

Art & Propaganda

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this discussion, you should be able to do the following:

- Define propaganda.
- Understand different types of propaganda and be able to list various examples of each.
- Understand and explain the purpose and use of various types of image projection.
- Understand the herd mentality and apply it to your own experiences.
- Understand what a demagogue is and be able to give examples.
- Begin to understand and explain how an agenda affects artwork.

KEY TERMS

By the end of this discussion, you should understand the following terms:

- Propaganda
- Soft propaganda
- Demagogue
- Herd mentality
- Visual Arts
- Literary Arts
- Dramatic Arts
- Musical Arts

PREPARE

Study the following instructional material:

Propaganda means “that which is spread out to affect a greater number or area.” It is an attempt by any person or group of people to project a certain image with the purpose of leading other human beings to either behave in a certain way or increase their respect, patience, or allegiance. Propaganda is usually thought of as a political practice, but it is also used for economic, religious, moral, and social purposes.

Propaganda is a loaded term. Generally, we think of it as a bad thing and only use the word when we disagree with its content or purpose: conservatives speak of liberal propaganda, capitalists of communist propaganda, Baptists of Mormon propaganda. But in reality, propaganda is just a set of skills used by all sides, consciously or unconsciously, to put forth their own points of view. In fact, we all indulge in it in the way we talk, the way we dress, the company we keep, and so on. Take, for example, the young man driving down the street with his windows open, rattling all the glass in the neighborhood with his sub-woofers. He is

engaging in a kind of image projection similar to the propaganda activities used by states, churches, and companies to define how they would like others to perceive them.

Not all propaganda is deliberate or systematic, nor is it always deceptive or manipulative. People and organizations often use propaganda to project a clearer and more accurate image. Likewise, deception and emotional manipulation have been used to further good ends. George Washington never chopped down a cherry tree, but the fable has encouraged American children to tell the truth for over two centuries. Indeed, all systems of education are laced with propaganda even though modern liberal societies like to think they are careful to present all sides equally.

Propaganda has many faces. Most governments, parties, sects, companies, and individuals have used it, and few have been completely honest in its application. Nearly every royal dynasty and most elected regimes have invented their own pedigrees, discrediting their predecessors while exaggerating their own achievements. Religious propaganda may have a more benevolent purpose, but it too manipulates the facts to achieve specific ends. Actually, religious propaganda is more inclined to use irrational, mystical, and unproven statements, as well as emotionally-charged images and language, to convince the public of the truth of its doctrines. Companies use propaganda to make their products more memorable and appealing. Essentially, the entire capitalist economic system rests upon consumer confidence. Obtaining and using material goods governs our work, wages, recreation, and self-esteem.

Sometimes propaganda takes the form of agitation, terrorism, and mob manipulation. Sometimes it seeks to project an image, sometimes to stifle one. In the Nazi rise to power, they used beatings and assassinations both to intimidate and silence their opponents. Terror, however, is not new to the twentieth century. The Aztec religion was based on a thirst for human sacrifice, and this thirst created a demand for constant warfare to provide victims. In



Aztec Tzompantli

response to this need, the Aztecs devised a propaganda system that glorified the military caste and terrified everyone else into submission. Their art was imbued with fear and dread; for example, the *tzompantli*, or stone sculpture of a rack of skewered human heads, carried a direct and undisguised threat to the Aztecs' enemies and clearly portrayed the image of a powerful state. The headsman's axe carried the same threat in the Middle Ages, and the guillotine served a more humane but no less clear purpose during the French Revolution.

Governments and Propaganda

Governments use propaganda to intimidate not only their own citizens, but other nations as well. Rival nations behave much the same as bull elk in rutting season. The impressive rack of antlers is not there because the bulls intend to fight, but in the hopes that they won't have to. If a bull in his prime is ever challenged, a little pushing almost always solves the issue without resort to serious bloodshed. In the same way, nations display their armaments, their economic prowess, their cultural achievements, and even their adeptness at sporting events

in an attempt to intimidate their potential opponents. For example, when India tested nuclear weapons underground on the Pakistani border in the late 1970s, it was a particularly risky form of rutting. But even in war, the point is not to kill all of the enemy's soldiers, but to get, as Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest called it, the "skeer" on the enemy: convince them they have been whipped and that they should cut and run rather than stand and fight. Unfortunately, the whole thing becomes nastier when enemies are too evenly matched to intimidate each other, or when effective propaganda convinces a people that persistence will pay off or that death does not matter as long as one fights valiantly.

Perhaps the most dangerous form of propaganda, however, is that which is diversionary. Instead of drawing attention toward a center of power, it draws attention away from it. It is, as Karl Marx called it, an opiate, a drug that dulls awareness of serious issues that might cause unrest or unhappiness if anyone was to dwell on them. The Romans called such diversionary tactics "bread and circuses," and all serious politicians were careful to provide these tactics to the masses. In Roman times, the "circuses" were chariot races, mock battles, and gladiators.

This kind of "**soft propaganda**" reinforces what is normal and contributes to a kind of mass self-esteem. The paintings of Norman Rockwell, the films of Frank Capra, and the songs of Bing Crosby all contributed to a cozy sense of well-being and rightness with the world in mid-twentieth century America. Today, we have celebrities, sports, soap operas, and talent contests. This is not to suggest that these works indicate a secret government conspiracy to pacify the American people, but it does indicate that stroking an audience's ego is good business and that the commercial value of such art leads artists to produce lots of it.

Propaganda and the Fine Arts

Since the beginning of history, mankind has used the fine arts as a vehicle for image projection. Consider the arts in four groups: the visual arts, such as painting, sculpture, and architecture; the literary arts, such as novels, stories, and poetry; the dramatic arts, such as theater, dance, film, and event management; and the musical arts, such as operas, anthems, and symphonies. Propagandists make use of the arts in various combinations.

Sometimes a distinction is made between propagandistic art and so-called "pure" art. This particular issue raises a number of philosophical questions about the nature of art and how it fits into the society that creates and propagates it. What is art? Is there such a thing as art without an agenda? Does an agenda corrupt art and make it less artistic? Can there be bad art with a good agenda or good art with a bad agenda? It cannot be denied that some great masterpieces had distinct political aims: Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* sings praises to the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity; Shakespeare's *Macbeth* pays homage to the ancestors of the Scottish dynasty that came to power as the rulers of England; Michelangelo's painting on the Sistine Chapel ceiling shows the kings of the earth kneeling before popes; Picasso's *Guernica* shows the brutality of the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War; and Dante's *Inferno* features a hell especially designed for the damnation of his political enemies. The political aims of these masterpieces could be interpreted as either propagandistic or as powerful art with meaning. Nevertheless, despite the meaning behind a work, it is possible to appreciate the art in its own right.

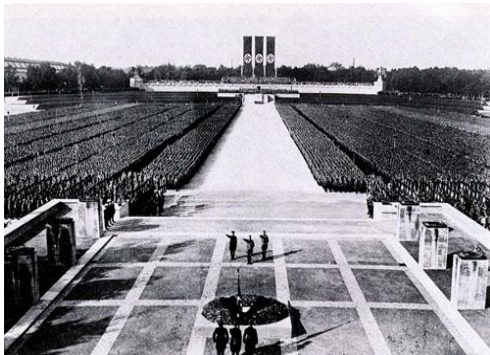
Visual Arts

The first widespread use of the visual arts to mass-produce a political message was the coinage of the Macedonian and Roman empires. These coins bore the flattering images of the rulers that minted them and carried political messages into the hands of their subjects.



A Roman Coin

Since then, various entities have used the visual arts to create and propagate unifying symbols: the Star of David, the Christian cross, the American flag, the hammer and sickle, the skull and crossbones, the Nike logo, the beehive, and the CTR ring. All of these symbols gain power by taking advantage of the human need to belong to a group. Those who propagate them assume that, when a person belongs to a group, they are more likely to



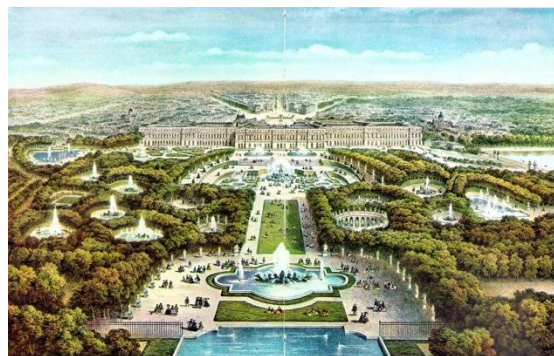
**Nürnberg, Reichsparteitag, SA- und SS-Appell
(Honoring the Dead)**

behave as the group behaves.

The classic example of image coordination was during the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 40s with its corporate colors of red and black displayed with high frequency and the standard swastika applied to flags, uniforms, buildings, documents, film, and modes of transportation.

Hitler's subjects were constantly reminded of the Nazi regime and intimidated by it. It encouraged the idea that everyone is on board, so you should be too, and if you aren't, you had better be careful.

Throughout history, rulers and governments have used architecture to project stability and power. "Kings are judged by [the] size of their monuments," said Colbert, a minister in Louis IV's court. Most of the world's architecture, from the pyramids to Versailles to the World Trade Center, owes its existence to that principle.



The Palace of Versailles

The mediums of sculpture and painting have also been used to tell the stories of nations and to praise the achievements of their patrons. The entire Italian Renaissance was a result of local rulers attempting to paint themselves into history in order to show themselves as enlightened patrons of the arts—possessors of that unique combination of intelligence, taste, and manliness they called *virtù*.

In modern times, photography has joined the lineup of visual arts used by propagandists. Robert Capa's *The Falling Soldier* from the Spanish Civil War raised the medium to new heights of emotive communication.



**Robert Capa (1913–1954),
*The Falling Soldier***

was to counter Hitler's negative associations by instead portraying him as an approachable German man who was making German life better.

Photographic propaganda increased greatly during the Nazi Regime and World War II. Heinrich Hoffmann was the photographer exclusively responsible for portraying Hitler to his people. His photo gallery portrays the Führer as a classic model of German *Volkstümlichkeit* (folksy coziness): relaxing in his *lederhosen*, gathering flowers, playing with his dog, or talking to children. The intent of this propaganda



**Heinrich Hoffmann
(1885–1957), *Hitler on the
Berghof Terrace***

Literary Arts

Like pictures, words can pack an enormous emotional impact. The literary arts, great and small, have been used to both advance and undermine great causes. Virtually every cause has at least one great literary work associated with it. But for a work to reach its audience, it must be accessible; the shelves of libraries are full of books that eloquently argue the case for many worthy causes, but their effect is minimal because few read them. Dull, nagging propaganda, even for the worthiest causes, can be counterproductive: witness the catastrophic failure of governments and private organizations to persuade young people to avoid dangerous drugs. Likewise, causes such as world peace, racial harmony, religious toleration, and family values fall flat if the propaganda fails to strike the right chord. Quiet, thoughtful reasoning is often not effective because it becomes boring or unintelligible and relies upon the reader to carefully follow all the steps of the argument. A written argument becomes much more digestible if it is reduced to an emotionally resonant catchphrase or sound bite and repeated endlessly. If it is rhymed, alliterative, or rhythmical, all the better to chant it by. Some examples include “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too,” “Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should,” “I Like Ike,” and “Fired Up? Ready to Go?”

The analytical and logical foundation for the ideas being conveyed becomes irrelevant because of their direct emotional appeal. Entire irrational, emotional judgments can be built around a single, unsupported statement if it is catchy enough and surrounded by other

unsupported statements. In fact, some words are created not to inspire thought, but to prevent it. In his novel *1984*, George Orwell describes a futuristic society where the government regulates language in order to regulate thought. Orwell calls this new language *newspeak*, and in it, entire groups of words with various shades of meaning are replaced with a single simple word that comes to stand for them all. For example, *bad*, *evil*, *incorrect*, and *immoral* are all replaced by the word *ungood*. Thus, newspeak reduces language's capacity for subtle shades of meaning.

In the same way, simple clichés and catchphrases substitute for real dialogue on political and social issues. Words such as *socialist*, *chauvinist*, *feminist*, *liberal*, *Red*, *hippie*, *democracy*, and *freedom* have complex emotional connotations; as a result, they are seldom used as part of a meaningful discussion. In recent times, the use of the suffix *-gate*, derived from the Watergate incident, has been attached to a myriad of names to plant the idea of political scandal without proving much of anything: *Irangate*, *Koreagate*, *Zippergate*, *Monicagate*. In general, extremist propaganda is clearer, more confident, and more committed than that of moderate causes, and uncompromising ideas are the easiest to promote.

Dramatic Arts

Thanks to film, radio, and television, many theatrical works containing political messages have been made more widely available throughout the twentieth century. Leon Trotsky prophesied that film would “take the place of religion and vodka” as an opiate of the people. It has done more than that. Producers, directors, and event managers have discovered that the impact of their messages grows exponentially as the size of their audience increases. This is sometimes called **herd mentality**, or going with the flow.

In crowd dynamics, doubters are more easily persuaded to conform by the large amount of true believers. The effect of crowd manipulation has been proven to diminish confidence in rational thinking, heighten confidence in seemingly strong leadership, and eliminate the influence of the conscience. Event managers know this and regularly plant compliant participators, cheer starters, and leading question askers in the crowd. Some of the most effective forms of crowd manipulation take advantage of the fear already inherent in a group: fear of outsiders, of unemployment or unpopularity, and so on. Often the blame falls on some kind of political scapegoat, such as Communists, Jews, liberals, or the privileged class.

First the propagandist emphasizes fear, reducing his audience to anger, despair, and pent-up frustration. Then he offers an easy solution: whatever he is promoting or selling. This is marketed as a cure-all, or even a messiah, that will deliver the people from their oppressors in return for their unquestioning obedience. In each case, when the initial reaction reaches critical mass, the enthusiasm and intimidation of the majority take over to mop up the stragglers. This is the craft of the **demagogue**, the “teacher of the people,” who first flatters the people in the crowd into seeing themselves as innocent victims, then fills them with fear and revulsion of their supposed persecutors, and lastly promises them deliverance in a kind of saved by grace catharsis. Its most sinister examples have resulted in war, oppression, and genocide. But the same kind of effect takes over with commercial marketing, fashion, adoration of pop idols, or any other trendy or “politically correct” mass movement.

Musical Arts

Music's power comes from its direct appeal to our emotions. It can quicken or slow our pulse, agitate us or calm us, brighten our mood, or give vent to our sorrows.. Almost as soon as a cause is born, it creates its own anthem: "The Song of Marseille" ("La Marseillaise") for the French Revolution, "Dixie" for the Confederacy, "The Internationale" ("L'Internationale") for Communism, and "We Shall Overcome" for Civil Rights.

Sometimes an old tune helps transfer our loyalties when the words are changed to advocate a new cause. Joseph Haydn's eighteenth century "God Save Emperor Francis" ("Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser") became a German national anthem during the revolutions of 1848. It was titled "Song of Germany" ("Deutschlandlied"), and in the third stanza, it calls for "Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit" ("Unity and Justice and Freedom"). After unification was achieved, German expansionism called for a more militant makeover of the old song, and it became "Germany Above All" ("Deutschland über Alles"). When Germany was defeated in World War II and the new nation renounced imperialism, the 1848 words returned, and this version remains Germany's national anthem to this day.

Conclusion

Propaganda is a powerful tool that can be used for good or bad purposes. It has been an implemented tool for a very long time. However, the twentieth century has been exceptional in many ways with regards to propaganda, including the intense politicization of all human activities, the ability to deliver propagandistic messages to a large population, and the dramatic and often dire results it has had on society. Without a doubt, the twentieth century has been the most violent in recorded history, and the more effective delivery of propaganda has been a major contributor. But at the same time, twentieth-century art has raised awareness of issues previously swept under the carpet, and in these cases, ignorance is not always bliss.

TEACH ONE ANOTHER

Discussion questions:

1. Think of one example of propaganda in each category: political, religious, social moral, and economic.
2. The text cites the use of music in car stereos to project a personal image. What other things do people do to project their chosen image? What things do you do? What image are you trying to project? Are you successful?
3. Do democracies employ terror as a means of propaganda? If so, name an example. If not, what do they use instead?
4. The text compares military propaganda to elk in rutting season. Name some examples from the present day that illustrate this principle.
5. Give some examples of "soft" propaganda in today's society.
6. Can you think of a time when you were persuaded by the herd mentality to do something that you later regretted or would not have done otherwise?
7. Name five people you would consider to be demagogues. What do they do that makes you feel that way?
8. Consider the following excerpt from the text, and be prepared to give and defend your opinion on the questions it asks: "What is art? Is there such a thing as art without an agenda? Does an agenda corrupt art and make it less artistic? Can there be bad art with a good agenda or good art with a bad agenda?"

PONDER AND PROVE

Prepare and submit the following creative assignment:

Design a slogan for a product, idea, or belief. Make it short and catchy.