

## Film and Propaganda: The Lessons of the Nazi Film Industry

Gary Jason  
California State University, Fullerton

One of the most philosophically fascinating uses of cinema is as a vehicle for propaganda. Granted, all mass media—books, television, music, newspaper, radio, the Internet—can be used for propaganda, that is, as tools for getting a message (anything from a specific idea to a general ideology) broadly accepted in a target audience. But, it has been argued<sup>1</sup> that film—as opposed to literature, the plastic arts, music, and the other performing arts—has a unique power as a tool for propaganda.

In this article I want to explore in more detail just what propaganda is, why it is morally problematic, and why film is uniquely suited for it. I will review an excellent old documentary on the use of cinema to propagandize—Erwin Leiser's *Germany Awake!*<sup>2</sup>—and will use it as a springboard for some broader thoughts.

Leiser was an eminent German film historian. His film explores the Nazi Party's systemic exploitation of film to create in the German people both the emotional attitudes and the particular beliefs that would make them maximally supportive of the Nazi agenda. This documentary first aired on German television more than a half-century ago, and is readily available<sup>3</sup> from a remarkable company, International Historical Films (IHF).

The estimable IHF makes major historical films from the past available on DVD. Any serious student of propagandistic cinema will find a

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Gary Jason, "Review of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*," *Liberty* (April 2007), pp. 50 and 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Germany Awake!* directed by Erwin Leiser (Erwin Leiser Film Produktion, 1968). A précis of and complete crew and casting for this and every other movie cited in this article can be found on the extremely useful International Movie Database, accessed online at: <http://www.imdb.com>.

<sup>3</sup> The website for International Historical Films can be accessed online at: <http://www.ihffilm.com>.

treasure trove of specimens available from this company, including classics of American, British, Nazi, and Communist (especially Soviet) propaganda.

Let me first offer a bit of background regarding the history of Nazi film. During the 1920s, Germany had developed one of the world's most sophisticated and successful film industries. After Adolf Hitler became Chancellor (in 1933), Joseph Goebbels—Hitler's Minister of Propaganda—moved swiftly to take control of the German film industry.<sup>4</sup> That same year, Goebbels set up the Reich Chamber of Film as the agency for purging the film industry of “undesirables” and guiding the production of “useful” movies. As the Nazis took control in 1933, about 1,500 industry players fled, including major producers (such as Erich Pommer, head of Germany's largest studio, UFA), eminent directors (such as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Douglas Sirk, and Billy Wilder) and star actors (such as Marlene Dietrich and Peter Lorre). It is worth noting that apparently Goebbels offered Fritz Lang—director of one of the greatest silent films in history, *Metropolis*—the job of head of the Nazi propaganda film unit, but Lang emigrated instead.

In 1936, Goebbels—who had earlier forced journalists into a division of his Propaganda Ministry—outlawed film criticism, and replaced it with “film observation” in which the journalist could only describe films, not critique them. Also in that year, the Nazis effectively banned foreign films, and by 1937 had nationalized the film industry entirely. At that point, the Nazi film industry had two major (and reinforcing) goals: first, to provide the German public with entertainment that was at least consistent with (and preferably supportive of) the Nazi *weltanschauung* (“worldview”); and second, to produce outright propaganda movies to create public support for their agenda.

Indeed, Goebbels set up a Nazi film school<sup>5</sup> to instruct people in the film industry how to make films harmonious with Nazi ideology, and forced everyone remaining in the industry to take classes there. The Nazis also had master censors (called “National Film Dramaturgists”) review every aspect of any film project from inception to release. And while the Nazis never nationalized the distribution channel (i.e., the theaters in which films were shown), they tightly regulated it. For example, theaters were required to show a newsreel and a documentary at every regular film showing. In 1941, when Germany declared war against the U.S.A., German theaters were forbidden to show any American movies—whether new or old.

It is important to note that while we usually think of Nazi filmmaking as primarily an exercise in propagandizing, in fact it was primarily focused on the creation of entertainment, because with the cutting off of foreign film

---

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.Wikipedia.org/Cinema\\_of\\_Germany](http://www.Wikipedia.org/Cinema_of_Germany), which has a concise and accurate overview of this period in the section “1933-1945 Nazi Germany.”

<sup>5</sup> See the article “Nazi Cinema,” accessed online at: <http://www.bbgerman.com/nazi-cinema>.

together with (after 1943) the increasingly bad war news and amount of enemy bombing, the public needed entertainment. Indeed, something like a billion tickets sold in Germany in both 1943 and 1944. During the thirteen years of the Third Reich, about 1,150 feature films were produced in Germany, or about ninety a year on average (although, again, more were made after the foreign film ban than before). Such a production level is amazing, when one thinks of the size of the country at the time (a little under 80 million citizens in 1939) and of the increasingly difficult wartime conditions of production. Of these, only about one-sixth were outright propaganda pieces. Nazi entertainment movies tended to be light musicals and war romance movies, or a combination of the two, such as *Great Love (Die grosse Liebe)* (1942).

Leiser's film provides a good overview of the clever use of film by the Nazis to promote their agenda. The documentary reviews the major Nazi propaganda films, grouped by the various specific goals the Nazis were trying to promote.

Leiser also begins the film by noting that both Hitler and Goebbels recognized the power of film as a mechanism of propaganda. Goebbels was heavily influenced by V. I. Lenin in this (as in other matters), citing Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship "Potemkin"* (1925)—scenes from which Leiser includes in his documentary—as the finest propaganda film ever made. Lenin had said, "Of all the arts, film is the most important to us [i.e., the communists]."<sup>6</sup> Goebbels obviously concurred.

Leiser notes that Goebbels's view was that the most effective propaganda movies were precisely those that were also entertaining. Leiser gives us an early illustration of this in *Dawn (Morgenrot)* (1933). This was the first film Hitler saw after becoming Chancellor, and remained one of his favorites. In the film, which is set during World War I (WWI), a German sub is sunk, and the ten men aboard face the fact that there are only eight diving suits. The crew decides that since they cannot all live, they will all stay to die together. Dialogue lines such as "I could die ten deaths for Germany—a hundred!" and "We Germans may not know much about living. But dying . . . that we certainly can do," serve to inculcate patriotism and a willingness to sacrifice for one's fellow soldiers. Leiser notes that this film was made before the Nazis took power, and one realizes this when the mother of one of the sub's crew expresses sympathy for the families of the British sailors who died—a sentiment that the Nazi Chamber of Film would never have permitted to be included in a movie.

---

<sup>6</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Directives on the Film Business," accessed online at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/jan/17.htm>.

Leiser then reviews the most influential of the Nazi propaganda films, tying them in with the goals the regime was advancing. His documentary briefly covers twenty-six such films.

Consider first the early struggle by the Nazi Party against the Communist Party for the support of German workers. (One needs to remember here that “Nazi” abbreviates the “National *Socialist* German Workers Party.”) Two films that were designed as vehicles to convince workers that they should shift support from the Communist to the Nazi Party were *Hans Westmar* (1933) and *Hitler Youth Quex* (*Hitlerjunge Quex*) (1933).

*Hans Westmar* portrays (from the Nazi perspective) the early Nazi struggle to win worker support from the Communist Party to the new, “better” form of socialism represented by the Nazis. The film takes place in the late 1920s, and is loosely based on the life of Storm Trooper Horst Wessel, who besides preaching to German workers about Nazism as the proper socialism, participated in street fighting against and assassinations of German Communists before being killed in turn by them shortly before the film appeared. In the film, the protagonist is portrayed as more of a martyred street proselytizer preaching working class solidarity rather than the thug he was in reality, because Goebbels wanted to emphasize the role the Nazis were supposed to play—now that they were in power—in “unifying” Germany. (In the movie, Westmar is killed by the communists not in retaliation for his own crimes, but because they were angry that he was successful in winning elections for the Nazi candidates.)

The film—of which Leiser’s documentary only gives us a few scenes—starts with Westmar coming to Weimar-era Berlin, and seeing communists marching through the city, singing their unpatriotic anthem, *The Internationale*. Their leader is a Jew, portrayed in gross caricature, and the Berlin Westmar meets is one with “cultural promiscuity”—such as jazz performed by black and (what we are to suppose are) Jewish musicians. There is a scene-dissolve into pictures of WWI German soldiers and their graves.

This movie was aimed (among other things) at reinforcing the classic Nazi take on the Weimar Republic: a “dissolute” government that allowed “foreign” and “degenerate” cultural influences to corrupt the innately “good,” “healthy” German culture. At the end of the film, we see the Jewish communist who incited the violence against Westmark flee the scene, but we see one of the communists—a good German worker—give the Nazi salute.

*Hitler Youth Quex* (also entitled *Our Flags Lead Us Forward*) was based on the novel of the same name by Karl Aloy Schenzinger, a book that sold about a half-million copies between 1932 when it was published and 1945 when the regime collapsed. The book (and thus the film) is loosely based on a real figure, Herbert Norkus, whose nickname, “Quex”—short for the German word quicksilver—is an allusion to his quickness at obeying orders.

The studio subtitled the film “A film about the sacrificial spirit of German youth”—a prophetic title, given the number of young Germans later to die in battle. It tells the story of a boy, Heini Volker—clearly meant to symbolize German youth—torn between his father, an old-line Communist,

and the charismatic leader of the local Hitler Youth. Heini grows up in a working-class section of Berlin during the depression. Heini's father makes him attend a communist youth camp, but the boy is shocked by the morals of the group (which allows booze and sex, something unknown to the Nazis, the viewer is thereby led to believe), and he runs away. Fortuitously, he encounters a Hitler Youth camp, and is drawn in by the participants' manifest nationalism, clean-living, and camaraderie. The story focuses on the wonderful things he learns in the organization, and his martyrdom at the hands of the jealous and zealous communists, who (in the scene Leiser's documentary shows) beat him to death for distributing Nazi flyers.

Leiser next considers a couple of films dealing with the Nazi relationship with the Communists, a relationship that changed back and forth during the reign of the regime. The first is the *Frisians in Peril (Friesenot)* (1935). This film was set on the Volga River, and is about a village overrun by the Bolsheviks. The film was pulled from distribution when the German-Soviet non-aggression pact (the Molotov-Von Ribbentrop Pact) was signed in 1939, but re-released under a new title in 1941 with the invasion of Russia.

The film is a paragon of hypocrisy, portraying in bathetic detail the oppression of the Christian Germans by the godless Bolsheviks—even as the Nazis were themselves suppressing religion and pushing dissenting ministers into concentration camps. In one of the scenes Leiser shows us, a Bolshevik tells a village elder, "There is no longer a God in Russia!"

However, this was again really a backhanded compliment by the National Socialists to the international ones. After all, when Hitler (to Stalin's utter amazement) invaded Russia, Stalin appealed to the Russians on purely nationalistic grounds (fight for Mother Russia!) even though Marxist ideology disparaged nationalistic sentiment (preferring class identification instead).

Next is the film *Bismarck* (1940), released during the period when Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, with their non-aggression pact, were busily dividing Poland between themselves. The movie shows Otto Von Bismarck as a brave patriot and lonely genius who acts only for the good of the German nation—the image Hitler had of himself, of course. In the movie, Bismarck is shown as explaining that the temporary Russian alliance will "free our hands."

However, Leiser then shows us a clip of a German newsreel from 1941 announcing that the German high command discovered a plot between London and Moscow, treacherously aimed at Germany, "forcing" the Germans to fight. The propaganda machine rapidly changed direction as needed.

Leiser returns to the use of movies to prepare young men for battle. After seeing a few more scenes from *Quex*, he shows us some of *D III 88* (1939), in which an officer lectures his men about putting aside the personal goals and feelings to commit themselves completely to the war machine. The movie is about the rescue of two young pilots by an older pilot flying an old plane with registration number "D III 88."

Another goal of Nazi propaganda was to demean democracy. For example, in *My Son, the Minister (Mein Sohn, der Herr Minister)* (1937), a

cynical French minister lectures his replacement about “swimming in the parliamentary system.” The young naïve replacement calls the Parliament “the most sublime product of democracy,” to the obvious derision of the older minister. He tells the young man that France will solve the economic recession by filling the country with retired ministers (all drawing 50,000 francs a year), and end its unemployment problem by establishing committees to discuss the problem. The Nazis meant to contrast the impotence of democracies to solve economic problems of the 1930s with the seeming ability of the Nazis to do so.

Of course, an overarching goal of the Nazi propaganda machine was to reinforce the historical narrative (its official myth, so to speak) that the party used to justify its rise to and then its authoritarian control of power. According to the story—let’s call it the “Nazi Historical Narrative,” or the NHN—the Nazis took over because near the end of WWI, a weak and treacherous parliament, pressured by a communist revolution (the “November Revolution”), sold out the German military. This gave rise to a corrupt, feckless, and “degenerate” democratic regime (the Weimar Republic), which the righteously indignant people dumped for the security and prosperity they knew the Nazis would bring.

The NHN was, naturally, duplicitous to the core. To simplify the complicated history greatly, the German military essentially ran the German war effort in WWI, but as the war drew to a close in mid-1918, the German alliance was losing. The military, which had resisted negotiating for peace, suddenly turned power over to the parliament in late 1918, in essence creating a weak democratic government and telling the leaders that the war was lost. As the weak parliamentary government took power, it faced a nascent revolution from the left. By January 1919, the German Communist Party was attempting a revolt. The result of this turmoil was the Weimar Republic, along with the “Stab in the Back Legend” promulgated by the Nazis to the effect that the soldiers could have won WWI, but were betrayed by a combination of weak liberal democrats and communist revolutionaries. The Nazis won power in the early thirties, and didn’t relinquish it until the bitter end.

Leiser shows us a number of scenes from several films that advanced and reinforced the NHN. There is the aforementioned film *D III 88*, where we see a scene in which an aviator decries having to fight on after the politicians have sold out him and his fellow.

The film that most directly pushed the NHN was *For Merit (Pour le Merite)* (1938), meant overtly to be the official story of how the German Air Force struggled between the end of WWI and Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. It not-so-covertly pushed the Stabbed in the Back Legend specifically, and the NHN in general. The protagonist of the movie is an aviator named Prank, the winner of Germany’s highest military award in WWI, the Pour le Merite (colloquially called the “Blue Max”). The award—which wasn’t a medal in the usual sense, but rather a symbol of acceptance into a prestigious military order—originated in the mid-eighteenth century and was given until the end of WWI. It was especially coveted by German pilots during WWI.

At the outset of the film, the war hero Prank (along with his other comrades) is forced into civilian work, because the Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to shut down its air force (which had been powerfully effective in WWI). He decides patriotically to open a fighter school with the help of his comrades, utilizing an old fighter plane left over from the war. Leftists—perfidious pacifists intent on keeping Germany impotent—burn the fighter plane, and when Prank fights them he is arrested for inciting violence and put on trial. Although he is let go, he leaves the country out of hatred for its weak and unpatriotic democratic government. When Hitler comes to power (and reinstates the draft), Prank—in a later scene in the documentary—returns to become the Colonel of a squadron (named after Baron von Richthofen, the famous WWI ace fighter pilot).

The scenes we see are powerful. In one, the hero Prank gives a speech about how detestable the government is, and what a miracle it would be if men can be found to overthrow it. Another scene shows two ex-soldiers each recognizing the secret Nazi pin the other carries, smiling at each other when they do.

In another scene, Prank—during his trial—rails against democracy, saying to the judges that he doesn't care what they do to him, though they should spare his comrades, who acted under his orders. He shouts, "We must rebuild the German state with a front-line soldier's ideas." This is of course meant to point to Hitler, and the film openly celebrates the Nazi decision to rebuild the military, impose the draft, and rebuild the air force under General Hermann Goering.

Another vehicle for pushing the NHN was *Venus on Trial* (*Venus vor Gericht*) (1941), which portrayed the Weimar Republic as a cesspool of "sin and chaos." Scenes show Orthodox Jews milling around, scantily clad dancers dancing "decadently" to jazz (again, played by black musicians), newspapers with headlines about sensational crimes and suicides, one headline noting that the Nazis are growing in numbers.

In another scene, we see a German sculptor (of neo-classical statues, the embodiment of Nazi taste in art) who is visited by a debt collector to seize his belongings. When the debt collector discovers that the sculptor is a member of the Nazi party, he says to the sculptor that he can find nothing to seize, and the men exchange Nazi salutes. The film also pushes the idea that modern art is "Jewish" art, and "degenerate." Some of the statues featured in the film as examples of "degenerate" art and shown in a contemporaneous Nazi-organized exhibition of this sort of art, were ironically recently uncovered,<sup>7</sup> buried in Berlin.

---

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Rauchwerger, "Berlin Displays pre-WWII 'Degenerate' Art," *Haaretz*, November 10, 2010, accessed online at: <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/berlin-displays-pre-wwii-degenerate-art-1.323857>.

Finally, Leiser shows us a few scenes from *Refugees (Fluchtlinge)* (1933). The movie was produced before the Nazis came to power, and was released the year they did. Like *Morgenrot*, while it was not a product of the Goebbels-controlled film industry, it had themes the Nazis embraced, and was the first film to which they awarded the state prize. The movie is about the plight of the Volga German refugees at the hands of the Russian Communists in 1928 Manchuria. The Communists are shown as vicious and racist toward the German refugees (remember, the film was made six years before the Nazi-Soviet Pact). The German refugees are saved by a strong, blond, decisive German leader. He rails against the Weimar Republic, calling it “November Germany” in allusion to the November Revolution. He rescues the villagers after getting their unquestioning obedience. This was clearly meant to get the audience to view Hitler in those terms.

Next, Leiser shows us scenes from a movie—*Homecoming (Heimkehr)* (1941)—intended (as was *Refugees* and *Frisians in Peril*) to promote the Nazi goal of repatriation of all foreign Germans, but in the case of *Homecoming*, also to promote their specific claim that the Polish persecution of Germans was the cause of Germany’s invasion of Poland. In one scene, we see a young German woman pursued by Poles, throwing stones at her. A repulsive man jumps out, grabs her, and tears off her necklace. The vicious crowd then stones her to death.

In another scene, we see innocent ethnic Germans languishing in a Polish prison camp, with one young woman saying, “At home in Germany, they’re no longer weak. They’re very concerned about us.” She asks with pathos why they shouldn’t be allowed to return home, and how nice it will be to have only Germans as neighbors. She says, “When you enter a store, you won’t hear Yiddish or Polish.” Why, even the birds will sing in German! The scene ends with the prisoners singing a patriotic song. In the next scene from the film, we see the triumphant return of the Germans into Germany, passing a huge poster of Hitler. In light of what the Germans did to Poland during the war, these scenes are beyond ironic—they are literally stomach-turning.

Next, Leiser shows us movies intended to give German citizens good feelings about combat, and cover up the ugly side of war. He shows us a scene from *Bismarck*, in which a key battle from the earlier Austro-Prussian war is shown as a “chess match,” with no fighting troops even visible.

In the film *Victory in the West (Sieg im Westen)* (1941), the German war-machine is shown as invincible. In one scene, we see Nazi soldiers at a checkpoint, as the announcer intones, “The German soldier stands on the Swiss border. Tomorrow the war is history.”

Again, in the film *Stukas* (1941), we get “the Nazi airman’s view of war,” in which the enemy is only a small target barely visible on the Stuka bomb sites. As jolly Stuka pilots cheerfully dive to bomb the enemy, they sing their song: “They strike with their claws, the opponent right in the heart, we are the black Hussars of the sky. The Stukas, the Stukas, the Stukas.” The cheerful ditty ends with “To England, to England, till England is defeated.”

Alas for the Stukas, it never was.

Then there is the strange flick, *The Crew of the Dora* (*Bestzung Dora*) (1943). The movie concerns a love triangle involving two Luftwaffe crew and a pretty young lady that gets resolved when the men fight together as a team. In the scene Leiser shows us, one of the men promises the young lady that they can settle in the East after the war. (The movie was canned the year after its release as the Russians advanced on the Eastern front.)

Leiser also shows us some scenes from a war film, *Request-Concert* (*Wunschkonzert*) (1940). The plot of the movie involves a common Nazi trope: the individual sacrifices himself for his comrades. In the film, a soldier shows his fellow soldiers the way back to safety by playing a church organ during the battle. He saves them, but pays with his life.

Leiser turns next to the Nazi propaganda directed at creating anti-Semitism—or more exactly, intensifying the anti-Semitism that was historically a strong force in German society—starting at the time Jews were being made to wear Stars of David patches and being deported to the concentration camps. He picks probably the most effective such movie, *Jew Suss* (*Jud Suss*) (1940), based loosely on the life of a Jew, Joseph Suss Oppenheimer, in the Court of Duke Karl Alexander of Wurttemberg during the eighteenth century. The grossness of the stereotyping and the viciousness of the attack make the film almost painful to watch. The Jewish characters were all played by non-Jewish Germans, who had to be certified as such.

This film was arguably the most perniciously powerful of the four major anti-Semitic propaganda movies produced under the Nazi regime, the other three being *The Rothschilds* (*Die Rothschilds*) (1940), *The Eternal Jew* (*Der ewige Jude*) (1940), and *Robert and Bertram* (*Robert und Bertram*) (1939). It was inarguably the most popular—indeed, it was a blockbuster, selling twenty million tickets. It was shown repeatedly to the police, concentration camp guards, and SS troops.

No doubt its success was in great measure due to the work done by its skillful director, Veit Harlan, who, like the other talented director who worked with the Nazis, Leni Riefenstahl, was tainted by his work. Indeed, after the war, he had the dubious distinction of being the only film director ever accused of crimes against humanity. After three trials, he was given a light sentence, when he persuaded the judges that the film was really dictated by the party and he tried to “moderate” its portrayal of the Jews.<sup>8</sup> In viewing the film today, one wonders what it is exactly he “moderated.”

I won’t review the plot in detail, as it is well discussed elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Essentially, it is about a profligate Duke who can’t get all of the money he

---

<sup>8</sup> The case of these two directors, so obviously talented and so inclined to work with the Nazis, who then faced stigmatization after the war, are explored in two excellent documentaries: *Harlan: In the Shadow of Jew Suss*, directed by Felix Moeller (Blueprint Film 2008) and *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, directed by Ray Müller (Arte 1993).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the Wikipedia article on Jud Suss, accessed online at:

wants from the governing council, and so borrows it from the avaricious, devious, lecherous, and ambitious money-lender (Joseph Suss Oppenheimer). Suss seduces the Duke by loaning him fabulous jewels and money to do such things as open an opera, but insists on the Duke's eliminating the ban on Jews in the city. When the Duke complies, Suss shaves off his beard and comes to the city. The film portrays this as the mistake that leads to all of the subsequent trouble.

Once he is an insider, Suss controls the Duke and uses the power selfishly—corrupting the Duke by procuring women for him, getting the power to tax, and then grinding the people for ever more onerous taxes. He makes the Duke and himself rich, and gets the Duke to allow Jews generally to enter the city, allowing them to prosper at the expense of non-Jews.

The plot also involves Suss's lust for a gentile girl, Dorotea, whom he eventually seduces under the promise to free her husband. Dorotea drowns herself out of shame at her "defilement." Goebbels pushed Harlan to let his wife, the Swedish beauty Kristina Soderbaum—who played the ideal Aryan heartthrob in a number of films—portray Dorotea. (Remember that the Nuremberg Laws prohibited the "racial pollution" of Aryan blood.) Suss is tried for treason, theft, and for having sex with a Christian woman. He is executed, and the Jews are expelled from the city, as a citizen intones, "May the citizens of other states never forget this lesson."

As testament to the power of the film, after the war, the West German government tried to destroy all copies of it. To this day, the film cannot legally be purchased or screened in Germany and Austria. Sales of the DVD are also prohibited in France and Italy.

The scenes Leiser shows us give the flavor of all this. In one, two Jewish men talk about the Duke's initial visit with Suss, rightly speculating that it is to borrow money. One of them says that Suss should give it to the Duke, "so we can take, take, take."

In the next scene, we see the Duke gape at Suss's cabinet full of opulent jewelry, as he gets drawn into Suss's scheme. When Suss's employee asks him whether he really will cut off his beard and dress like a gentile to get into the Duke's city, Suss says, "I open the gate for all of you to enter. You'll wear velvet and silks, maybe tomorrow, maybe the day after."

Of course, when the Nazis talked about making Germany "Jewish free," they didn't mean to expel the Jews, but to kill them. This required acclimatizing the public with the idea of the state murder of targeted groups. A crucial propaganda film for advancing this campaign was the melodrama *I Accuse (Ich klage an)* (1941).

This film is about a doctor's decision to help his wife—who is suffering from advanced multiple sclerosis—to die by giving her an overdose of an unspecified drug. He is put on trial; at trial he argues that the suffering

---

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jud\\_Süß\\_\(1940\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jud_Süß_(1940_film)).

have a right to die, and accuses his critics of being cruel for trying to stop assisted suicides in these cases. The Nazis, of course, deliberately obscured the differences between allowing the ill to commit suicide or allowing doctors to help them do it, on the one hand, and euthanasia, on the other (the involuntary killing of patients deemed terminally ill and incapable of choice), along with eugenic programs to kill those deemed not having lives worth living, such as (from the Nazi view) the mentally ill or mentally deficient, or people deemed to be deformed—and from there, to groups deemed to be racially inferior.

The scenes we see show the doctor administering the lethal dose to his wife, who dies in his arms while saying, “I feel so peaceful, so happy.” As the narrator reminds us, while the Nazis did indeed start with the terminally ill, they moved on from there to target the mentally deficient and the mentally ill, and from there to political enemies and ethnic groups they took to be inferior.

We also see the discussion among the jurors at the end of the trial about whether allowing doctors to assist suicide for those in great pain is morally permissible, and one of the doctors reminds the other jurors that this shouldn’t be forced, “But if a patient asks a doctor for death as a last favor, it should be permitted.” When another asks whether a doctor by himself should have the power to commit euthanasia, the first replies, no, “There should be commissions, panels of doctors.” (Death panels, so to speak.) Another draws the conclusion that it should be decided by the state who to kill, by passing laws governing these panels.

Leiser then returns to the theme of the justification of the war against the British. He contrasts a German film, *The Higher Order (Der höhere Befehl)* (1935), which celebrates the Anglo-Prussian alliance against Napoleon with the propaganda film *The Rothchilds*, which portrays the Duke of Wellington as a dissolute womanizer and a fickle ally. The Prussians are presented as the real victors at Waterloo.

In *Uncle Kruger (Ohm Kruger)* (1941), we see the British maltreating the Boers (the Dutch settlers in South Africa) during the Boer War. The British high command is shown frankly saying that the war is all about increasing its empire, and that they need to set up concentration camps to separate the women and children from the men. Regarding concentration camps, the Germans never showed their own in any of their movies, but several of their films show the British concentration camps in the Boer War. In one scene, we see Boer women and children file grimly into the camp. We see a woman complain about the rotten meat they are forced to eat. When a British doctor expresses sympathy, a British officer (who strongly resembles Winston Churchill) berates him and threatens to send him to the front. When one of the women shouts at the officer that he is a butcher, he draws his pistol and shoots her dead. Leiser points out that this scene is very similar to a key scene from the Soviet propaganda movie *The Battleship “Potemkin.”*

Leiser also shows us scenes from a movie based upon the life of the brutal German colonialist Karl Peters. In the eponymous propaganda bioflick,

*Carl Peters* (1941), we see Peters explaining to the German Parliament (the Reichstag) that Germany needs colonies, just like Britain's. He shouts at the politicians, "Did you ever realize that when the world's lands were divided and distributed, the German nation from the fifteenth century onward remained empty-handed? Germany needs colonies!" The crowd applauds, while the feckless parliament is angry. He adds, "I brought you East Africa, but we need more. . . . We can't conquer from our desks, but only with men who are strong and confident and don't become cowards when confronted by England."

In 1897, after a hearing in the Reichstag, the real Karl Peters was dishonorably discharged from his post as Imperial High Commissioner in East Africa for brutality, including the execution of his concubine as well as a servant with whom she was having an affair. Hitler rehabilitated Peters in the year after taking power. In a chilling scene in the movie pertaining to this, we see Peters confronted by a member of the Reichstag for hanging people without a trial. Peters stands with arms crossed, in a posture very reminiscent of Hitler when delivering a tirade, and says, "If I wouldn't have hung two blacks as a warning then a rebellion in England would have erupted! And then hundreds of German farmers would have been massacred."

Leiser notes that during the entire Nazi reign, not one movie appeared showing Hitler or having an actor portraying him. Instead, the Nazi propaganda machine used prior historical figures to portray Hitler favorably. For example, from the biofiction *Bismarck*, the parliamentary opponents of Bismarck's use of power are shown as mere dreamers or worse, one of whom says, "We are the proud people of poets and philosophers." To this Bismarck replies, "Don't you see the irony in 'poets and philosophers'? While you dream, others are dividing up the world."

In *The Great King* (*Der grosse Konig*) (1942), directed by Viet Harlan, the historical Frederic the Great is portrayed as a precursor of Hitler, portraying the relation between Frederic and his generals in the way that Hitler saw his own relationship with his high command: a soaring military genius, pressed by timid generals who want to sue for peace. He takes command back from the short-sighted weaklings.

The narrator makes a fascinating point following these scenes, reading from Goebbels's diaries: watching this film made Hitler believe in his own infallibility. Hitler's major military moves were arguably a big reason for his country's losing the war. If so, this all brings new meaning to the old saying, "Don't fall for your own propaganda."

The film made nearest in time to the end of the war was *Kolberg* (1945), another Veit Harlan film. Unlike earlier historical war films, this movie portrayed a famous battle in bloody detail—Napoleon's forces trying to take a Prussian city. And the message it pushed—which Leiser conveys in several scenes—is one of resisting to the last. For example, in one scene, a general is talking to a townsman, to whom he says that they will have to surrender. The man—meant to typify the solid, patriotic, ordinary German—replies, "You weren't born in Kolberg. You were ordered here. But we grew

up here. We know every store, every corner, every house. We won't give up. Even if we have to dig with our fingernails to hold on to our town, we won't let go. They'll have to hack off our hands or beat us to death, one by one." The message is clear: fight until the end. "Burial in ruins rather than surrender" is a message that cost the lives of God only knows how many Germans.

Leiser ends this admirable documentary by showing clips from the musical war-romance *Great Love*, in which the lead actress sings "It's not the end of the world" along with her audience of German soldiers. The documentary goes silent as scenes of the devastation in Germany appear, with shots of a German soldier—a proper, blond Aryan one—shaking his bowed head.

Let me make a few critical points about Leiser's documentary. First, there are—to be honest—continuity problems in places, where it is unclear which film is being shown or what propaganda theme exactly is being advanced. A better organization of the material presented—say, by message being conveyed and in order of importance—would have been easier to follow.

Moreover, given the short length of the film (only eighty-five minutes), his attempt to cover the thirteen years of Nazi propaganda and to discuss twenty-six feature films inevitably results in a certain shallowness. In some cases we may see only a brief scene of a movie, with no discussion of its plot or historical subject.

Conversely, there are some movies one would want to have been included, such as *Robert and Bertram* (1939). This was a perfect example of Goebbels's notion of propaganda being disguised in an entertainment movie. The film is (on the surface) a light-hearted musical comedy starring two actors who somewhat resemble Laurel and Hardy. The characters are shown as lovable, charmingly crooked rogues, but the targets of their con games are grotesquely and malignantly stereotyped Jews. In addition, he could have contrasted it with *The Eternal Jew*, which was overt—not to say blatant—propaganda and it was a box-office flop.

The documentary's shallowness is pardonable (if problematic), when one remembers that Leiser's documentary is just a quick overview of a deep subject, not a systematic exploration of it. Fair enough. I should note as well that he also authored a book on the subject, which of course goes more deeply into the subject.<sup>10</sup>

However, more disappointing to me was the lack of any serious analysis of the key concept of "propaganda." This is a very tricky term, so that some conceptual analysis is in order here. What exactly is propaganda? Is it inherently bad? Is film a particularly effective vehicle for the dissemination of propaganda? If so, why?

---

<sup>10</sup> Erwin Leiser, *Nazi Cinema* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974).

Let's start with the notion of propaganda itself. To begin with, it involves deliberation—the propagandist intends to convey a message. This point is not made clearly enough in Leiser's documentary.

Consider his discussion of *Morgenrot*. Granted, the film effectively pushed the attitude that a “good German” is one who faces death well and selflessly. Now, set aside for the moment the stubborn fact that, generally speaking, throughout most of human history, that attitude—selflessness and courage in the face of death—has traditionally been considered virtuous. Given how many millions of “good” Germans the Nazis led to death—not to mention how many more millions of good non-Germans the Nazis led the “good” Germans to slaughter—that was arguably a bad attitude to promote.

But was it Nazi propaganda, or for that matter, any propaganda at all? It was a privately produced film, made before the Nazi party held power. The filmmakers don't seem to have been Nazi sympathizers. Of the two directors, one—Vernon Sewell—was a British director who went on to make numerous films in Britain up through 1971. The other director was the Austrian Gustav Ucicky, who was hired by UFA Film Company in 1929. While during the war period he directed several propaganda pictures, it seems to have been out of a desire to keep working, and Ucicky kept working in the industry after the war. Indeed, *Morgenrot* was awarded Best Foreign Film for 1933 by an American film organization, the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures.<sup>11</sup>

To put the point provocatively, if I do a film that portrays, say, blue-collar workers in a very positive light, and the communists show it to their followers, and proclaim loudly how wonderful it is, does that make me a communist propagandist? Surely not. At a minimum, the promulgation or propagation of a belief (attitude, desire, goal, value, or whatever) by a film (or any other medium) is propaganda only if it is intentional on the part of its creators to further the promulgation of that belief.

More exactly, even if the creator of a film (or again, any other medium) created it to promulgate a belief that happens to be part of the agenda or ideology of some group G, we can rightly say that the creator created propaganda, but *not* that his film was G propaganda, unless the film's creator was a member of G or was at least supportive of most of G's agenda (a “fellow traveler,” as the phrase goes).

More troublesome is this: What *bad* message, exactly, is presented in the clips from *Morgenrot* that Leiser shows us? Is courage bad? Or selflessness? Or solidarity with one's fellow fighters? Isn't propaganda the propagation of false, indeed, perniciously false beliefs?

The problem here is in part one of linguistic evolution. In times past, “propaganda” had the neutral meaning of simply disseminating information to further an idea or cause (religion, ideology, or the like). In fact, the term comes from the Church's Sacred Congregation for Propagating the Faith. But

---

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.nbrmp.org/about/history>.

after the twentieth century, “propaganda” has come to have the connotation of propagating an idea or idea-complex by manipulative, mendacious means.

There is another connotation to the meaning of “propaganda” that Leiser’s documentary mentions. It notes that Goebbels felt that the most effective propaganda film was entertainment film, presumably because people were unaware that they were being fed a message, and so less apt to fight it. Some have made the distinction between “overt” and “covert” propaganda here.<sup>12</sup> Is there a morally relevant difference between the two?

In order to get around the various connotations of “propaganda,” I will use the neutral term “marketing” to mean the intentional attempt to get some audience (be it people generally, or a specific target group) to comply with the desires of the marketer (or the marketer’s employer). Marketing involves conveying a message, and thus necessarily involves a medium: oral presentation, magazines, newspapers, fliers, posters, books, music, Internet pages/sites, radio shows, television shows, and movies.

We can distinguish between two main kinds of marketing, depending upon just what it is that the marketer is trying to get the audience to accept. Economic marketing (i.e., advertising and sales) aims at getting the audience to buy some product (i.e., some good or service). Advertising aimed at getting you to buy a certain brand of car is an example of economic marketing.

Epistemic marketing is marketing aimed at getting the audience to accept a belief or set of beliefs. That can be the marketing of a belief, theory, cause, religion, political institution (such as a government), political ideology, or social/ethical value system. You can market, for example, the belief that the world will end soon, the theory of anthropogenic global warming, the cause of Irish home rule, the Catholic religion, communism, or natural-rights ethics.

The marketer may be working solely for himself/herself, or working as an agent for some other person, group, or organization. As I see it, marketing of any sort ranges on a scale from the perfectly good (or moral, or “clean”) to the perfectly evil (or immoral, or “dirty”).

Moreover, I think that the criteria by which we judge the ethical status of any marketing are fairly clear, at least in general terms. Borrowing from business ethics, the criteria include at least the following six major factors. I will list these, and illustrate with cases from economic marketing.

*Transparency of intention:* Other things being equal, the more the marketer makes it clear to the target audience that his message is intended to make them do or believe what the employer wishes, the more ethical the marketing. A salesman who says, “Hi, I sell Fords and I want to try to convince you that the car for you is on this lot!” is perfectly transparent. Subliminal advertising (such as when specific products are placed in the hands

---

<sup>12</sup> The nice survey in Wikipedia (under “propaganda”) makes this distinction; see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propaganda>.

of famous actors in the movies) is perfectly opaque, and accordingly ethically dubious.

*Rationality of audience:* Other things being equal, we expect marketers to direct their messages to audiences capable of understanding them and making rational choices. A salesman trying to sell a Ford to a normally educated adult customer is targeting the rational. An insurance salesman trying to sell an annuity to a patient suffering from advanced Alzheimer's disease in a dementia care facility would be targeting the clearly *non compos mentis*, and the sales pitch is accordingly unethical.

*Logicity of appeal:* Other things being equal, we expect marketers to avoid sophistry. A salesman selling a Ford by adumbrating its major qualities is perfectly logical. A salesman who employs a false analogy, such as comparing his minivan with (say) another company's SUV, is being sophistical, and accordingly the marketing is unethical.

*Avoidance of emotional manipulation:* Emotional manipulation usually involves the irrelevant association of products with emotions. So a doctor who tries to convince a patient to give up smoking by showing him the statistics on smoking and lung cancer is not manipulative. A marketer who pushes a brand of vodka by merely associating it in picture ads with models in bikinis is being manipulative, making the marketing ethically dubious.

*Truthfulness of message:* Other things being equal, we expect marketers not to employ fraud, misrepresentation, or lies in selling their product. A salesman who tells the customer that the car has 50,000 miles on it, when it does, is being truthful. One who makes the same claim but in fact himself turned back the odometer reading from 150,000 to 50,000 miles is committing fraud, so that the marketing is accordingly immoral.

*Legitimacy of product:* Other things being equal, we expect a marketer to be selling an ethical product. A salesman trying to sell a Ford is selling something *prima facie* ethical to sell. A hit-man trying to convince a jealous husband to employ him to kill the other's unfaithful wife and her lover is inducing an angry person to participate in murder, so that the marketing would accordingly be evil.

No doubt there is a lot of disagreement about what sorts of things are immoral products, but that is tangential to the point here. The point is that these criteria enable us to explain more specifically what was profoundly wicked about the Nazi propaganda movies (or any malevolent propaganda, for that matter).

For example, Goebbels's preference for using entertainment film in order to propagate Nazi ideology shows that he did not want transparency, and a film like *Die Grosse Liebe* is unethical for that reason. A film like *Hitler Youth Quex* is profoundly evil for (among other reasons) targeting young boys to adopt an ideology, before they are rationally equipped to think through the reasons for and against it.

Then again, a film like *Uncle Kruger* is morally repellant for its illogical analogy between the concentration camps the British had during the Boer War (which held about 100,000 people, and were meant to stop terrorist

attacks; they certainly were not extermination camps), with the Germans' own concentration camps (which were specifically designed to exterminate mass numbers of people—11 million in all).

From the angle of the criterion of truthfulness, films such as *D III 88* and *For Merit* were morally disgusting for perpetuating the “stabbed in the back” myth. A film like *I Accuse* is immoral for (among other reasons) the fact that it promotes a morally repugnant “product,” namely, the state killing of people the state regards as having no value. *I Accuse* is also morally repellent for its illogical analogy between suicide (which is voluntary) and state organized euthanasia (which is not).

Not only do these criteria help to explain which films constitute propaganda in the perfectly correct pejorative sense (i.e., evil epistemic marketing), but they help to explain why film is so susceptible to being a medium for propaganda.

Consider first transparency. Film can hide epistemic messages especially easily, for just the reason Goebbels had in mind. You can hide the message in an entertainment movie. Film—unlike the printed text—is inherently an observational medium. The viewer passively receives images, and rarely critically evaluates those images.

Again, consider the criterion of rationality of the audience. Movies are powerfully effective at communicating with children, most especially children who are too young or too uneducated to read critically. Precisely because of its observational nature, movies are especially effective at illogical persuasion. No careful logical reasoning is presented in film, and worse, while being bombarded by rapidly changing images and sounds, the mind cannot critically follow complex arguments.

Next consider truthfulness. Since film is observational at its core, it has an inherent verisimilitude. Seeing is believing, as we rightly so say. For example, in *Bismarck*, the viewer *sees* Bismarck saying that this treaty with the Russians will help the Germans to find time to prepare for war, and so one is inclined to think that it actually happened that way.

Of course, the magic spell cast by a successful propaganda movie can be blocked or undone by countervailing information. A film that presents a false narrative can be rebutted by critical reviews, discussion in classrooms, and news stories, and it can be lampooned in satirical send-ups (parodies). For this reason, authoritarian regimes typically marry propaganda with the state control of education and censorship (or outright control) of the news media.

The power of film as a tool for propaganda is real, as both Lenin and Goebbels well understood, and is amply demonstrated in this valuable documentary. Spelling out precisely why this is so, however, is philosophically quite tricky. I have tried to advance the investigation in this article, but I realize that there remains a great deal more to be said.

