

Propaganda and its Impact on the Craft of Film

Troy Finley

Propaganda is one of the most important narratives in the history and foundation of film. To better understand its communication, it's imperative to dissect the faces it hits and how the eyes digest and take in the information. Propaganda films are just like any film or film genre and are executed in similar ways. To be specific, in this specialized field of visual communication, propaganda is absorbed through subversive/sub-textual communication, blatant appearances and themes, mixing personability with moments of cult-growing grandeur and other elements. Simply put, like many other forms of film, it relies on the manipulation of what we think, what we see, and what we feel.

Propaganda has existed for as long as people have cared about their image. The famous example of Caesar being kidnapped by pirates, ransomed, then having his troops track down his abductors to crucify them himself can be chalked up as a story to bolster the image of Caesar, the symbol of Roman might.¹ Propaganda in film, however, is much more adventurous and refined in its craft than some of the old stories of millennia ago. Whereas the old tales of merciless rulers, scathing rumours, and gallant emperors were told and passed down in spoken word, statues that blocked out the sky, and paintings that covered intense palaces,² film is much more portable; film shows movement, film plays with time.

Propaganda has some of the most riveting histories in the continuously developing saga we call filmmaking. Steeped in political turmoil, betrayal, boundary-pushing craftsmanship, secret funding, and forming the foundation of our modern and current world as we know it, Propaganda films and elements are continuously crafted and utilized in a vast array of media for a trove of reasons and purposes.³ Defining what is propaganda in film is not as simple as determining it plainly as a genre or a style; it is a methodology. It is not just another accent in the vocabulary of film, but a different cadence and dance. Understanding this will help us analyze and vivisect the

¹Richard P. Wright, *Kidnap for ransom: Resolving the unthinkable*. (New York: CRC Press, 2009), 4.

²Louis Marin and Anna Lehman. "Classical, Baroque: Versailles, or the Architecture of the Prince," *Yale French Studies*, no. 80 (1991): 167–82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930266>.

³Alexander L. George, "Propaganda Analysis: A Study of Inferences Made from Nazi Propaganda in World War II" *American Political Science Review* 53, no 4. (1959): 21 - 27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952085>

first feast of this paper, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will) (Riefenstahl 1935).⁴

The role of propaganda is to communicate particular messages and coerce opinions and images. If we want to vilify an icon, there is a way; if we want to deify someone or something, which Riefenstahl executed with an immense understanding in the film, there is a method. If you want to make people believe in you, trust you, and like you, you go through their children, their mouths, friends, and pets; *Triumph des Willens* executed this in the first 12 minutes. The first image (Riefenstahl 1935, 1:30) she shows is of an airplane coming down from the clouds (subversively can be taken as the heavens), seeing the old traditional grand architectures of Germany, and then landing in the Nuremberg area to the thunderous applause of the masses. Already this legend of propaganda has established a divinity from the descent from the clouds (some people may absorb this message actively, while others absorb it passively), the swoons of the people (seen in the masses), the beauty of Germany (thereby prompting that the government aids this culture), and the power of Hitler by being able to land anywhere he wants. This is an incredible example of knocking off the subversive/sub-textual messages, blatant appearances and images, and building a cult-like presence within the first five minutes.

This is where Riefenstahl shows us her mastery of understanding public relations and how to throw it through the centrifuge of propaganda.⁵ Hitler has only been seen once so far when he leaves the plane, and we see him smiling at the crowds. Now he is moving down a street in his open-top Mercedes limousine and we do not see his face. We see the back of his head/body and a close-up of his hand, intercutting with the crowds saluting, lifting their hands to Hitler. The closest we get to seeing his face is a profile showing us him smiling; then something extraordinary happens. She cuts to a statue holding ducks (which is dripping with symbolism), cutting to Hitler shaking hands with a mother and her child, close-ups of children at the parade, and, most subtly of the film so far, to a cat.

As previously mentioned, you can make people trust you if they see you share a common personal feature, like admiration for pets. We have a cat watching the parade underneath a Nazi flag, and then it cuts to Hitler looking from the right to the forward direction. She makes it look

⁴ *Triumph des Willens*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (UFA GmbH, 1935). 1hr., 44 min. DVD.

⁵ Alan Sennett. "Film propaganda: Triumph of the Will as a case study." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 55, no.1, (2014): 45-65.

like he is looking at the cat. Doing so has established a node where masses of people can connect and relate to this image and character he is portraying. This subtle and minute sequence has opened an entire pathway for more people to relate to the visage which Hitler portrays.⁶

This film, obviously problematic and as putrid as war, is still a masterclass in propaganda, filmmaking, and how it frames its subjects. You can understand why Riefenstahl refused to admit that this film was propaganda or of the ilk, but because of the additions of the cat, the editing, and the delivery, it would be absurd to say that it is not so. Is it effective as propaganda? Yes, but in short bursts. If this film were to be exhibited in its entirety, it would become dull, and like every other film, the most effective ones are the most entertaining and riveting.

In Response, The Allies combated this with their own films: *Schichlegruber - Doing the Lambeth Walk* (Charles A. Ridley, 1942),⁷ *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940),⁸ *Why We Fight* (Litvak et al., 1942 – 1945),⁹ as well as many others in a variety of different approaches. Some were filmed by already-established directors, such as John Ford, and others gave way to incredible directors of the future, such as Frank Capra.¹⁰ On the Axis side of the film world, propaganda films helped create careers for other legends such as Eiji Tsuburaya and Akira Kurosawa.¹¹

Propaganda films are, of course, still made to this day; people still care about their image. A great example is *Top Gun* and how the United States military helped aid the production as long as it painted them in a mighty light.¹² However, an interesting tale of propaganda in film pre-dates World War II, where many people believe it was perfected, and some believe it truly distinguished the genre from documentaries.

The 1910s were full of rapid evolution and the rebirth of nations and cultures across the globe, and at this time, a Civil War was fermenting in Mexico.¹³ Like most civil wars, this was

⁶Mary F. Brown, "Triumph of the Will," *Humanity & Society*, (1995): 95 - 97

⁷ *Schichlegruber - Doing the Lambeth Walk*, directed by Charles A. Ridley (UK Ministry of Information, 1941) 2 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYdmk3GP3iM&t=5s>.

⁸ *The Great Dictator*, directed by Charlie Chaplin (United Artists, 1940) 2hr., 5 min. DVD.

⁹ *Why We Fight*, directed by Litvak et al. (US Department of War, 1942- 1945). DVD.

¹⁰Michael W. Hughey, "Propaganda in the Modern World," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*9, no. 4, (1996): 569-577.

¹¹Donald Richie, and Joan Mellen. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. (Univ of California Press, 1998), 24 - 28.

¹²Michael McCafferey "Deadly propaganda: The Pentagon and Hollywood," *Guardian (Sydney)* 1830, (2018): 5.

born from an immensely unbalanced economy and corruption. Like many of the most brutal wars, figures were crafted that would outlast the battles and carve a face in the country's iconography. You see, one of the most remarkable tales in the world of propaganda starts with the Mexican Civil War and the figure of Pancho Villa.¹⁴

It was either the Mutual Film Company or Pancho Villa who made first contact with the other; this detail is currently lost from the passage of history. However, they both saw the power in which film could create a spectacle for mutual benefit. Villa sought a means to get greater support across the border and bolster his image, while The Mutual Film Company saw an opportunity to create scandalous pictures to produce incredible wealth. The complete film *The Life of General Villa* (Cabanne & Walsh, 1914)¹⁵ which originally was supposed to be directed by D.W. Griffiths¹⁶ was unfortunately lost¹⁷ even though it was apparently popular for the times. A mixture of documentary and staged movements, held together with the same "authentic" strings of reality television, helped create and endure the image of the Mexican Revolutionary that we know today.¹⁸

Even though we have not found a complete copy of the film today, we can tell by reports that as a result of this picture, the American Left had started to approve more of this side of the Mexican Revolution. We know parts of this film show extremely brutal imagery, such as bashing out gold teeth, an actual execution, and an active slaughter on a real battlefield. Nevertheless, with all this extreme violence perpetrated by his side of the war, it persuaded people to back his movement.¹⁹ It would be fascinating to compare and analyze this film with *Triumph des Willens* and see how each relates and deviates from the other while creating a positive outcome for

¹³Kees Koonings, and Dirk Kruijt, eds., *Societies of fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America* (New York: Zed Books, 1999), 109.

¹⁴Zuzana Pick, "Pancho Villa on Two Sides of the Border". In *Constructing the Image of the Mexican Revolution* (University of Texas Press, 2010), 69–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/721081.7>.

¹⁵ *The Life of General Villa*, directed by Christy Cabanne (Mutual Film, 1912) 1hr., 45 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g58zPkStLMY>.

¹⁶Allison McNearney, "How a Hollywood Film Starring Pancho Villa Got Lost to Legend." *The Daily Beast*, April 19, 2020. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-a-hollywood-film-starring-pancho-villa-got-lost-to-legend>.

¹⁷Gregorio, C. Rocha, "Review of *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself* by B. Beresford." *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists*, 6, no. 1, (2006): 142–145. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41167239>.

¹⁸McNearney, "How a Hollywood Film Starring Pancho Villa Got Lost to Legend."

¹⁹McNearney, "How a Hollywood Film Starring Pancho Villa Got Lost to Legend."

the movements that backed them. One showed a figure in radiant light, while the other painted the central figure as a wartime Robin Hood actively killing people, yet both aided their images.

It is a shame that propaganda has evolved so subtlety that, in many cases, the majority watching it will not recognize it. Not that it is not impressive or worthy of study on its own towards its craftsmanship and delivery (negating the fact of its danger and morally questionable execution at times), but early propaganda is such a valuable asset to study the language of cinema. It is so blunt and boisterous, easy to point out the message, meanings, and how and why they chose that shot or story element. The grand scale, the subtext and its meanings, how it interacts with the people, and the technical aspects of how it was performed is so valuable when crafting other films and learning how to make a film early on. Propaganda has moved on to become so unrecognizable that analyzing it has resulted in shaving off the initial layer, scrutinizing it beyond, shaving off another and repeating while cross-analyzing and investigating investors' and producers' connections and history. Trying to figure out personal angles of people not in the limelight and to whom they are connected. Honestly, we intake propaganda at such an extreme level that we may not even realize we may bend into the jingoistic, appearing as the meek, and have wholly turned an eye to the reality of the situation. It has turned into showing a glimmer of something in one direction, while the true situation nests behind the bush, unaware of its existence, a Roman Circus on an industrial scale.

As you can tell, propaganda in film is a complex topic with a labyrinth, spiralling history. It is still utilized today and improved upon with each film released and developed with an intense methodology and craftsmanship. Like any other form of film, it manipulates what we think, what we see, and what we feel to try and turn that into what they hope we will understand, relate to, and what they want us to believe.

Bibliography

- Brown, Mary L. "Triumph of the Will." *Humanity & Society* 19, no 1. (1995): 95– 97.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016059769501900108?journalCode=hasa>.
- Chaplin, Charlie, director. *Why We Fight*. US Department of War, 1942 - 1945. DVD
- George, Alexander L. "Propaganda Analysis: A Study of Inferences Made from Nazi Propaganda in World War II" *American Political Science Review* 53, no 4. (1959): 21 - 27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952085>.
- Hughey, Michael W. "Propaganda in the Modern World." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 9, no. 4 (1996):569–577. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20019859>.
- Koonings, Kees and Dirk Kruijt, eds. *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America*. New York: Zed Books, 1999.
- Litvak et al. directors. *The Great Dictator*. United Artists, 1940. 2hr., 5 min. DVD.
- Marin, Louis, and Anna Lehman. "Classical, Baroque: Versailles, or the Architecture of the Prince." *Yale French Studies*, no. 80 (1991): 167–82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930266>.
- McCafferey, Michael. "Deadly propaganda: The Pentagon and Hollywood." *Guardian* (Sydney) 1830 (2018): 5.
- McNearney, Allison. "How a Hollywood Film Starring Pancho Villa Got Lost to Legend." *Daily Beast*. April 19· 2020. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-a-hollywood-film-starring-pancho-villa-got-lost-to-legend>.

Pick, Zuzana. (2010). "Pancho Villa on Two Sides of the Border." In *Constructing the Image of the Mexican Revolution*, 69–96. University of Texas Press. 2010.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/721081.7>.

Richie, Donald, and Joan Mellen. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Univ of California Press, 1998.

Ridley, Charles A., director. *Schichlegruber - Doing the Lambeth Walk*. UK Ministry of Information, 1941. 2 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYdmk3GP3iM&t=5s>.

Riefenstahl, Leni, director. *Triumph des Willens*. UFA GmbH, 1935. 1hr., 44 min. DVD.

Rocha, Gregorio, C. "Review of *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself* by B. Beresford." *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists*, 6, no. 1, (2006): 142–145. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41167239>.

Sennett, Alan. "Film propaganda: Triumph of the Will as a case study." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 55, no.1, (2014):45-65.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/framework.55.1.0045>.

Wright, Richard P. *Kidnap for Ransom: Resolving the Unthinkable*. New York: CRC Press, 2009.