

# The Power of Art Should Never be Underestimated

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A review of *The Listener: Memory, Lies, Art, Power, A Graphic Novel* by David Lester, Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011, 310 pp, \$19.95; distributed by AK Press, [akpress.org](http://akpress.org).

All works of art, regardless of their form, offer a message to their audience. Some may be conceived as more deliberate acts of communication, while others allow room for nuanced interpretation. As a political tool, art can even inspire an audience to risk their own lives or take the lives of others in the name of social change.

Leni Riefenstahl's film *Victory of Faith* documents the Nazi Party's 1933 Fifth Party Rally in Nuremberg and her later *Triumph of the Will* was made at the Nazi Party's 1934 congress. Both exemplify how the power of art can move an entire population to commit mass murder on the scale of the Holocaust. Riefenstahl's films represent the art of manipulation, preying on popular anxiety for the purposes of political gain and popular domination through deliberate propaganda.

*The Listener* is a political graphic novel by Vancouver resident, cartoonist, painter and guitarist for Mecca Normal, David Lester. This work of historical fiction is published by Winnipeg-based Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

Other artistic initiatives like the abstract sculptures by *The Listener's* protagonist, Louise Shearing, leave more room for interpretation or inspiration for political action that have led to their own deadly consequences. *The Listener* begins in present-day Vancouver with a man named Vann, who dies during a political act of civil disobedience inspired by a sculpture created by Louise.

Louise then leaves on a journey to escape her guilt and to find solace in the works of Western masters within the great museums of Europe. While in Berlin, Louise meets Rudolph and Marie, an aging German couple whose memories fill the book's pages with 1930's German history and the propagandist politics that led to the rise of Nazi fascism. Louise listens intently to her new friends' little-known story that becomes pivotal for her own recovery and that greatly influences the conceptualization of her next sculpture that ends the narrative, a larger-than-life work to represent the ideas of Nestor Ivanovych Makhno, the Ukrainian anarcho-communist guerrilla.

Vann, a young Cambodian doctor turned activist, provides the contrast that moves the protagonist forward past her guilt, eventually releasing her to her creativity. He is the mirror within which the protagonist can see herself and which allows her to evolve. This literary and narrative tool is perfectly embodied in Chapter 12.

In this climactic chapter, Walter, a Holocaust survivor and close friend of Vann, visits Louise in her Vancouver apartment to tell her more about the young Cambodian genocide survivor, who, until viewing Louise's sculpture, wondered why artists were targets for eradication by the Khmer Rouge. During his unannounced visit, Walter tells Louise, "Art held a fascination for [Vann] because very few Cambodian artists survived the genocide." He continues, "...your art inspired Vann, but it was his decision to act in the way that he did. Just as you interpret history and make art, he interpreted your art to make history."

Art inspires creativity. Art may be inspired by memory and can be a reminder of the past. Art is also about history's interpretation as posed by an artist's conceptualization. But the artist has little control of the effect a work of art may have because the observer—through his/her own contemplation—may be roused towards grotesque acts of brutality or who may, preferably, be moved to perform exceptional acts of bravery.

Montreal anarchist poet, Norman Nawrocki expresses the role of art which is appropriately quoted in the book, "Spread the word, write it, sing it, shout it out, whisper it, type it, paint it, draw it, dance it, jiggle it, shake it up and down,...don't be afraid, experiment, practice, agitate, organize, resist,...do something intelligent, somewhere, something new and exciting that will bring us one step closer to where we all want to go: a healthy planet, without exploiters and exploited, here and now."

I'm sure this is what Vann had in mind as he risked his life for political expression and ultimately lost it.

I readily add David Lester's *The Listener* to my graphic novel collection and place it appropriately beside Jason Lutes' *Berlin: City of Stones* that is a beautiful multi-volume graphic novel of historical fiction of pre-WWII Germany.

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