and their passion from a fire projected from a female source. The “male gaze,” the line of sight that is so powerfully analyzed in spectator theory, in this movie is presented as deriving from a diffuse, flickering, circular female energy that creates the light to be arranged into a gaze. The end
Fig. 19–20. Pillars of light bending together . . .

to magically form a sun.
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of the movie returns the male gaze with what is in effect an even more powerful female gaze. The spectator of either gender is involved in a kind of sexual exchange with the camera, drawn into a public ritual of viewing and being viewed. As Terri Gordon describes the effect of this movie’s presentation of beautiful bodies, “The image is a seductive one, inviting the viewers to join the cult of the body and take part in the organic wholeness of the social sphere.”

To see how Riefenstahl envisions a quite distinctive role for a female in creating the gaze that defines the nation, we can turn to an earlier narrative movie she made, *The Blue Light*. That movie shows a striking rejection of Hollywood clichés about male and female gazes: the attempt of males to take control of the female gaze by installing the female in a love relationship destroys the fire that generates the spirit of the state. In that film, Junta, a mountain girl, has a strange relationship to a cave of crystals high up on a mountain, from which some nights a blue light shines down into the town. She is the only person who can enter that cave, because only she knows the way up the mountain. When the light shines, young men are hypnotically driven to climb toward the crystals, and all fall to their deaths. When we see the light shining from the mountain, it appears very much like a film projector’s light, a beam emerging from a hole on the mountain, spreading out to illuminate and draw men to it. The light in effect creates a film in which the men must act out their role of tragic self-sacrifice. The cave full of crystals is another of the images, like the many-armed goddess and the sun at the end of *Olympia*, of multiplicity connected to femaleness, and as in that movie, this female power draws men to leave their private lives and engage in mythic acts of sacrificing themselves to the spirit of the mountain. Susan Sontag describes the mountain as a “high mystic goal which was later to become concrete in Fuhrerworship, . . . which invites the ultimate affirmation of and escape from the self—into the brotherhood of courage and death.”

Into this mythos of a tragic fascism, a rather Hollywood plot is introduced: a man from outside the town seduces Junta; they frolic on the hillside and she shows him how to climb to the cave of crystals. But the man does not share in that “high mystic goal” of dying for the Majestic Mountain. He sees in the crystals only a source of destruction, which can be converted into a source of wealth by being mined and sold. He leads the townspeople up the secret path so they can ransack the crystals and become rich. Then an eerie sequence occurs in which Junta falls to her death from the mountain. From that we cut to a modernized version of the town. The young men no longer sacrifice themselves; instead they
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sell books of the myth and are rich from the money they received for the crystals. This story is thus a tale of the replacement of the mythical city by the city of money. The agent of this transformation is an "outsider," someone not of the "race" of the town, and the conversion of the town is in effect the loss of its racial roots, of that which went beyond the material and the physical. The mythical, the light emerging from crystals that transformed consciousness and led the townspeople to that "self-sacrifice," which Hitler called the essence of the Aryan spirit, is reduced to the material—glittery gems. The woman who could project the mythical is reduced to a dead body, a piece of matter.

It is striking that the cause of Junta's reduction from mythical status to mere matter is her falling in love. Before the outsider came, Junta had no relationship to any individuals; nobody in the town was even willing to look at Junta. The townspeople drove her away, especially from the young men. The outsider thus brings into this world what we could call the individualized "male gaze" of Hollywood, the gaze of a lover, and it is this gaze which destroys the mythical, if rather tragic, quality of the town.

The outsider, though presented as quite an elegant fellow, is a prototype of the Jew, who converts culture and its special superhuman relation to a people into a universal object of exchange, into money. As Hitler wrote, the Jew brings self-preservation or self-interest as the prime goal, replacing self-sacrifice. Self-interest makes all interactions exchanges, as each person must gain. There is no sacrificial joining together to create a community, and hence in Hitler's terms no "Aryan spirit." Even the story of Junta becomes an object of exchange, found in a book circulated to everyone who visits the town. The movie does not provide any image of another way to make use of the self-sacrificing spirit created by the light, but Mein Kampf does make such a suggestion: the town needs a leader who can organize the self-sacrifice inspired by the magical light and turn the town into a superhuman community full of self-sacrificing people—a fascist totality.

In her last movie, Tiefland, Riefenstahl returns to the image of a woman who instills some magical desire in men, but in this movie, it is by her own dancing, not by a light coming from a cave in a mountain: the desire has become sexual. Yet this movie stills remains far from Hollywood tropes, because it suggests what was evident in The Blue Light: the desire for the woman as a private possession is what destroys the community. The woman has to be accepted as a public figure, a dancing self, tied only to the surrounding mountains, not to a private house within the town.
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Riefenstahl’s movie turns the question of whether the dancer performs in public or in private into a central element of the plot. The leader of the town takes the dancer and installs her in a private world, shielding her from public view. This act of removing from the public what would “feed” their desires is paralleled to another act of this leader: he takes the water that runs into town from the mountains and uses it to water his bulls, which he breeds for his own glory. The breeding of bulls is precisely an image of using the power of leadership to promote a false sexuality, the same thing he does when he uses his power to keep the dancer in his private house, dancing only for him. The misuse of the woman is equated to the misuse of natural resources: he is creating a false image of male power by removing from the public the sexuality, the “libido,” the “blood,” the fluid that should “water” the nation and help it breed the superior race.

It is also crucial that the leader does not marry the dancer, and so does not really form a social “body” with her, but rather subordinates her to himself as an individual. Because he needs money, he marries a wealthy woman instead, and arranges for the dancer to marry a shepherd, with the proviso that he will continue his sexual relationship with her because this arranged husband is an idiot. The leader thus tries to make two women serve to increase his individual stature.

However, his plot fails because the shepherd has been in love with the dancer ever since he first saw her dance, and when he realizes what has been arranged, he kills the leader and goes off with the dancer to live in the mountains. It might seem that this ending is an image of restoring private love. But the movie militates against such a reading. When the shepherd kills the leader, the murder mirrors an earlier scene where the shepherd killed a wolf feeding on his sheep. When the shepherd confronts the leader, he says, “Ah, the wolf,” before attacking. In other words, he is not fighting for his own private life in fighting the leader; rather he is acting as a good shepherd, as a leader that the town needs. Furthermore, the act of killing the leader is staged as a performance, with the townspeople as an audience that ultimately joins the performance by keeping the leader from escaping, pushing him back into the arms of the shepherd. The townspeople thus become the chorus in the “dance number” of the orchestrated removal of this bad leader. After this number, the return of the shepherd to the mountains is not a return to privacy but to his role as a caretaker of a multitude, with no fixed abode, no private house. In the final shot, the shepherd and dancer do not enter a cottage in the hills; rather they are framed by romantic shots of mist and
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mountains. The dancer’s being taken up into the mountains seems then the restoration of the romantic mythic source of culture, the restoration of water and sheep to feed and clothe the people.

Water plays the role in this film that light does in The Blue Light and that flame does in Olympia: all three represent conduits for the transference of the divine or the superhuman into the modern state. This infusion of the divine is also represented by the development of the males in all three movies: in Tiefland, the shepherd transforms from an unsophisticate at the beginning to a skilled performer when he kills the bad leader; in Olympia, the athletes first appear as young people doing rather amusing exercises, then transform into cosmic athletic figures; in Triumph of the Will, we early on see boys clowning around who later create lines of beautifully disciplined soldiers. In all three movies, there is a process portrayed whereby beautiful masses of male bodies are produced by the metaphoric infusion of spirit from female goddesses, represented as acting through fire and water and light.

The politics of these movies is muddied by Riefenstahl’s uncertain relationship to Nazi ideology. We can see the problem in an issue that has haunted the history of Tiefland: Riefenstahl used concentration-camp inmates, Roma, for the townspeople. While the Nazi regime had rounded up these Roma as a type that should be eliminated to restore the pure cultural roots of Germany, Riefenstahl’s use of them to represent the people who need a new form of leader could imply that she has a different view of race. She claimed later that her movies were seeking an ideal leader who could be a mythic soul for all of humanity. In Olympia, she similarly portrays African and Asian athletes—not merely Aryans—as beautiful. She seems to come close to advocating a universal beauty, not a racial one. However, I suspect that her inability in Tiefland to create any image of a new leader who has a real relationship to the peasants suggests that she cannot quite envisage Hitler’s becoming the shepherd of these “foreign” sheep. When we follow the dancer and the shepherd into the mountains, we are seeing the racially “pure” unite with the mountains and leave the mongrelized hordes in the city behind. Riefenstahl cannot quite unite the mythic and the modern.

There is a difference between the monumental figures created in these movies and the stars created by Hollywood films. Hollywood celebrity is not mythic status: rather it takes the form of what individualism needs, namely a mass interest in the private character of those turned into celebrities. And celebrities, for all their power in influencing mass reactions and all their seeming superhuman status, do not disrupt the notion that
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everyone is merely human. The norm of the narrative of celebrity is that it is the private self, the peculiar talent or character or bodily beauty of the star that creates the celebrity status. In Riefenstahl’s films, it is a mythic something that leads Junta, the dancer, Hitler, and the athletes beyond their private selves to their public roles. Griffith, as we saw in Chapter 2, was torn between these two visions, the monumental and the individualist: he tried to install the collective inside the private mind, but could not see how there would be enough room for the truly monumental. Hence he proposed supplemental collective bodies such as the KKK or the movies to maintain the monumental.

In the next chapter, we will follow the career of a filmmaker who moved across this divide, shifting in his moviemaking from the attempt to imagine a society devoted to the worship of the monumental to devoting his films to creating a society in which the vast resources of the state are devoted to supporting private individuals.