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Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century

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SUMMARY (ENGLISH)

This study explores the development of propaganda art from the 20th to the 21st century. Although it is often assumed propaganda belongs to the history of so-called “totalitarian” states, I show that modern propaganda has its origins in British democracy, and as such, is applicable to all modern structures of power in the past and present.

I define propaganda as the performance of power by means of the equation *propaganda = power + performance*. Through my work as a propaganda researcher and my practice as a propaganda artist, I show that different structures of power generate different forms of propaganda and therefore different forms of propaganda art.

Concerning the 20th century, I discuss the differences between avant-garde, totalitarian, and modernist propaganda art. I do so by comparing structures of power from the Russian Revolution, the Stalinist regime, and the Cold War with specific forms of artistic production that they made possible. The differences between these structures of power and their art forms are manifold, and for this reason I argue that we need to define propaganda in plural: as *propagandas*.

Although the word propaganda has fallen out of use for some time in favor of terms such as “public relations” and “advertisement,” I argue that if propaganda indeed can be defined as the performance of power and exists both in democracies and dictatorships, there should be no reason not to speak of contemporary propaganda and contemporary propaganda art in the 21st century.

Based on theoretical research, field work in Azawad (northern-Mali) and Rojava (northern-Syria), as well as my own practice as a propaganda artist, I argue that propaganda and propaganda art in the 21st century can be understood through three specific categories, namely War on Terror Propaganda Art, Popular Propaganda Art, and Stateless Propaganda Art. By means of concrete examples of artists and artworks within each of these three categories I try to show how the performance of power in the 21st century translates into different visual forms, and how they shape and direct our reality.

My study shows that power and art exist in continuous interaction. Different structures of power create the conditions for different forms of art, while art simultaneously contributes to visualizing, communicating, and legitimizing power. Power and art are not the same, but should not be examined separately to one another. Propaganda and propaganda art are not terms that only refer to the past, but concepts and practices through which we can understand the construction of reality in the present and, most of all, through which new realities can – and must – be created.