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The Marriage Between Art and Politics: Propaganda

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The Marriage Between Art and Politics: Propaganda

It has often been said that the difference between life and survival is that surviving is to simply sustain a pragmatic existence, while living is when one experiences the raw and emotional joys, despairs, and depths of their humanity. That being said, primary outlets that contribute to a solid existence typically include industries involving food, medicine, engineering, and governmental structure, or aspects of life that are necessary for maintaining systematic survival, but are nonetheless purely practical in essence. Conversely, the main expressions of life and humanity are frequently conveyed through various mediums of art, such as paintings, novels, music, and films. Of course a person could still survive without such outlets, but they would scarcely be living. This is precisely why various expressions of art are deemed as such revered aspects of human life. Since its forms have the power to evoke certain, innate emotional responses, as well as inciting intense feelings of unity or division, art is arguably one of the most influential tools in all of humanity. However, although these two contrasting elements seem as though they are present without any overlap, they are commonly seen together, joined in a juxtaposing marriage in the name of politics. The most prominent examples of this union are particularly noticeable at the beginning and middle of the twentieth century, when the vast majority of Europe, Asia, and the United States were riddled with war, political and civil unrest, and revolution. In other words, this widespread vulnerability ushered in an ideal 'honeymoon phase' for this 'marriage,' otherwise known as propaganda. Throughout the duration of this time,

change was an inescapable aspect of every person's life, therefore the political leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, and Germany in particular, were in desperate need of their citizens' aid in order to sway this era of change in their preferred direction. However, before they could utilize, and even exploit, their people's skills and resources, they needed to gain their approval first. Moreover, people often do not easily form deep connections with basic aspects of structured survival, like political affairs, and are significantly more prone to become invested in the arts instead. With this in mind, the politicians and other prominent figures in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States, knew that in order to mobilize and persuade their citizens to align with their opinions, they had to incorporate their ideals into popular forms of art like film. Essentially, by utilizing cinema as their main medium of propaganda, leaders of Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union, were able to shift their public's opinion in favor of their own with the help of artistic manipulation that inspired investment and faith in the specific political values of their agendas.

Some of the most prominent examples of the persuasive powers of this artistic and political union, were that of the Hollywood directed propaganda films in the United States during the Second World War. Movies like the 1945 documentary, *Know Your Enemy- Japan*, directed by Frank Capra, played a significant role in influencing the way in which the average American citizen was supposed to view the Japanese based on the will of the government. In order to establish the Japanese as an unquestionable enemy in the minds of the American public, Capra included graphic images and aspects of Japan's history and everyday life that served to simultaneously alienate and demonize the Japanese. For instance, the film focused on Japan's political and religious structure, in which "religion and democracy were all done up in a one man page" (Capra, 1945), equating the power that leaders like Franklin Roosevelt, the Pope, and

Jesus possessed, to the significant influence singularly held by the emperor. Although this portion of the documentary was not related to war, Capra chose to capitalize on the opposing ways the Japanese distribute power, directly contradicting the modern, western ideals of individualism and democracy that Americans live by.

Additionally, to further intensify the gap of commonality between the Americans and the Japanese, Capra then focuses on the barbaric origins of their ruthless warrior code, Bushido, which preaches death as the only option to surrender, absolute loyalty to a superior, and encourages ambush and double crossing. Then, the documentary displays images of Japanese samurai burning churches and Japanese, Christian converts in Tokyo and Nagasaki, purposely added to convince the Americans of their inhumane, and even Christian-hating culture. A comment is also included in the film that the samurai mindset, along with the Japanese standard of living, “is as it was hundreds of years ago.” (Capra, 1945). Based on these phrases and images, it is clear that the director is aiming to make the Americans feel culturally and even socially superior to their primitive and savage enemies. Yet, the most profound part of the documentary is when the commentator described how the emperor was meant to bring “justice, enlightenment and peace” (Capra, 1945) to his people. However, when each of these three key words is said, gory images of naked, dead women and babies are shown, along with exhausted Japanese peasants, serving as a visual representation of Japan's instability, indignity, and barbaric culture. Furthermore, at a time when American political leaders were trying to motivate citizens to help fight back after the attacks on Pearl Harbor, films such as this one possessed the correct amount of persuasive power needed to seize the attention and public opinion of potential American soldiers. Essentially, in his documentary Capra was tasked with creating a chasm between the Americans and Japanese using his artistic techniques and choices. In short,

politicians can initiate division, but it is the work of the artist that gives it a platform to stand in people's hearts and minds, disguising hatred as captivating entertainment.

Nevertheless, 'homewrecker' propaganda films whose purpose was to pin one group of people against the other, were hardly uncommon in the first half of the twentieth century. Much like *Know Your Enemy- Japan*, the silent Russian film, *Battleship Potemkin*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein, was created in 1925 in the midst of political revolutions, and was designed to motivate the people to resist the Tsarist regime. The film particularly played on a cliché, but nonetheless compelling, theme of unity, in which the community banded together to defeat evil. The outrage in the movie began when sailors on the battleship protested their poor accommodations, to which the Tsarist captain responded that he would "shoot them like dogs" (Eisenstein, 1925). Soon after, a fight broke out between the Tsarist officers and disgruntled sailors, in which several officers and the prized leader of the revolt, Vakulinchuk, were shot. His death inspired the people of the town, Odessa, to honor him as a symbol of revolution, sparking anger in the minds of the citizens. The subsequent scene conveys a gruesome and graphic massacre in which the Tsarist soldiers open fire on the citizens. To ensure the viewers are convinced of the tyrannical evils of the Tsar regime, there is a scene of a mother carrying her dead child while screaming at the soldiers, and another mother dying while her child is right beside her in a carriage. These disturbing images of innocent people, specifically children, being maimed or killed that were also shown in the film *Know Your Enemy- Japan*, is harsh content that the director chooses to include because the unnatural death of such guiltless people is impossible to justify. Therefore, the viewers seemingly have no choice but to side with those fighting the Tsar regime, because the film has clearly distinguished a morally 'good' and morally 'bad' side, of which they are conditioned to either hate or love throughout the movie and even

their lives. Additionally, the community and generosity aspect of the film is something all humans tend to be satisfied with both in fiction and in real life. When the sailors and citizens worked together to fight the corrupt Tsarist soldiers, phrases like “all against one, and one against all,” (Eisenstein, 1925), were propaganda intentionally included to emphasize the successful outcomes of a communist system. Ultimately, the political turmoil brought on by the revolutions in Russia, along with the bombings of Pearl Harbor in the United States, left both sets of citizens confused, vulnerable, and most importantly, impressionable. At a time when they were grasping for definite answers and clarity, their governments gave them an overt enemy to blame through a medium that would enthrall them, while also simultaneously convincing them to support the party or government’s cause.

However, the marriage between art and politics can never be characterized as just one type of union. More specifically, in the case of director Leni Riefenstahl, who filmed Nazi propaganda films like the infamous *Triumph of Will*, this particular ‘marriage’ would likely be considered arranged. In fact, Riefenstahl made it quite clear when being interviewed in the 1993 documentary, *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, directed by Ray Müller, that she had no investment or interest in the politics behind the films. Her apathy towards the subject of Nazi political affairs resembles that of the stereotypical arranged marriage, in which two people are forced to live with one another, despite the fact that they generally possess no love or attraction for the other. To Riefenstahl, all of the movies she edited and filmed were purely artistic. When asked about her potential involvement in such affairs, she either laughed at the idea, or went off on a tangent, passionately discussing the issues or logistics of her specific techniques, like camera angles. As a matter of fact, in her mind “the film wasn’t even about politics, it was an event” (Müller, 1993) in which she said she would have made “exactly the

same film in Moscow if the need arose” (Müller, 1993). To further demonstrate her sole investment in her creations, Riefenstahl recounted herself making Hitler promise she would never have to make a political film after *Triumph of Will* again. In addition, she then later went on to compare herself to other famous and devoted artists like Rodin and Michaelangelo, claiming that “if an artist dedicates himself totally to his work he cannot think politically” (Müller, 1993). However, even though at the time, many were not aware of his secret plans and capabilities, Riefenstahl’s ‘arranged marriage’ to Hitler’s political agenda was still a union nonetheless. Her motives may have been purely rooted in her work, but she stated she wanted to try something different, and Hitler gave her the opportunity to do so. In a lot of ways, his plans gave many people this same kind of opportunity, afterall, ushering in change and new possibilities was the core of his platform. From that standpoint, Reifenstahl, like other Germans at the time, eventually became tangled up in the weeds of his motives by simply just trying to do their jobs and advance their careers.

In some ways, this propaganda ‘union’ can also be characterized as a relationship in which one partner is far more dominant and manipulative than the other. To clarify, where Riefenstahl simply saw a chance to make a unique film and further develop her skills, Hitler viewed her as an artistic tool whose talents he could exploit and influence for his own political gain. For instance, Riefenstahl claimed that Hitler was interested in utilizing both politics and art because he said that he wanted the film (*Triumph of Will*), “to be made by an artist not a party film director” (Müller, 1993). Not only was Hitler aware of the intense persuasive powers of the arts, but he knew that because of the connection and passion that Riefenstahl had formed with her creations, it would be difficult for her to pass up his offer.

Unfortunately, this was the case for a plethora of other film directors who adopted projects that would later be utilized as propaganda material. Moreover, to reference Frank Capra once again, his documentary, *The Battle of Russia*, was filmed to educate Americans and troops about their ally, the Soviets, in which Capra was careful to paint them in a more positive light. He focused on aspects of Russian culture that were entertaining, yet also familiar to Americans, like Tchaikovsky and Leo Tolstoy's book *War and Peace*. However, the film conveniently did not mention anything about communism. In fact, during the Cold War, *The Battle of Russia* was removed from circulation by the U.S. government because it no longer fit the narrative they wanted to convey to the public. In a matter of years, what was once viewed as a respected piece of art was now seen as "blatant pro-Soviet propaganda posing as factual analysis" (Five Came Back). Other directors like John Huston also faced difficulties when their authentic films did not satisfy the will of the government at a specific time. One of his documentaries that he filmed in 1943 called the *Report from the Aleutians*, included shots depicting the actual monotony of army life when not engaged in battle, such as latrine digging and smoking cigarettes. Nonetheless, despite his captivation of such authenticity, U.S. Army authorities objected to including these scenes in the film in order to uphold the heroic and action-packed reputation the military needed to continue to recruit troops for war. In addition, another documentary that he filmed called the *Battle of San Pietro*, included unprecedented levels of realism that was difficult for many to watch. As a result, the U.S. Army delayed its release to the troops and public because they feared that the "close-up faces of dead soldiers who were being loaded into body bags" (Five Came Back) would damage morale necessary for continuing citizen's involvement in the war effort. They also scrutinized Huston and his content, accusing him of being too anti-war. Even after the Second World War was finished, Huston created another documentary in 1946 titled *Let There*

Be Light, designed to provide hope and education to veterans who had returned with various conditions related to post-traumatic stress disorder. However, the release was again delayed by the U.S. Army until the 1980's because of its potentially demoralizing effects on recruitment. Once again, normalizing such disorders, and exposing the real aspects of war and politics, were not to be publicized on such a large national scale unless the content complimented the government's rhetoric. It is very clear that this was the situation for Huston in particular, considering during the time after World War II the United States was focused on being superior in every way to the Soviets.

Given this information, it is perhaps fair to generalize that no matter what type of 'marriage' there is that exists between politics and art, the power dynamic is usually in favor of those who are of political affiliation. To the government or certain parties, art is the tool that, when in their grasp, is designed for manipulation, allowing them the ability to control or alter the emotional responses and opinions of the public they rely on for support. For leaders like Hitler, his popularity and the effectiveness of his propaganda relied heavily on "tap[ping] into traditional ideas and link[ing] them explicitly to a new, contemporary reality" (Reeves) Or rather, he focused on channeling the glory days of Germany's past in order to persuade the people that he was the chosen one who would once again restore their former glory. However, much like a marriage would not be successful if one focuses primarily on the past, Hitler's campaign soon began to fail when the events happening in the present contradicted his narrative of eminent rebirth for Germany. In fact, the author of *The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality*, Nicholas Reeves, claims that Nazi film propaganda "demonstrated that it was incomparably better at reinforcing existing attitudes than it was at changing them" (Reeves).

Meaning, the only tool powerful enough to dismantle politicians' manipulation of reality through the use of propaganda, is reality itself.

Ultimately, the 'union' between the arts and politics can be described as fickle, with its fair share of ups and downs. When the art no longer compliments the rhetoric of the politics, there is a conflict of interest among the two entities, until a change occurs and common ground is once again established elsewhere. Essentially, as demonstrated through the various censorships of films, and the selected portrayal of reality, over the course of the twentieth century in particular, it is evident that political leaders influence the emotions and reactions of their citizens using art in order to compel the public to adopt a certain, desired opinion of them. In terms of a marriage, this tactic would be similar to a spouse buying their partner flowers after they have committed adultery in an effort to convince them that they are loyal and trustworthy.

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