

Obsession with propaganda *

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What is propaganda? That is a question that even modern historians and linguists continue to ponder. We are aware of the propaganda that surrounds us everyday but we have no definite way to define it. The problem is that propaganda comes in so many forms and guises that it becomes almost impossible to categorize, sometimes it is completely blatant while other times it is much more subtle. The one thing that is for certain is that film has been shown to be one of the most effective media to utilize as propaganda. From the great directors, such as Eisenstein, to the campaign commercials we see today, propaganda has permeated the very structure that makes up the film industry and is most obvious in the structure of documentary films. So, it should not surprise us when we finally see a film like *Obsession: Radical Islam's War on the West* (Wayne Kopping, 2005), an excellent example of a well done, subtle, propaganda piece. This film, though, helps serve as an indication of larger trends within the form of film. *Obsession* helps illuminate the very propaganda nature of documentary film as a whole through an examination of the structures and techniques used.

To effectively support this thesis, we must first focus on showing that the film *Obsession* follows standard propaganda techniques to promote its own view. After establishing this, we can then generalize the concepts to help show how documentary itself is inherently propagandist. Finally we will conclude by discussing the ethical issues involved with this.

Before we can look at the implications of the film, we must first understand the basics of propaganda. The Institute of Propaganda Analysis defined propaganda as "the expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends," (IPA, 1938). The most common application of this can be found in mass media, which has been shown to be the most effective means to affect large audiences. Though the IPA was disbanded due to supposed conflicts with national security, their thorough research on propaganda is

useful for this topic. Specifically they laid out the techniques most commonly used by propagandist. This list is commonly criticized for its simplicity, but Jacques Ellul supports it in his book *Propaganda* where he states, "Modern propaganda is based on scientific analyses of psychology and sociology. Step by step, the propagandist builds his techniques on the basis of his knowledge of man," (Ellul, 1965). The techniques proposed by the IPA are just simplifications of the tendencies of the human mind as expressed through psychology. These techniques include demonization, oversimplification, symbolic transfer, and appeal to fear (Institute of Propaganda, 1938). We will see that *Obsession* uses all of these techniques to manipulate its audience.

Demonization is one of the techniques proposed by the Institute. Harold Lasswell, author of *Propaganda and the World War*, described this best when he said, "that every war must appear to be a war of defense against a menacing, murderous aggressor. There must be no ambiguity about who the public is to hate," (Lasswell, 1971). From this we can see that the effective propagandist first separates the group into a dichotomy, consisting of *Us* and *Them*. By doing this, they could then make the *Them* out to be evil, which in turn sanitizes the *Us*. Of course, *Obsession* doesn't use demonization in the classical sense in the sense that they don't claim that Muslims are demons. At this point we have to take into account the context, which in this case is the world post world war 2. Today's society views Hitler and the Nazis as the modern demons, which is what *Obsession* utilizes. The film makes claims of alleged historical ties between Radical Islam and Nazi Germany. The director continues by drawing parallels between the supposed shared anti-Semitism, and the similar propaganda techniques used by each group. In the end, the impact of the use of demonization is that the viewer ends up viewing radical Islam as being evil while at the same time it boosts our collective egos by sanitizing us.

Another common technique is to use oversimplification to create broad generalizations about the issue. Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder, in their book *Fallacies*, explain that, "Since most people are uncomfortable making sense of deep or subtle arguments, manipulators oversimplify the issue to their advantage," (Paul & Elder, 2004). This allows the propagandist to take a problem that is only specific to a small group and apply the problem to the entirety of the larger group. Not only does this make the argument more attractive to the masses, as they aren't required to conceptualize groups within groups, but also at the same time increases the severity of the issue. *Obsession* makes effective and subtle use of this technique. The film initially begins by dealing with a

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problem unique to radical Islam, but it is only a matter of time before the adjective *radical* is dropped while discussing the group. For the unaware viewer what started out as a problem with a small group of people, is now an issue with the entirety of Islam. The director has used this oversimplification such that the problem now lies with a very large percentage of the global population.

While generalization is very effective, symbolic transfer can be one of the most persuasive. The Institute of Propaganda Analysis states, "Transfer is a device by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept," (IPA, 1938). While described as a positive transfer, the negative connotations of detestable images can also be associated with the concepts or ideas that are being presented. In *Obsession*, "experts" explain how the Nazi's used symbolic transfer by presenting such images as a squid engulfing the world to taint the image of their enemies. Ironically, the film uses the exact same process. In the beginning of the film, the narrator speaks of the tendrils of radical Islam that are spreading over the world. The director uses this along with other squid imagery to associate the negative feelings of these images with the idea of radical Islam. In the end this technique escalates the viewers fear.

The final technique that we will examine is the appeal to fear. Dr. Paul states, "Manipulators know that people tend to react primitively when any of these fears are activated. Thus (the manipulators) represent themselves as having the ability to protect against these fears," (Paul & Elders, 2004). By playing on the fears of the audience the propagandist makes himself out as the only means of protection. This in turn makes what he says even more persuasive to the scared viewers. The "experts" in *Obsession* extend the effect of using fear, by saying that fear in general leads to hatred, which then in turn leads to violence, and thus makes the propaganda even more effective. The only problem is that *Obsession* is trying to make the viewers fear Islam. It uses statistics, generalizations, and demonization to exaggerate the threat. The film then uses rhetoric that implies that radical Islam is the number one threat to the west; that our way of life is in danger and that we are on the brink of another holocaust. It is obvious that the main intent of the film is fear and as the "experts" state fear is one of the key tools of the propagandists.

Now that we have seen that *Obsession* displays many of the aspects of propaganda, the next step is to show that it is not an exception but an example of the inherent nature of documentaries. Before we can show this, we must first define what a documentary consists

of. In Introduction to Documentary, Nichols states, "Documentaries of social representation offer us new views of our common world to explore and understand," (Nichols, 2001). In Nichols description of the nature of documentary, the key words to pay attention to are "new views". While Nichols continues on to discuss documentary as a means of expression and exploration, we are more interested in the underlying idea that documentaries represent a specific perspective and a unique opinion. These new views are nothing more than an opinionated presentation of information that, due to the nature of film, is being spread to the masses, and the only feasible reason why these views would be expressed is to convince people to think differently than the status quo. Now we can see that, from what Nichols said, documentaries fall nicely into the definition of propaganda as proposed by the IPA. We must keep in mind, though, that this alone is not enough to show that documentaries are a form of propaganda. Using *Obsession* as an example, we can see that many of the propagandist techniques that we found being used in the film are inherent to the field of documentaries.

By looking at the basic form of documentaries, we can see that such techniques as generalization, symbolic transfer, and emotional appeal are essential for the form's inherent stylistic elements. To show this we must first understand the roll of generalization within documentaries; in this case it is used to simplify the world for the viewer. We are only presented with limited issues, and even more limited views on those issues. In the end this presents a drastically different world than the one the film is claiming to accurately reflect. Generalization in this context, much like *Obsession*, helps strengthen the importance of the issue and present the views and opinions that the director has deemed important for the viewer to know. Secondly, symbolic transfer is a key staple to the documentary film style. While maybe not as extreme as the case of Nazi propaganda or *Obsession*, every documentary makes use of symbolic transfer. Michael Rabiger in Directing the Documentary explains this process, "Documentary units are often sent out to 'collect B-roll', which means getting illustrative material for something that has been, or will be, said," (Rabiger, 2004). This additional footage, through this process, becomes associated with the message being portrayed verbally; this association in turn transfers the emotional significance of the footage to the ideas being presented. Even more importantly this allows a transfer of the sense of realism associated with the footage, which helps makes the message seem even more valid, more true. Finally, we have the appeal to emotion. Though not present in every documentary, it is a common occurrence that the director tries to personalize the issue, to make us feel for the cause. Not only does this

help persuade us, it also makes us feel closer to the issue. Our emotions make the ideas seem even more important to us. These techniques are not the only ones ever used in films, but they do form the basic components of the inherent structure of documentaries.

We have shown that documentaries fall under the definition of propaganda as well as utilize some of the common propagandist technique, but we can't claim they are equivalent to the films the Nazis used. Every documentary has its own unique view or message that it is trying to portray, but some are more blatant than others, and some use more unsavory techniques. These more despicable propagandist, as described by Dr. Paul, "do not use their intelligence for the public good...Manipulation, domination, demagoguery, and control are their tools,"(Paul Elders, p.5). *Obsession*, though subtle, uses many of the logical fallacies described earlier to promote the opinions of the director and not necessarily the public good. We must remember there is a spectrum that every documentary falls into, from the extreme films created in Nazi Germany to the documentaries of Jacques Cousteau. With a spectrum like this, we must examine the ethical issues of persuasion in documentaries.

If all documentaries fall into the category of propaganda, what are the ethical ramifications that we need to deal with? If every documentary uses the same type of persuasive arguments is there any point to differentiating between them, they are all equally guilty of using these techniques. The answer is that we can't accept films such as *Obsession*; there is a certain point when the blatant abuse of these techniques becomes inappropriate. To understand this, though, we must first examine the issue of truth and persuasion and the significance each has to the morality of the film.

It has been a common assumption that documentaries have to present the truth in a completely impartial objective manner, but as we have seen it is quite the opposite. Documentaries aren't a reflection of truth but an opinion or interpretation of that truth. The problem is not that documentaries don't perfectly portray reality, but that we as the viewing public assume that the documentary form dictates that it must be completely valid. Jacques Ellul explanation of truth and propaganda works equally well in this case of documentaries, "The truth pays off is in the realm of facts. The necessary falsehoods, which also pay off, are in the realm of intentions and interpretations," (Ellul, 1965). Documentaries present facts about the way the world works, but they also present an opinion on that information. This can be a simple matter of what shots were shown, or it might be a much more complex opinion presented through interviews and related footage. The morality, in this case, is that the

documentary's opinions are based off of valid points and well formed arguments, and not falsified data and manipulated techniques, such as the ones used in *Obsession*.

Opinion and persuasion do not need to be shunned at first sight. It can be said that being exposed to differing opinions is as, if not more important, than just viewing the truth of the matter. Being exposed to a multitude of views helps us refine and cultivate our own opinions. The question when viewing documentaries, is not how accurate is its claims, but how well its point is argued. This not only includes how persuasive its techniques are, but also that it avoids using techniques and logical fallacies that outright manipulate the viewer, unlike *Obsession*. Documentaries may be propaganda by definition, but they are as much propaganda as this paper is, and should be judge in the same manner. It's not a matter of black and white, or right and wrong, but a question of how effective the documentary was in portraying its views.

In conclusion we can see that *Obsession* is a great example of the propagandist nature of documentary. Not only does the film try to spread its opinion through persuasion, but also utilizes techniques that are common to propaganda. Using *Obsession*, we saw that these aspects are not unique to this film; they are also the basis for the documentary form. Though, documentary has been shown to be a form of propaganda, in that it portrays an opinion in a persuasive manner, this is not a reason to completely reject the form. They portray an opinion and the arguments to support that opinion, through their choice of materials they show. These films can help enrich our lives by presenting us with a diverse variety of opinions, all we need to do is let go of our insistence on truth and broaden our horizons.

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