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Propaganda and Image: The construction of myth

The following text is a summary of my dissertation, submitted in November 2014 in partial fulfillment for the requirements of the MA Visual Communication Studies, University of Derby, under the supervision of George S. Vlahos.

This summary includes the introduction (project description, background, aims and methodology) followed by a summary of the two main units. The final section, "Conclusion", is presented intact.

Introduction

This study concerns the examination of the image in the context of political and advertising propaganda. More specifically, the visual material is approached through the concepts of distance and closeness, chosen as corresponding with the processes of mythification and demythification of a person or a product. In this context two aspects of the image are highlighted. On the one hand, the image as a tool, namely as a medium for the making and conveying of a message. On the other hand, the image as meaning per se, as the actual content of the message, a notion closer to religious iconography.

The study is based on the examination of visual material from two representative examples of modern and contemporary propaganda. The first concerns the study of the gradual construction of Hitler's mythical image as "Fuehrer" through the analysis of posters of nazi propaganda of the period 1920-1940. The second example is based on the analysis of a contemporary advertising campaign (2013) for the south-african newspaper "Cape Times", which communicates the idea of "closeness" to the mythical through iconic historical photographs, digitally processed as "selfies".

My motive for choosing the subject were the frequent references -direct or not- to the Nazi example, as well as, a tendency to compare the present situation to that of the 1930s-40s. A tendency that also can be traced in images, in the manner of visual comparisons between the two periods. The study is situated within the fields of visual studies and rhetorics concerning

the role of the image in communication. It thus concerns an audience involved in the field of communication, semiotics and design. Apart from that, it concerns and addresses a broader audience that realizes the crucial role of images within society.

The first objective that this study addresses is a double one. Firstly, to study the way the mythical image of a person is constructed, through the analysis of Hitler's case-study, chosen as a representative example of modern political propaganda. It aims to highlight the points of the gradual transition from a human, mortal character to the myth of "Fuehrer", which became a symbol of Nazi ideology and functioned as a ritualistic element. Secondly, the analysis of the contemporary example from the field of advertising propaganda aims to highlight the points that compose the concept of "closeness" and of how this is conveyed through the construction of the idea of "distance" and the use of iconic historical photographs processed as "selfies".

The second objective addresses a substantial differentiation regarding the construction of meaning and the function of propaganda: the nazi propaganda aimed to construct a mythical figure of the leader as having a superhuman, immortal character. This process thus was the core of the rhetoric. In the contemporary example, on the other hand, the creation and destruction of this mythical distance appear simultaneously, as the idea of the distance from the iconic historical figures and facts is constructed, in order to communicate, through (the possibility of) its elimination, the notion of closeness to the news.

Thirdly, the study aims, in a general sense, to highlight the two fore-mentioned aspects of the image, as medium and as meaning, through the examination and analysis of the two case studies. For this reason, these two aspects were examined separately, in an introductory unit which is herein not included for the sake of the economy of this text

The methodology is primarily based on Roland Barthes' theory on myth and the semiotics of the image, as well as, on Jean Baudrillard's problematic regarding the function of discourse and the construction of meaning in the postmodern example. Secondly, I employed Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the epic and novel forms, as well as, Walter Benjamin's notions of dialectic image and "aura" in order to highlight certain points of interest.

Unit A: From Hitler to “Fuehrer”

The study of the gradual contraction of Hitler’s mythical image as “Fuehrer” is based on a semiotic analysis of Nazi propaganda posters from 1920 until 1940 that depict Hitler, following a chronological axis. Viewed as a whole, the mythical image of “Fuehrer” was the outcome of a systematic, methodical procedure that can be summarized in the following main points.

Initially the aim was to establish Hitler face as a recognizable image. This process is reflected in the posters up until the early 1930s, corresponding to the period prior to Hitler’s rise to power. During this period, Hitler was depicted as having a human face, but this image was being massively reproduced. It was through these reproductions that his image was identified with specific facial features, which composed a general typology of appearance. At the same time, his image was invested with signs that communicated the idea of the uniqueness of his face and aimed to establish an im-pressive image, in the literal sense of leaving an impression in the mind of the viewer.

At a second stage, in a series of posters corresponding to the 1932 pre-election rally onwards, Hitler was presented as a “Divine ruler”, a concept which points towards the double mythical nature of “Fuehrer”; on one hand through a series of signs deriving from Christian iconography, he appears as having a divine origin and a god-sent character. Hitler thus appears as the “savior” of the nation and as the “creator” (architect) of the empire (Reich). At the same time, he is presented as the “military ruler”, as the glorious leader and the high-end of a long tradition of kingship. These two elements, the divine and the military, coincide in the idea of the “Divine Ruler” which can be traced back to the monumental figures of Pharaohs, and the marble statues of Roman emperors, as well as, to the middle-age and renaissance royal portraiture. In fact, the depiction of the ruler in such a way so that imposes on the viewer the idea of holiness can be identified as a central element in visual propaganda of Queen Elizabeth I, in the 16th century, when the sacred image of *Diva Elisabetha* replaced Christian icons; her portraits were based on divine proportions, that aimed to transmit the idea of “Beauty” and “Majesty”, thus imposing on the viewer the idea of a distance deriving from her divine character¹.

¹ Strong, Roy, *Gloriana. The portraits of Queen Elisabeth*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987, pp. 36-40.

Thirdly, the Nazi propaganda invested “Führer”’s image with a monumental tone, corresponding to the one that drove the architecture of the period towards the creation of monumental forms. This quality appears both literally and metaphorically in the posters of the mid-1930s. In the literal sense, Hitler is depicted as a concrete figure of epic dimensions, bearing significant resemblance to a marble statue. As such he appears metaphorically as immortal, eternal and glorious.

The epic tone invested in Hitler’s mythical image was reflected on two other important aspects of Nazi propaganda, typography and architecture. In typography, the prevalence of the gothic typeface “Fraktur” is indicative of the immediate relationship between design and its general social and ideological context, as it visually reflects the main tone of “Führer”’s mythical image. In an interesting counterpoint to typography, architecture was for Hitler a “word in stone”². This phrase reflects the general philosophy of architectural design of the period, as summarized in Albert Speer’s theory of Ruin value (“Ruinenwerttheorie”³). This was an important indication of a point of view of the present as past, while it also presumes and implies an inherent detachment from the then current events.

Finally, a series of posters from the late 1930s indicate that Hitler’s image had obtained a symbolic and mythical status shortly before the outbreak of WWII, as “Fuehrer”’s head was depicted along with other symbolic forms of the Nazi regime (swastika, cross, eagle, map). The analysis of the posters also indicated that the fore-mentioned central symbols of Nazi identity constituted equivalent expressions of the Nazi ideology.

The image of Hitler remains to this day a symbolic figure. Its cult dimension can be observed, among others, in the context of neo-nazi and contemporary nationalist movements. Even outside this context, his symbolic image or partial elements are used as symbols of authoritarianism, censorship or “pure evil”. Regardless, though, of the various connotations that his image bears up to this day, the essential condition that drove the gradual mythification of Hitler was the retraction of the historical along with the human dimension.

² Taylor, Robert R., *The Word in Stone. The Role of Architecture in the National Socialist Ideology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, p. 30.

³ Speer, Albert, “Inside The Third Reich”, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970.

UNIT B: “Closer to the news”

The advertising campaign “Closer to the news” was created in 2013 for the promotion of the South-African newspaper “Cape Times”. In its printed form, it consisted of a series of print ads that were incorporated in the newspaper, while they were also reproduced as posters in Cape Town⁴. Shortly after its launch, the campaign won several international awards and worldwide recognition, which resulted in the images being reproduced online, namely at a global scale, as news in various newspapers and websites. In this context, the creative director of the campaign appeared to reveal the “hidden charm” of the advertising images.

In its printed form, the advertising images present a repetitive compositional structure. More specifically, they consist of a central image, that of the “iconic” historical photograph, which has been digitally processed in order to resemble a “selfie”. This processed photograph takes up the main part of the composition, surrounded by white space. At the bottom corner, a smaller image appears, that of the folded newspaper so that the masthead and the original photograph of the main article is visible. In each entry, the message “You can’t get any closer to the news” is repeated, positioned in the bottom margin, as a caption of the processed photograph.

The close semiotic analysis of these images revolved around the central concept of “closeness”, and how this was articulated by the construction and elimination of the idea of distance. More specifically, the concept of “closeness” was examined from four different perspectives, corresponding to the four main sections of the analysis: “recognisability”, “historicity”, “subjectivity” and “demythification”, presented below in brief.

In the first section I examined the concept of “recognisability”, namely the use of “iconic” photographs and figures. From this perspective, the idea of a distance was created by the summoning of the “iconic” quality of the chosen personalities and photographs, which was eliminated through a series of signs that constructed an artificial “familiarity”, namely the idea of persons and images that appear familiar and, as such, close.

In the second section, “historicity”, I approached the concept of closeness from a chronological perspective. More specifically, I examined the use of historical photographs and of “history”, as signs for the crafting of the idea of past, of distant in time. In turn, this artificial historical depth that was attributed to the images was undone. This retraction was the basis for

⁴ Jan Cronje, *Cape Times Ad Campaign Wins Awards*, 2014. <http://aloweprofile.co.za/cape-times-wins-award/>, accessed 20/10/14.

the communication of the concept of “currency”, of being present and close to the depicted event.

The third point of the analysis concerned the notion of “subjectivity”. This concept, expressed as a subjective point of view, defined a viewing distance, which implies a subject – the viewer/consumer- and an object –the viewed/iconic. The elimination of this distance between the subject and the object formed the advertising promise, which can be articulated as a promise for the viewer/consumer to become, through the consumption of those images, quite as iconic.

Finally, in the fourth section I examined the second-degree reproduction of these images online and their “demythification” by the creative director. What was presented as a semiotic analysis of the images was in fact both partial and operational; functioning as a caption to the second degree, it provided substantial signs that made the advertising images globally consumable. The “demythification” was also the basis for the mythification of the advertiser himself, which appeared as the “creator” and as the one who has the ability and power to reveal the “secret” of the image.

Finally, a concluding remark on the function of signs concerns their self-referential, tautological character, in the sense that they did not refer to an external reality, an actual event or incident (this corresponds precisely to the fore-mentioned absence of a historical dimension). In the light of Barthes’ definition of tautology as “the verbal device which consists of defining like by like”⁵, the signs concerning the identity of the depicted persons or events were nominal, in the sense that they functioned as verbal identifications, while their historical accuracy was irrelevant to the functionality of the message.

⁵ Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, Hill and Wang, 1972 (1957), p. 151.

D. Conclusion

In closing this study, I will refer to three main points that concern both case-studies. The first – which corresponds to an objective that was set from the beginning- regards the central issue of myth and, specifically, how the notions of mythification and demythification appeared in the two case-studies. The second point concerns the issue of the retraction of the historical dimension as a central condition for the creation of the mythical in both nazi propaganda and the contemporary campaign. In the third point I address the central notion of the image and how its two aspects –as means and as meaning- were exhibited in the two examples.

Myth

Regarding the way that a mythical image is constructed, a substantial differentiation can be observed between the two case-studies. In the first case, the mythification of Hitler was at the core of the rhetoric, clearly distinct from the attempts of anti-propaganda to disrupt his myth. In contrary, in the case of the contemporary advertising campaign, the myth and the mythical distance were part of the same rhetoric.

At this point, the notions of distance and closeness, that were used in the analysis as corresponding to the creation and elimination of the myth, will assist in highlighting this difference. In the first example, of nazi propaganda, Hitler's mythification concerned the creation of a ritualistic distance, which invested him with an unapproachable, superhuman character, as expressed in the myth of "Fuehrer". The anti-propaganda material of the same period, in its various expressions, aimed to disrupt this mythical shell, and was clearly distinct from the Nazi rhetoric. In the second example, however, the boundaries between the creation and elimination of the mythical image appear vague. As shown above, the rhetoric of the campaign was founded on the creation and elimination of the mythical distance in all perspectives. It was thus presented how mythification and demythification can be part of one and the same advertising message, thus forming, through a self-referential orbit, the mythical image of both the product and the advertiser.

Therefore, in both examples, mythification was the core of the propaganda, in the sense that both constitute attempts to construct a mythical image, whether this concerns a person or a product. In fact, the contribution of the analysis of the second example was that it showed how images and signs that mythify and demythify can co-exist and function in the same context. This

is an important observation, as it concerns a phenomenon which is very common in the digital medium, where the co-existence and reproduction of images from various, often untraceable sources makes it very difficult to identify the signs that contribute to the creation of a myth from those that aim to disrupt it.

History

The second important point that emerged from the whole of this study addresses the issue of the historical dimension, and specifically, how the distortion of the historical was, in both cases, a basic function of propaganda, as well as, an essential condition for the creation of the myth.

In the case of nazi propaganda this distortion can be traced in two main points. Firstly, in the way those historical facts were implemented in the mythical narrative of Hitler's rise to power, with a clearly functional character to support the specific political interests. Secondly, the distortion of history became evident in Hitler's investment with the mythical cover, as his mythification meant precisely the subsiding of his historical dimension –namely his human status- to the myth of "Fuehrer". In this case, as Barthes observes, "myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant [...]"⁶.

If in the first example history served the construction of nazi mythology and Hitler's mythical image, in the second, contemporary example it was the absence of history that served the advertising myth. More specifically, this absence is reflected in the success with which historical material was used as part of the advertising speech; historical photographs, events and persons appeared one-dimensionally and superficially as signs, meaning "past", "distant", "old". Moreover, the repetitive mention of historical figures and facts as "iconic" is indicative of the subsiding of their historical dimension, as they merely appeared as recognizable images; history was, then, the means for the summoning of their epic, mythical dimension as "iconic images".

As a whole, the analysis of the two examples showed how the historical element was distorted in the context of propaganda and implemented within the myth. Moreover, the analysis of the contemporary example highlighted a crucial point: how historical images and digitized historical material, which is directly available online and can be a valuable source of

⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, Hill and Wang, 1972 (1957), p. 140.

knowledge, can at the same time be used –perhaps with alarming ease- in the context of a rhetoric, advertising or otherwise.

Image

A general aim of this study was to highlight the two aspects of the image, as means and as meaning in the context of propaganda. For this reason, it is deemed necessary to emphasise these two aspects of the image as they appeared through the analysis of the two case-studies.

In the case of nazi propaganda, I examined the instrumental aspect of the image, and more specifically of the poster, as means for the construction of Hitler’s myth as “Fuehrer”. The symbolic image of “Fuehrer” itself, with the specific qualities that invested it, defines the second aspect of the image, namely as ritualistic element. In its entirety, the fact that Hitler, as an actual, political figure, and “Fuehrer”, as mythical image, co-existed inseparably was the decisive success of nazi propaganda, resulting in a devastating war and the loss of millions.

In the second, contemporary example, the image in both its printed and digital form, was the means for the crafting of the advertising message. In addition, the semiotic analysis of the images indicated how individual visual elements were used for the articulation of the rhetoric of “closeness”. In this case, the ritualistic aspect of the image can be traced in the iconic photographs as such. At the same time, the over-signification of their iconic quality also defines a utilitarian aspect,

Perhaps, more accurately, the ritualistic aspect of these photographs can be traced in their processed form as “selfies” and in their consumption as meaning per se, namely in the consumption of the identification of the viewer with the iconic. This aspect of the image can also be traced in the mythical image of the advertiser himself, as “creator” and “omniscient”.

The general aim of this study was to highlight various aspects of a matter which appears, nowadays, very current. For this reason, I chose to adopt and juxtapose a wide range of examples and theoretical backgrounds. As a whole, this study showed how the co-existence of the historical and mythical dimensions, in the field of the image, was in both cases the essential “misleading” function of propaganda. At a second level, this co-existence marks a double denial: the denial of the mythical dimension as such –namely as purely fictional- which is reflected in its conception as “misleading”; and the denial of the historical, which reflected in its operational recurrence. This double denial perhaps marks the ground on which myth, in its various utterances, is built.