Creative Review
Advertising, design and visual culture

Propaganda: Power and Persuasion
Posted by Rachael Steven, 16 May 2013, 16:35 Permalink Comments (3)

The British Library has curated more than 200 items for a fascinating new exhibition exploring the use of state propaganda.

Propaganda: Power and Persuasion, which opens on May 17, explores how governments around the world have used art, literature, and media to influence public perception from the 1500s to the present day. As well as showcasing the myths and ideals peddled by various states in the 19th and 20th centuries, it provides a compelling look at some of the first and most successful forms of advertising.

The exhibition is divided into six sections: origins; nation; the enemy; war; health and today. Origins showcases some of the earliest known examples of propaganda, from leaflets distributed in the 1500s denouncing the Roman Catholic church to an idealised portrait of Napoleon depicting him as the model of power and authority (below), while Nationhood displays a range of state marketing material designed to instill a sense of cultural pride and in some cases, rebrand a nation.
Enemy and War explore the use of propaganda during conflict - as well as ubiquitous posters demonising Jews and Uncle Sam's army recruitment drive, there are Vietnamese pop art prints depicting US soldiers as controlled by capitalist greed (below). Soviet posters attacking US cultural icons such as the Statue of Liberty (top) and atheist publications mocking the madness of religion.

The latter part of the exhibition looks at the use of propaganda techniques to promote public health. It features video footage curated by the British Film Institute, as well as a range of posters that employ poetry, shock statistics and scare tactics to promote healthy behaviour, such as this poster (below) warning people to use tissues when coughing and sneezing. It also looks at the impact of the 1980s AIDs campaigns.
In today, Propaganda's final section, the Library considers how propaganda has changed as technology has
developed: instead of posters and leaflets and stamps, we have social media, national press and the internet. The
centrepiece of this is a screen displaying a wall of tweets (below) showing responses to the Sandy Hook elementary
school shootings; Obama's re-election and the London 2012 opening ceremony.

Sadly, there's little else to this section but it does pose the unsettling question of whether we still recognise propaganda
in the digital age or whether by reweeting other's messages and sharing or liking ads or articles, we are becoming
unconscious propagandists ourselves.

Some of the posters on display in Propaganda are more than two metres tall - and it's startling to see such powerful
images up close. From a visual communications perspective, the exhibition is a fascinating insight into the power of
propaganda and the use of techniques that underpin commercial advertising - catchy slogans, striking images and calls
to action are used to great effect.

"After World War I, there was a realisation of just how successful propaganda was in influencing public behaviour. There
was a real desire to take those techniques and use them for commercial purposes, which is why the American Tobacco
Company hired Edward Bernays (a member of the US government's Committee on Public Information widely credited
as the founder of PR) to help promote cigarettes to women," says curator Ian Cooke.

There are also several examples of innovative design and artwork on display, from propaganda leaflets disguised as
music sheets and banknotes to handkerchiefs bearing the message 'be careful who you speak to'. Some emulate
contemporary art trends while others, such as communist propaganda, deliberately rail against it.

Dotted around the exhibition space are several black mannequins bearing definitions of and famous quotes about
propaganda (below). Cooke says this is a visual representation of what unites all propaganda: the need to impose
messages on a clearly defined audience until they become engrained in the public psyche.
“If there wasn’t a clear message and a clearly defined audience, then it wasn’t propaganda. Propaganda was all about psychology and influence – just as commercial advertising is today,” he adds.

The exhibition doesn’t dwell on how propaganda has influenced mass media and marketing - although Cooke says they could have filled the building with examples - but for anyone interested in the visual arts, it’s a vast and thought provoking collection, and well worth the £9 entry fee.

Propaganda: Power and Persuasion opens on May 17 until September 17. An accompanying book (above) by David Welch is also on sale now. For more information or to book tickets, visit: http://www.bl.uk
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3 Comments

Propaganda is alive and well today, it’s just dressed up in different guises. Take this so-called ‘public service’ poster I snapped at the weekend:
http://instagram.com/p/2ja-3Qhe_x/

Plus

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Included in the exhibition is a book called Spinfluence: The Hardcore Propaganda Manual for Controlling the Masses, produced by propaganda agency Wolff&Co. Spinfluence will appeal to crooked politicians, media manipulators and corporate big-wigs alike, in fact anyone interested in how to exploit people for profit and power. Covering fun techniques and tactics such as emotional hijacking, brainwashing and hysteria harnessing. Find out more at spinfluence.co.nz

Nick McFarlane

2013-05-21 04:17:16

Great post and a really insightful exhibition.
I love the way Uncle Sam points right at me.
Like he knows my innermost thoughts.
And so good to see Edward The Godfather of Consumerism Bernays getting a name drop.
He's got alot to answer for. Naught naughty.
Propaganda was / is about fear. A little bit like advertising.
If I don't have X, what might happen? Better go and buy it. Now i feel safe.
Aaah, that post shopping dopamine fix.
I am slightly disturbed (but don't worry about me) to hear that "If there wasn't a clear message and a clearly defined audience, then it wasn't propaganda. Propaganda was all about psychology and influence – just as commercial advertising is today."

hmmm
"Propaganda was... (past tense)
Where's it gone?
Sadly Phil is right, Propaganda is alot more nefarious now.
Question is, can you see it?

LPx
Lucid Parade

2013-06-02 15:56:37