

### Current Event Connection Stage One

“Just as no one can be forced into belief, so no one can be forced into unbelief.” This quote from famous Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud provides the basis that man is a stubborn horse with a plastic mind. Siegfried Kracauer, a German film critic at the time of post World War II Global Film, would probably agree.

Dr. Siegfried Kracauer was born to a Jewish family in Germany in 1889. With the rise of Nazi Germany in 1933, he fled to Paris and eventually settled in the United States. Kracauer worked for the New York Museum of Modern Art on a scholarship grant for his experience working with German Documentary film. Kracauer specialized in his critique and evaluation using theories of film trends in relation to political tendencies and beliefs in society. Kracauer was highly interested in the correlation between the film medium and subconscious influence on the psyche of the viewer. His first successful book on film was a psychological analysis of Nazi film propaganda. Two decades later, Kracauer published “*Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*” which emphasizes realism as the most important type of film because it possesses a unique and powerful effect on the unconscious mind. The following passage from the publication represents this idea:

The moviegoer is much in the position of a hypnotized person. Spellbound by the luminous rectangle before his eyes— which resembles the glittering object in the hand of a hypnotist— he cannot help succumbing to the suggestions that invade the blank of his mind. Film is an incomparable instrument of propaganda.

Grierson, who considered documentary film a godsend for propaganda messages, once said that "in documentary you do not shoot with your head only but also with your stomach muscles." And when asked whether in his opinion the illiterate

peasants in India might profit by films popularizing reforms, Pudovkin used surprisingly similar terms: "The film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body" (160).

In this passage, Kracauer relates the filmmaker to a hypnotist and the viewer to a hypnotee: just as a hypnotist digs deep into the mind of his victim using his "glittering object," the filmmaker presents messages and symbols on the screen that demand the conscious of the viewer. Both result in the same influence on the mind, giving a person new cognitive perspectives and associations. The tactics are even shockingly similar – the hypnotist and filmmaker persuade with images. Therefore, Kracauer's passage represents the sensitivity of the human conscious.

Kracauer suggests that because both the person being hypnotized and the film viewer choose their environment, they will assume full control of the situation, including what they will perceive. As ironic as it seems, a person with this mindset tends to be more willing to adopt new ideas. Kracauer argues that filmmakers know this tendency, and use it for persuasion in their films. The best way they can do this is through realism and documentary films. If something looks real, the common person will believe that is probably is. This is perfect for propaganda filmmakers, as the careful director will skillfully include only what is the most positive representation of his side. Strong support of the preceding passage is shown in the next page of *Theory of Film*:

Take that flashback scene in the triumphant war documentary, *Victory in the West*, in which French soldiers are seen mingling with Negroes and dancing in the Maginot Line: these excerpts, which the Nazis put together from French film material they had captured, were obviously calculated to make the spectator infer

that the French are flippant and degenerate and thus to lure him spontaneously— by means of psychological mechanisms of which he would hardly be aware— into the camp of the wholesome and dynamic victors (161).

This quote brings forth the importance of editing in film: what appears as one thing can really be something completely different. Since documentary films are made of grainy, stock film that gives viewers a sense of reality, it is important to include a perception of reality. Propaganda focuses solely on exploiting the negative aspects of the opposition while emphasizing the positive aspects of the supporter. Kracauer argues that the average person will inevitably remember the negative and absorb it, especially if it is presented in a familiar way.

Realism emphasizes the challenges and negative occurrences in life. Through realism in documentary films, it is easier get into the mind of the viewer to obtain a change in perspective. In essence, negative emotions create an enduring effect on a person whether he knows it or not. Kracauer argues that when a viewer is presented with a negative image, he is more likely to remember it. When he is presented with messages related to that image, even if he is unaware he is being presented with them, he will internalize them. In essence, this is the argument that Kracauer makes about realism and documentary films in the above passage from *Theory of Film*. Some may agree, but others propose that it underestimates the power of autonomy in mankind by rendering him unable to control the stimuli presented on the screen.

### **Stage Two**

In my current event connection stage one, I mentioned a film sequence that represented the main passage. In this current event connection, I will be using that sequence to further elaborate on the point made in the last connection. This sequence, in which Kracauer mentioned in *Redemption*, is a prime sequence showing the effect of realism and propaganda in war and

post war cinema on the human psyche. The sequence is from the 1941 Nazi Propaganda film, *Sieg im Westen (Victory in the West)*.

In this German Propaganda war film, French soldiers and cooks are seen dancing wildly in the Maginot line. This is followed by a French war quote: *Nous vaincrons parce que nous sommes les plus forts*, which means “We win because we are the strongest.” The French used this quote to represent their strategy in the war. So, why would Nazis quote a powerful French political quote? According to a book published in 1998 by Robert Boyce: “It was with this strategy the French went to war in September 1939. Of course, things did not work out as planned ... Put simply, in 1940 France ran out of time” (Boyle). So while the quote seems ironic at face value, it really is quite simple: Nazis were mocking the French. The quote was there to account for the strategy that ended up failing in the war and allowed Nazi Germany to occupy France. This is a powerful quote summarizing of the Nazi takeover of France in 1940.

So what does any of this have to do with the psyche of the viewer? Put simply, the Nazis wanted to portray the French as flippant, ignorant, and out of control. This is first represented when the French soldiers are seen drinking, dancing and acting wildly in the Maginot line. This footage, most likely taken from several different French films, aimed to represent the French as weak and feeble-minded. At the time, this likely had a powerful effect on pro-Nazi propaganda film viewers. The average viewer would remember this scene and perhaps associate it with France in general, but it is the quote following the clip that truly has the effect.

Propaganda in itself can have a high impact on the psyche of the viewer, but propaganda in film may have a higher impact due to the viewer’s initial interpretation of the war. Nazis used their documentaries to show themselves as strong and competent, suggesting that the countries they occupied were weak and “had it coming.” When viewers adopt this idea, it strengthens the

impact of the politics involved and gains more supporters. More supporters equal more potential Nazi warriors. Through the use of realism in their documentaries, they were able to make the films more believable and powerful. Although, what the average viewer did not know at the time is the ability of editing in film. The Nazis took French footage to make that scene, when really it was not what it showed. That is the essence of realism in propaganda and documentary films: to actively change the mind and actions of the viewer.

Nazi Germany supporters were likely transformed into their mindset by the media, including through film. When one views something fear-evoking but offers a solution, they are more likely to take action. This action would lead to a more powerful Nazi party and supporters. Through film, the German Nazis not only degraded the reputation of the French, but only showed positive footage of German soldiers. Which one is the viewer more likely to remember? The Nazis knew that they could influence people to support their cause, and one of the main ways they did that was through film. If it had not been for Nazi Propaganda Documentary film, one may argue that there may have been a few less (or a lot less) Nazi Germany supporters.

### **Stage Three**

My stomach is nauseous, and I feel extremely uncomfortable. At first, I thought this was due to the fact that it is currently snowing outside. There was only one problem: the realization that I did not start to feel this way until after I saw the video. For the first time in many years, I reconsidered my morality and what kind of decisions I made my entire life. The message was convincing, and I felt like I should join their side. After all, what kind of heartless person would support murder and barbaric behavior?

One may think I am referring to a video about slavery, Nazi Germany, Jewish concentration camps during the holocaust, sweat shops or another international human-borne

tragedy. The horrors of these things are unimaginable. So, which event was this video attempting to use realism to deter? Eating meat.

During Current Event Connection One, I referred to a passage from German film critic Siegfried Kracauer's book entitled: *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. The passage regarded the use of propaganda and realism in order to persuade the viewer to join a political extremist side using the film medium. The mentioned passage is below:

The moviegoer is much in the position of a hypnotized person. Spellbound by the luminous rectangle before his eyes— which resembles the glittering object in the hand of a hypnotist— he cannot help succumbing to the suggestions that invade the blank of his mind. Film is an incomparable instrument of propaganda.

Grierson, who considered documentary film a godsend for propaganda messages, once said that "in documentary you do not shoot with your head only but also with your stomach muscles." ... Pudovkin used surprisingly similar terms: "The film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body" (160).

I want to centralize a point in this passage: using the "stomach muscles" to effectively create a documentary or accept its message; in other words, to use extreme, unexplained, and disgusting examples to demoralize the other side. Propaganda documentary filmmakers often do this by using the notoriously effective "scare them, disgust them, and then offer a solution" psychological tactic, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals is no different.

Better known as PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the prevention of cruelty to animals with a strong emphasis on going vegetarian/vegan. One of the methods PETA uses to draw attention to their cause is through the

streaming of videos on their website, [peta.org](http://peta.org). These films have names such as “Meet your Meat,” “Chew on This” and many more. “Chew on This,” a video stating “30 reasons to go vegetarian,” is the video of reference.

PETA uses extreme examples and documentary-style footage to catch the attention of the viewer; this is their “glittering object.” The video uses heart-wrenching reasons including: “No living maternal creature wants to see her family slaughtered,” “Because when animals feel pain, they scream too” and other things to initiate powerful negative emotions, which is the primary intention.

There is so much that could be said about the similarities between Nazi propaganda films and PETA propaganda videos. The strongest similarity is the use of realism through inflation of one side and defamation of the other. For as long as documentary has been around, it has been used to support a cause because it is easier to convince the viewer that the event is really happening, without question. Even more effective is when filmmakers effectively offer a solution. PETA’s solution is to “go vegetarian” and the second Current Event film sequence’s solution is to “join the powerful, non-partying (no pun intended) Nazi Party.”

I am not trying to suggest that People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and Nazi Germany are the same by any means – PETA has done some necessary things to prevent inhumane treatment of animals (not including bombing medical facilities). They just use the same tactics to get the support of the cause. As my emotional comedown is happening, there is still no chance I will become a vegetarian, but that video may pop in my head in the future before I eat a chicken wing.

The worst part is that, although I chose to watch the video, I did not choose to have it burned into my psyche. Clearly, the message was effective and I was hypnotized one way or the

other despite the choice to remain omnivorous. PETA is just one of many extremist nonprofit organizations today that use videos to elicit strong emotion. Whether it is used to get donations, new members, or both, it proves perpetually effective and conversation-provoking. Using realism through documentary has been effectively used throughout time in propaganda, and most likely always will be.

### **Stage Four**

When it comes to bringing awareness to a cause through documentary film, non-profit organizations and other political groups have many options. However, the most effective method is the one that will be remembered by the viewer. In order to create a significant memory, the video must possess qualities that tune into the viewer's emotions and relevance to his/her life. Using two videos from two different notorious organizations, one from 1945 and the other from 2006, the effect of emotion on the viewer's subconscious will be demonstrated. The first video example is from a Pro-Nazi propaganda film called "Victory in the West (Sieg en Westen)" and the second video is "Chew on This," a video from the non-profit organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

I want to start off by establishing that the above organizations are NOT similar in most ways, and support completely different political phenomena. Therefore, even comparing the two in that way would be a fallacy. The only main similarity between PETA and the Nazis is the use of strong propaganda messages in order to gain supporters, and the method in which these political groups gain these supporters. Their multimedia messages create emotion-provoking memories through the use of guilt and immense fear. These emotions are strong enough to warrant at least a thought from the supporter, and with these emotions, a sense of power



emerges. Whether that power is genocide of a religious group or choosing a vegan lifestyle, the choice of the supporter would not have been conceived without emotional stimulation.

The sequence from “Victory in the West” creates a sense of power in the viewer by portraying the Nazi party as strong and moral. The video shows the French soldiers acting weak, wild and uncontrollable while the Nazis overpower them with morality, so to speak. This could create a sense of disgust toward the French and support of the Nazis. The Nazi party uses an emphasis on weakening the other side to gain power, “stealing power” if you will.

“Chew on this,” the video from PETA, gives power to itself by essentially telling the viewer that “they have the power, so why shouldn’t they use it?” This subsequently creates guilt, and can do so in many ways. PETA’s tactics work because they use innocence and guilt, which frustrates the power and emotions of the viewer. This causes him to transfer the power and emotions into a vegan diet to reduce his guilt. PETA’s propaganda usually does not really require much thought on the part of the viewer outside of the questioning of his/her own decisions. I feel that this is ultimately why those who turn vegetarian because of these videos eventually revert back unless commitment to the organization is established long-term (the viewer donates to the organization, attends protests, etc.).

On the plus side, emotion does not always produce behavior. It all depends on the personality of the supporter, the availability of the cause, and a message that the viewer deems relevant to his/her own life for the long-term. For example, a naturally empathetic person is more likely to adopt and retain the message of PETA, and a more ethnocentric person is likely to side with a strong political organization like the Nazis.

The messages of organizations using emotions to elicit behavior do not come without consequence, however, as people who do not fall victim to the message are often upset about the

way the organization works and will rebel against it. An organization that uses negative emotions to achieve awareness will almost always create opponents that will strive to overthrow the power of the organization. While this seems to work in a lot of cases, especially in a controllable situation such as PETA, the fact is that there will probably always be supporters of that cause, especially when someone of higher power is involved, like a dictator. Powerful leaders can elicit emotions almost as effectively as filmmakers with enough persuasion.

The correlation between the success of the Nazi party and the success of PETA is important for the study of film and propaganda on the human mind. Although these organizations are vastly different, they remain powerful by possessing dedicated leaders, messages and supporters. The leaders of an organization believe their cause and are in a way like the “hypnotist” in the passage. Thankfully, a hypnotist is only effective when one believes that he/she can, indeed, be hypnotized. Literally speaking, using strong, emotion-eliciting images and messages will only be effective if the cause is relevant to the right viewer. Therefore, the process of using film to support a cause by creating emotion will always be effective in the presence of the right viewer and with the influence of the right auteur.

## Work Cited

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**Sequence Description:**

In this Nazi Germany War Propaganda film sequence, French soldiers and chefs are seen dancing wildly and mingling with negroes in the Maginot line, followed by a famous French political quote: *Nous vaincrons parce que nous sommes les plus forts* (we win because we are the strongest).