

PROPAGANDA & CONTEMPORARY ART: THE AESTHETICS AND REHEARSAL OF POWER

PART I: An Aesthetic Language of Power

[QUOTE]

INTRO SENTENCE NEEDED. The term propaganda itself is highly pejorative, suggesting manipulation, deceit and fascism. But its relationship to politics through history have been far more complex. Taken up by incommensurable ideologies, propaganda has provided a language of power – a language capable of shaping sociopolitical relationships – through its aesthetics. By 1945, Joseph Goebbels Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment had produced 1,097 film; a staggering number of films in the Ministry's twelve years of existence. While many of these films were an obvious depiction of what we understand as propaganda, the majority were far less politically overt or 'propagandistic'. These films were subtler in their promotion of Nazi values and found their effectiveness in what they hid, rather than what they revealed. Goebbels recognized that "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." (Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience*, London and Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University (2004) p. 13. Quote from March, 1933.) Unsurprisingly, it is the subtler form of propaganda which dominates contemporary forms of propaganda. The overt and historical forms of propaganda which dominated the early to mid 20th Century have (almost) become a historical relic in the West; its political rhetoric far too obvious for a population well versed in media. Because they are deemed politically ineffective and neutralized through decades of media exposure to media-savvy citizens, their aesthetics have become an object of historical study. They are now found in museums as time capsules, in art as detached reflections on aesthetics, in advertising as commodification, and even dorm rooms as poster decorations. Brian Welsh's 2019 film *Beats* captures the emerging rave scene of the 90's in Scotland and follows the generation born after 1977 when radical European politics had come to a close. Their demand to party, take drugs and celebrate their youth in the face of police crackdowns is steeped in the rhetoric of revolutionary left politics and its imagery. This paints a perfect picture of a neutralized radical rhetoric whose real political power is only taken up in distant and remote movements in other parts of the world. But just the same, it is an aesthetics with enduring appeal that is repeatedly taken up by subsequent generations, if only as an aesthetic veneer. In turn, the abandonment of overt propaganda aesthetics has allowed artists to take them up for their own artistic and autonomous ends. I have limited my own reflections on a collection of contemporary artistic practices that are using propaganda art to foster meaningful political reflection as well as aesthetic enjoyment, divorced from the instrumentalized form of propaganda. These are artists that employ aesthetic languages of power to create their own worlds in a process of worldmaking; that exercises political agency through its creation as well as reception while maintaining a sense of implausibility. This latter sense provides a critical testing ground divorced from political instruments. These artists appropriate propagandistic modes and gestures as forms of redistributing power to open up new modes of being as well as alternate utopias.

A History of Propaganda Aesthetics

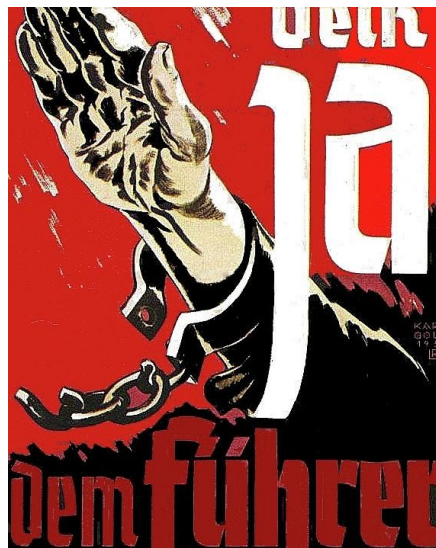
The history of modern propaganda art is often associated with avant-garde movement of the 20th Century that produced movements explicitly aligned with left-wing propaganda including Constructivism in Bolshevik Russia or Berlin's Dadaists in the Interwar period. One of the most

influential movements, Constructivism, saw the artist as an engineer responsible for shaping sociopolitical relationships in society. El Lissitzky's famous *Beat the Whites with Red Wedge* (1919) applies the bold lines, horizontal slashes, geometric forms and limited colour schemes of this new politically-useful art in support of the Bolshevik Red Army during the civil war. [further description on how this is meant to be a politically revolutionary aesthetic].



Similarly, Futurism in Italy emerged in 1909 under Filippo Tommaso Marinetti applying comparable aesthetics while taking up motion and speed as its emblem of the future. The movement's close association with Italian Fascism as well as the influence of Russian Futurists on the Russian avant-garde places it as an emerging form of a new political aesthetic. But these new avant-garde forms, in their conceptual and formal operation, would prove too vague and unusable for both the Russian Bolsheviks and European Fascists. A contemporary Russian account relates an old woman examining a cubist poster depicting a large fish eye and declaring, "They want us to worship the devil!" (<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/10/how-i-fell-under-the-spell-of-soviet-propaganda-posters-by-fraser-nelson/>). By the thirties when radical politics had emerged victorious, state-sponsored art was dominated by a constructivist-inspired Socialist Realism and agit-prop. These styles were much more forceful in ideology and representational than the avant-garde. The bold lines, restricted palette and geometries were applied to images of heroic men and women, towering leaders, and the machinery of war and industry. They inspired a sense of power and authority, as well as a utopic romanticism that seduced the spectator. They provided a ordered and packaged world, with clearly defined identities to be taken on by their audience. One of the most interesting historical facts of this art was its adoption by both the radical Right and radical Left. Looking at the propaganda posters of the Spanish Revolution, the posters of the right-wing Falangists are nearly interchangeable with those of the left-wing Republicans. Only the hint of the Falangist symbol or the Republican colours tells them apart. Adolf Hitler was strongly opposed to expressionist and avant-garde art, preferring a form of neo-classical art which differed from ancient Hellenism in terms of heroic attitude (Schmid pg 129). This was the art that made its way into Albert Speer's vision of the Reich's capital, Germania, as well as state-sponsored art. Hitler's infamous 1937 exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, or Degenerate Art, - the most widely attended art exhibition in history – gathered avant-garde work in order to subject it to total criticism. Adolf Ziegler, Hitler's favorite painter, headed the exhibition and was appointed by the Nazis to oversee the destruction of this so-called degenerate art. It is quite revealing that despite Hitler's complete rejection of the avant-garde, it was consistently used in Nazi propaganda art aimed

at the popular masses. This is an art no different from the Soviet and Fascist art of his political neighbours. No doubt, he too was forced to admit its captivating and effective power.



While a line can certainly be drawn between the autonomous art of expressionists, cubists, suprematists, etc. and the agit-prop of poster art, or instructive Socialist Realism, the latter's aesthetics could not exist without the former's symbolic and expressionistic contribution to aesthetics. Similarly, these instrumentalized art forms are often excluded from art history. (Groys, Art and Power?) This is an art form that is subservient to political aims; it does not exist in the same sphere of autonomous art as the avant-garde. It lacks the independent style of the artist and flounders in its static repetition. Propaganda is usually understood as weak in artistic terms. However, Boris Groys rightly points out that this is an art form that requires different criteria of evaluation. This art is effective when it becomes reproducible; capable of effectively transmitting messages to its public. When we judge its by its reproducibility and popularity, this is a highly successful form of art and its appeal remains obvious. Every so often, it makes a re-appearance in the political arena, however rare. Detroit-artist Shepard Fairey created the most iconic poster of the century with his 2008 image of Barack Obama inscribed with the word "Hope". It would become the official poster used by Obama's election campaign and was circulated endlessly in popular media.



Of course, a more critical reading of art in general can interpret all art as propaganda. Activist Upton Sinclair famously declared, "All art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda" (Upton Sinclair, *Mammonart*). The US State Department's 1946 touring exhibition, *Advancing American Art*, used the art of Ben Shahn, Georgia O'Keefe and others to promote American culture in the Soviet satellites. A painting by Jackson Pollock seems far removed from Cold War politics and yet Abstract Impressionism came to be the C.I.A.'s symbol of democratic and creative freedom. Despite this critical reading of artwork, we cannot say that their formal qualities illicit a sense of propaganda in the public mind. More importantly, providing an aesthetic language of power is not the primary artistic concern.

The Neutrality of Propaganda Aesthetics

What I have hinted at above is that the propaganda art which we most closely associate with 20th Century totalitarianism has a far more complex relationship with politics. Fascist art itself does not tend toward a particular style (neo-classical, for instance) but can "adopt any artistic style which seemed efficient and powerful enough to fulfil the purpose of political propaganda and corporate design" (Schmid p. 139). Similarly, there is no artwork which has fascistic tendencies, only artwork associated with fascism through historical coincidence. Even so, such associations can be reconstituted. It would be unconvincing to argue that the heroic sport-body-shaping of the Aryan man of Nazi Germany - a fairly novel social ideal at the time - is meaningfully echoed in the heavy sport-body-shaping culture of today. And much like that heroic male ideal is borrowed from ancient Athens, most fascist aesthetics were borrowed and drew their strength precisely from a pre-existing and enduring appeal (Mosse, p. 249). What can be said about propaganda, whether left- or right-wing, is that like advertising, it works by stirring up strong emotions, or agitating the spectator into a frenzy, through its persuasive rhetoric. Once agitated, the viewer is hit with the ideological message. To borrow an example from advertising: a young girl is seen racing boys in a soap box race, cheered on by her father.

"What do I tell my daughter. To I tell her that her grandpa is worth more than her grandma? That her dad is worth more than her mom? Do I tell her that despite her education, her drive, her skills, her intelligence, she will automatically be valued less than every man she ever meets? Or maybe, I'll be able to tell her something different."

We are emotionally-moved, stirred by a sense of social injustice. Suddenly, the words AUDI appear. We are being sold a car. It is a difficult leap of the imagination to tie expensive consumer vehicles with gender inequality but such is the power of a propagandistic rhetoric.¹ What is interesting is not so much the rhetorical play of bait and switch but that propaganda (and advertising) admits through this play that it cannot advance a discursive argument. By this, I mean an argument that cannot be co-opted and that remains steadfastly organized by its own dialectic. There is an irrational component to propaganda which can must be processed by the viewer through emotional image. Even fascist speeches, seemingly a discursive form of argumentation, took the form of symbolic action (Mosse, p. 247). Schmid points out that "even Hitler did not believe in the preservation of an aesthetic interpretation or appreciation. That is why embedded in his racial policy was the idea that only a single (Aryan) race that remains pure can transmit genetically a predisposition toward an

¹ Adam Curtis' *Century of the Self* (2002) provides a compelling analysis of how propaganda would evolve into the advertising industry, rebranded as Public Relations by Edward Bernways at the end of the first World War.

attitude reflected in the heroic art of his making.” (Schmid, pg131?) Schmid makes an argument that integral to Hitler’s racial policy is the belief that only through a pure bloodline that transmits from generation to generation a biologically-constituted disposition to viewing art can an aesthetics be free from misinterpretation or co-optation. Lebanese-artist Rabih Mroue, known for his politically charged theatre works takes on a resigned attitude to the future fate of his work, believing that “all my artwork will eventually be co-opted” (BAK Mroue reader intro). In his analytical film of cinema, *An Idiot’s Guide to Ideology*, philosopher Slavoj Zizek discusses how Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has been taken up by contradictory political movements throughout history: the symphony was a highlight of the Nazi Symphony repertoire, much adored by Hitler; Chairman Mao excepted the work from his ban on Western culture considering it a piece of enlightened Western work; the reactionary government of Rhodesia went as far as adopting it as its national anthem. He goes on to examine the on-stage aesthetics of the German rock group Rammstein, a politically neutral band, which takes up seemingly fascist imagery transforming them into empty gestures for the sake of their pure aesthetic enjoyment. At the time of this writing contemporary forms of political propaganda art online are a repetition of a historical mix of counterculture art of extreme right Futurists and extreme left Dadaists (Cramer, lecture DNL Infiltration). Author Angel Nagle in turn analyzes how post-internet aesthetics as well as transgression are used by both left- and right-wing propagandists online (Nagle, 2017). The image’s inability to speak for itself is summed up by the online right-wing slogan “The Left can’t meme”. Online, the Left is ridiculed for their inability to create short, catchy memes, relying excessively on text to establish an intellectual argument. These are art forms which can be reconfigured, restructured and even co-opted. In that sense, the aesthetics of propaganda are neither good nor bad, neither right- nor left-wing. This has more to do with how art as image functions.



PART II: A Theory of the Contemporary Image

It’s not that we mistake photographs for reality; we prefer them to reality – David Levi Strauss

Despite the historically recent invention of the photography camera and the film camera, the role of the image in society has dramatically shifted in recent decades. While originally the photographic image was understood to capture an objective reality, whose surface was a faithful image of the world, the naiveté of this logic was challenged in the 1960s. Photography and film were ultimately deconstructed as mere representations of the world; a framed distortion of the world at best, and an outright manipulation by the image-maker at worst. Art critic David Levi Strauss speaks about photography as providing the semblance of evidence rather than evidence itself (Strauss; Between

the Eyes). His essay writings document how photography is used to establish an ideology not by providing real images of a political claim, but speaking to an ideology through staging or insinuation. Similarly, Alain Badiou speaks of the need for the semblance of the passion for the real, where one's passion for the real² must be staged in a fiction or public theatre for it to be accepted as evidence of the real (Badiou, 2007). This is immediately tangible in how contemporary politics are often framed as an 'event' -not unlike an artistic happening – that exists in order to be photographed; in order to provide evidence of our passion. The primacy of the image in our ontological understanding of reality and politics begins to emerge.

Philosopher Vilem Flusser describes how images operate on an emotional level rather than dialectic. What is unique about this in the contemporary, is that we have come to use the image to orient ourselves in the world, rather than the historically reverse causal relationship. For example, the online identity, so bound in the identity of the self for our generation, is largely built through stylized images. The online avatar can itself become more than a symbolic stand-in but an ontological extension of the self. Boris Groys diagnosed this as an era not of spectacle but of self-design (Groys, *Art and Power*) that is made possible through the tools of image-making available to the public. Ice Poseidon, a YouTube star that makes his living by live-streaming his day-to-day life up to eight hours a day, is an extreme example. He is a person defined by his self-made films that have no other goal other than to project his sense of self on screen. Ice Poseidon is made by his films, rather than the reverse. Artist Ryan Trecartin can be seen to offer a critique of the self-design-through-image culture through his films that feature grotesque caricatures of media starlets and pop culture personas that self-document for their audience's entertainment. In his films the projected, imaged self eclipses any sense of an authentic self. Flusser goes as far as to claim that images have established themselves as the causes of events, rather than their illustration or documentation (Flusser; *Lectures*). For him, the turning point is the Romanian revolution of 1989, which was in turn described by Jean Baudrillard as "the moment that the studio became the focal point of the revolution [...] everybody ran to the studio to appear on the screen at any price or into the street to be caught by cameras sometimes filming each other. The whole street became the extension of the studio, that is, an extension of the non-place of the event or of the virtual place of the event. The street itself became a virtual space" (Baudrillard 1993, 64). Where the individual would once use their world experience to orient themselves in an image, images are now illustrations that orient the individual in the world; the image itself becomes an epistemological foundation. Flusser argues that this brings about a peculiar situation where logical discourse or political consciousness (as a product of linear or written consciousness) are no longer helpful for our orientation, suggesting a post-history. The image is thus the source of a contemporary ontology for any individual but one that remains maintains a purely emotional dialectic, free to be rearticulated at will by those that ascribe it meaning.

Another understanding of the contemporary image can be found in Boris Groys' comparison of the digital image to the Byzantine icon. The digital image is provided by data, which is invisible to us, and to which we entrust faith that it offers us a true representation of its content. A religious-like leap of faith is suggested in our relationship to the contemporary image heightening the mysticism and magic surrounding images. In this case, the image becomes the concrete reality and the world

² Alain Badiou speaks of the passion for the real as the zealous pursuit of "what is immediately practicable, here and now." (Badiou, 2007, p.58)

becomes its pretext. This would have once been called idolatry; perhaps we live in the age of endlessly permutating idols. Images claim to reveal the world but in the act of limiting what they illustrate, they also hide it. This is exactly how propaganda operates: “propaganda art consists of what it makes visible and invisible at the same time: while it shows one thing, it conceals another” (Staal, 2017, p.251). Groys’ analysis of the image as icon is not far from the function of propaganda art: it places the world of image and symbol within the same realm as the everyday reality, where one prefigures the other and are not separate.

Flusser identifies this as the inner dialectic of the image. When an image’s ontology becomes the source of reality while also being a fabrication, what does that suggest for our understanding of the world? Giorgio Agamben extends this dialectic to the television: “...truth and falsity became indistinguishable from each other and the spectacle legitimize[s] itself solely through the spectacle. (Agamben, 200, p.83) The significance of the image is a bit more ambiguous, however, than Flusser’s thesis leads us to believe. We speak on one hand of its low-value and devalued position (Groys, *Going Public*) in an age of its endless reproduction through our screens (Steyerl, *Poor Image*; Benjamin, *Mechanical Reproduction*). On the other hand, the image’s cultural primacy as the source of authority (and distraction) is the driving force behind its ubiquity. Images are thus paradoxically both low-value and high-primacy objects.³ I raise this point, only because it remains an open question whether as artists we devalue their quality through their relentless reproduction, or we elevate their meaning by multiplying them. Perhaps a historical example can be found in the fasces symbol in Italy under Mussolini, where the symbol became a material of reality appearing everywhere: on the screen, on the cigarette matchbox, on the breast of every shirt. In the context of these theoretical interpretations, images become their own source of political power. As artists, we are capable of producing political agency through our very media. The increasing role of the image in defining our reality places even greater responsibility on artists and image-makers, who are all quickly becoming propagandists.

What I find most interesting, however, is that when we apply this understanding of the image to propaganda and its historical forms, we can begin to understand why their dialectic divorce from politics as such is possible, and why artists can themselves apply them to their own politics, identity, or contemplations; or in artistic terms: their aesthetic enjoyment. This of course does not divorce it from its historical significance but offers it up as site of contemplation and reflection, as well as play.

PART III: A Practice of a Language of Aesthetics

“All art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda.” -Upton Sinclair, Mammonart

With the traditional propagandistic image largely de-instrumentalized through its abandonment by state politics, it is now taken up by artists as an aesthetics to explore. And in as much as these aesthetics are politically neutral, they are open to political shaping by the artist. If the propagandistic images are taken up as an artistic aesthetic, can we call a certain group of politically affirmative artists propagandists? Propaganda is instrumentalized because it acts upon and can be used by political agents. As we saw in the above historical examples, it serves, or is subservient to political ideologies. In other words, it intervenes directly in the political sphere, often through activity outside

³ In this context, we should not confuse low-value with low-meaning.

of the autonomous artistic sphere. But this does not accurately reflect the autonomous art practices of artists that explore both the aesthetics and the claim to power that propaganda permits. Certainly, there are artists whose work is explicitly propaganda: artwork that is first and foremost characterized by its useability. For instance, the Dutch artist Jonas Staal is known for his World Summits; a political forum that unites politically disenfranchised or marginalized groups to rehearse power through the vehicle of his art practice (REF). In his PhD thesis, *Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century*, artist Jonas Staal outlines the origins and coherence of propaganda within democracy, and its relevance to contemporary art practices.⁴

Nevertheless, I wish to speak of some art practices that can be more appropriately described as worldmaking. Worldmaking can be understood as the enactment of a worldview, the identification with a certain reality, and, in the case of art, its affirmative depiction. In particular, it is a form of practices that reconstitutes socio-political relationships through establishes visual frames (in this case, propaganda). **What I am more interested in is the practice/process of art as a rehearsal of political agency rather than political instruments that exist outside art.** This is an art can not merely be a political instrument. It must carry a creative capacity through its enactment or assembly. Its own critical testing ground. Of course, propaganda imagery has been present in art in a non-instrumentalized capacity for decades including the works of Diego Rivera or Barbara Kruger. However, their contemporary application by contemporary artists functions within a post-structuralist context, conflating geographies and time-periods.

I want to consider how the aesthetic languages we use in our work, particularly those of historical propaganda, can contribute to worldmaking. A well-known theory in verbal language, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, suggests our worldview is shaped by the structure of our verbal language. Variants of the hypothesis put forward a weak version that language influences our thought, with a strong version arguing that language determines our worldview. Can an aesthetic language have the same effect? The Viennese art collective Wochenclausur discusses the new material of artists to be sociopolitical relationships (like clay or marble) that can be shaped within the constraints of their pre-existing conditions. In a landscape of so many visualities, we can emphatically say that we cannot speak of a deterministic aesthetic language. But perhaps we can construct one that can that takes up established languages of power for our artistic ends of exploring empowerment. Can we imagine an empowering aesthetic language? How do artists use this language as a rehearsal of power?

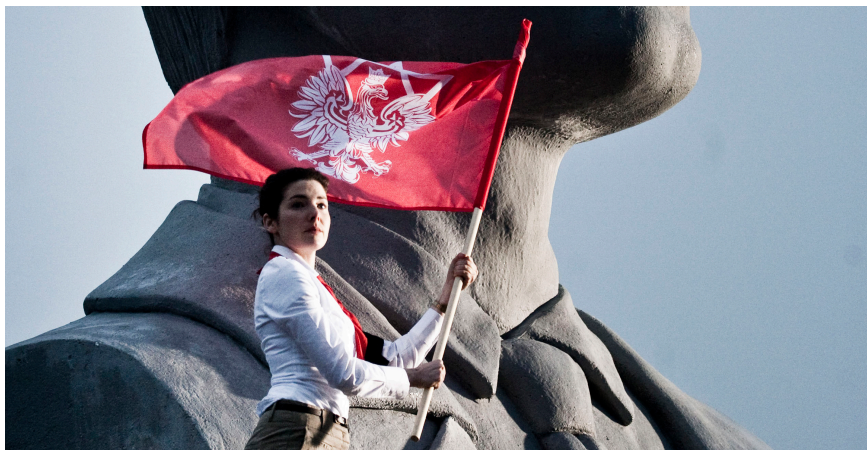
Affirmative Aesthetics and Worldmaking

In the Dutch-Israeli artist Yael Bartana's film trilogy, *...and Europe will be Stunned* (2007-11), Bartana uses the utopian artistic language borrowed from Nazi and Zionist films.⁵ The work representing the Polish pavilion in the 20017 Venice Biennale intermixed with symbols of Israel and Poland's history. In them, she postulates the return of Polish Jews to Poland. In the opening segment, the young Sławomir Sierakowski, the actual leader of the Polish left-wing Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique)

⁴ Jonas Staal's *Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century* (2017), provides a very thorough reading of the historical relationship between art and propaganda, including contemporary art practices that function as propaganda outside the autonomous sphere of art.

⁵ Zionist propaganda films themselves borrowed the visual language of Nazi propaganda.

movement, delivers an impassioned speech imploring Jews to return to rebuild a homeland. "Let the 3 million Jews that Poland has missed... return to Poland, to your country." Bartana plays with the sweeping rhetoric of political rally speeches, framed by dramatic low-angle shots reminiscent of a Leni Riefenstahl film.⁶ Notably, this speech is delivered in an empty and abandoned stadium; it remains unclear to which audience the speaker addresses, playing with his dislocation in time. Later on, a Jewish group is seen triumphantly and romantically constructing buildings on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto, hinting at Zionist films. These acts of course, remain impossible in the real world. The grandiose speech is delivered to no one; a possible homeland is erected at an unimaginable location. Nevertheless, Bartana is playing with a possibility of a worldview, where the sociopolitical arrangement between Jews and Poles, and the political fulfillment of a homeland in Europe is explored however implausible it remains. While Bartana argued that she herself remained ambivalent about the value of such a return, she would later go on to establish The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP) located somewhere between art and politics. This was a group psychotherapy where national 'demons' are exposed (www.jrmip.org). It is "an impossible artwork, a quintessential act of deconstruction sprung from the limitless space of rhetorical production at the margins of the imaginary / pragmatic dialectic." (<http://yaelbartana.com/text/deflections-anti-mirrors-2>). Does this suggest that the fictional rehearsal through a language of power engendered a real political exploration of the possible? Bartana also did not use actors instead preferring to have real political actors deliver their own speeches using their own words. In this sense, her art practice becomes a vehicle for political actors to enact their own political beliefs, their own rhetoric, and their own political agency. Nevertheless, a sense of a detached enjoyment of aesthetics by Bartana permeates the work. Her position throughout remains ambiguous through the postulation of the implausible. She never openly suggests a politically moral position but instead uses the established propagandistic frames to evoke emotion within the spectator, rejecting the moment of bait-and-switch leaving the spectator to decide for themselves.



Her subsequent work, *What if Women Ruled the World* (2017), brought together women in power to re-enact the doomsday scenario of Stanley Kubrick's war room scene in *Dr. Strangelove*. Set up as a series of theatrical re-enactments across cities, she would each time bring a separate group of female politicians, intellectuals, activists, scientists and even military leaders. to imagine how a world ruled by

⁶ Her work was criticized in Russia because the aesthetics of her film carried too many negative associations with Stalinism. This underscores an important point: languages of power are culturally-specific, not universal.

women would handle a doomsday scenario. Female actors lead the participants through the scenario blending real-life discussion with scripted dialogue. The work is filmed and subsequently turned into an edited film project. Bartana sets up her participants in a dramatic set providing a physical platform that dramatizes the fiction but provides the enactment of an all-female board room. Like her previous work, Bartana does not attempt to instrumentalize; she is not advocating a political reality. Instead, she offers a very provocative scenario – the total reversal of gender power structures – while giving her participants a public platform outside of their professional access. It is easy to imagine that these rehearsals of power, by actually bringing women of power together in one room, creates an affirmation in the participant and spectator’s mind of a reconstituted relationship of gender power. At minimum, it offers these women a chance to connect across disciplines that would never overlap otherwise. Bartana offers us an implausible worldview using visual clichés of power politics but their application to women creates an uncanny affirmation of what may not be impossible. Both *...and Europe will be Stunned* and this latter work, while working with radically different visual languages, can be seen as an exercise in an affirmative political imagination.

Jordi Colomer’s work *Unete! (Join us!)* for the 2017 Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale offered a video work closely engaged in a utopic revolutionary language for a contemporary mobile population. The film follows a group of people, closer to a movement, as they move from site to site left by female leaders. The women give speeches, moving from one European language to another, echoing their physical transitory movement. Their props and dress seem ad-hoc, similar to the provisional architecture that characterizes his sculptural work in the same pavilion. Colomer notes: “There’s a certain meaning of the term stage scenery as a provisional architecture that is portable, of open-use, capable of being interacted with. My characters act within the city in that sense.” (<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/132725/jordi-colomer-nete-join-us/>). Intermixed with these scenes, singer Lydia Lunch rides on the back of a pick-up truck with a megaphone urging us to cast off the chains of oppression, to unite, and to take power. Colomer does not apply this populist and revolutionary language to any particular cause. Rather, he allows us to enjoy their aesthetic by removing a clear political position and applying his imagery to implausible scenarios. His band of roving utopians however is reminiscent of the displaced and mobile populations of the present and the suggestion of a mobile and ephemeral architecture/infrastructure suggests a worldview sympathetic if not fully restructured to meet the demands of this growing population. The pavilion is conceived by Colomer as an installation of installations where the audience is invited into a relational exploration of the work that serves as “mediations through which the social relationships at an international event of this level are partially articulated”. (Segade, 2017 <http://www.jordicolomer.com/userfiles/file/TEXTOS/unete!%20Join%20Us!%20Biennale%20Venezia%20Spanish%20Pavilion%20Jordi%20Colomer/segadeENG.pdf>) The imperative cry of *Unete!* itself is very reminiscent of Latin American revolutionary slogans, which carries the connotation of a people united, unlike its friendlier English translation. His work is an act of worldmaking: he enacts the emergence of an international sociopolitical movement by having his actors move through European cities drawing real crowds. At the same time, his imperative command to the spectator to unite, however unlikely, asks us to underwrite the utopic dream with our own faith as spectator. Unlike other examples we have seen, it is not clear who this group is that enacts power. Perhaps it serves as a model for the contemporary Western individual unmoored from a political position that nevertheless retains the cloak of a propagandistic rhetoric.



Minor Aesthetic

The use of historical aesthetic languages of power is also found in a constellation of postcolonial, marginalized, and feminist artwork where the language of the oppressor is adopted for their own political positioning. Deleuze and Guatarri proposed a theory of minor literature. For them, “any minority group writing in a major language produces what they term minor literature, which has the capacity to destabilize and undermine the dominant language, culture, and discourse in which its authors operate” (REF). Deleuze and Guatarri first applied this theory to the work of Franz Kafka, a Jewish writer in Prague writing in the dominant German language of his time. The tension between the identity and location of the “minor” coupled to the dominant “major” culture offers an opportunity to reconstitute or reinterpret the dominant culture. We can describe a visual equivalent in the art world, or a “minor aesthetic”.

African-American artist Kehinde Wiley paints heroic and naturalistic portraits of African-Americans, and is well known for his official portraits of Michelle and Barack Obama for the National Portrait Gallery. He blends a firmly contemporary depiction of individuals using historically appropriated poses and backgrounds from European art. One of his paintings takes the famous 1801 Jacques-Louis David portrait of Napoleon crossing the Alps on his white horse, replacing Napoleon with a black man wearing a bandana and cargo clothing. The horse, cape and pose are preserved from the original, with a new background of a European flower-motif one would expect to find decorating the walls of an 18 century European home. Continuing his use of Napoleon art, Wiley takes the 1806 portrait by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres of the Emperor sitting on his throne replacing him with rapper Ice-T. The rapper now holds the Emperor’s sceptre draped in his cloak while gazing authoritatively at the spectator. The spectator’s recognition of the power and authority ascribed to his figures is clear through the use of established political images; propaganda images of their own time meant to legitimize the political authority of the poser. In the case of Napoleon, these are a historically unprecedented type of propagandistic image, where the power of the Church or Divine appointment no longer underwrote his power requiring an incredibly aggressive self-legitimization through image. Again, we see the enactment of power through a propagandistic language. Wiley has made a world

populated with Black figures of authority that fold time and space together, thoroughly destabilizing our established notion of the representation of power. The work of course remains implausible through its compression of space and time in an alternate history.



Other Aesthetics of Power

The aesthetics of power that I have discussed so far do not need to be limited to those of propaganda. Engaging in an entirely different language of power, the Canadian Inuit production company Isuma creates film and television programs that promote and preserve Inuit culture. The company has been making films since 1990 with their work beginning to make headway in art circuits. Their work was shown in Documenta 14 in 2016 and will be representing Canada in the 2019 Venice Biennale. Their work is structured as an archive of original Inuit life, as an inter-generational transmission of culture, as well as the rebuilding of native knowledge. In their 2007 film *Issaittuq* (Waterproof), a young Inuk who has turned to alcohol and violence is sentenced to two months at an outpost camp in the arctic where he is received by a local hunter. While the film is set up as a traditional fictional film, certain moments are set up as instructions on the preservation of Inuit know-how. One scene depicts the hunter offering instruction on how to catch, skin and eat a seal. The seal is real, and as spectator we are shown a clear procedure of the proper way to skin, the best parts to eat immediately, and the cutting of the animal. It is not just the character who is instructed but the audience as well, who becomes the carrier of Inuit knowledge, going well beyond the usual limits of a fiction film.

Their most recent production, the 2018 film *SGaawaay K'uuna* (Edge of the Knife) is the first feature film spoken in the Haida language.⁷ Prior to filming, none of the actors could speak Haida and had to learn directly from native speakers during the production. The language is endangered with only 14 native speakers left. The production of the film thus works to preserve the Haida language by creating new speakers. Similarly, actors received traditional body tattoos reflecting their personal histories, further preserving another cultural trait. What Isuma offers is not a real-world attempt at definitively reviving the Haida language; something that cannot be done with a handful of new speakers. Instead, it treads into the world of implausible worldmaking: it is a symbolic revival, a time capsule for future Haida generations, and a potential teaching tool for students. Isuma's films are rehearsals of Native

⁷ The Haida are a Canadian First Nations tribe associated with the Haida Gwaii archipelago in British Columbia.

power by providing a visual language that affirms native culture and epistemologies for their production participants and audiences, while also providing a vehicle for Native Canadians to enter into the film and television industry. It is a language of aesthetics far removed from the Western language and its very positive affirmation is a declaration of native power and legitimacy.



PART IV: My work

[This section remains incomplete – what I will do will not be finalized until late March]

In my film *Utopias* (2019), I have asked: what are those ways of living, as well as those social relationships, that are possible but obscured by dominant ideologies? What future paths have been masked through propaganda narratives? The film follows the fictional trial of an activist woman who is a leader of a land occupation movement. During the trial, the court prosecutor examines how the movement has blocked the construction of a condo development project in order to establish an independent and idealistic community on the same land. A witness, a future tenant of the condo development, is brought in to provide his own opinion on the movement. Each character offers personal opinion as well as historical examples of other land occupation movements, their successes, and their failures. The film combines classical themes such as utopia, progress and ideology with new contemporary themes such as precarity, urban development and ecological awareness. In the movie questions are asked about a sustainable future in a world of new epistemologies of living in a community. The theme of utopia comes to the fore. The film takes place in a world of contradictory ideas about what progress means, in which each individual tries to establish his / her own vision of utopia. However, the characters have to struggle with the problem that their personal utopia is the dystopia of the other. Through the discussions of the characters, the film asks the audience: What is my own personal utopia? How does it collide with the utopias of other people?

- the enjoyment of propaganda
- the examination of their neutrality through overlap
- the implausible projection of a political stance
- In the film the dialectic between action-inaction forces the audience to confront their own positioning. While my worldview is one of direct action, one can only be brought to participate by

In my Worldmapping work, I have tried to provide an illustration of the symbols, relationships and actors that collect themselves under separate political worldviews.

- consists of a series of large visual maps (or infograph-like works) based on alchemical engravings from 17th C that illustrate a highly structured and ultimately usable universe. These engravings list the elements of alchemy, the virtues of the alchemist, and their universal arrangement in relation to a godhead project; they are a very organized worldview. Much like Left Accelerationist Nick Srnecic's call to create 'maps' that allow us to understand the complex relationships of power, capital, etc of neoliberalism, these visual maps illustrate both a neoliberal understanding of the worlds arrangement as well as a more global emancipatory worldview. These maps are populated with symbols, historical figures, flags, and 'values' that relate to each worldview. They are meant to be understood as a sort of propaganda poster that allows the viewer to begin to make sense of the dynamic forces behind certain understandings of the world.

-If I use languages of power, what is at stake in my work?

-how does my work operate in the same sense/or differently from the above artists? i.e. have I suggested an implausibility that maintains the work as a gesture – perhaps ref. that Dutch author writing on Salgado etc.

-ADS as the aesthetic enjoyment of contemporary propaganda of the War on Terror. It however remains problematic because of the influential power that this propaganda continues to have.

Conclusion

Languages of power endure not only because of their formal appeal, but also because of their latent power to reshape sociopolitical relationships. The artists I have discussed explore not only an aesthetic but enactment of power through that aesthetic. This form of investing political agency in actors, characters and audience is an act of worldmaking, categorically separate from real-world realities. Nevertheless, their real power to reshape relationships creates an impetus for making work that orients us positively in the world – as these artists do - in direct competition with the flood of contemporary propaganda that negates our worldview. These artists, in their deployment of a language of power, engage in a particular kind of affirmative worldmaking. Nor do these images of worldmaking need to be programmatic or aesthetically/formally unified. The condition of contemporary art practices suggests we can offer a plurality of potentialities with which to play.

REFERENCES

[TBC – all organized on Mendeley]

Notes to Incorporate

Historical

Generalize away from agit-prop

Discuss in historical movement from image to film

Practice

Rehearsal of power as major theme – how does each artist engage in this? (Note rehearsals are not 1:1 – as a rehearsal they remain undetermined, vulnerable and not defined - rejecting the prepackaged identity of propaganda.

How is the theoretical section reflected in artistic practices

for each artist be explicit in the kind of propagandistic imagery they draw from and their worldmaking

Mark-David Hosale reference for Worldmaking

Add Andrea Bowers?

Add artist photographer dressing up locals as wermacht in field?- ask David Themes

“appropriation of modes, gestures as forms of redistributing power to open up new modes of being as well as alternate uotopias.”