

MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

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What is Image Propaganda?

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According to the online *Duden*, an encyclopaedia of the German language, “propaganda is the systematic dissemination of political, ideological or corresponding ideas and opinions with the aim of influencing public awareness in a specific way.” Among the synonyms listed for “propaganda” are awareness campaigns, agitation, incitement, cheap propaganda and indoctrination, which, with the exception of the first two, are clearly negative. Whosoever uses propaganda is trying to manipulate us, foisting opinions on us that are not ours, and yoking us to a cart that we would not pull of our own free will. Derived from the Latin *propagare*, the term has come to be associated primarily with verbal messages. However, in everyday use this naturally includes visual messages as well. The graphic design of election posters comes to mind, for instance, with regard to election propaganda.

If we consider how the term has been used across the 20th century, however, it becomes evident that its negative connota-



1 – Alfred Leete, *Lord Kitchener Wants You*, 1914. Poster for recruiting volunteers to sign up with the British army, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Kitchener_Wants_You, accessed 14 June 2020



2 – James Montgomery Flagg, *Uncle Sam*, 1917. U.S. Army poster used to recruit soldiers https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Sam, accessed 14 June 2020

tion is relatively recent. In the first half of the century, propaganda was more synonymous with advertising, which was seen as a legitimate means of promoting goods, events or political parties. It was not until after the Second World War that it came to be viewed in a more negative sense and with increasing suspicion as a vehicle of manipulation – in the Federal Republic of Germany this was most certainly due to the reappraisal of National Socialist history. After all, the Nazis named the department responsible for political information the “Ministry of Propaganda”, while at the same time the Soviet Communist party established a “Propaganda and Agitation Department”. Right up to the 1970s the term was used in a positive sense quite matter-of-factly by the United States Information Agency for promotional information. Today, however, the term “propaganda” is no longer commonly used and is rightly cited in academic contexts as a source term and placed in quotation marks.

The term “visual propaganda”, after brief periods of use during the First and Second World Wars, has only become more customary since the 1980s. This could be an indication that is

used to describe past events, as the term “propaganda” has been used with less and less frequency – as a search with a Google programme specialising in this field demonstrates. Classic examples of “image propaganda” include a recruitment poster featuring Lord Kitchener (the British secretary of state for war), which was distributed all over Britain during 1914, and bore the slogan: “Britons [Lord Kitchener] Wants You. Join Your Country’s Army! God Save the King” (ill. 1). It became the basis for the American poster with the image of Uncle Sam and the slogan: “I want *you* for U.S. Army.” It was used in 1917, in the final year of the First World War (ill. 2), to recruit volunteer soldiers, as unlike the German Empire, the United States had no conscription. In both cases, the person making the statement is looking directly at the viewer, which greatly intensifies the slogan’s call to action. A CDU election poster from 1953 is a good example from the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany, with similar effect and the slogan: “Alle Wege des Marxismus führen nach Moskau! Darum CDU” (All paths of Marxism lead to Moscow! Vote CDU) (ill. 3). The upper part of the poster is filled with a giant dark grey male head wearing a cap with the Communist party’s hammer and sickle. The figure seems as intimidating as it is devious.

Of course the left used this type of propaganda as well. During the Weimar Republic, John Heartfield was a preeminent creator of a number of unambiguous visual messages. Many of his collages are unequivocal: *Hitler muss weg!* (“Hitler has to go!”). If we were to apply his directness to current political messages, they would probably be considered rather simplistic – to the point of being called “propagandistic”. Today, where propaganda has long since been replaced by advertising or PR campaigns, a too direct invitation to buy, vote or participate is considered *démodé*.

Although visual communication for the public still relies on the emotional impact of images, it is not so much negative sentiments, such as fear, a guilty conscience or shame that are elicited, but feelings of security, belonging and coolness instead. Election posters – especially those for governing parties – often depict their candidates surrounded by crowds or as commanding statesmen/stateswomen (ill. 4). Product advertising has also undergone a transformation since the Weimar Republic, from simple invitations to purchase something to lifestyle messages that communicate via images rather than words. This is especially true for alcohol and cigarettes – campaigns for Bacardi and Gauloises being a good case in point.

This raises two important issues: First, we need to ascertain whether political or even military image propaganda is in the same category as product advertising. After all, the former is about shaping society, the latter about selling goods to make a profit. Recent trends in visual communication indicate tendencies of convergence and blending by appealing to a sense of belonging to certain social groups. Second, there are clear indications that we need to abandon the classical sender-receiver



3 – Unknown artist, *Alle Wege des Marxismus führen nach Moskau! Darum CDU*, election poster by the CDU national party headquarters in Bonn, 1953, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:CDU_Wahlkampfplakat_-_kaspl010.JPG, accessed 14 June 2020



4 – Unknown artist, *Sicher in die Zukunft – CDU*, election poster by the CDU national party headquarters in Bonn, 1994, <https://www.hdg.de/lemo/bestand/objekt/plakat-sicher-in-die-zukunft-cdu-1994.html>, accessed 14 June 2020

model. Visual messages conceived with a specific idea of how they are to be received do not guarantee that they will, in fact, be understood as intended. On the contrary, how visual messages are interpreted has been proven to vary considerably – with the ability to develop a life of their own to the point of being quite contrary to their original objective. Hence, image propaganda is a complex subject, which has changed since Heartfield's time in numerous ways.