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Moralism about Propaganda

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Clark University

ABSTRACT. What is propaganda? What makes it morally subversive? And does the fact that it is morally subversive affect its value as a work of art? This paper characterizes a central feature of propaganda: it is emotionally manipulative. On the basis of this I argue that ethicism more plausibly applies to propaganda than to other forms of art. Ethicism is the claim that relevant moral defects also make a work of art aesthetically defective, that is make the work less valuable as a work of art. I point out an important difference between propaganda and other works of art by showing that a problem raised against the merited response argument for ethicism does not to apply when we apply the argument to propaganda.

The film program at my university recently put on a screening of Felix Moeller's *Forbidden Films*. The documentary collects and discusses examples of films still restricted in Germany, that is films that cannot be screened publicly without a permit. Some of the propaganda clips are blatantly outrageous, others are subtly subversive. And all of them, in the context in which they are set, evoke moral disgust in the audience. They give the viewer a good glimpse of the workings of propaganda. For works of propaganda, maybe more than for any other works of art, it is clear that they are morally problematic. And, maybe more than for any other works of art, our moral discomfort with propaganda interferes with our engagement with them as works of art. Watching the clips in *Forbidden Films* I resist: I resist feelings of admiration and sympathy for the doctor who kills his wife suffering from multiple sclerosis (*Ich klage an*), I resist feeling appalled by Joseph Süß Oppenheimer (*Jud Süß*), and I resist being drawn in by the cinematography and by the catchiness of the music used to portray the life of Luftwaffe pilots (*Stukas*). And not only do I resist but I hold that mustering this kind of resistance is my moral obligation. The entire

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experience is an uncomfortable struggle: one that cannot be described as an aesthetic experience. This paper seeks to explain this kind of resistance.

More technically speaking the paper has two main objectives. 1) It gives an account of propaganda art and 2) it argues that ethicism more plausibly applies to propaganda than to other forms of art. Ethicism, as proposed by Berys Gaut (1998 and 2007), claims that relevant moral defects in a work of art also constitute aesthetic defects. Gaut argues for this claim by introducing what he labeled the “merited response argument.” A number of discussions have since criticized the argument. I am not trying to address all criticisms of the argument in this paper. But I want to show that the merited response argument is more plausible when applied to propaganda art in at least one respect. And I thereby want to shed light on the way in which propaganda is morally problematic and aesthetically defective.

I. The Context

Moralism, as I understand it here, is the claim that moral defects in a work of art are aesthetically relevant because they constitute or at least can constitute an aesthetic defect. One might also want to say that holding moralism means endorsing the complementary claim that a moral merit in a work constitutes or at least can constitute an aesthetic merit. But the latter claim has drawn much less attention in the discussion. This paper will focus on moral and aesthetic defects as well. Moralism traditionally opposes autonomism, the view that moral flaws are irrelevant to the aesthetic value of a work. It has more recently also been contrasted with immoralism, which argues that a moral defect in a work can constitute an aesthetic merit.

There are more and less strong claims that fall under moralism understood in the way just outlined. One might hold that aesthetic value is reducible to a specific kind of moral value. The theory Leo Tolstoy puts forth in *What is Art?*, for example, suggests this view. Taking up the distinctions put forth by Gaut, we could label this view ‘radical moralism.’ Gaut’s own view, in contrast, merely claims that a work is aesthetically flawed in so

far as it is relevantly morally flawed. On this view other properties can be and generally are relevant to the aesthetic value of a work as a whole. For example, the morally problematic view endorsed in a propaganda poster can diminish its value as a work of art while the perfect composition of elements in it set to evoke an emotion can at the same time boost its overall aesthetic merit. Gaut stresses that ethicism, as he defends it, does not seek to reduce aesthetic value to moral value. Noël Carroll has argued that we should endorse an even weaker form of moralism: a work or art can be aesthetically flawed insofar as it is morally flawed. Carroll focuses on narrative art and the cases where a moral defect does become morally relevant on his account are cases in which our moral resistance prevents us from becoming immersed in the narrative. As said above, this paper is concerned with with ethicism and whether it is true with regard to propaganda: do the ways in which propaganda is morally problematic constitute an aesthetic flaw?

2. Propaganda: Moral Defects

What makes propaganda morally flawed? In most cases propaganda advocates a morally problematic message. We also assume that it is characteristically manipulative: it is not transparent about conveying messages or evoking emotions, and/or it is not transparent about the existence of perspectives opposing the perspective the propaganda itself takes. This is surely not a complete analysis of the nature of propaganda art. But it should give us a good start on understanding typical cases.

Works of art often open a dialog with our own experiences. They draw on experiences we have had with their subject matter, either first hand or through others. Seeing a version of Munch's painting *The Sick Child* can make us reflect on when we ourselves have gone through grief and the loss of someone we love. Reading Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* can point us to how we ourselves have experienced or experience coming of age. And we might draw on our own experiences as or with women of color and women in general in reading Zora Hurston's *Mules and Men*. In many cases drawing on our own experience can enhance our understanding of and response to the a work of art (though there might also be some cases in which drawing on our own experience interferes with a proper understanding of the

work). And art can open new perspectives to change our experience of our own lives in the future. It is typical for works of propaganda that they prevent a dialog between the work and our own experiences instead of encouraging it. It is this kind of manipulativeness that the remainder of the paper is concerned with. I will first spend some more time explaining and illustrating this manipulativeness it through examples.

Propaganda seeks to evoke broad emotional patterns, for example, of admiration, pride, fear, and disgust. These emotions are not supposed to point us to our own past and future experiences. Instead propaganda aims at overpowering, concealing, and distorting the range of what we feel when we encounter what it portrays. It makes a genuine emotional response to whatever it portrays impossible.

The first two images show a poster and a magazine add for the 1941 propaganda film *Stukas* [FIGURES 1 & 2].

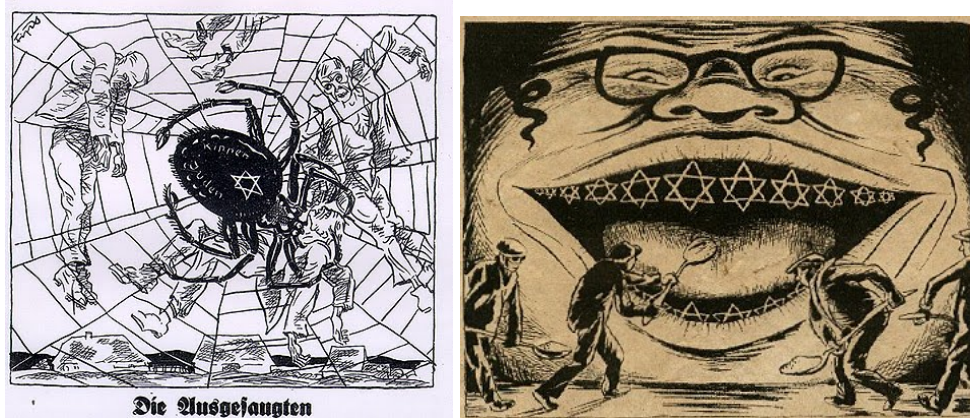


FIGURES 1 & 2. A poster and a magazine add for the movie *Stukas*, 1941.

The film portrays the lives of three squadrons of pilots in the Luftwaffe who fly dive-bombers (Stukas). Their combat experience as portrayed in the film is characterized by toughness, confidence, camaraderie, and joyfulness. It makes ample use of music. One scene shows a shell-shocked character reacquiring his motivation to fight during a performance of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* at the opera festival in Bayreuth. And in another the camera zooms in on the faces of pilots singing the "Stuka song" while flying a dangerous mission against England. The film evokes emotions of pride, admiration, and joy that seem absurd to a contemporary audience. The emotions the films seeks to evoke are well illustrated in a review published after the film came out: "Sheer enthusiasm transfigures the danger. Faithful comradeship proves its power when one comrade after another, after an emergency landing has to be bailed out middle of the enemy. Out of this comradeship the life of each one continuously receives a stream of power. Faith takes away the fight of death. The emotion becomes more intense in the festive heights of Hölderlin's hymns and Wagnerian music."¹ The experience of being in combat in 1941 and in particular of being part of the failed air campaign against Britain was surely a different one: one characterized by chaos and heavy losses. The propaganda film seeks to define the image its audience has of the German fighter. Unlike other works on the topic of war it does not seek a dialog with the experience of someone in battle or talking to someone who has been in battle. Instead it seeks to replace the images evoked by these experiences with a fiction that can now be the target of pride and admiration.

The emotions *Jud Süß* (1940) seeks to evoke are a different set of emotions: fear, anger, and disgust. Turning the intentions of Lion Feuchtwanger's novel that served as a basis on its head, the film portrays Jews as ruthless, scheming, power hungry, rapist capitalists (or alternatively filthy immigrants). The propaganda images below from the Nazi tabloid *Der Stürmer* (the first from 1930 and the second from 1938) seek to appeal to the same set of emotions [FIGURES 3 & 4].

¹ Günther Sawatzki as quoted by Giesen 2003, p. 79.



FIGURES 3 & 4. From *Der Stürmer*, 1930 & 1938.

Jud Süß is a more well-known piece of propaganda than Stukas. This is probably because it is hard to beat the viciousness of the emotions Jud Süß evokes. But the two films are strategically similar. Both seek to conceal, override, and distort the audience's everyday experiences with what the films portray. Jud Süß on orders of Himmler was deliberately shown to prepare the SS and police for actions against the Jewish population and to prepare locals for their deportation.²

So far I have focused on Nazi propaganda discussed in *Forbidden Films*. But the pattern of emotional manipulateness applies more broadly. Looking at contemporary works of propaganda, for example, we can find the same strategy. The last two images show recent posters appealing to xenophobic sentiments [FIGURES 5 & 6].

Both posters evoke feelings of fear and insecurity. They conjure up an image of a foreigner as impossible to understand and as a threat to our autonomy and identity. Of course our own interaction with foreigners will give us a different picture. Most of us interact with foreigners on a regular basis and our relationships with them are not hard to understand. On the contrary: they are a deep part of who we are and open opportunities to do the things we want to do.

² For an analysis see Leiser, p. 84f.



FIGURES 5 & 6.

3. The Merited Response Argument

Let me return to the relationship between moral and aesthetic value. Gaut's argument for ethicism runs roughly as follows.

- (1) Prescribed responses to art works are subject to evaluation.
 - (2) Some of the evaluative criteria for prescribed responses are ethical ones.
 - (3) If a work prescribes a response that is unmerited, then the work has to that extent failed qua work of art.
- (C) Therefore, ethical defects are aesthetic defects.³

I will not give a full-fledged defense of the merited response argument in the space of this paper. Instead I will focus on one specific line of criticism

³ For this reconstruction see Anderson and Dean 1998.

that brings out what is distinctive about the way in which propaganda is morally (and aesthetically) flawed.

Anne Eaton in a recent paper stresses the distinction between moral attitudes that are internal to the work and moral attitudes that are external to the work. Eaton uses the following examples. Our moral disapproval of Uriah Heep in Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* is internal to the work. The novel gives us plenty of grounds for disapproval: "Heep's character is imbued with vivid prompts for disgust and repulsion: he is portrayed as clammy, slimy, and writhing [...]" (Eaton 2012, p. 282). Our moral disapproval of Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos* is external to the work. The work itself presents him as admirable and as deserving of sympathy (Eaton, *ibid*).

Given these two different kinds of attitudes, there is room for conflict between the two. We feel the admiration and sympathy for Tony Soprano. But at the same time his actions make us feel outrage and frustration that are not prescribed by the work itself. Eaton argues that bringing about this conflict is an artistic achievement. The work sets up a puzzle for itself, which it then goes on to solve: evoking sympathy in the face of imaginative resistance (Eaton, p. 285). Matthew Kieran defends immoralism on different grounds. But his argument also relies on the same conflict between different kinds of attitudes, which he argues gives us an opportunity for moral learning (Kieran 2002, p. 63-73). But the possible conflict has other implications, too. Feeling a prescribed response like admiration and sympathy for Tony Soprano, is morally problematic on its own. But what if we feel both sympathy as an attitude prescribed by *The Sopranos* and moral outrage as an attitude we bring to the work externally? This does not look morally problematic. We can say that we redeem ourselves through the outrage we bring to the work externally. This outrage can then be partially directed at the sympathy we are feeling. But this means that the work by itself does not prescribe a response that is unmerited. It leaves us room to have a complex, overall merited, response that consists of internal and external attitude. We could also say that it leaves us with a responsibility to morally distance ourselves from the work. But if the response prescribed by the work is not in itself unmerited, then of course the work is not aesthetically flawed on that ground.

4. Propaganda: Aesthetic Defects

As we have just seen, the distinction between attitudes internal to the work and attitudes we bring to the work externally creates problems for the merited response argument. Eaton and Kieran are right that the distinction also helps us explain what is especially rewarding (aesthetically and morally) about some works with immoral content. I now want to return to the case of propaganda.

As we have seen above, propaganda prevents a dialog between our responses to the work and our responses in everyday life. It thereby seeks to conceal, distort, and/or override our emotional responses to what it portrays. The absence of such a dialog prevents us from experiencing a conflict between the attitudes internal to the work and attitudes brought to it externally. While *The Sopranos* leaves room for us to feel moral outrage at what is portrayed as admirable this is not the case for *Stukas*. And *Jud Süß* does not leave room to feel sympathy and compassion for whom it portrays as threatening and despicable. Being able to experience a conflict between an attitude a work prescribes and external attitudes presupposes that we can compare responses evoked by the work to our everyday responses. Feeling moral outrage at the actions of Tony Soprano presupposes that we have experience with authority, honor, and terror that are not colored by how they are portrayed in *The Sopranos*. Propaganda deliberately blurs the line between attitudes internal to the work and external attitudes we could bring back to it. Successful propaganda causes all our experiences of what it portrays to become colored by the propaganda.

The heroic portrayal of the fighter pilots in *Stukas* invalidates the soldiers' experience in combat. The image created by *Jud Süß* distorts how the audience views the Jewish community. And the way anti-immigration propaganda paints foreigners veils interactions with our neighbors. The blurring of internal and external attitudes in some works of propaganda is taken on very deliberately. In *Stukas* this is done by dehumanizing the enemy but also by stressing that a true fighter does not experience the horrors of combat in the same way an ordinary person would. This is made clear in a scene when one character remarks to the other that one "doesn't really think about his comrades' death any more, only about what they died for." (See Leiser, p. 20). *Jud Süß* does so by presenting the stereo-

type of the jew in disguise: scheming while posing as an innocent member of the German society. It makes the picture it paints indefeasible by suggesting that the threat it portrays can still be true despite appearance to the contrary.

If propaganda blurs the distinction between external and internal attitudes to a work, it also prevents external attitudes from being redeeming. Or, to put it differently: it prevents us from being a responsible audience capable of distance from the work. Above I have shown that the possibility of this distance creates problems for the merited response argument. These problems then do not apply to propaganda. And if the merited response argument goes through for propaganda, this means that the attitudes it prescribes are in fact unmerited. We should not admire the bomber pilots and we should not shudder at Oppenheimer. We should resist and if necessary shut down the aesthetic response the work evokes. Propaganda art, if it is successful as propaganda, is aesthetically defective and hence unsuccessful as a work of art.

5. Conclusion

This paper has accomplished two goals. 1) It has pointed to a central characteristic that many works of propaganda share: they are emotionally manipulative in that they prevent dialog between emotions evoked by the work and our own everyday experiences. Propaganda seeks to control our everyday emotional responses by overpowering, concealing, and distorting them. On the basis of this analysis I then argued that 2) moral flaws are more likely to constitute an aesthetic flaw for a work of propaganda than for another work of art. I have shown that propaganda prevents us from distancing ourselves from the work. This means that we cannot take on attitudes that could redeem a morally problematic response prescribed by the work. Art typically leaves room for an autonomous response and often relies on this autonomy in the way it engages us. The fact that propaganda art undermines this autonomy is crucial to understanding the way in which propaganda is morally and aesthetically flawed.

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