Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and its Application to Art

SHERYL TUTTLE ROSS

Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, Francisco de Goya's *Fifth of May*, Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, and D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, are all examples of expressly political art. Historically some art has been not only an object of aesthetic appreciation, but has also embodied and imparted a political message. Understanding the way art can be used to further political aims is an important part of art education. I contend that it is as important to investigate the political and cultural uses of art as it is to engage in the more traditional inquiries of form and style.

To further this end, I propose a new model of propaganda that can better accommodate the phenomenon of art propaganda. "Propaganda," in current usage, has a pejorative sense; however, at one time "propaganda" was understood to mean mere persuasion. My aim in this essay is to rehabilitate propaganda as a term of analysis while accounting for the pejorative sense propaganda has come to have. First, I provide a conceptual analysis of propaganda. In doing so, I develop a new model of propaganda — the epistemic merit model. I argue that this model will enable us to identify and assess propaganda in general. Second, I show that my definition is especially well-suited to cases where the propaganda in question is also a work of art, since art, from posters and pamphlets to films and novels, has been a particularly prevalent means for the dissemination of propaganda.

Analyzing Propaganda: Some Previous Definitions

The term "propaganda" was originally associated with propagating or spreading the Christian faith. The word was coined by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 to refer to the *congregio de propaganda* which was an organization of the Roman curia that had jurisdiction over missionary territories. "The congregation's mission...was to reconquer by spiritual arms, by prayers and good

Sheryl Tuttle Ross teaches at Edgewood College in Madison, WI. She is currently preparing a paper for the Pacific APA.

Journal of Aesthetic Education, Vol. 36, No. 1, Spring 2002

works, by preaching and catechizing the countries lost to the Church in the debacle of the sixteenth century."[1] Propaganda in this sense meant something along the lines of persuasion, preaching, or education.

Although the term "propaganda" originated in the sixteenth century, the term was not widely used until the early part of the twentieth century. The development of various mass media, from the mass market magazines in the 1880s to film in 1895 from radio in the 1930s to television in the 1950s, allowed access to an ever-increasing audience for mass persuasion. Theories of propaganda analysis became popular as propaganda, associated mainly with totalitarian regimes and war efforts, was perceived as a threat to liberal democracies.[2] Most theories of propaganda analysis begin with definitions of propaganda. As a starting place we will consider these definitions, and I will offer counterexamples to suggest that available definitions are insufficient to capture the sense that we now associate with the word.

Perhaps the most general definition of propaganda is: "any attempt to persuade anyone of any belief."[3] Thus, propaganda is defined as *mere persuasion.* Of course, the original connotation of the term was just that: mere persuasion. However, this definition includes all acts of persuasion from the meteorologist attempting to influence beliefs about the weather to parents urging their children to go to bed.

The Institute for Propaganda analysis was formed to educate the public about the styles and uses of propaganda. It published workbooks and held seminars in the early 1930s aimed at promoting the ideal of "self-determination," regarding propaganda as contrary to this end. They offer the following definition: "Propaganda is an expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence the opinions and actions of other individuals or groups with reference to a predetermined end."[4] While this definition adds some details to the previous one, it does not add any restrictions. Further it does not offer any explanation of how propaganda could be contrary to the end of self-determination. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis is suggesting that the phenomena of propaganda is dangerous without accounting for this within its framework. The definition of propaganda as mere persuasion does not account for how we currently use the term, in other words, for the pejorative sense it has come to have.

Alfred Lee also holds that propaganda involves persuasion, but adds further conditions that restrict its scope. He defines propaganda as "an expression overtly set forth or covertly implied in order to influence the attitudes and through the attitudes, the opinions and action of a public. "[5] This is not just mere persuasion, but rather adds the condition that the target of the persuasion is a public. This is an improvement over a parent telling a child to go to bed being thought of as propaganda. However, there is no mention of the kind of public or the kind of message that propaganda

presents so a mathematical theorem presented at an international math symposium would seem to meet these criteria. In other words, there are still not enough conditions to limit its application.

F.C Bartlett, following along similar lines as Lee, claims that "propaganda is an attempt to influence public opinion and conduct — especially social opinion and conduct — in such a manner that the persons who adopt the opinions and behaviors do so without themselves making any definite search for reasons.[6] His definition, by claiming that the recipient need not search for reasons, comes closer to identifying the pejorative sense of propaganda. However, commands given in a computer manual would have to be considered propaganda under this definition.

Hans Speier has a far more restrictive definition of propaganda "activities and communications from a government to its own citizens, other governmental personnel, or foreign audiences in general."[7] We might call this definition a top-down definition. Speier as well as Edward Bernays, Walter Lippmann, and more recently Noam Chomsky maintain that propaganda must stem from those in government or power.[8] By specifying a particular source of propaganda, this definition differs from the previous definitions. However, this might be too restrictive as it ignores propaganda on behalf of revolutionaries.

These definitions are useful reference points, and I will use them throughout this paper. Of course, as we have seen in these definitions, the phenomenon of propaganda is not limited to art. Nonetheless, since art has been so widely used for political ends any definition of propaganda should be able to account for its use. However, the principle problem with these definitions is that even though all of the theorists listed above claim that propaganda is in some sense bad — often using terms such as "brain-washing" to describe it — their definitions do not accurately characterize wherein the pejorative character of propaganda lies. My definition will both pinpoint its negative aspects, and be applicable to art.[9]

A New Definition of Propaganda

The definitions mentioned in the previous section all have a common thread that suggests propaganda can be analyzed by using the communication model of Sender-Message-Receiver. These theorists all hold that propaganda is in some sense intentional. That is, not only does propaganda involve persuading, but also the one who is persuading (Sender) is doing so intentionally, and moreover there is a target for such persuasion (Receiver) and a means of reaching that target (Message). This suggests the first condition for something's being propaganda: Propaganda involves the intention to persuade. This condition is in line with the original use of the word, which we recall is to propagate or intentionally spread Catholicism. However,

as we have seen with the definitions in the first section, not any attempt to persuade is sufficient. We can narrow the field by examining the sender, the message, and the receiver of propaganda.

The Sender

Conventionally, theorists offer the following advice for analyzing propaganda: Consider the source. In other words, we should ask "who is trying to persuade us?" The second condition involves who sends the message. Speier argued that the sender of propaganda needed to be a government. This is too restrictive, but captures the political nature of propaganda. Revising Speier's condition, I contend that a second condition is that propaganda is sent on behalf of a political institution organization or cause.

Many can agree that propaganda is political, but a disagreement may then arise over what constitutes the political realm. I suggest that being political, in the garden variety sense of the word, involves, minimally, partisanship and a preoccupation with a conception of justice or social order. There are conspicuous cases such as candidates running for political office or countries involved in a war effort. The institutions that constitute governments clearly meet these criteria. Partisanship that involves a preoccupation with a conception of justice or some sort of social order may also take the form of a cause or organization such as Planned Parenthood, Right to Life, English First, Greenpeace, or The Grey Panthers. However, in saying that the sender is a political institution, organization, or cause, I am not suggesting that propaganda has to be overtly propagated as historically some propaganda has been done covertly on behalf of these political entities.[10] Nor am I suggesting that the person persuading has to be a member of the political institution or believe in the cause, for it is often the case the hired guns are used to construct and convey the message.

This, of course, is not to say that I have settled definitively what should count within the realm of the political. My aim is to capture the intuition that propaganda is political. Even though what counts as political is somewhat contentious, there may be some consensus about clearly political institutions, organizations, or causes. However, those who have another conception of the political could still use the epistemic merit model, but it would be up to them to specify or stipulate how the term is being used.

The Receiver

When considering other definitions of propaganda, we found that The Institute for Propaganda Analysis' definition was too broad since it included a parent's telling a child to go to bed as an instance of propaganda. In order to avoid this counterexample, I proposed above that the sender must be

a political institution, organization, or cause. However, this does not completely deal with the elements present in the counterexample. It does not seem that propaganda is aimed at merely one person; rather, propaganda must be aimed at a group. To capture this intuition, I propose that the third condition is the recipient of propaganda be a socially significant group of people.

At this point we should be clear about the differences between a socially significant group of people and political institutions, organizations, and causes. We must be careful to distinguish the sender and the receiver of propaganda. The sender of propaganda — a political institution, organization, or cause — is a somewhat formal group that might involve something like membership. A political group has an internal organization and is committed to some set of particular positions. The senders of propaganda often aim at creating an "us" against "them" mentality.

In contrast, the receivers of propaganda are possible supporters of that group or cause who may not be linked formally with each other.[11] A socially significant group of people could be as broad as a group dividing along the dimensions of race, sex, or age, or the relevant group might even be more narrow such as the readership of *The National Review*. It may be that the subject matter of a particular piece of propaganda is only of local interest and therefore the socially significant group that it addresses is restricted to certain geographical locations, such as Chicago. In targeting possible supporters of their cause, political groups are attempting to influence the beliefs, desires, opinions, and actions of the socially significant group of people.

The Message

My objection in the first section was that while many theorists regard propaganda as dangerous, their definitions do not account for this assessment. Thus far, we have gathered that propaganda involves (1) an intention to persuade, (2) a socially significant group of people, (3) on behalf of a political institution, organization, or cause. This does not account for the pejorative sense that propaganda has come to have such that it is associated often with lies, appeals to emotion, and psychological manipulation. In short, it seems that the pejorative sense of propaganda stems from how its message is thought to function. And furthermore, identifying how propaganda actually functions is paramount to coming to terms with its power. However, even though we can agree that lies, appeals to emotions, and psychological manipulation do play some role in propaganda, they are not sufficient to characterize how propaganda is deleterious. At first glance it may appear sensible to characterize propaganda as appealing to emotions since many propagandists claim that is precisely what they are doing. Adolf Hitler writes

"its [propaganda's] effect for the 'most part must be aimed at the emotions."[12] Lippmann suggests that propaganda "consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas."[13] The view is also advanced by The Institute for Propaganda Analysis. They maintain that:

> in all these devices our emotion is the stuff with which the propagandist works....Without it they are helpless; with it, harnessing it to their purposes, they can make us glow with pride or burn with hatred, they can make us zealots in behalf of the program they espouse.... what we mean is that the intelligent citizen does not want propagandists to utilize his emotions, even to the attainment of "good" ends, without knowing what is going on.[14]

Accordingly, what makes propaganda effective and potentially dangerous is its appeal to emotions which subvert reason. These theorists typically maintain a Platonic view that reason is emotion's opposite and that reason is wholly separate and superior to emotions. However such an account of propaganda is flawed for two reasons. First, it misrepresents the nature of the emotions. For even when emotions do play a role in propaganda, they are not effective because of a separateness from reason. Moreover, it does not adequately cover the phenomenon of propaganda, for we are not manipulated solely by emotional appeals.

Nevertheless, emotions can be a relevant part of propaganda's message. In order to capture the emotional component of some propaganda, we can say that some propaganda encourages *inappropriate emotional responses*. *Birth of a Nation* is designed to inspire hatred toward a race of people, false pride, and ignoble courage which are all examples of inappropriate emotional responses. It is not that pride *qua* pride is bad or inferior to reason but rather the object of pride is not an appropriate object. Sometimes this can take the form of connecting emotional responses to spurious states of affairs.

However, even if we accept the qualification that propaganda often encourages inappropriate emotional responses, this will not account for all cases of propaganda. In writing about propaganda, Bertrand Russell maintains that too much has been made of the view that propaganda appeals to emotions. He writes "[t]he line between emotion and reason is not so sharp as some people think. Moreover, a clever man could frame a sufficiently clever argument in favor of any position which has any chance of being adopted."[15] Russell offers us a way in which propagandists can work without appealing to emotions, as often propaganda functions by using practical syllogisms (and certainly not irrational arguments) with wholly false premises.[16] If propaganda is bad because it circumvents reason and appeals to the emotions, then this view will not adequately account for propaganda that simply relies on bad arguments.

Propaganda often attempts to use emotion to help mobilize action, but this ought not to be wherein the pejorative sense lies. By highlighting problems with locating propaganda's pejorative sense in appealing to emotions, I do not want to say that the emotions do not play any part in propaganda's effectiveness. My account later in this section will recognize that propagandists do appeal to emotions.

Another common view is that propaganda consists of lies, and this is what accounts for its negative connotation. In its usual sense, lying entails x's uttering a statement that x believes to be false with the intention of leading an audience y to believe it to be true. There are two separate claims wrapped in the view that pieces of propaganda are lies. The first is that lying involves intent, and the second is that lying involves falsehoods.

First, we might wonder whether an intent to lie is a necessary part of propaganda. There is a distinction between an intent to persuade and an intent to lie. I argue the first condition for something's being propaganda is there must be an intent to persuade. That is, there must be an attempt to influence or convince someone of something. In contrast, an intent to lie seems to imply that the person persuading believes one thing about a particular state of affairs, yet endeavors to convince others to hold a position contrary to it. A practical problem is that often propagandists do not try to persuade someone to believe a view contrary to what the propagandist actually holds. That is, by claiming that propaganda involves the intent to lie, this view denies that there are "true believers" who try to persuade others to join their cause. I think that an attempt to persuade as the first condition more aptly describes the activity of a propagandist. However, focusing on lies is helpful because it leads us to consideration of the truth status of the claim being made.

If we think of propaganda as lies, then the purported falsity of the message could account for the pejorative sense propaganda has come to have. For we would like to think of ourselves as preferring truth over falsity, and propagandists sometimes use falsehoods in order to convey their message. Some of the most notorious cases of propaganda involve the misrepresentations of war atrocities, from the French's claims in World War I that the Germans ate babies to the claims that Iraqi soldiers dumped prematurely born infants out of their incubators.[17] Nevertheless, falsity cannot fully account for propaganda's pejorative sense, as, strictly speaking, propaganda may not involve falsehoods. In practice there are difficulties if a propagandist relies upon falsehoods to convey her position, since the falsehood may be recognized as such, and one's credibility is then called into question. Josef Goebbels emphasized that lies should be told only about unverifiable facts and further the truth should not be told if it is deemed to be unprobable or lacking credibility.[18] The aim of the propagandist is to create the semblance

of credibility. If we consider all propaganda to be false and, furthermore lies, we are not capturing the actions of those who use propaganda to achieve their political ends.

To capture the spirit of the claims that propaganda functions by appeals to the emotions or lies, we should characterize propaganda as being epistemically defective or lacking epistemic merit where this criterion not only applies to propositions and arguments but also to conceptual schemas (ways of carving up the world) as well as moral precepts.[19] We can say that a message, M, is epistemically defective if either it is false, inappropriate, or connected to other beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading, or unwarranted.[20]

False statements, bad arguments, immoral commands as well as inapt metaphors (and other literary tropes) are the sorts of things that are epistemically defective. Not only does epistemic defectiveness more accurately describe how propaganda endeavors to function, but this condition is superior to characterizing propaganda as false, since many messages are in forms such as commands that do not admit of truth-values. While a statement's being false is sufficient for its being epistemically defective, it is not necessary; it is broader in scope. Epistemic defectiveness also accounts for the role context plays in the workings of propaganda.

We can look to an example from advertising in order to illustrate uncontroversially how a true sentence can be used in an epistemically defective message. The makers of Bayer aspirin claim of their product that "No aspirin has been proven more effective." This statement is not clearly false; however, it leads one to believe that this aspirin is the most effective pain reliever: it is the best aspirin. As a matter of fact, aspirin is aspirin — providing that there is the same amount in each tablet and that there are not any other active ingredients — all brands of aspirin are equally effective. This message is epistemically defective in virtue of its seemingly natural but unwarranted connection with other beliefs.

Epistemic defectiveness is not only broader than truth and falsity such that true statements can sometimes be used in epistemically defective messages, it also encompasses communications and ways of understanding the world that are not normally thought to admit of truth-values such as commands, and conceptual frameworks. This attempts to capture the fact that we make judgments with respect to the fittedness of conceptual frameworks to the phenomena at hand, evaluate certain commands as being just or unjust to follow, and deem some metaphors to be apt while others are inapt. For example, the command of World War II pamphlet "Jap...You're Next....Buy Extra War Bonds!" trades on inappropriate stereotypes. Likewise, the metaphor of the rat/Jew in the Nazi film *Jud Suess* is an inapt metaphor.

By describing propaganda as inherently epistemically defective, I have attempted to captured the role that psychological manipulation plays in its

dissemination. This condition accords well with descriptions that propagandists offer of their work. George Orwell, who wrote propaganda for the BBC during World War II, claims that it is at best indifferent to the truth. His term "doublespeak" captures how ambiguous referents can create a true statement but an epistemically defective message.

Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this project to delineate all the ways in which a message could be epistemically defective, if such a project were indeed possible. It will be up to the critic to argue that a particular message is epistemically defective; the burden will be to show how a particular message seems to be intended to function. Some examples will serve to illustrate how this notion can be applied.

A message may be misleading given a particular context and background assumptions that an audience is likely to have. For example, toward the end of a fierce 1990 U.S. Senate campaign against African-American candidate Harvey Gantt, the Jesse Helms campaign ran what has come to be known as the "white hands ad." The voice-over said, "You needed that job. And you were the best qualified. But they had to give it to a minority because of a racial quota. Is that really fair?" and on screen viewers saw masculine white hands crumpling a rejection notice. This commercial was believed to be crucial to Helm's re-election, and it was successful in spite of the fact that Harvey Gantt had gone on the record as being opposed to racial quotas. The "white hands" ad is not strictly speaking a lie, for nothing within the ad is false, nor is it effective simply by appealing to emotions, even though emotions about affirmative action run high. This ad is epistemically defective because it spuriously leads its audience to believe that Harvey Gantt (perhaps, because he's an African American) supports morally objectionable racial quotas.

Epistemic defectiveness is the cornerstone of my definition of propaganda. I have argued that propaganda is an epistemically defective message used with the intention to persuade a socially significant group of people on behalf of a political institution, organization, or cause. While building upon previous definitions, this successfully accounts for the pejorative sense propaganda has come to have. Epistemic defectiveness captures the role that the emotions play in propaganda as well as commands, conceptual schemes and metaphors. In so doing, it can accommodate the phenomenon of art propaganda.

Art and Propaganda

Historically, political institutions, organizations, or causes have employed artists to convey their message to the people. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* was commissioned by the Republic during the Spanish Civil War. Many British authors, including E.M. Forster and H.G Wells, were organized by England's

Ministry of Information in order to write pro-Allied war propaganda.[21] Although propaganda is thought of as a twentieth-century phenomenon, this tradition dates back even further with commissioned Royal portraits and battle scenes populating the museums of the Western artworld.

Since art is frequently used as a medium of dissemination by propagandists, we need to be sure that any definition of propaganda can account for propagandistic art. There is also political art that is not propaganda. So, we need to be wary that our definition of propaganda is not so broad as to make all political art propaganda. That is, we need to distinguish merely political art from political art that is also propaganda. In this section, I will show how my definition functions to make this distinction.

First, we will recall that I have delineated four necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for something's being propaganda. They are (1) an epistemically defective message (2) used with the intention to persuade (3) the beliefs, opinions, desires, and behaviors of a socially significant group of people (4) on behalf of a political organization, institution, or cause. I will deal with the first condition last as it is the most complex. It will also enable me to argue that even if all art is epistemically defective, my definition would still allow for a distinction between merely political art and propaganda.

I have argued that propaganda involves an intention to persuade. This condition would seem to be met by most political art. Performance artist Holly Hughes does so in *Clit Notes* as does filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein in *Potemkin*. However, there are some cases of artists who provide social commentary and are aligned with political causes but whose work is unknown and not public until after their death.[22] Emily Dickinson's poem *I'm Wife-I've Finished That — is* a case of a work of art that was made without the intention to persuade, but is decidedly feminist in its message. This is a case of political art that is not propaganda, since there is no intention to persuade.

This condition does not preclude a previously private artwork, or an artwork without political pretensions, from being used as propaganda. The work of art may be invested with new meanings by the propagandist, whose intentions then become relevant in the analysis of the piece of art as propaganda. Although Wagner did not write his operas with Nazi ideology in mind, his work was picked up by the Nazis and invested with new meanings. When we evaluate the artwork, we need to evaluate not only the conditions of its making, but also the conditions of its use. A piece of artwork might be labeled propaganda in some contexts, but not in others. This allows for the possibility that there is political art that is not propaganda. The intentions in a given use of art (or particular context) help to determine whether or not it's propaganda.

Closely linked with the intention to persuade is the condition that propaganda targets a socially significant group of people. Personal diaries typically

are not written to target socially significant groups of people, so those works will not count as propaganda. *The Diary of Anne Frank is* not an incidence of propaganda.

I have also argued that propaganda must be done on behalf of a recognizable political institution, organization, or cause. Often, political satire offers an epistemically defective message in order to persuade a socially significant group of people, but it does not do so on behalf of a recognizably political institution or cause. Dana Carvey's satire of President George Bush on *Saturday Night Live is* not an example of propaganda, since neither Dana Carvey nor *Saturday Night Live* are arguably a political institution, organization, or cause. On the other hand, Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is propaganda since he uses satire on behalf of the Irish in order to protest taxation laws that were oppressing poor people. This is where the advice "Consider the source" is relevant in propaganda analysis.

My most controversial claim is that propaganda must be epistemically defective. Epistemic defectiveness nicely captures how works of art can function as propaganda. Messages presented through works of art are often not in the form of an argument but rather made through the use of icons, symbols, and metaphors. The condition of epistemic defectiveness also can explain how montage, dissolves, and other cinematographic features play a role within propaganda without making the claim that montage is necessarily a political form.[23]

My definition requires that we look at the content of the message and how that content is supported by evidence within the work, and further how the message is connected with other beliefs. In order to argue that something is propaganda, we must offer details about the content of the work, and demonstrate how a message functions to mislead individuals. Once we have done that and indicated how the work meets the other conditions, we have a convincing case for something's being propaganda.

Final Concerns

At this point there are two types of concerns that we must consider. We must address certain objections to the epistemic merit model and show the importance of this model of propaganda to art education. There may be some who object that the epistemic merit model of propaganda is too broad and others who have doubts about the epistemic defectiveness criterion. After addressing these objections, we can better see how the model is valuable for art education.

First, it may be objected that there are countless propositions, beliefs, commands, and conceptual schemas that are epistemically defective. For 9+14 = 19822 is false and thereby epistemically defective. Since so many things lack epistemic merit, the scope of propaganda will be immense.

To this objection, I must reply that there is too much emphasis being placed on the name of the model and not enough emphasis on how the four conditions work together to limit the scope of propaganda. It will not be the case, for example, that Newtonian physics counts as propaganda, even if we want to say that it is epistemically defective. For it would be hard to argue that Newton was endeavoring to persuade his audience of something he himself would not rely on. That is, propaganda involves the intention to use an epistemically defective message. These two conditions in concert limit the scope of propaganda considerably.

There may be others who object that the criterion of epistemic defectiveness is itself vague. I would argue that the fact that our judgments about what is epistemically defective are sometimes tentative does not diminish the value of this model. For it has isolated conceptually propaganda from other communications, and given us a framework within which we can discuss our disagreements about particular cases. Simply dismissing another's work as propaganda is not an acceptable analysis under this model, but rather the critic must say how the piece in question meets each of the conditions which in turn may lead to a *productive* disagreement, if the case is not clear-cut.

The notion of a productive disagreement is at the heart of an education in the humanities and is particularly relevant for art education. For one goal of art education is developing the critical skills of the audience through exposure to interpretations of art. There are various sorts of interpretative methods at large in the artworld today. Those that emphasize formal features that give rise to an aesthetic experience, others that emphasize art historical developments such as the development of the vanishing point perspective, and still others that focus on the cultural and political aspects of art.

The epistemic merit model of propaganda provides a means by which the audience can interpret the cultural and political importance of a work of art that is not necessarily at odds with other methods of interpretation. This is in contrast to some of the postmodern approaches (such as those influenced by Althusser) which maintain that all features of art are inherently political. That is, this model of propaganda takes very seriously the role that the social context plays in making meanings in artworks without claiming that all meanings are reducible to it.

Another advantage of this model is its emphasis on art as a source of knowledge and as a source of misinformation. Underlying the notion of epistemic defectiveness is the view that art can teach us something about the world and our place in it. The flip side of this widely accepted view is that art can mislead us or miseducate us. A focus on how art can mislead by being epistemically defective is an important addition to art education.

And finally, perhaps the most important aspect of the epistemic merit model with respect to art education is that it can be easily applied to our everyday interactions with popular arts, movies, posters, music, and television. The film *Dead Man Walking is* an ideal candidate for this type of analysis. We need to evaluate the film in the social context it was presented to see if it meets the four conditions of the epistemic merit model of propaganda. (1) an epistemically defective message (2) used with the intention to persuade (3) a socially significant group of people (4) on behalf of a political institution, organization, or cause.

We might note that the political cause set forth in the film is the abolition of the death penalty. Tim Robbins, the director of the film, has reported that he made the film with that cause in mind and the film was distributed worldwide.[24] So it meets conditions (2), (3), and (4). The question then becomes whether the message of the film is epistemically defective.

The message that the death penalty is unjust is, in part, conveyed through a powerful visual metaphor at the end of the movie. The central character Matthew Poncelet, played by Sean Penn, is being executed by lethal injection. He is portrayed as the sacrificial lamb of our society and its need to exact revenge for murder. The character is shown from a variety of camera angles strapped to a medical table which is visually similar to being tied to a cross. The final allusion of the film is that the person being executed is christ-like. This strikes me as an inapt metaphor, for even if the death penalty is immoral, the comparison of a convicted killer to Christ seems unfair. For they are in essence comparing a person who might be regarded as evil to someone who represents the divine. We will remember that inapt metaphors are a species of epistemically defective messages. The point here is not that it is simply offensive to those that regard themselves as Christians, but that someone convicted of a horrible crime is not aptly described as divine. The message is arguably epistemically defective because it seeks to tie our views about the justice of the death penalty to the claim that Christ was unjustly executed which spuriously leads us to believe that all such executions are wrong. The faulty comparison with Christ leads us to believe that, like Christ, Matthew is being unfairly persecuted.

If this interpretation of the film is correct, there is a plausible case for its propaganda. However, some may argue that this case is not as clear-cut as I have presented it. To do so, they would offer an alternative interpretation of the significance of the final scene. Whether or not a particular instance of art should be considered propaganda will depend upon which is the better interpretation of the meaning of the film. This does not diminish the value of the epistemic merit model for art education, but rather is a case where, by using the model, we can have a productive disagreement. In sum, the epistemic merit model of propaganda more accurately captures the relevant

features of propaganda as the term has been used this century. The four components of the model — (1) an epistemically defective message (2) used with the intention to persuade (3) a socially significant group of people (4) on behalf of a political institution, organization, or cause — can be used to identify and analyze political discourse in general and in particular expressly political art. The primary benefit of this model is that it defines propaganda in a way that focuses on epistemic content, thus allowing us to evaluate putative cases of propaganda using traditional philosophical tools of epistemic evaluation. This evaluation emphasizes the semantic content of an artwork and how it is connected to other beliefs and values within the cultural context. Thus, by using the epistemic merit model, we have a systematic means of identifying instances of propaganda and analyzing a political use of art.

NOTES

1. Robert Jackall, "Introduction" in *Propaganda*, ed. Robert Jackall (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 1.
2. *Propaganda Analysis*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938).
3. William Hummell and Keith Huntress, *The Analysis of Propaganda* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1949), 2.
4. *A Group Leader's Guide to Propaganda Analysis* (New Haven: The Institute For Propaganda Analysis, 1938), 41.
5. Alfred Lee, *How to Understand Propaganda* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), 18.
6. F.C. Bartlett, *The Aims of Political Propaganda* (Octagon: New York, 1940), 6.
7. Hans Speier, "The Rise of Public Opinion," in Jackall, *Propaganda*, 28.
8. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 47-48; Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Liveright, 1928), 31; and Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 2.
9. When I refer to propaganda's pejorative sense, I am not referring to an ethical component, but as I will argue, an epistemic one. My aim in this essay is to develop a framework within which propaganda can be fruitfully explored. And I hope that many of those explorations will utilize moral concepts. However, it is outside the scope of this paper to consider the ethical status of propaganda. For an interesting ethical analysis consult: R.R.A. Marlin, "Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion," *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1989).
10. Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: British, American, and Canadian Propaganda 1914-1933* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987). He gives historical evidence that several prominent English writers were organized by England's Ministry of Information in order to write pro-Allied war propaganda. These writers made it look as if it were they were writing merely of their own accord.
11. Hitler distinguished between "members" and "supporters," and claimed that propaganda is aimed at supporters.
12. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 79.
13. Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, 47-48, emphasis added.
14. *A Group Leader's Guide to Propaganda Analysis*, 7.

15. Bertrand Russell, *Free Thought and Official Propaganda* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1922), 39.
16. For example, one might construe Hitler as arguing: (1) Economic prosperity is good and economic distress is bad. (2) We are currently in a state of economic distress. (3) Jews are the cause of our economic distress. (4) Eliminating this cause would lead to economic prosperity. (5) Therefore, if we eliminate the Jews, then we will be economically prosperous. This is valid, but based on two wholly false premises.
17. I am, of course, not suggesting that real atrocities do not take place during war, but merely that their misreporting is a frequent propaganda strategy.
18. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 51.
19. This presupposed both moral realism and that there are justified true beliefs. It does not however assume any particular account of moral realism or justification.
20. I borrow this term from Noël Carroll, who offered the following account of it in "Film, Rhetoric, and Ideology," in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 279. If something is epistemically defective, "it is either false, or it is ambiguous, or it is connected to other beliefs in ways that are misleading or unwarranted." He implies that each feature is a sufficient condition. I disagree with Carroll that ambiguity is a sufficient condition for epistemic defectiveness, since this would lead one to believe that all polyvocal artworks are epistemically defective. In other words, if ambiguity is sufficient, then univocity must be seem as the norm. This is often not the case with artworks which pride themselves on multiple and sometimes ambiguous meanings. Nevertheless, epistemic defectiveness is a powerful notion that captures the fact that not only propositions and arguments are evaluated for their merit.
21. Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words*, 8.
22. This would require that one's definition of art did not have a publicity condition.
23. H. Herbst, *John Heartfield: Photmonteur*, film made in Germany, 1976. The claim is made in this film that montage is an inherently political form.
24. Interview with David Letterman. October 1996.