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Propaganda Today, Propaganda Tomorrow, Propaganda Forever: A Comparison Between Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and Ross' *The Hunger Games*

Kate O. Tobin

Throughout history, the struggle for influence and dominance has consumed humans, resulting in war, poverty and destruction. Governments have, on occasion, used propaganda to sway a public in one direction versus the other. The term propaganda often has a dishonest, manipulative, egocentric connotation. Over time, although technology has progressed from radio to television and cinematic broadcasts into our digital era, propaganda has remained a stable feature of media technologies. Major studio productions today, such as Gary Ross' *The Hunger Games* (2012), include substantial examples of propaganda, primarily through television broadcasting. Throughout the film, people are blinded to reality through the very sheltered portrayal of life provided to them by Panem.

In a style that is not dissimilar, Nazi Germany consistently masked the harsh reality of World War II, using films made by Leni Riefenstahl, which emphasized the positives of life under the Nazi regime. The propaganda themes seen in *The Hunger Games*, such as speeches meant to inspire goodwill, the portrayal of power and spectacle, and benevolence, can similarly be found in the films of Leni Riefenstahl, who promoted Hitler and Nazi Germany, particularly in her film *Triumph of the Will*. Today, propaganda, while more subtle, can still be found. In our even more advanced age of technology, effective propaganda must take on the most modern media platform.

Similar to today, Leni Riefenstahl was successful because of her proficiency in producing propaganda using the technology of the time. Leni Riefenstahl, full name Berta Helene Amalie Riefenstahl, was born in Berlin, Germany in 1902. Riefenstahl was a natural performer from a young age, dancing on stage up until a knee injury limited her to acting. In 1934, she directed and starred in her first film called *The Blue Light* in which a woman, who is thought to be a witch, is the only one able to successfully climb a treacherous mountain (Rentschler, 1989). *The Blue Light* was monumental for the time as women did not typically direct blockbuster films.

Through its shots which captured the audience and inspired feelings of witnessing the sublime, *The Blue Light* caught the attention of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, and Riefenstahl was asked to photograph the 1934 Nazi rally. From this event came *Triumph of the Will*, perhaps Riefenstahl's most well-known work. *Triumph of the Will* became a compelling piece of Hitler's propaganda, as did *Day of Freedom, Our Armed Forces* (1935), which displayed the readiness for battle and the will of the new army (Lebovic, 2018). After the Führer was charmed by Riefenstahl's films in 1938, he had Riefenstahl produce another successful film titled *Olympia*.

The film was a captivating documentary of the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympic Games and as stated in an article from BBC, it became "a meditation on everything the Games stood for, and everything Germany could achieve" (Barber, 2016). The type of propaganda that Leni Riefenstahl excelled at was influence through manipulation, which was tremendously successful within Nazi Germany leading up to and throughout World War II.

Propaganda often seeks to convey a vision for a society; for *The Hunger Games* and *Triumph of the Will*, this is a vision of wealth, strength, and superiority. One way to project this ideal is through the power of speech. Hitler, as presented in *Triumph of the Will*, and President Snow, as presented through propaganda from Panem in *The Hunger Games*, both seek to motivate their citizens through persuasive speeches. For instance, in *The Hunger Games* during the propaganda film presented at The Reaping, the event at which two representatives are selected to be sacrificed in order to presumably maintain peace, President Snow says, "this is how we remember our past, this is how we safeguard our future." This parallels words spoken by Hitler in *Triumph of the Will* while standing before the German army in which he chants, "before us Germany lies, in us Germany burns, and behind us Germany follows" (49:33). The two phrases speak of the past and of the future as a way to remind those listening why, in Hitler's case, the German army must rise and fight, and in Snow's case, why the Hunger Games must continue.

Another parallel in the speeches of the two dictators is the call to action directed towards the young. Hitler, in *Triumph of the Will*, tells the Hitler Youth "All of Germany sees you for the first time. I know that as you serve Germany, Germany will see in you its proud sons marching with joy" (37:26). In comparison, during the tribute parade in *The Hunger Games*, President Snow tells the tributes "We salute your courage, and your sacrifice." Not only does saying this allow the Hitler Youth members and Hunger Games tributes to feel a sense of glory, but it also shows those watching the distinction and honor which is awarded to these youths, and pushes the viewer to strive for that same renown. In this way, Hitler and Snow have successfully manipulated generations of citizens who, as long as their dictatorship continues, will aspire to please their leader.

In addition to motivational speech, successful propaganda will attempt to portray power and solidarity in the face of challenge. In both *The Hunger Games* and *Triumph of the Will*, power is portrayed through military strength, order, and numbers. In *The Hunger Games*, as District 12 watches a propaganda message from Panem during The Reaping, clips of soldiers running into battle is shown. On top of that, victors of the Hunger Games portrayed in the propaganda film are strong, and closely resemble statues of Greek gods. Likewise, in *Triumph of the Will*, masses of soldiers stand at the ready to fight for their country (34:10). The men shown appear young and strong and, while the sheer size of the army standing before Hitler is threatening to those who would oppose them, it is comforting to those who support them. Projecting the size of an army to a population will certainly evoke fear and conformity because while it indicates that they are protected, it is also a threat. Political rallies today communicate solidarity, and social media can be a means of sharing that common belief, or experience.

In both films, the control exhibited throughout the propaganda becomes a source of security for the public. In general, people want to feel protected and provided for by their nation. Today, in times of natural disasters or mass tragedies, the government communicates directly through social media the lengths they have gone to in order to help and protect people.

Propaganda strives to remind the community of the nation's generosity in times of hardship. Leni Riefenstahl depicts benevolence in her film *Triumph of the Will*, as does Panem in the propaganda we see in *The Hunger Games*. In *Triumph of the Will*, particularly during footage taken from the Hitler Youth camps, pitchers are often seen overflowing with water (15:48) and food is in abundance (16:32). Much like this, in *The Hunger Games*, while many people in the districts struggle on a daily basis to put food on the table, the tributes are well fed and experience the plentiful treatment that Panem provides its citizens. In this case, the Hitler Youth members can be closely compared to the loyal citizens of Panem, who are both well provided for in appreciation of their allegiance. Additionally, the propaganda film shown during The Reaping includes President Snow, who says that the tradition of the Hunger Games "would serve as a reminder of our generosity and our forgiveness." In this way, the public accepts the tradition of the Hunger Games with the mindset that Panem is unselfish and that things could always be worse. Hitler projects a similar message in *Triumph of the Will* as he says, "Our gratitude is the promise to stand by you, through thick and thin, whatever comes our way" (24:50). The German people are then led to believe that if they fight hard for their nation, that Germany will protect and provide for them as best as it knows how. In addition to the content of propaganda, the way it is portrayed is critical to its goals.

Besides similarities between propaganda elements within the films of Leni Riefenstahl and Panem, there are similarities in the setting and film-making style of *Triumph of the Will* and within *The Hunger Games* propaganda. One close parallel is the use of the flag. Footage at the Nazi rallies are comparable to the televised tribute parade in *The Hunger Games*: long, parade-like spaces lined with crowds stretched in front of hanging Swastika flags. In *The Hunger Games*, the Swastika flags can be swapped for those adorned with the symbol of Panem.

The inclusion of the flag in the propaganda film and televised propaganda is an extra reminder to the public who provides for them and leads their nation. Background audio also has a large part in film propaganda. Throughout *Triumph of the Will* and the televised events of *The Hunger Games*, trumpets play in the background. The trumpet sound is significant because it is “more closely associated with power than any other instrument” (Vienna Symphonic Library). The incorporation of the trumpet into the televised footage that is viewed by those in Nazi Germany and in the districts of Panem communicates, once again, who holds the power in the nation. Overall, the sound of the trumpet works in conjunction with the elements above to create effective propaganda.

To conclude, propaganda is at its most influential when it results in blind, undying loyalty by a nation’s citizens to those in power and also induces paralyzing fear. Through the style of propaganda produced by Leni Riefenstahl and Panem, the messages are made unmistakable. Within both *Triumph of the Will* and the propaganda films in *The Hunger Games*, the rows of soldiers that appear, paired with the audio of the trumpets, make the message perceivable without words. The public conforms with limited resistance because they understand the spoken and unspoken messages, and that is why we can summarize that the propaganda was effective in *The Hunger Games* and Nazi Germany. Through inspiring words, and the representation of proficiency, power, and support, the people of Nazi Germany and of the districts of Panem conformed to Hitler and Panem’s demands with limited resistance. As powerful and effective as propaganda can be, it doesn’t guarantee long term success or victory, as both Nazi Germany and Panem eventually fell.

Today, social media provides a platform for propaganda in a way it never has. Over time, past events have served as a lesson, and the repercussions have served as a reminder of the threat of propaganda. Dystopian novels, such as *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, aim to remind the public of the dangers of propaganda, and can be considered a form of propaganda themselves. People today hold on to that false sense of security; propaganda is still relevant and has the same effects, only in a new

form of digital media. Therefore, is mass manipulation on digital media a new threat that we haven't given sufficient concern to? Could it pose a greater threat than we think given that past events/dystopian novels teach us to be cautious and wary time and time again?

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