Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century

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CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have tried to narrate how modern and contemporary propaganda art have shaped and constructed the manifold competing realities in which we find ourselves today. I have laid out a different canon, not that of the great masters, but of actors of our time, from the War on Terror to popular mass movements and stateless peoples – those who make our world as we speak. As different as their objectives might be – from Steve Bannon to Judith Butler and Abdullah Abdul – they follow Judith Balso's dictum to "present ourselves to the present."[1]

I have narrated the history of propaganda art as a performance of power from modernity to the 21st century. And contrary to what the stakeholders of power would like us to believe, I have argued that although propaganda art has a history, it does not belong to the past. Contemporary propaganda art is and has always been an art of the present, as it is an art of the world we inhabit and make. Now, our challenge I believe is what conclusions we can draw from our own implication in the performance of power and construction of our present-day reality. Propaganda studies is among the least innocent forms of research. As we have seen throughout these chapters, the way propaganda is defined often implicates how it is practiced. But it can also mean that realizing how propaganda operates makes us ask ourselves how to practice it *differently*.

Currently, as far as the term propaganda is still in use, we are presented with what I consider a false choice between propaganda or counter-propaganda, the latter meaning as much as "non-propaganda." But an absence of propaganda would suggest an absence of power. And power is everywhere, even though that doesn't tell us anything about the *kind of power* we dedicate ourselves to. Democracy, as we have seen throughout this thesis, is often framed as the opposite of propaganda. But not only is democracy the birthplace of modern propaganda, the use of the term itself says little to nothing about an egalitarian distribution of power. From the regimes of Trump and Duterte to those of Erdoğan and Orbán, elected dictatorships are ruling many parts of our world. And so-called "secular" and "liberal" Western society is far from immune to them; rather, it seems to be the ideal breeding ground for such new contemporary forms of violent ultranationalism and authoritarianism: it might even be worth a new term, "democratic fascism." Nonetheless, democracy as a word that could uphold a different ideal of power and a different distribution of power is re-invented in the sta-

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1   Judith Balso, "To Present Oneself to the Present. The Communist Hypothesis: a Possible Hypothesis for Philosophy, an Impossible Name for Politics?," in Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism* (London/New York: Verso), p. 32.

teless region of Rojava and on our city squares. These are the emerging powers I believe we must dedicate ourselves to articulate our side in the contemporary propaganda struggle.

In my introduction, I have clarified my own stakes in this thesis, as a propaganda researcher and as a propaganda worker. Many examples and categories of propaganda art we discussed in the fourth chapter are ones that I have been implicated in myself, and I would not have been able to conceptualize them otherwise. I was a member of Artists in Occupy Amsterdam, an artist collective that aimed to be a Dutch equivalent of Not An Alternative by both challenging and supporting the social movement from within the protest camp. In 2015, I initiated the Artist Organizations International with curator Joanna Warsza and dramaturge Florian Malzacher, an attempt to ally artist organizations from all over the world, amongst which Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International and Öğüt's Silent University. I joined Matthijs de Bruijne in his actions with the Dutch Unions, his collaboration with the Socialist Party (SP) in the former miner-town of Heerlen, and taught art students alongside him and filmmaker Rob Schröder during the occupation of the University of Amsterdam in 2015. And, as mentioned in my introduction, I worked with the artists of the Azawadian and Rojavan movements, amongst which Mazou Ibrahim Touré and Abdullah Abdul, to develop temporary embassies and the People's Parliament of Rojava

In other words, my own work is situated in between the categories of Popular Propaganda Art and Stateless Propaganda Art, a result of my direct involvement in Assemblism, my practicing of Embedded Art and founding of my own artist-organization in the form of the New World Summit. That does not mean that these categories of propaganda art "belong" to me, as I have myself only been able to articulate them by learning from fellow artists and political organizations alike. It is for this reason that I have not wanted to write a thesis about my own work, but have aimed to employ my own knowledge and experience in propaganda work to open the larger field of propaganda art research and practice. Nonetheless, that does not excuse me from clarifying the definition of both art and propaganda that I hold central to my own work, which has informed the writing of this thesis, and that I aim to pursue in the future.

For me, it is impossible to define art without taking into consideration the structures of power through which art has been produced, presented, circulated, and validated. I agree with Sinclair that "all art is propaganda," although that does not yet define what kind of power and thus what kind of propaganda art we are dealing with exactly. And more importantly, the fact that art must be understood in its relation

to power does not by definition mean that it always succumbs to it. Even in Sinclair's militant reading of art history as a site of class struggle, we still encounter a variety of artists which, in the most compromised of situations – and one could ask what situation is not compromised in one way or another – were able to challenge or even change the powers that be, sometimes at great personal risk. So, the paradox here is that art cannot be understood outside of power, but that art at the same time is something else or "more" than the sum of the powers that be. Power shapes art, but art also shapes power. That brings us to the question, what exactly is this "more," this surplus of some kind, that the competences of artists bring about? Or, phrasing the question differently: is this "more" a kind of power that art itself lays claim to?

Even though the definition of art is subject to continuous change, as we have seen from examples from the French to the Russian Revolution, from the War on Terror to Stateless movements, there are nonetheless re-occurring competences that characterizes the work of a wide array of artists. Visual literacy – whether visual artist, film maker or architect – is possibly one of the most important competences if we wish to articulate some continuity between them; the capacity to "read" form, and thus the acquired competence to think and act the world through a morphological perspective. We touched on such morphological readings of the world when we discussed some case studies of Popular Propaganda Art, in which we encountered artists that analyzed Assemblist practices in terms of a "social montage" or "social assemblage." These artists' morphological approach expands artistic concepts such as the assemblage or montage into a larger social realm. If we understand morphology as a genealogy of form, as a competence to "read" form and to produce form, then morphology relates both to how we understand the world visually, how we represent it, but even so how we imagine it to be changed.

Does that mean that no one else but artists can acquire such morphological competences? Certainly not. The mythology of the artist genius and its exceptional sensitivity and magnetic attraction to the sublime, looming underneath the shadows on the cave-wall of our ephemeral reality, is to be done with. Nonetheless, one could say that at least one continuity amongst the wide array of people we have called "artists" through the ages, is that they practice a morphological approach to the world, training and refining this competence as their primary occupation. This does not mean that art is only made by what we traditionally define as artists. In this thesis we have seen that, through the prism of contemporary propaganda art, the nature of the artist, the curator, or the art institution can radically change. While not generally recognized as such, it is hard not to describe Philip Strub as a

curator when modifying scripts of film makers, and it is equally difficult not to understand the cultural wing of the Pentagon that subsidizes the films that pass Strub's rigid curatorial criteria as an *art institution* – or at least as an *art fund* – in the context of War on Terror Propaganda Art. We have seen similar changes in what defines art and the role of artists in Stateless Propaganda Art, for example in the case of the Rojava Film Commune, in which the meaning of being an artist expands into simultaneously being an educator, an institutor of new artistic platforms, a distributor of cinematic knowledge, and a revolutionary. But however different these two examples are – the worlds of Philip Strub and Diyar Hesso undoubtedly are radically opposed – in both cases power changes the very definition and form of art, but the engagement of artists with the domain of morphology remains, whether it is by employing visual literacy to imagine ever changing threats of non-existing terror, or by employing such imaginative capacities to bring into being the revolutionary model of stateless democracy. To change the world, for better or worse, we will need to imagine such change first. In that sense, the capacity to imagine the world differently might be the most important aspect of the morphological practice that we call "art," and it is simultaneously the reason why art, in a grand variety of shapes and forms, has been of continuous importance in propaganda past and present.

This approach to art as morphology could count as a definition of art in general; or at least, as a possible way to find a master narrative in the many different practices that have been termed as art. But it does not yet say anything of the kind of art, and most of all the kind of propaganda art, to which I dedicate my own practice. The morphological competences of art can be applied left and right, from regimes of terror to liberational movements. In my case, I would say that I aim to contribute and help to articulate what I would term as an *emancipatory propaganda art.*

To explain what I would like to call emancipatory propaganda art – a term I touched upon lightly in the introduction – I wish to return to the People's Parliament of Rojava: the public parliament that my artist-organization, the New World Summit, was commissioned to develop for the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava. I have already discussed some of the morphological dimensions of the parliament that resulted from my collaboration with Minister of Foreign Affairs Amina Osse, such as the transformation of the parliament from a closed hall to a public space, and the transformation of the half circle into a full one, denying a clear center of power. But how exactly is the parliament's morphology performed as a form of propaganda, in the light of the idea of an emancipatory propaganda art?

Throughout this thesis we have expanded the Chomsky and Herman propaganda model, which we discussed as a multilayered performance that comprehends both a macro- and micro-performative dimension. In the case of the expanded state, we have seen how Chomsky and Herman's model operates through monopolized power, in which the interests of the proprietors of the expanded state shape desired attitudes and convictions in a given population through politics, the economy, mass media, the military industrial complex, et cetera. But in the case of popular mass movements and stateless peoples, we have also seen how this multi-layered performance can operate differently, as these emerging powers depart from a collective demand for the democratization of power. Through the inverted propaganda model, we have analyzed how popular mass movements and stateless peoples enact the macro-performative dimension of propaganda departing from a common interest, which is furthered in the form of micro-performances of the diverse constituencies that make up a movement. In other words, the difference in the multi-layered performance of power that is propaganda between the expanded state, and popular mass movements and stateless peoples, is defined through the change in distance between sender and receiver, between proprietor and the subject of ownership. In the case of War on Terror Propaganda Art, the senders are defined by an elite status and their subjects are not, whereas in the case of Popular Propaganda Art and Stateless Propaganda Art, sender and receiver occupy similar positions in the process in which an egalitarian claim to power takes shape.

In the case of the People's Parliament of Rojava, the macro-performative dimension is defined in the process of creating it: the assembly of Rojavans and my own artist-organization, that together follow the decision-making process of stateless democracy to conceptualize, design and construct the parliament as a morphological translation of Rojavan ideology. The micro-performative dimension is of equal importance, namely the moment after the inauguration of the parliament, when different Rojavan communes will one by one occupy the space for the day to day practice of self-governance; the day to day performance of stateless democracy. The decentralized model of power that is stateless democracy thus informs the morphology of the parliament, but simultaneously, this morphology contributes to further shaping of stateless democracy in practice. Emancipatory propaganda art is the result of exactly this interplay between the macro- and micro-performative dimension of propaganda: the morphology that is art is shaped through a specific emancipatory paradigm of power, but that same power is shaped through the work of art at the very same time.

The ambiguity located in the very term performance, becomes par-

ticularly clear in the case of the People's Parliament of Rojava. Here, performance is simultaneously a concrete act that leads to the construction of a material presence in the form of the parliament. But at the same time, it embodies an imaginative dimension which surpasses the process of conceiving and building a space. What defines this imaginative dimension is what the parliament signifies in a future-present. How the parliament will be used from day to day; how its shape and form impacts its users who are simultaneously it's owners; and how it will continue to operate as a space in which the real and the imaginative co-exist. The People's Parliament of Rojava is a space that exists and which – in terms of its functions – simultaneously is in the process of becoming; and is that ambiguity, that duality, not exactly what is signified by the word *emancipation*?

Our choice as propaganda artists is what kind of process of becoming we desire to contribute to; in which performance of power do we partake? If our choice is that of an emancipatory propaganda art, then it means we choose to participate in a performance of power of which the outcomes are, different than War on Terror Propaganda, partially unknown. For "emancipation" is defined not simply by an objective we can set from the start; rather, it is the understanding that in the present material conditions that define our reality, we are limited in what we can desire to become. It is for this precise reason that, in line with Butler, we have spoken of Assemblism as a practice of a "people-in-the-making," as their collective demands do not define them as a homogeneous category, but as a transformative one. What this people will become we do not know, but that they must become something else in the present we know for sure. Emancipation thus means to alter the material conditions that currently stop us from *becoming more*.[2] The paradox of emancipatory propaganda art, is that it is a performance that takes place in the limited conditions of the present with the aim to open a space of imagination of a future-present, in which we might perform differently.

What defines art in the context of emancipatory propaganda art, is the imaginative capacity of morphology: the ability to read the world through form, and the ability to imagine to change it. What defines performance in the context of emancipatory propaganda art, is its twofold operation in between the real and the possible: to confront the material conditions of our world, while enacting the imaginative capacity of art to open the possibility for it to become more. What defines the conditions for both art and performance as emancipatory propaganda art, is

emancipatory power: the necessary coalition in which art partakes, to further the demand for the communal democratization of power.

The power struggles of the past have frequently been narrated to us as a "clash of civilizations." But I suggest not to use that dubious phrase, invented by societies that considered themselves rulers of the earth while accelerating its global destruction more than any other in history. Instead, I would qualify the arena of the contemporary as a "clash of worlds." On the one hand, we witness the world of endless neocolonial war and climate crimes on a global scale, one that will secure a future without human history. On the other hand, we witness the possibility of a "world of many worlds," as phrased by the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN).[3] The world of many worlds is a world of emancipatory propaganda. These many worlds, fierce and imaginative, are the domain of emancipatory propaganda art. A space of transformation where we defiantly reclaim the present as our true site of struggle. And, in the process, we might make a future history – future worlds – possible once again.

Now is the time to choose our sides. Now is the time to choose for many worlds. Now is the time to choose *what kind of propaganda* will construct our reality anew.

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2   *Becoming More* was a ten-day public program that took place in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, from May 18 to May 25, 2017.

3   In the words of the EZLN: "Today, thousands of small worlds from the five continents are attempting a beginning here in the Mountains of the Mexican Southeast, the beginning of the construction of a new and good world, that is, a world which admits all these worlds." EZLN, *Zapatista Encuentro: Documents from the First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998), pp. 29-30.