Sheryl Tuttle Ross, “Propaganda and the Moving Image”

**Introduction**

Famous propaganda films: Riefenstahl’s Pro-Nazi *Triumph of the Will* (charting the rise of Hitler’s National Socialist movement in inter-war Germany), her influential sports doc *Olympia* (which set standards for filming sports that remain influential), the *Daisy Commercial* Lyndon Johnson fielded to scare voters about the extremism of Barry Goldwater (his opponent in the 1964 presidential election).

The power of cinematic propaganda is now unquestioned.

It’s objectives: Often a) political (Triumph of the Will or the Newsreels/Four Minute Men); sometimes b) historical/ideological (Birth of a Nation).

Propaganda is not only filmic: written (*Mein Kampf*), spoken word (Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*), music (Dylan’s *Ballad of Emmett Till*), photographs (naked little girl napalmed in Vietnam; the soldier shot in the head during the Spanish Civil War).

Ross hopes to “integrate a body of scholarship [across several academic disciplines] … in order to give an overview of how thinking about propaganda can enrich our understanding of film [and vice versa].”

JP: is **all art** *propaganda?* Discuss!

Propaganda Simpliciter

The *ontological/metaphysical* question: **What Is Propaganda?**

Is this the right question, or should we rather ask “**What sort of things have been counted Propaganda?**”? (JP: maybe there is no set of *necessary and sufficient conditions* for what counts as propaganda)

Ross: “We are investigating [at minimum] a social practice that has … a wide range of social … and political consequences.”

Anti-propaganda in Philosophy: Plato banned poets from his Republic; Socrates attacked *Sophists* and *Rhetoricians* (aka, *debaters* and *propagandists*, Athenian-style!)

Propaganda began as simply *one of the products of the persuasive arts*.

JP: What are some examples of *persuasive arts*?

**One view: Propaganda is Necessary**

Is propaganda “a necessary part of maintaining social order” (aka Plato’s Noble Lie; Machiavelli’s good ruler “[is] … a great feigner and dissembler”; Rousseau’s approach to education of the young: “…[children must be] protected deceptively from unseemly influences until the child is suitably prepared through moral and emotional education.”

**Opposing view: Propaganda is the Enemy of Truth and Justice (and Philosophy?!)**

Locke, Kant, Rawls, Habermas, Nozick all think a good society depends on the view that “human beings [are] inherently rational and a conception of justice [and the good society] … can be elucidated through philosophical methods].”

A Starting Point: let’s “group theories of propaganda in the following categories: Neutral, Negative, Omnipresent, Top-Down, and Heterogeneous”

Neutral Propaganda

Propaganda is just persuasion. It is **Not Inherently Bad**!

Maybe Socrates was wrong to claim that Sophistry (use of the tools of philosophy *only to persuade,* ***whether or not what we try to persuade others to believe is TRUE!***) is really avoidable, rather than an unavoidable part of rational persuasion?

Real-world example: Fauci recommending that people *not wear masks* early in the pandemic, and *not* because wearing a mask was not thought to reduce rates of transmission of COVID-19, but because it was important to not put too much pressure on the limited supply of masks for the necessary use by doctors, nurses, and other health practitioners. (Noble Lie?)

Filmmakers (especially of documentaries) often think “cinema is a form of persuasion, one that reveals truth.”

Godard: “Photography is truth; the cinema is truth 24 frames per second.”

The *actualities* from the birth of cinema took this view.

Many proponents of this view (John Grierson, ‘father of documentary film and founder of the National Film Board of Canada’) thought photography and film would *intensify and expand our perception of both natural and social reality* and lead to “a sense of greater reality” that would lead to *greater levels of civic participation in the community*.

Soviet example: Moscow Film School was tasked to *unite a geographically vast and culturally/ethnically disparate* country under a new government.

Technical advancements from the Moscow Film School: sequencing matters (face of a man followed by the image of a bowl of soup leads audience to think ‘he’s hungry’, whereas same image of the face of a man followed by an image of the same man in front of a gun leads audience to think ‘he’s brave’).

These techniques were then used by filmmakers engaged in agitprop (like *Potemkin*) to generate metaphorical impressions that convey a message, and that ultimately helped Eisenstein “enthusiastically [accede] to the demands for Soviet mythology that would stir proletarian consciousness” in the citizens of the newly-formed Soviet Nation.

But note: “[t]he association of propaganda with miseducation is the most prevalent negative sense of propaganda.”

Negative Propaganda

Nazi exploitation of propaganda films like *Triumph of the Will* led to counter-propaganda films like Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* that tried to expose the manipulation of the masses in Nazi Germany through films like Riefenstahl’s.

More-recent example: Chomsky’s *The Manufacture of Consent*. (discuss)

How negative propaganda works:

“….circumvents rational, reflective and informed judgments.”

Examples: “upselling”: ‘do you want fries with that?’; peer-pressure generates *herd behavior* (‘bandwagon fallacy’) by way of advertising (JP: the ubiquity of Vanns [uncomfortable to walk in for long] and Doc Martens [expensive] among teens, Doc Martens and Blundstone boots [expensive] and Uggs [ugly but comfortable] among young adults/college students in the US, etc.)

Subliminal Advertising: Vicary’s Hoax: he claimed his film *Picnic* contained messages slipped into single frames in the movie “increased Coke sales by 18.1% and popcorn sales by 57.7%”.

Upshot: not so easy to persuade through film as one might think.

Omnipresent Propaganda

On (Driencourt’s) theory, “everything is propaganda” because propaganda is “an all-pervasive force” arising from “the rise of mass culture”. It supposedly changes *who we are* not just *what we believe*.

Driencourt “claims that news sources give us both the information and the very conceptual apparatus by which we comprehend states of affairs.”

Ellul’s propaganda as ‘organized myth’…”the social determination of thought that provides individuals within a mass society a cognitive map and a coherent worldview.” It is “inescapable, ubiquitous and again not necessarily limited to persuasion.”

Other proponents of this dark view: Cultural skeptics/dystopians like Adorno and Horkheimer

JP: True/Convincing?

Ross’ segment on feminist theories of film and ‘the male gaze’ will be considered when we do our unit on Feminist Filmmaking and Film Theory.

Top-Down Propaganda

Propaganda is manipulation *from above by master manipulators [elites].* Walter Lippmann was the originator of “manufacture of consent” (Chomsky only borrows the phrase). Based on Edward Bernays’ view that advertising and public relations were altering the ‘pictures in our minds’ through mass media manipulations. Much of this was based on psychological research, using “symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas.”

Key: the *levers that are used to deploy these manipulations* are *wedded to the uneven distribution of money and associated social power* giving these **elite manipulators** unfair advantage in the ‘marketplace of ideas’ (Chomsky, Herman are particular proponents of this view).

Ross thinks *Birth of a Nation, Who Killed the Electric Car?*, and even Capra’s *Why We Fight* are examples of the way cinematic tools can generate and amplify our tendency to be swayed by presentations that arouse our emotions, and this can operate even independently of our ability to reflect on and rationally evaluate these influences on our moods, emotions, and *even our ideas*.

JP: how ubiquitous and influential is ‘mass media manipulation’? Is it as dangerous as these thinkers/theorists suppose?

Some Current Examples supporting the Chomsky/Herman ‘partisan news’ analysis**:**

A very large proportion of Russian population believe the lies being sold by the people in political, social and economic power in Russia (i.e., those that support the Putin Regime).

Some Western left-leaning analysts have taken up the model of the situation in Europe vis-à-vis Ukraine, where NATO expansion has ‘created’ the conditions against which Putin *had to respond*.

**But:** is this model **true**?

How can be come to know?

Do we believe what our **information silos tell us?**

Is this the **end of a common model of the world?**

Herman/Chomsky’s Propaganda Model

1. the size, concentration of ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms.

2. advertising as the primary income source of the mass media;

3. the reliance of the media on the information provided by the government, business and ‘expertise’ funded and approved by these primary sources of power;

4. ‘flag’ as a means of disciplining the media; and

5. ‘anticommunism’ as a national religion and control mechanism.

Supporting Evidence**: Sinclair Broadcasting** which owns and operates more TV and Radio Stations in the country than any other single corporate entity. Right-wing, ultra-conservative commentary are “must-airs” on all Sinclair-owned stations.

Would resurrection of the Fairness Doctrine help prevent this phenomenon?

Fairness doctrine required that all public television and radio stations follow a ‘fair and balanced’ principle which required that if a political viewpoint was expressed, there had to be an alternative viewpoint that was aired in the same segment. (Famous model: *Point/Counterpoint* discussion program on PBS).

Why the Fairness Doctrine no longer controls publically-available media content: *Citizens United* vs. *FEC* (2010) decided that the doctrine was a violation of the First Amendment (money = speech).

Heterogeneous Propaganda

Bones of the Jowett/O’Donnell theory: “*propaganda* is a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”

The Jowett/O’Donnell Ten-Point Plan of Analysis of the Major Features of Propaganda

1. The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign

2. The context in which the propaganda occurs

3. The identification of the propagandist

4. The structure of the propaganda organization

5. The target audience

6. Media utilization techniques

7. Special techniques to maximize effect

8. Audience reaction to various techniqu9es

9. Counterpropaganda, if present

10. Effects and evaluation.

Here this propaganda theory is similar to theories of film/media interpretation “that call for the content of the materials to be analyzed.”

This is a ‘decidedly neutral’ model of propaganda (unlike Mulvey’s feminist-themed view) since “there is nothing specifically negative about attempting to persuade someone in any given context.”

JP: in this respect, the theory is *descriptive* rather than *normative* (doesn’t take a position about what is right or wrong, good or bad about propaganda).

Another heterogeneous model of propaganda covers *both* neutral and negative senses of propaganda, e.g., Jason Stanley’s, which defines two types of propaganda:

Supporting Propaganda: a contribution to political discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet it is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those ideals by either emotional or nonrational means (Michael Moore’s documentaries often fall in this category)

Undermining Propaganda: a contribution to political discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet it is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals.

Ross thinks the *Supporting Propaganda* definition is useful, but regards the *Undermining Propaganda* as too narrow in its conception of what is *negative* in propaganda in a way that fails to capture the many negative features of propaganda identified by research in film theory, rhetoric, cultural studies or media history.

A third heterogeneous model: Epistemic Merit Model (EMM)

Ross thinks EMM manages to handle the *pejorative* sense of propaganda better (than Stanley’s, for example) and while it handles well examples of pejorative propaganda (the way *Guernica* has been used propagandistically, for example), it “contains insights into the general phenomena, and…it could be descriptive of both the pejorative and neutral senses of propaganda [while applying also] to a broad range of works of art and other cultural artifacts.”

EMM’s Definition: “Propaganda = an epistemically defective message used with the intention to persuade a socially significant group of people on behalf of a political institution, organization or cause.”

Where “epistemically defective message” = “a message [that is] false, misleading, inappropriate or connected to other beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading or unwarranted.”

A message can be **true** and still be ‘epistemically defective’.

Example: the Bayer aspirin advertisement that claims “no one other aspirin is proven more effective” (true, but only because *all aspirins are equally effective*!).

Note Eisenstein’s observations about how film editing can convey knowledge or mislead.

Ross offers a modified EMM definition that can cover *neutral propaganda* equally well: “1) a charged, epistemically merited message; 2) used with the intention to persuade; 3) a socially significant group of people; and 4) on behalf of a political institution, organization or cause.”

She then defines “Charge Message” as involving all three acts of Austin’s speech act theory: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act.

For those not familiar with Austin’s speech act theory, here’s what each term means:

Locutionary Act = message has signs or symbols that were intended to express meaningful

Content

Illocutionary Act = message would intend to do something further by means of the charged

Message

Perlocutionary Act = message would have some sort of uptake whereby the audience

recognizes the locutionary and illocutionary acts

Ross recognizes an objection to her modified EMM theory: “epistemic merit or defectiveness is one of degree and hardly the sortal property necessary to separate different kinds of propaganda.”

Ross’s reply: “…all propaganda is of the same species, that is, it is all a species of political persuasion. What serves to differentiate all propaganda from other forms of persuasion are the conditions 2–4.