# The Aestheticisation of Politics in the Digital Age: From Leni Riefenstahl to Computational Propaganda with AI

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**open-forum**

**Keywords:** Aestheticisation of politics, propaganda, Leni Riefenstahl, artificial intelligence, deepfakes, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag

**Posted Date:** April 17th, 2026

**DOI:** https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-9401967/v1



**Additional Declarations:** No competing interests reported.

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## Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the aestheticisation of politics and mass propaganda, tracing a comparative line between the cinematic techniques of Leni Riefenstahl in Nazi Germany and contemporary strategies of computational propaganda and generative artificial intelligence (AI). Drawing on Walter Benjamin's theoretical frameworks on the "aura" of the work of art and the aestheticisation of politics, and on Susan Sontag's "fascinating fascism", it is argued that generative AI represents a new phase in mass manipulation. This technology amplifies and personalises historical propaganda tactics, eroding the "aura" of truth and contributing to an epistemic collapse. Through a critical-comparative analysis, the study aims to offer a theoretical framework connecting historical propaganda to its digital counterpart, highlighting continuities and discontinuities, and exploring the ethical and social implications of AI in the public sphere.



**Keywords:** *Aestheticisation of politics, propaganda, Leni Riefenstahl, artificial intelligence, deepfakes, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag.*


## 1. Introduction

The growing difficulty in distinguishing truth from falsehood in the digital age, exacerbated by the proliferation of AI-generated content, echoes historical concerns about mass manipulation

and the aestheticisation of politics. If, in the twentieth century, figures such as Leni Riefenstahl used cinema to shape narratives and emotions in the service of totalitarian regimes, today generative AI offers tools with an unprecedented potential for persuasion and disinformation. This transition raises crucial questions about the nature of truth, the formation of public opinion, and the resilience of democracies in the face of new forms of propaganda (Pronger, 2025; Woolley & Howard, 2018).

Although Nazi propaganda and Riefenstahl's work are widely studied, and AI is an emerging field of research, there is a gap in the literature that integrates these two distinct eras into a coherent analysis of the aestheticisation of politics and mass manipulation. This article seeks to fill that gap by examining the continuities and transformations in propaganda strategies, from the choreographed grandeur of Riefenstahl's cinema to the algorithmic personalisation of generative AI (Neudert, 2017; Park, 2025).

The main research question guiding this study is: How do the strategies of aestheticisation of politics and mass manipulation, exemplified by Leni Riefenstahl's work in Nazi propaganda, manifest and are transformed by the capabilities of generative artificial intelligence and computational propaganda in the digital age?

The central thesis of this article is that generative AI and computational propaganda represent a *contested terrain* in the aestheticisation of politics. While these technologies amplify and personalise the mass manipulation techniques observed in Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda, eroding the "aura" of truth and contributing to an epistemic collapse, they also open space for forms of resistance and counter-narratives. The capacity to create convincing synthetic realities and disseminate them in a targeted manner challenges the foundations of reality perception and public trust, but the very nature of AI as a tool of creation and dissemination also enables the emergence of new forms of agency and contestation (Han, 2022; Gillespie, 2024).

To develop this thesis, the article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, exploring Walter Benjamin's concepts of "aura" and the aestheticisation of politics, and Susan Sontag's analysis of the "fascinating fascism" in Leni Riefenstahl. Section 3 addresses computational propaganda and generative AI, focusing on the transition from the "Big Lie" to the "Viral Lie" and the epistemic crisis. Section 4 details the analytical methodology. Section 5 presents the main analysis. Finally, sections 6 and 7 discuss the implications and conclude the article (Riefenstahl, 1935, 1938).

## 2. Theoretical Framework / Literature Review

### 2.1. The Aestheticisation of Politics and the Aura of the Work of Art (Walter Benjamin)

Walter Benjamin, in his seminal work "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), introduced the concept of "aura" to describe the uniqueness and authenticity of a work of art, rooted in its history and physical presence. Mechanical reproduction, in democratising access to art, simultaneously destroys this aura, freeing the work from its ritualistic context and enabling its politicisation. However, Benjamin warned against the danger of the aestheticisation of politics, a fascist strategy which, rather than politicising art, transforms politics into an aesthetic spectacle (Benjamin, 1968).

> *"Fascism attempts to organise the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure, which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their rights, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values." (Benjamin, 1968, p. 241)*

This aestheticisation of politics, according to Benjamin, serves to divert attention from social and economic contradictions, channelling the energies of the masses towards the admiration of leaders and symbols, and towards participation in collective rituals that suppress critical thought in favour of emotion and submission. War, in this context, becomes the supreme expression of that aestheticisation, transforming destruction into spectacle and death into heroic sacrifice (Benjamin, 1968).

### 2.2. The Fascinating Fascism: Leni Riefenstahl and Nazi Propaganda (Susan Sontag)

Susan Sontag, in her essay "Fascinating Fascism" (1974), analysed the work of filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl as the most paradigmatic example of fascist aestheticisation. Riefenstahl, with films such as Triumph des Willens (1935) and Olympia (1938), did not merely document reality; she constructed it, employing innovative cinematographic techniques to glorify the Nazi regime and its ideals (Sontag, 1974).

In Triumph des Willens, which depicts the Nazi Party congress in Nuremberg in 1934, Riefenstahl employed low camera angles to magnify Hitler's figure, choreographed the masses

to create an image of unshakeable unity and power, and used rhythmic montage to evoke a sense of grandeur and destiny. Light and shadow were manipulated to confer a mythical aura on the events and figures. The result was a work that, though technically brilliant, served as a powerful propaganda tool, transforming politics into spectacle and ideology into aesthetics (Kershaw, 2008; Evans, 2008).

In *Olympia* (1938), her work on the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, Riefenstahl perfected this vision, focusing on the cult of the body and its transformation into sculpture in motion. The slow motion, dramatic angles, and rhythmic montage do not merely record the sporting event; they create a mythology of the Aryan body, perfect, disciplined, and triumphant. This body, stripped of flaws and individuality, becomes a **body without aura**: a purified, reproducible aesthetic object instrumentalised in the service of ideology. Its beauty lies not in its uniqueness but in its conformity to an ideal of racial and physical perfection. This aesthetic dehumanisation is a direct precursor to the way in which generative AI can today create and manipulate images of "ideal" bodies, not as representations of individuals but as avatars of a synthetic and ideologically charged perfection. Riefenstahl's obsession with the optimisation of the body through discipline and aesthetics can be seen as a primitive form of **transhumanism**, an aspiration to transcend human limits that, in the Nazi context, was intrinsically linked to eugenics and racial purity. AI, in this sense, can be seen as the technological realisation of that fantasy of control and human enhancement, with all the ethical implications this entails (Sontag, 1974; Riefenstahl, 1938).

Sontag argued that fascism, through Riefenstahl, eroticises power and glorifies submission, presenting order, discipline, and strength as aesthetic ideals. The human body, especially the male body, is idealised and displayed in heroic poses, symbolising racial purity and physical superiority. This aesthetic, which Sontag described as the "fascinating fascism", reveals a dangerous attraction to the beauty of domination and destruction, where form overcomes ethical content (Sontag, 1974).

It is important, however, to acknowledge the heuristic limits of this comparison. Nazi propaganda operated in a context of state monopoly of communication, institutionalised violence, and systematic suppression of dissent that has no direct equivalent in contemporary liberal democracies. The proposed comparison is not one of scale, political intent, or moral gravity — Nazism remains a historically singular phenomenon in its genocidal dimension. What connects Riefenstahl to generative AI is, rather, the aesthetic logic: the mechanism by

which form subordinates factual content to political emotion, and by which technical beauty becomes a vehicle for the acceptance of narratives that, under rational scrutiny, would be rejected. It is this continuity of mechanism, and not of context or scale, that grounds the comparative analysis developed here (Kershaw, 2008; Sontag, 1974).

### 2.3. Computational Propaganda and the New Media Ecology

The digital age has brought with it a fundamental reconfiguration of propaganda strategies, culminating in what Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard has termed "computational propaganda". This phenomenon involves the use of algorithms, bots, big data, and other digital tools to manipulate public opinion, disseminate disinformation, and polarise political discourse. Unlike the mass propaganda of the twentieth century, which targeted a homogeneous audience, computational propaganda is hyper-personalised, adapting messages to users' individual profiles (Woolley & Howard, 2018; Howard & Woolley, 2016).

Scholars such as Tarleton Gillespie (2024), José van Dijck (2024), and Taina Bucher (2018) have deepened our understanding of "algorithmic culture" and "platform governance", revealing how algorithms are not merely neutral instruments but active agents in the formation of public discourse and the modulation of visibility. Their influence extends from content moderation to the very architecture of social interactions, shaping what we see, how we interact, and, ultimately, how we perceive reality (Gillespie, 2024; van Dijck et al., 2023; Bucher, 2018).

The author, in a work under development (Author, 2026, unpublished manuscript)*, proposes a conceptual transition from the "Big Lie" — associated with totalitarian regimes such as the Nazi, where a central falsehood is repeated exhaustively — to the "Viral Lie". The latter is characterised by decentralisation, by the proliferation of multiple false narratives, and by their organic dissemination through social networks and recommendation algorithms. The "Viral Lie" does not depend on a single authoritative source but rather on the capacity to adapt and replicate in diverse contexts, making it more difficult to combat. Crucially, the "Viral Lie" differs from the "Big Lie" not only in its decentralised mode of dissemination but also in its adaptive morphology: it mutates across platforms and audience contexts, shedding and acquiring narrative elements as it circulates, making it structurally resistant to traditional fact-checking methods designed to identify and rebut a stable, singular falsehood.

* Note: This reference constitutes a self-citation of a manuscript in preparation by the author, not yet submitted for peer review. [Full reference to be restored in the final version upon acceptance.]

Social media algorithms, in optimising engagement, tend to create "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers", where users are predominantly exposed to information confirming their pre-existing beliefs. This environment is fertile ground for the dissemination of disinformation and radicalisation, as propaganda narratives can be targeted to specific groups based on their demographic and psychographic data, thereby increasing their efficacy and impact (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001).

### 2.4. Generative AI, Deepfakes, and the Epistemic Crisis

Generative artificial intelligence, with its capacity to create texts, images, audio, and video indistinguishable from those produced by humans, represents a qualitative leap in the evolution of propaganda. Tools such as deepfakes enable the creation of highly convincing synthetic realities in which public figures can be portrayed as saying or doing things that never occurred. This technology directly challenges the notion of truth and authenticity, since visual and auditory evidence, traditionally considered reliable, can now be fabricated with ease (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Groh et al., 2024).

The impact of deepfakes and generative AI on public trust is profound. When the real cannot be distinguished from the artificial, the common factual basis necessary for healthy democratic debate is eroded. This phenomenon contributes to what some authors term "epistemic collapse", where the very capacity to discern truth becomes compromised. It is crucial, however, to analyse this "collapse" not as a final state but as a field of tension and contestation, where the proliferation of alternative "truths" coexists with ongoing efforts at verification and counter-narrative (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019; Rini, 2017).

Two structuring concepts in this analysis require precise operational definitions. By "algorithmic aura" is meant the appearance of authenticity and singularity generated by AI-produced synthetic content: a simulation of the Benjaminian original presence which, paradoxically, is mass-produced and devoid of any historical "here and now". While both terms operate within the same conceptual field, a distinction is warranted. "Algorithmic aura" designates the broader phenomenon: the appearance of authenticity and singularity conferred on any AI-generated content by virtue of its technical perfection and perceptual indistinguishability from the real. "Pseudo-aura", by contrast, names a specific weaponisation of this appearance — cases in which the simulated authenticity is deliberately deployed to deceive, as in deepfakes of political figures designed to manipulate electoral outcomes or manufacture consent. The former is a structural condition of generative AI output; the latter is

its strategic application in the service of disinformation. The "algorithmic aura" operates through the mimesis of reality rather than its derivation, conferring perceptual credibility on fabricated content that dispenses with any factual grounding. By "epistemic collapse" is meant, in the wake of O'Connor and Weatherall (2019) and Rini (2017), the progressive erosion of the social capacity to establish a common basis of verifiable facts: not the punctual absence of truth, but the dissolution of the very conditions of possibility of factual debate, where the multiplicity of alternative "truths" renders verification functionally inoperative at the level of public discourse.

As Park (2025) explores, generative AI raises questions about the "aura" of art in the digital age, suggesting that, while it can create aesthetically impressive works, its algorithmic origin may prevent the formation of an aura in the Benjaminian sense, or, paradoxically, create a "pseudo-aura" of fabricated authenticity. The capacity to replicate artistic styles and create complex narratives without direct human intervention challenges our conceptions of creativity, authorship, and artistic value, with direct implications for propaganda (Park, 2025).

## 3. Methodology / Analytical Approach

This study adopts a critical-comparative and conceptual analytical approach, aiming to establish bridges between apparently disparate historical and technological phenomena. The choice of methodology is justified by the need for an interdisciplinary lens capable of uncovering the continuities and transformations in the strategies of aestheticisation of politics and mass manipulation over time. Rather than focusing on empirical analysis of specific data, the article prioritises conceptual exploration and the comparison of paradigmatic case studies (Flick, 2018).

This critical-comparative and conceptual approach, aligned with critical theory and cultural studies, contrasts the propaganda techniques of Leni Riefenstahl in the Nazi context with the strategies of computational propaganda and generative AI in the digital age. The focus is on identifying recurrent patterns in the use of aesthetics to persuade and control, examining the means (cinema vs digital platforms), the manipulation strategies (mass choreography vs algorithmic personalisation), and the impacts on the perception of reality and the formation of public opinion. The primary objective is not the empirical validation of hypotheses but the construction of an interpretive framework that reveals continuities and transformations, offering a robust conceptual basis for future empirical research (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018).

The selection of the empirical cases presented in section 4.1.1 follows the criteria of analytical typicality. Following the logic of "paradigmatic cases" proposed by George and Bennett (2005), the chosen examples do not aim to be statistically representative. However, at maximum conceptual revelatory power, they are cases in which the theoretical mechanisms under analysis — "algorithmic aura", "viral lie", "eroticisation of the false" — manifest themselves sufficiently clearly to permit their identification and description. The 2023 Slovak case was selected by combining available academic documentation, a circumscribed temporal scope, and a clear articulation of the relationship between the technical production of synthetic content and its measurable political impact. The reference to 2024 campaigns serves to demonstrate the generalisation of the phenomenon beyond a singular case (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

The analytical procedure adopted is interpretive-critical: each case is read in light of the previously defined theoretical concepts, identifying how the mechanisms of political aestheticisation present in them replicate, transform, or intensify the patterns identified in the historical analysis of Nazi propaganda. This triangulation among theoretical framework, historical analysis, and contemporary case constitutes the methodological core of the article, aligning it with the tradition of critical media theory, which rejects the separation between conceptual analysis and historical and empirical evidence (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Flick, 2018).

# 4. Analysis / Main Argumentation

## 4.1. From Mass Choreography to Algorithmic Personalisation

### *4.1.1. Illustrative Cases of Computational Propaganda and Deepfakes*

The transition from mass propaganda to algorithmic personalisation is exemplified by AI-generated audio deepfakes used in the 2023 Slovak electoral campaign. Days before the legislative elections, AI-generated recordings circulated on social networks simulating the voice of the liberal candidate Michal Šimečka discussing the purchase of votes and the rise in beer prices — two topics with immediate emotional resonance among the electorate. Analysis of this case in light of the concepts mobilised in this article is revealing. First, the fabricated audio operated precisely as an "algorithmic aura": the imitation of the candidate's real prosodic patterns — rhythm, intonation, characteristic hesitations — conferred on the synthetic content an appearance of authenticity indistinguishable from the original voice to the ordinary listener, without that appearance deriving from any real act of communication. Second, its

dissemination followed the logic of the "Viral Lie": without centralised distribution, the audio adapted to different contexts — WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, Facebook shares — replicating organically, making rebuttals structurally slower than propagation. Third, the motor of its virality was not informational verisimilitude but emotional impact: the "eroticisation of the false", in the sense proposed here, operated through the shock of hearing a candidate "confess" to corruption. This visceral experience activated sharing before verification. Although rapidly exposed by fact-checkers, its impact during the critical pre-electoral period illustrates how algorithmic aestheticisation can displace public debate from the factual to the affective plane (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; Chesney & Citron, 2019).

A structurally distinct example is the proliferation of AI-generated photorealistic images in political campaigns of 2024, documented in multiple national contexts. Unlike the Slovak case — where the deepfake simulated a real communicative event — these images do not replicate reality: they construct it from scratch. A candidate never photographed in a given situation can be visually "placed" there with technical perfection; an adversary can be portrayed in compromising contexts that never occurred. It is here that the "algorithmic aura" operates in its purest form: the image derives from no original presence, has no Benjaminian "here and now", yet simulates having one with a fidelity that invokes belief. The aestheticisation is total — politics becomes entirely image, and the image becomes entirely fabricated. The "politics of visibility" identified by Gillespie (2024) acquires its most radical meaning here: whoever controls the capacity to generate credible synthetic visual representation controls, to a large extent, what is perceived as real in the public sphere (Gillespie, 2024; Groh et al., 2024).

These cases demonstrate that the "Viral Lie" is not an abstraction but a reality with tangible consequences for the democratic sphere. Algorithmic personalisation, combined with the capacity to generate synthetic content, enables propaganda to operate at an unprecedented scale and with unprecedented precision, adapting to the cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities of each individual. The aestheticisation of politics, once orchestrated by filmmakers such as Riefenstahl for a massified audience, is now atomised and reconfigured by algorithms and AI, transforming every screen into a stage for individualised manipulation.

Nazi propaganda, masterfully orchestrated by Joseph Goebbels and visually realised by Leni Riefenstahl, rested on the creation of a unified spectacle for the masses. In Triumph des Willens, crowds were choreographed in perfect geometric formations, Hitler's speeches were staged with theatrical precision, and music and symbolism were deployed to evoke a collective

emotional experience. The objective was to create an illusion of national unity and unwavering devotion to the leader, in which the grandeur of the collective subsumed individuality. Participation was, to a large extent, passive, of admiration and submission to a narrative imposed from above (Kershaw, 2008; Evans, 2008).

In the AI era, computational propaganda inverts this logic. Instead of a spectacle for the masses, we witness the fragmentation of the audience and the algorithmic personalisation of propaganda. Social media and digital platform algorithms analyse vast quantities of data about users — their interests, beliefs, vulnerabilities — to present them with highly targeted content. Propaganda is no longer a shared experience but an individualised narrative, adapted to maximise the emotional and cognitive impact on each recipient (Woolley & Howard, 2018; Howard & Woolley, 2016).

This personalisation creates an illusion of participation and relevance, where the user feels the message is made "for them". However, this "participation" is, in fact, a more sophisticated form of manipulation, where filter bubbles and echo chambers reinforce prejudices and radicalise opinions in an almost imperceptible manner. Riefenstahl's propaganda was explicit in its intention to glorify the regime; algorithmic propaganda is often insidious, disguised as organic content or neutral information, making it harder to detect and resist (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001).

It is crucial, however, to recognise that AI and digital platforms are not merely tools of unidirectional manipulation. The same technology that enables the personalisation of propaganda also democratises the production and dissemination of counter-narratives. Citizens and activists can use AI tools to create and distribute alternative messages that challenge dominant narratives and expose disinformation. This capacity for algorithmic "counter-propaganda" represents an important counterpoint to the centralisation of media power, offering potential for resistance and diversifying public discourse (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018).

### 4.2. The Reconfigured "Aura": Authenticity and Syntheticity in the AI Era

Walter Benjamin argued that the technical reproducibility of the work of art led to the loss of its "aura", its uniqueness and authenticity. However, Nazi propaganda, through Riefenstahl, sought to recreate an artificial "aura" around Hitler and the regime, using cinema to mythologise its image and events. The grandeur and technical perfection of her films were

intended to confer a quasi-divine authority on Nazi ideology, even though that authority was constructed rather than inherent (Benjamin, 1968).

In the generative AI era, the question of the "aura" assumes a new dimension, which can be conceptualised as an "algorithmic aura". Just as Riefenstahl's "body without aura" in Olympia represented a fabricated, dehumanised perfection, deepfakes and other synthetic content can imitate reality with impressive fidelity, creating a "pseudo-aura" of authenticity. An AI-generated image or video can appear so real that its artificial origin is almost impossible to detect with the naked eye. However, this "aura" is inherently fragile, for it does not derive from a unique history or presence, but rather from an algorithm and the data on which it was trained. The "algorithmic aura" is, therefore, a simulation of authenticity, a mimesis of singularity which, paradoxically, is mass-produced and devoid of an original "here and now". This quest for perfection and optimisation, whether of the human body or of digital content, echoes the transhumanist aspirations for the transcendence of natural limits, but with the caveat that, in the AI era, this "perfection" is intrinsically synthetic and potentially manipulative (Park, 2025; Chesney & Citron, 2019).

The challenge lies in the proliferation of synthetic content, which, while lacking a genuine "aura" in the Benjaminian sense, can deceive and persuade effectively. The capacity to create convincing visual and auditory narratives without any connection to factual reality erodes trust in the image and sound themselves as evidence. This leads to a paradoxical situation where everything can be questioned, and truth becomes a matter of belief rather than evidence. The "aura" of truth is replaced by the ubiquity of syntheticity, making verification a Herculean task and the distinction between the real and the fabricated increasingly obscure (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019; Rini, 2017).

### 4.3. The Aestheticisation of Disinformation: Deepfakes and the Eroticisation of the False

Susan Sontag, in analysing the "fascinating fascism", highlighted how Nazi aesthetics eroticised violence, discipline, and submission. The formal beauty of Riefenstahl's films served to render morally repugnant ideals acceptable and even desirable. Form overcame content, and aesthetic emotion obscured ethical judgement, creating a "sensuality of domination" that appealed to irrational impulses (Sontag, 1974).

In the deepfake era, we witness a new form of aestheticisation of disinformation, which can be described as the "eroticisation of the false". This eroticisation refers not solely to content of a

sexual nature, but to the inherent seduction of technical perfection and the capacity to simulate reality convincingly. Deepfakes are not merely tools for disseminating lies; they are also aesthetically appealing creations, often shocking or sensationalist, that capture attention and provoke intense emotional reactions. Their capacity to generate images and sounds that appear real yet are entirely fabricated confers on them a persuasive power that transcends mere information transmission, appealing directly to the desire to see and believe what is visually impeccable (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Groh et al., 2024).

Parallels can be drawn between the way Nazi propaganda used aesthetics to normalise violence and the way deepfakes can normalise the false. By rendering disinformation visually attractive and emotionally engaging, generative AI may diminish the audience's critical resistance, making it more susceptible to manipulation. The line between reality and fiction becomes increasingly thin, and the capacity to discern truth is compromised by the seduction of synthetic content, transforming disinformation into an almost visceral and irresistible experience (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019; Rini, 2017).

### 4.4. Epistemic Collapse as a Consequence of Hybrid Propaganda

The combination of historical techniques for the aestheticisation of politics with the capabilities of generative AI and computational propaganda results in a "hybrid propaganda" scenario that threatens an "epistemic collapse". Epistemic collapse refers to the loss of a society's capacity to establish a common basis of facts and truth, leading to a fragmentation of reality and extreme social polarisation (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019; Rini, 2017).

If Nazi propaganda operated in a more controlled media environment, where the "Big Lie" could be imposed in a centralised manner, hybrid propaganda in the digital age is decentralised and multifaceted. Generative AI enables the creation of innumerable "viral lies" that spread organically through social networks, each adapted to specific audience niches. This proliferation of false narratives, combined with the difficulty of verifying the authenticity of content, creates a disorienting environment in which trust in institutions, the media, and even science itself is eroded (Author, 2026).

The result is a society in which truth is subjective and critical discernment is overwhelmed by the avalanche of disinformation. The aestheticisation of politics, which Benjamin and Sontag identified in fascism, is now amplified by AI, transforming politics into a continuous spectacle of fabricated narratives in which emotion and tribal identity prevail over reason and informed debate (Benjamin, 1968; Sontag, 1974; Nichols, 2024).

***Table 1. Comparison between Nazi Propaganda (Riefenstahl) and Contemporary AI Propaganda***

| Characteristic | Nazi Propaganda (Riefenstahl) | AI Propaganda (Contemporary) |
|---|---|---|
| *Primary medium* | Cinema & Radio (Analogue) | Social Media & AI (Digital) |
| *Target audience* | Homogeneous mass | Individuals (micro-segmentation) |
| *Mechanism* | "The Big Lie" (Repetition) | "The Viral Lie" (Fragmentation) |
| *Aesthetics* | Grandeur, Sculpture, Myth | Synthetic Realism, Deepfakes, Virality |
| *Effect on truth* | Substitution of truth | Dissolution of truth (Epistemic Collapse) |
| *Scale of production* | Artisanal + mass distribution | Synthetic + hyper-segmented distribution |
| *Audience agency* | Passive (Spectator) | Simulated ("Algorithmic participation") |
| *Mode of legitimation* | Grandiose spectacle (political sublime) | Simulated authenticity (algorithmic aura) |
| *Forms of resistance* | Centralised censorship; underground press; exile networks | Decentralised counter-narratives; algorithmic literacy; AI-assisted fact-checking |

*Source: author's own elaboration.*

## 5. Discussion

The analysis presented demonstrates that artificial intelligence is not merely a neutral tool but a catalyst for the reconfiguration of propaganda and the aestheticisation of politics. The continuities between Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda and computational propaganda with generative AI are notable, particularly in the way aesthetics is mobilised to manipulate emotions and shape perceptions. However, the discontinuities are equally significant, with AI introducing algorithmic personalisation and a capacity to fabricate synthetic realities that transcend the technological limitations of the twentieth century (Castells, 2009; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

The original contribution of this study lies in deepening understanding of the continuities and discontinuities between twentieth- and twenty-first-century propaganda, with a particular focus on the aestheticisation of politics and the emergence of an epistemic crisis. By connecting the concepts of Benjamin and Sontag to the reality of generative AI, this article offers a theoretical framework for analysing the evolution of mass manipulation in a constantly transforming media context. The concepts of "body without aura" and "algorithmic aura" constitute original

contributions that extend the Benjaminian framework to the domain of AI (Habermas, 1989; Thompson, 1995).

The theoretical implications are vast. It is imperative to develop new conceptual frameworks that account for the complex interactions among technology, aesthetics, and politics in the digital age. The distinction between reality and representation, central to communication theory, becomes increasingly fluid, demanding a reassessment of our analytical tools. The very notion of "authenticity" needs to be redefined in a world where the synthetic can be indistinguishable from the real (Baudrillard, 1983; Virilio, 2000).

The practical and political implications are equally urgent. The proliferation of deepfakes and computational propaganda poses an existential challenge to media literacy, AI regulation, and the protection of democracies. It is crucial to invest in education for critical discernment, develop technologies to detect synthetic content, and implement policies that hold creators and disseminators of disinformation accountable (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tufekci, 2017).

This study, being predominantly theoretical, has recognised limitations. The analysis of specific empirical cases of deepfakes in politics or computational propaganda campaigns would be a valuable complement. Future research could explore the role of AI in online radicalisation, the impact of AI-generated disinformation on democratic elections, or the development of effective countermeasures to combat the "Viral Lie". The concept of the "attention economy" as a motor of algorithmic aestheticisation likewise merits in-depth investigation (Zittrain, 2008; Morozov, 2011).

## 6. Conclusion

In sum, generative artificial intelligence emerges as a powerful tool for the aestheticisation of politics, amplifying the mass-manipulation capabilities once exemplified by Leni Riefenstahl in Nazi propaganda. If Riefenstahl choreographed the masses to create an illusion of unity and power, AI personalises propaganda, adapting it to each individual and creating filter bubbles that reinforce prejudices. The "aura" of truth, already fragile in the face of technical reproducibility, is now eroded by the ubiquity of synthetic content and deepfakes, rendering the false indistinguishable from the real (Arendt, 1967; Postman, 1985).

The contribution of this article resides in tracing a conceptual bridge between Walter Benjamin's and Susan Sontag's analyses of the aestheticisation of politics and "fascinating fascism" and the challenges posed by generative AI. The original concepts of "body without

aura" and "algorithmic aura" enable a more precise analysis of the continuities and ruptures between twentieth-century propaganda and its contemporary counterpart. It has been demonstrated that AI not only replicates but transforms propaganda tactics, culminating in a scenario of "epistemic collapse" in which the capacity to discern truth is severely compromised (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Marcuse, 1964).

The long-term implication is the urgent need to develop social and critical resilience in the face of algorithmic propaganda. The protection of democracy and the public sphere demands a concerted effort to promote media literacy, invest in research on synthetic content detection, and implement regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency and accountability in AI use. The struggle against the aestheticisation of politics and mass manipulation is a continuous battle that, in the digital age, acquires new and complex dimensions. What remains open — and what constitutes the field of research this article seeks to open — is whether the very tools that make possible the "algorithmic aura" and the "viral lie" can be appropriated to build forms of literacy, resistance, and counter-narrative equal to the challenge. Technology does not determine the outcome: it determines the terrain of the dispute. Moreover, it is on that terrain, simultaneously aesthetic, epistemic, and political, that the future of the democratic public sphere is decided (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

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