
Beauty, above everything, and everyone?

By: Enrique Ubieta Gómez / Special for CubaSi
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"I did not know a thing about politics. I just recorded it," repeated Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003), Hitler's filmmaker, in her long survival to the horrors of Nazi-fascism. That statement was doubly mendacious: first, on such an elementary level, since the main propagandist of Nazi ideology knew —it was recently proven her involvement in a Jews' slaughtering. Afterwards, her documentary records were not just takes of what was happening: she built the event, giving every sequence a non-aseptic intentionality, as if it were a fiction film. In the words of Susan Sontag, *"'reality' [was] built to serve the image."* In his documentary ***"Triumph of the Will"*** (1935), considered a technical masterpiece, *"the cameras present for the first time a political congress planned in its entirety for media coverage,"* as the journalist Daniel Cecchini wrote.

But Leni hid behind another phrase, which establishes the true dilemma of the creator in the face of the social and political events of each era: *"The search for beauty in the image, above everything and everyone."*

This cult of beauty, alien to any human commitment, was surprisingly rewarded and consecrated: ***“The Triumph of the Will”*** received the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1935 and the Grand Prix des Arts et des Techniques at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1937. Even after the war, in 1956, when the Holocaust perpetrated against Jews and other ethnic groups (for example, gypsies and Slavic peoples) was already known, a Hollywood jury considered “Olympia” (1936) to be among the top ten best films of all time. Wikipedia explains its charm thus: the film was *“the idealized representation of strength, elegance and power based on muscular and impeccable bodies.”*

I would like to dwell, because of its unusual relevance, on one of the “technical contributions” of the German filmmaker: the planning of the political fact for its media coverage. In 1976, British musician David Bowie, who according to Maria Cantó, *“was flirting with fascism at the time,”* declared: *“Adolf Hitler was one of the first rock stars (...) Look at some of his recordings and see how he moved. (...) It's amazing. And when he came on that stage, he controlled the audience. He was not a politician. He was a media artist. He used politics and theatricality, created this thing and controlled the show for 12 years. The world will never see anything like it again. He staged a country.”* Although the unusual “praise” does not refer to the filmmaker, there is no doubt about the role she played in that staging.

But she was wrong. There are other showmen in international politics; their commercialization simplifies and sometimes nullifies the content, to overemphasize the form. The means at Hitler's disposal were primitive compared to those at hand today, despite the incomparable creativity of Leni Riefenstahl. And fascism, old and new, turns politics into a mass show, where emotion replaces reason. It is not (just) about murdering thousands of opponents, as the Latin American dictatorships of the 1980s did (Pinochet, Stroessner, Banzer, Videla). There will be no limits to murder —Venezuela can attest to this, when neo-fascists set fire to living people who are or appear to be Chavistas— but the manipulation of the masses today is more sophisticated. Let's establish a pattern: Berlusconi, Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro, Milei, María Corina Machado. Every gesture, or grimace, every nonsense, funny or not, every disguise, disheveled hair or untidy clothes, unpredictable

behavior, blunt, false or incorrect statements, without shameful scruples or masks.

The severity and correctness of a Margaret Thatcher or a Hillary Clinton—expression of an elite confident in its power—contrast with the incorrectness of Boris Johnson or Donald Trump, of Bolsonaro or Milei, who seek a different audience, that of the almost below, the middle below, who still kick to hold on, and seek a miraculous leader who has bathed/baptized himself in the waters of the Jordan River like Bolsonaro. Milei also traveled to Israel, and while Zionist troops were killing tens of thousands of Palestinians, an AP dispatch described his performance as follows: *“at the foot of the Wailing Wall, in the Old City of Jerusalem, (...) he embraces his rabbi while sobbing. Then he rests the palms of his hands on the stone and kisses it.”* When Cristina Fernández accused him of being a “showman,” he did not reject the term, *“new times require a bit of a show,”* he replied.

I go back to my core theme: are there still artists who pursue absolute “beauty,” beauty detached from moral standards, rewarded with applause (or coins) from the powerful? Artists who claim to know nothing about politics, while they “reflect” or construct the dark side, convenient for the reconquest of privileges, in the Homeland they do not deserve? Yes, they exist. Perhaps none of them treasures the creative genius of Leni Riefenstahl, but let us be alert. There is no beauty that is opposed to or indifferent to what is just, useful, or true. The utility of virtue.

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