propaganda

by Paola Giorgis

Abstract:

Italiano. *Questa voce esamina quali sono i **meccanismi retorici e visivi** su cui si basa la propaganda, offre alcuni **esempi** di come funziona, e propone tre possibili **esercizi** per provare a problematizzarla e depotenziarne gli effetti. Più che termine discriminatorio in sé, la propaganda è sovente utilizzata come **veicolo di (ri)produzione** di **discriminazione**. Dalla simbologia del potere nei ritratti di Elisabetta I (1533-1603) alla propaganda nazista, dal teatro greco ai contrapposti manifesti della Democrazia Cristiana e del Fronte Democratico Popolare nelle elezioni del 1948,, l'analisi qui presentata segue **alcuni percorsi storici e letterari** che hanno mostrato come la propaganda non si limiti ad alterare i **fatti,** ma sovente **li fabbrichi** per soddisfare o costruire **precise ideologie**. La propaganda viene qui analizzata nei suoi **meccanismi retorici ricorrenti**, tesi a indurre una determinata risposta nelle/nei destinatari attraverso la creazione di una **visione della realtà** volta a **influenzare** il modo in cui le persone guardano a se stesse e alle/gli altri. L'analisi prosegue proponendo tre possibili esercizi di **decostruzione della propaganda**: la **conoscenza** dei suoi meccanismi comunicativi, la **verifica critica** e costante delle fonti, e, infine, la **ricerca** di **contro-narrazioni,** ad esempio nei lavori degli street-artist - muralisti, graffitisti, etc.*

Propaganda is defined as a hidden or overt intentional move aimed at **inducing a desired response** in the **addressee** –e.g., to orientate the public to perform or not perform a determined action, often by playing on emotional drives or fears; to create consent or dissent towards a specific event or situation, etc. Propaganda thus **prefabricates a highly orientated vision of reality** that has the precise scope of **impacting** on how individuals **see themselves and others**.

This entry examines the **rhetorical and visual mechanisms** of propaganda, offers some **examples** to show how it functions, and suggests three possibile **exercises** to problematize it and defuse its effects.

Etymology:

Propaganda: ablative fem. gerundive of **Latin *propagare*** "set forward, extend, spread, increase". First used with this meaning in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV who established the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fid*e [Congregation for Propagating the Faith] to supervise foreign missions of the Catholic Church. In 1790, the word indicated “any movement or organization to propagate some practice or ideology”. During the First World War it acquired its contemporary meaning of “dissemination of information intended to promote a political point of view”, and from 1929 the word refers to “material or information propagated to advance a cause”.

(Etymological Dictionary Online)

Problematization:

Rather than being a discriminating word in itself, ‘**propaganda**’ is more a **vehicle** for the **dissemination** of **discriminating** language, and this is why it is relevant to discuss how its mechanisms work within this dictionary.

In Western culture **propaganda** was not defined as such until the XVII century; yet, it has always played a relevant **role in cultural** and **political life.** To celebrate or denigrate public or political figures, to commemorate real or invented victories, to affirm the power of empires, to vilify the enemies: many have been the rhetoric and visual devices used throughout the centuries to **advance** specific **causes** and **orientate** public opinion in a determined **direction**. Among others, the ancient Greeks used oratory skills and theatrical plays; the Romans scattered the visual landscape of their empire with massive architectural elements and statues of the emperor; Elizabeth I (1533-1603) disseminated her portraits to convey political messages both to her supporters and her enemies in England and abroad.

Communication strategies:

"The best propaganda is that which, as it were, works invisibly, penetrates the whole of life without the public having any knowledge of the propagandistic initiative"

(Joseph Goebbels, March 1933)

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One of the **two main fields** in which propaganda is widely used are **politics** and **advertising**. Political and marketing propaganda largely work on the same rhetorical strategies, yet they do not share all of them. This discussion will particularly examine **political propaganda**.

To exemplify **how propaganda works**, a precious and reliable source is **Victor Klemperer**'s epitomical essay *LTI – Linguae Tertii Imperii – The Language of the Third Reich* (1947/2000). A Jewish university professor in Nazi Germany, deprived of his job, his house, and his dignity, Klemperer decided to analyse **Nazi rhetorical strategies** as "an act of self-defence" (p. 8), as he himself stated. Klemperer identified **some recurring features** to show how propaganda works through the use of specific words and rhetorical moves. Though the **Nazi regime** devoted a particularly malicious and vigorous proficiency in propaganda, such rhetorical patterns define the political propaganda not only of regimes but of (**contemporary**) **democracies**, too.

Here below are outlined some of the **most recurring communicative strategies** used in propaganda:

- **repetition**: words become slogans; repetition reinforces the message and makes it 'true'; the more one is exposed to the same message, the more s/he will like it (in rhetoric, they are known respectively as 'the Validity Effect' and the 'Mere-Exposure Effect');
- **renaming places** and **rewriting history**: adapting geography and history to fit a specific political narrative (e.g., change the names to streets and towns; celebrate or eliminate determined historical figures or events);
- **use of euphemisms**: euphemisms [vague and mild expressions] may be used to make people digest unpleasant political moves (e.g., a new tax), but also to define the in-group and exempt it from collective responsibilities (e.g., the expression '*Italiani brava gente*' – Italians, good people – to label Italian 'compassionate' colonialism and warfare);
- **use of hyperbole**: hyperboles [exaggerations] are used to define the out-group, also with the intent of creating hostility and fear (e.g., exaggerating the number of immigrants in Italy);
- **use of contractions**, **abbreviations**, and **acronyms**: this rhetorical move gives a veneer of scientificity, organization and objectification to political choices and bureaucratic systems, preventing people to fully understand what's going on. With that purpose, in Italy are often used English expressions, too;
- **reducing vocabulary** and simplifying concepts; reshaping or overturning the meaning of words (e.g., defining military actions as 'Peace Missions');
- **reinforcing** some vague existing *vox populi*: though very frequent in traditional media, this communicative strategy reaches its peak in the social media, where the vagueness of an existing common pre-assumption is snowballed and gets reinforced through the sequence of different posts until it becomes an unquestionable truth;
- **use of specific metaphors** or terms taken from the apparently neutral and objective terminology of **exact sciences** – natural sciences, mathematics, medicine and the like – to justify or even celebrate acts of discrimination and violence against a certain group of people (e.g., the existence of human races and of a hierarchy among them). In rhetoric: *ad verecudiam* fallacy [mistake]: the experts, the scientists say so;
- **deflection**: put the blame on others; reinforce one's power by identifying the Other as the Enemy; **find a scapegoat**; create fear: a rhetorical move that transforms the victims into a threat ('you have to defend

yourself, your family, your nation from a threat') In rhetoric: *ad baculum* fallacy [*baculum* = a stick; appeal to force or threat to persuade someone about an argument and accept a conclusion);
- **appeal to emotions** and sentimentalism; fanaticism: **faith replaces knowledge**. In rhetoric: Myside Bias [partiality];
- **deification of the leader**: though particularly evident in regimes, the deification or an acritical glorification of political leaders – e.g., by embedded media – is a common communicative strategy in democracies, too;
- **manipulation of the media**;
- **ridicule**, intimidation or violent repression of **dissent**.

Critic and writer **George Orwell** walks in Klemperer's steps in identifying which are the rhetorical moves used by propaganda.

Orwell could widely become aware of **how the propaganda machine works** in particular during his experience as a combatant and an eye-witness in the Spanish Civil War. Fighting both at the front and in the streets of Barcelona, he reported such experience in one of his classics, ***Homage to Catalonia*** (1938/2013). By comparing what he read in the contemporary accounts in the newspapers and in the war reports, and what he daily experienced in the field, he realized **how far the facts happened differ from the facts narrated**, and how such narratives were fabricated to create different enemies, serve different ideologies, and orientate the interpretation of facts. He then sorely realized how **propaganda not only alter fact**s, but **often fabricates them** to suit a precise ideology.

The experience of **how reality can be twisted and manipulated by propaganda** to serve different political purposes marked a demarcation point in Orwell's life, and was one of the events that shaped his political views and literary production in the following years.

Such a stance reaches its highest point of critical reflection and political accusation in his **novel *1984*** (1949). The world famous dystopian novel of a future society where privacy, decency and truth are denied, and every aspect of life is under the omnipresent and malevolent control of the Big Brother, is not only Orwell's desperate cry against the **evils of totalitarianisms**, but also remains one of the most **acute warnings of how propaganda modifies reality** to its own ends, and how forms of total control, brainwashing, repression of dissent, the propagation of prefabricated narratives, are not the exclusive prerogative of totalitarian systems, but with more or less overt force, **are operated by democracies, too.**

Here below are **two visual examples** of how propaganda can work.

The elections of April 18th, 1948, were the first political elections in Italy after the Fascist Regime. Two main fronts were opposed: the *Democrazia Cristiana* [Christian Democracy] and the *Fronte Democratico Popolare* [The Democratic Popular Front], a coalition formed by the Communist and the Socialist parties. Propaganda was fierce on both sides.



In one of their political posters, the Christian Democrats depicted Italy as a young woman: on her right arm, the Italian flag with the words '*Patria, Famiglia, Libertà*' [Motherland, Family, Freedom] representing the core values of the party. The woman is holding a shield (the emblem of the party) to protect herself from the attack of the Bolsheviks. The slogan says '*Difendetemi!*' [Defend me!], a vehement exortation to protect her and the country from Communism.

From their side, one of the posters of the *Fronte Democratico Popolare* [The Democratic Popular Front] showed the giant warning '*Attenzione!*' [Beware!], almost a cry here again reinforced by the exclamation mark, and a hand that tore off the first layer of the Christian Democracy's shield to show that, underneath, there was the Fascist dagger dripping blood, an overt mention to the violent and tragic recent history of Fascism.



These and other posters had to be **visually impactful** and use strong and immediately **recognizable images** in order to reach the widest range of voters, even those who were less literate.

In both examples, we can see how **hyperbole** works. Both images display **similar visual and rhetorical elements** that complement each other to reach the highest potency of communicative effect. The two propaganda posters are in mutual dialogue with each other, where **one represents the counter-narrative of the other**.

They share two main elements, the **shield** and the **exclamation mark**, which though convey opposite messages. In the propaganda poster for Christian Democracy, the **shield** is a **protection** from the attack of Communism – the hammer and sickle thrown against the young woman, Italy, who embodies and defends the Christian values. In the propaganda poster of the Democratic Popular Front, the shield is a **sham** that is meant to hide the true nature of the Christian Democracy party, its Fascist legacy.

Also the use of the **exclamation marks** are exhortations that are designated to induce two opposite reactions. In the poster for Christian Democracy, the call ('Defend me!') urges the addressees to use their vote to protect Italy and her values, while the call in the poster of the Democratic Popular Front ('Beware!') warns the voters about a fraud perpetrated against them, also implying that while the Christian Democrats are lying about their true essence, the Democratic Popular Front tells the truth, revealing the imposture carried out against the voters.

The main common communicative element on which both work is **fear.** The poster of the Christian Democracy party shows in the foreground a red hand throwing the hammer and the sickle against the young woman, while the poster of the Democratic Popular Front shows the Fascist dagger dripping blood. The opposite party is thus depicted **not only as a symbolical threat**, but as a **real physical menace** performed by the well recognizable **visual-phsysical** elements that identify the Communist and the Fascist parties.

Subversion:

As **propaganda** works through well-oiled **systems of power** – the State, political structures, the educational system, the media, the marketing network, etc. – and it often operates at **subtle levels** – e.g., playing on emotions and fears – its problematization and subversion are not always easy, but can be realized in several ways.

Here are **three possible critical exercises** to see beyond what is being disseminated by the propaganda tools.

The **first**, is to understand how propaganda functions. Propaganda can be dismantled by detecting **how its rhetorical** and **communicative mechanisms work**. Knowing how determined communicative elements function

can help us being less easily caught in, and influenced by, the web that propaganda cleverly threads. Recognizing rhetorical and communication strategies is like **opening a machine** to see how it functions inside.

The **second**, quite obvious, is to **look for facts** instead of looking for prefabricated versions of facts. Since propaganda manipulates (or creates) facts to orientate one's attitude and actions, it is relevant to look for different information on how a specific event really happened. However, facts should be searched and analyzed from **different sources**, otherwise the risk is to fall into the trap of fake counter-narratives and fake news – that is, to get caught back in propaganda.

Finally, another possible option to problematize propaganda is **looking for possible alternatives** to the predominant narrative. A good exercise is, for example, walking in the streets and observing the works of Street Art. **Street Art** vindicates the **public space** as a **political space** capable to provide counter-narratives of power that are visible for everyone. There are several ways in which street artists convey their messages, among which: juxtaposing **two oppositive visual elements**, thus creating an effect of defamiliarization of the taken-for-granted (e.g., some works by Banksy); using public walls to **denounce discriminations and inequality** (e.g., the women street artists La Suerte, Panmela Castro, Shamsia Hassani in South America and Afghanistan); **covering swastikas graffiti** with **food murals**, like the Italian Cibo.

Whatever their techniques and subjects, street artists **operate a relevant function** in providing alternative readings of contemporary events, and often offer a **forceful counter-narrative of mainstream propaganda,** as for example the **murals** by Italian street artist **Blu** against the high-speed train in Susa Valley near Turin, Italy.

Discussion:

- Can you imagine other ways to problematize or subvert messages of propaganda?
- What type of communication strategies are more effective on you? And which are the least?
- Can you find any past or contemporary examples of how propaganda works in your country?
- Walk around your city, town, etc. and look for murals that convey a different vision from predominant propaganda.

References/Further Readings:

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