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AESTHETICS OF PROPAGANDA

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It. *Estetica della propaganda*; Fr. *Esthétique de la propagande*; Germ. *Ästhetik der Propaganda*; Sp. *Estética de la propaganda.* The word "propaganda" was used for the first time by Pope Gregory XV when he created the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, an organisation tasked with the job of spreading Catholicism in response to the Protestant Reformation. In this context, propaganda meant something similar to education or preaching. However, despite having its origins in the seventeenth century, the term only achieved widespread usage in the twentieth, and despite such widespread usage its definition remains contested. We look at different definitions of propaganda, coming from debates in the field of political theory, the most prominent site for discussions about this phenomenon, and we then go on to assess how aesthetics may shed light on the value of propaganda artworks.

THE CURRENT DEBATE

The intention to persuade is a necessary condition for a message to count as propaganda. This is probably propaganda's only uncontroversial feature, and some general definitions take this feature to be both sufficient and necessary, as they equate propaganda to mere persuasion. Hummell and Huntress (1959: 14) simply define propaganda as "any attempt to persuade anyone of any belief"; David Welch provides a similar definition: "put simply, propaganda is the dissemination of ideas intended to convince people to think and act in a particular way and for a particular persuasive purpose" (Welch 2013: 2); and the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, formed in U.S. in the 1930s, goes in the same direction: "propaganda is an expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence the opinions and actions of other individuals or groups with reference to a predetermined end" (Lee & Lee 1939: 4). These definitions use different phrasing to say that propaganda is mere persuasion; however, whilst "persuasion" is a necessary condition, it cannot be a sufficient one. If this were the case, any quarrel or debate would become a battlefield of propaganda. Even in philosophical debates, arguments aim to persuade

opponents, but that does not suffice to make them propaganda. Also, rhetoric itself, which is the art of persuasion, would be a form of propaganda.

Jowett and O'Donnell provide a definition of propaganda that is more exhaustive: "propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett, O'Donnell 1992: 4). This definition has the advantage of underlining how there may be something wrong with propaganda, something deceptive. Indeed, though the term had been in use since the seventeenth century, propaganda received far greater attention during the twentieth, when it was associated with totalitarian regimes. The fact that propaganda was used as a tool by these regimes to move the masses indicates that one ought to make a distinction between mere persuasion and propaganda and, to be accurate, our definition also needs to account for the pejorative connotation propaganda has come to receive.

Some other definitions of propaganda have focused on its capacity to elicit emotions. For instance, Lippmann (1927 : 37) suggest that propaganda "consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas" and Harold Lasswell (1927 : 627) argued that "propaganda is the management of collective attitude through the manipulation of significant symbols". In his definition Lasswell emphasizes how the communication of the message is mediated through the manipulation of symbols, hence implying that the type of engagement the propagandist aims to elicit is based on affective responses to the symbols employed. These definitions imply that propaganda has an impact on the audience's beliefs through the mobilization of an emotional response that is detached from rational deliberation. So, they hint at the fact that in propaganda there may be something to be wary of, but they do not clarify whether, and how, emotional responses actually bypass rationality, and their definitions do not account for propaganda that relies not on emotions, but simply on bad arguments, such as syllogisms based on false premises.

Sheryl Tuttle Ross (2002) provides a refined definition. According to her, persuasion remains a necessary condition, so a message M is propaganda if it is intended to persuade its receivers about the validity of a given viewpoint. Yet this is not sufficient. The message needs to be sent on behalf of a political institution, organization, or cause, and what really differentiates it from other persuasive processes is that propaganda is epistemically defective or lacks epistemic merit (Tuttle Ross 2002: 19). To clarify the idea of epistemic defectiveness she borrows from Carroll (1996), who holds that "a message, M, is epistemically defective if either it is false, inappropriate or connected to other beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading, or unwarranted" (cf. Tuttle Ross 2002: 23).

TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF PROPAGANDA

Tuttle Ross's definition manages to highlight what is actually distinctive about propaganda: it is an inherently political phenomenon (as the message is sent on behalf of a political institution, organisation or cause), and it is epistemically defective, so that the message is unsound or somehow inaccurate. Anywhere there is a political message, there can be propaganda. Political speeches can be propaganda,

but epistemically defective messages can also be conveyed through artworks. This means that propaganda art is a subcategory of political art that is distinguished by its rhetorical scope and epistemic flaws. Classic instances of propaganda are Leni Riefenstahl's films but, interestingly, Tuttle Ross takes as an example Tim Robbin's *Dead Man Walking* (1995), which she considers a propaganda film insofar as, she argues, it is about a political issue – the death penalty – and it is epistemically defective in presenting its stance against death penalty (cf. Tuttle Ross 2002). Despite her controversial view on the film, this example shows the importance of the scope of a theory of propaganda art, which might be useful to analyse a great deal of artworks that are about political issues, and that need to be subject to an accurate scrutiny of their epistemic value, as they may actually count as propaganda.

Propaganda is tainted by a pejorative connotation, that has to do with its epistemic defectiveness, and this carries over in our assessment of propagandistic artworks. Indeed, propaganda art is surely defective, at least from an epistemic point of view. A proviso to this claim is that we should not encourage a Manichean assessment of a work's epistemic value, as this comes in degrees, and a work might have more or less epistemic merit. Furthermore, even epistemic flaws do not necessarily imply altogether negative consequences on the aesthetic value of the work. The debate on Leni Riefensthal's *The Triumph of the Will* (1935) is a case in point. Some authors hold that our aesthetic evaluations need not be affected by considerations on other values of the artworks (cf. Harold 2011), and even those who hold that the aesthetic value may interact with other values (like the moral or epistemic value) can still moderate their claim, as a *pro tanto* judgement (cf. Gaut 2007), and make space for other kinds of aesthetic considerations.

Nonetheless, when we scrutinize propaganda artworks, we should not lose track of their actual aim. We say that a horror film that does not scare you is a defective horror film and that a comedy that is not funny fails as comedy. As we have seen from the very initial definitions of propaganda, its main purpose is that of persuading the audience. Hence, propaganda works are also to be assessed in relation to such aim. This means getting into a relatively uncharted territory, as a work's capacity to affect the audience's system of beliefs requires empirical research that is yet to be carried out in relation to propaganda art.

We may postulate a positive correlation between a work's epistemic merits and its capacity to persuade the audience, which means that propaganda works, being epistemically flawed, should fail at their persuasive attempt. Yet this seems an oversimplification of the actual impact propaganda has, and has had, in contemporary societies. Philosophical theories focused on the interpretation of artworks rely on the idea of an "ideal" audience, which is capable of understanding complex semantic relations, has a general knowledge of topics and issues at stake in artworks, and knows the author's public persona as well as his or her *oeuvre* (cf. Levinson 2006). Yet, an ideal audience is not the only audience engaged with rhetorical artworks and it may not be unrealistic to think of part of the audience being persuaded by a bad argument or just by unsound inferences warranted by a work. In these situations, our appraisal of the work's epistemic merits would not suffice to determine its actual capacity to persuade the audience, as the work might still succeed in its persuasive purpose even if epistemically flawed.

We cannot predict when an epistemically meritorious work fails to persuade its audience, and vice versa when propaganda succeeds in its intent. Hence, we are left with an incomplete theory of the aesthetics of propaganda, that gives way to future work in the field. When we are to evaluate a propaganda artwork, we are to consider its rhetorical powers, that is, its capacity to persuade the audience *in spite of* its epistemic flaws. Aristotle famously showed how there could be different strategies and tools the rhetor could use to persuade the audience and how these strategies could go beyond the mere logical accuracy or the epistemic merits of the arguments provided. The stirring of the emotions, the recourse to a personal authority or the use of enthymematical reasoning are among the strategies that could be used to persuade an audience (cf. Aristotle 2018). The aesthetic appraisal of propaganda needs to take into account the strategies used by the artwork to convey its message. Finally, as the scope of propaganda is that of affecting people's actions, attitudes and beliefs, the theoretical endeavors should also be backed up by empirical research to target audiences' reaction to specific propagandistic artworks and different rhetorical strategies.

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