Propaganda: The Art of Selling Lies
The Film

From ancient cave paintings to Twitter feeds and deep fakes, propaganda's rapid progression hasn't compromised its potency. Tracing its effective use by religious figures, politicians and marketers, director Larry Weinstein crafts a persuasive study of the mechanics behind propaganda. This fascinating investigation confronts us with timely questions: If we grow up surrounded by propaganda, how do we know what is true? What risks are inherited by a society tricked into their perceptions? Freedom of speech is critical to a democracy's survival, yet demagogues have consistently exploited that freedom to coerce willing supporters. Contemporary artists, including Kent Monkman, Shepard Fairey and Ai Weiwei, analyze their politically motivated work, creatively co-opting the conventions of disinformation that have permeated their respective cultures. As our platforms for spreading ideas continue to expand in a digital age, dangerous lies have never been better disguised.

Alexander Rogalski

Source: https://www.hotdocs.ca

The Filmmaker

Larry Weinstein is one of Canada's most prolific and accomplished documentary filmmakers, and has been honoured with retrospectives around the world and broadcasts in more than 40 countries. The majority of his 30 award-winning films centre on music and the creative process, while his other subjects range from the horrors of war to the pleasures of football. His films consistently push the boundaries of conventional documentary storytelling by employing tools from fiction films, dramatic reconstructions, historical cinematic stylings and impressionistic visuals. In 2007, Larry received the Cannes MipDoc International Trailblazer Award with the citation, "Weinstein is a deserving awardee for his creativity, originality and risk-taking, and for pushing the genre of documentary forward."

Source: http://www.larryweinsteinproductions.com

Educational package written and compiled by Enid Wray enidwray@icloud.com
**VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS**

The following three sub-sections are intended to provide you with a range of Pre-Viewing, Viewing and Post-Viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film’s larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, sample curricular outcomes and a page of weblinks for further investigation.

**Pre-Viewing Activities**

Provide students with the title of the documentary film: *Propaganda: The Art of Selling Lies.* Have students make predictions with respect to what the film is about. Have them consider themes and/or issues, as well as the kinds of sounds and images they are expecting to hear and see while watching.

Following this exercise, share some examples of "classic" propaganda posters with the students from the collection of iconic images titled "50 Powerful Examples of Visual Propaganda and the Meanings Behind Them" (https://www.canva.com/learn/examples-of-propaganda). Provide students with the opportunity to generate their own definition of the term "propaganda."

In a large group, discuss both the student predictions and the small-group responses. Following this discussion, provide students with a blank organizer, either in hard copy or in digital format, structured as a KWL chart. Have students individually complete the first two columns (K and W) based upon their knowledge, and any questions they have prior to watching the documentary.

Prior to watching the documentary ensure that students are familiar with the following terms: culture, stereotypes, bias, patriarchy, fake news, colonialism, ideology, democracy, totalitarianism, fascism, orthodoxy, dissident, xenophobia, satire. This could be accomplished by having students working in pairs to investigate one or two terms each, and sharing notes; students building the vocabulary list collaboratively using a shared Google Doc; or the teacher providing a handout with this vocabulary list (if time is an issue).

**Viewing Activities**

Have students be mindful of completing their KWL chart as they view the documentary.

Have students make general notes about the documentary as they watch. In particular, students should keep track of any questions they have about what they are watching, and any personal or emotional reactions they experience while watching the documentary.

Have students keep track of the imagery used in the documentary. Each student should be prepared to choose a minimum of three images which resonate with them most meaningfully. Students should be prepared to share as a Post-Viewing Activity.

Have students keep track of the examples of propaganda presented in the documentary. Each student should be prepared to choose a minimum of three examples of propaganda which resonate with them most meaningfully. Students should be prepared to share as a Post-Viewing Activity.

Have students pay attention to the way the filmmaker tells these stories. What is the perspective of the filmmaker? How are the filmmaker’s values and opinions reflected?

Have students complete the worksheet available from Teach with Movies (TWM) titled Worksheet for a Documentary that Seeks to Persuade on Issues of Political or Social Significance (http://teachwithmovies.org/articles-studenthandouts). Student responses may be used in a Post-Viewing discussion about the techniques used by the filmmakers, and the extent to which these techniques affect and/or influence their response to the documentary.

**Post-Viewing Activities**

Have students share their initial reactions to the film using a single word, a few words or a short sentence. Document student responses for possible use in an Extension Activity.

Have the students assess how closely their predictions matched the reality of the documentary. Have students, either in small groups or as a whole class, provide examples
of how their predictions were accurate or not. Have students provide concrete examples, that is, words and/or images, from the documentary that lead them to their conclusion(s).

As a large group, have students refer to the TWM worksheet. Use the student responses to address the degree to which the filmmakers have been successful in telling the story they set out to tell. Discuss the ways in which both the information sources, as well as the filmmaking techniques, contributed to the success or failure of the documentaries (or any one of them).

Individually, each student should revise, as necessary, their original definition of the term "propaganda." Engage in a whole-group conversation to try to arrive at a working definition for the class as a whole. (No worries if you can’t come to a singular agreement.)

Historian Edward Jones-Imhotep asks: "If we grow up only surrounded by propaganda, then how do we know what is true?" In small groups, have students consider the following questions: Is anything "true"? How do you evaluate truth? Is there such a thing as a singular truth which can be known? Justify your answers.

Some politicians and their spin doctors ascribe to the belief that if you repeat something often enough, it must be the truth. Working in small groups, have students consider the following: How can we protect democracy from people tampering with the truth? What are our personal responsibilities, as citizens in a democracy, to see past the spin? Do you live up to these expectations in your day-to-day life? What tools do we have at our disposal to help us fulfill this most fundamental obligation of citizenship? Which of these tools do you use? On a regular basis? Why or why not?

As narrator, director Larry Weinstein asks why we are “so easily seduced by propaganda and coerced into adopting opinions that are not our own?” Working in pairs, have students consider the following: What are the personal responsibilities, as citizens in a democracy, to see past the spin? Do you live up to these expectations in your day-to-day life? What tools do we have at our disposal to help us fulfill this most fundamental obligation of citizenship? Which of these tools do you use? On a regular basis? Why or why not?

As noted by street artist Shepard Fairey, “street art... interacts with people where they live their daily lives.” Working in small groups, have students go on a virtual field trip. Identify five works of street art they encounter in their daily lives. Are these works temporary or meant to be permanent? Are they political in nature? Do they improve the local environment? What makes these works memorable? (e.g., What emotional appeal do they have? Did they make you laugh? Do they contain some fundamental truth?) Do they think the artists were successful in what they set out to accomplish? Justify your answers.

Gérard Biard, editor-in-chief of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo states, “Faith is individual. Religion, today, is in the political arena... We have to be able to criticize what is taking place in politics. We have to be able to criticize, attack, mock and insult religion.” Working in pairs or small groups, have the students discuss this statement, and whether or not there should be any limitations on it. Bring students together for a whole-group discussion.

Near the end of the documentary, the narrator asks the following: “Perhaps we should regard the lessons of human history as a cautionary tale and try to veer away from the horrors of our past? But is it actually possible to take the icons of history and infuse them with new meaning?” Working in small groups, have the students consider the following: Does the "roar of the engines [on the Nuremberg racetrack]... drown out the history?" Can we really "reclaim" these places? Why or why not? What are other examples of places imbued with historic meaning being reclaimed? What other places might be reclaimed? Should they be? Explain.
WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

About the Film

*Director’s Website:*
http://www.larryweinsteinproductions.com

Additional Resources

*Charlie Chaplin Official:* The closing monologue from the Charlie Chaplin classic *The Great Dictator* provides a pop culture reference to the way in which Hitler used his speeches as propaganda for his anti-semetic rhetoric.
[https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/) Type “Charlie Chaplin Final Speech from The Great Dictator” into the search engine of the website.

*Charlie Hebdo:* For those who want to take a glimpse into the world of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo.
[https://charliehebdo.fr/en](https://charliehebdo.fr/en)

*Canadian War Museum:* An overview of Canadian propaganda used during both World Wars, including a curated collection of propaganda posters.
[https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/propaganda/index_e.html](https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/propaganda/index_e.html)

*FactCheck.org:* A project of the University of Pennsylvania, this non-partisan website is dedicated to keeping American politicians honest.
[https://www.factcheck.org](https://www.factcheck.org)

*Forbes:* The November 2018 article “Should Social Media Be Held Responsible for the Atrocities and Deaths it Facilitates?” provides the business case for why companies like Facebook are slow to take responsibility for the actions of their users.
[https://www.forbes.com/](https://www.forbes.com/) Type the name of article into the search engine of the website.

*Street Museum of Art:* A public art project which adopts the guerrilla tactics of street art and graffiti culture in a program of illegally curated exhibitions. Explore the artists and exhibits.
[http://www.streetmuseumofart.org](http://www.streetmuseumofart.org)

*TED:* In his September 2017 talk “We’re Building a Dystopia Just to Make People Click on Ads,” Zeynep Tufekci discusses the relationship between artificial intelligence, algorithms, ads and access to social and political information on websites like Facebook and Google.
[https://www.ted.com/](https://www.ted.com/) Type the title of the video into the search engine of the website.

*Ted:* In the November 2012 talk “How to Separate Fact and Fiction Online,” Markham Nolan shares investigative techniques that can be used to verify information in real time.
[https://www.ted.com/](https://www.ted.com/) Type the title of the video into the search engine of the website.

*The New York Times:* The October 15, 2018, article “A Genocide Incited on Facebook, with Posts from Myanmar’s Military” is a comprehensive analysis of the role that Facebook played in the recent forced migration of Myanmar’s Rohingya population.
[https://www.nytimes.com/](https://www.nytimes.com/) Type the title of the article into the search engine of the website.

*The New Yorker:* The December 2017 article “The Fight over Virginia’s Confederate Monuments” addresses the issues around plans to remove a statue of Confederate hero Robert E. Lee. The web version includes an option to listen to the article.
[https://www.newyorker.com/](https://www.newyorker.com/) Type the title of the article into the search engine of the website.
As narrator, director Larry Weinstein asks, “How is it possible that our powers of reason have so often been overtaken by the irrational?” Share your thoughts.

Politically conservative street artist Sabo clearly believes that the role of the artist is to speak out against the abuse of power. Do you agree? What do you see as the role of the artist?

Do you believe that art can be made solely for “art’s sake”? Is all art political, as Mao Zedong and others believe? Is all art propaganda, as George Orwell, Ai Weiwei and others believe? When is art not political? When is art not propaganda?

Sabo asks: “What if the media is the enemy of the people?” Is it? Is it always? Is it necessarily so?

What is “fake” news? Why create it? Are some topics/issues more likely to be faked? Are there “tells” which giveaway fake news? If so, what? What factors might affect whether or not an individual, or a community, believes any given fake news story? How do you, personally, identify fake news? What do you do when you encounter fake news? How do you think we got to, as Sabo says, “a point in time when just telling the truth is revolutionary?”

Three hundred year ago, Voltaire, an outspoken advocate of civil liberties, said, “Those who make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.” Why are we still falling for the absurd? How is it that we can “be made to hate somebody on the flip of an ideological switch”?

Consider the monarchy. How do events like the wedding of Harry and Meghan, or the birth of children to William and Kate, constitute propaganda? What purpose does it serve? What do you make of it all?

Filmmaker Astra Taylor states, “We like to flatter ourselves and think we don’t consume propaganda, other people do.” What are you reading at present? What did you stream or watch on television last night? What music did you listen to most recently? Could any of these be considered propaganda? If so, which? If so, how? Does that understanding change your relationship with the material? Why or why not?

Have you yourself ever been in a situation where you felt like you were being propagandized? How did you know? How did you feel? Were you suppressing your own opinions? Were you feeling threatened or ostracized? Did you feel the need to just go with the group consensus? What did you do?

Dissident artist Ai Weiwei believes that “the essential power of art is a subversive power. Art is about freedom.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

With respect to subversion, and with the words of Morten Traavik in mind: Are you a termite or an elephant? If you choose to tackle an issue, which approach do you take? Why? Have you ever considered the alternative approach? Under what circumstances might you?

Kathy Griffin paid a steep price for the photo shoot of her holding a replica of U.S. President Donald Trump’s bloody head. Were the consequences appropriate? Was the shoot in bad taste? Did it cross a line? How provocative is “too” provocative? What is the role of the comedian? Should she have apologized? Do you think you would have apologized had you been in her position?

In his appearance before the United States’ Senate Commerce and Judiciary committees, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg apologized that Facebook had not done “enough to prevent [their] tools from being used for harm.” How does social media allow propaganda to hide itself? Was Zuckerberg’s mea culpa good enough? Does saying sorry matter? Is saying sorry good enough? Should Facebook be held responsible when users use the platform to promote hate speech, to plan harassment or to enable genocide? Is it possible to hold social media companies responsible? How could this work? Why are social media companies like Facebook slow to accept responsibility?

According to The Globe and Mail’s David Walmsley, “The role of journalism in a democracy is the critical last line of defence when it comes to reality.” Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? What is the difference between facts and opinions? What are “alternative” facts? Can facts ever be “negotiable”?

Larry Weinstein challenges us with this, his final statement in the documentary: “We must all be aware of our own emotions and how they can be maliciously and manipulatively exploited. There are no easy answers, there is only personal responsibility.” What pledge do you make, to yourself and to the larger community, to take personal responsibility for allowing “humanity to flourish”?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Questions for Pre-Viewing or Post-Viewing Activities

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1. “Great propaganda exploits your need to believe something, your need for belief and your craving, or your appetite, for a magical form of empowerment.” Adam Phillips

2. “People want to believe in stories. Storytelling is embedded in the history of propaganda. Good propaganda is a good story, is a good narrative. There is an enemy, there is a hero.” Paolo Granata

3. “Propaganda wants to be everywhere. It is only propaganda when it is part of a larger endeavour of constructing, of engineering, reality. When we don’t think it’s propaganda it works best as propaganda.” Jonas Staal

4. “To this day my family still reverberates from the trauma of colonialism. I want to dismantle the propaganda of the government selling people a myth, a story, a lie about themselves, about their own histories, and about Indigenous people.” Kent Monkman

5. “A lot of the narratives about North Korea that we get in our Western media are propaganda... just as much propaganda as the state propaganda of North Korea itself.... People know what is propaganda and what is not propaganda, and that’s a paradox that people are living an existence which is so obviously manipulated.” Morten Traavik

6. “As a woman in this world I know that there are patriarchal messages, there are sexist messages. There’s no sort of Bureau of Male Affairs pushing those from on high. It’s just sort of in the ether and being transmitted through the culture and we call them stereotypes. We talk about bias, but we don’t use the term propaganda.” Astra Taylor

7. “The most successful propaganda, I think ever in the world, has been the propaganda that says, what you really want, is to be rich.... We’ve been sold the wrong picture of a good life.” Adam Phillips

8. “Having a two-dimensional sculpture made of this figure [Obama] is a way to legitimize, and also de-racialize. That’s a big obstacle in the United States, racism.” Shepard Fairey

9. “Art functions like a cancer in communist society. It destroys every single cell. That’s why I am seen as the most dangerous person for the state.” Ai Weiwei

10. “People would believe it [the film Triumph of the Will] because it used components of information in a manipulative way to sway people’s thought to a kind of almost religious belief in a system.... At that point, my senses, my life and eternal truth, become a single thing in these privileged moments. It’s very beautiful, it’s very moving, it’s very dangerous if it’s misused.” Monsignor Timothy Verdon

11. “Cartoonists were killed simply for drawing.... Every form of totalitarianism, including religion, detests humour. They try to censor it by any means possible. Humour is a weapon.” Gérard Biard

12. “Apparently there was a whole thing between Fox News and Trump to... take all the attention away from... other things.... It’s genius though. It’s misdirection. It’s all propaganda.... The more chaos that you can create in the press, the less anyone’s going to look at what you’re doing. It’s the greatest magic trick ever, you know.... Social media has been weaponized.” Tyler Shields

13. “Part of their strategy is to rely on us, the viewers, whether we agree with them or disagree with them, to propagate those videos so we actually are part of this chain of contributions that actively creates the propaganda art of ISIS.” Christiane Gruber

14. “Now in the post-9/11 world, Muslim communities are frequently the target of anti-Muslim propaganda.... There’s a strategy behind it, and there’s a lot of money as well.... This is an incredibly polarizing, and polarized view, of the world and in the end, extreme groups benefit from that polarized view, and they need each other. They need an enemy.” Christiane Gruber

15. “This spreading of his [Steve Bannon’s] message to Europe shows the kind of transportability of a set of skills around propaganda. There are a lot of places in the world where these kinds of tensions, or issues, can end up being exploited for these purposes and where it can be done basically underground.” Edward Jones-Imhotep
CULMINATING ACTIVITY: ART FROM THE HEART

Ai Weiwei believes that art comes “from the heart of an individual.”

In keeping with this sentiment, the street artist known as Sabo believes that it’s “your duty to disturb shit when you think things are wrong.” and Shepard Fairey uses the “tools of propaganda in a way that [he thinks] is socially responsible.”

With these beliefs as your guiding principle, and an understanding of what constitutes “propaganda,” your job is to select an issue of the day, one which you feel strongly about, and design an action campaign.

The creation of your action campaign will consist of two parts:

Planning

• Research your issue
• Determine what fundamental message(s) you wish to convey
• Determine what action(s) you wish people to engage in
• Define the target audience for your message
• Determine how to present your message in a way which will grab the attention of your target audience

Execution

• Create a piece of propaganda art to engage your audience with respect to your chosen issue

In the documentary, Historian David Welch differentiates between propaganda created using “old” mediums (printed posters) and that created using “new” technologies (particularly cinema).

Your finished piece of propaganda art may be produced using either an “old” or a “new” technique. Alternative to the presentation formats mentioned above may be considered only in consultation with the teacher.

Your propaganda art must be accompanied by a brief (approximately 500-word) written document outlining your planning process as above. Students will keep track of their research notes and research sources. Each project should include a full and properly formatted Works Consulted. Teachers and students may refer to the Online Writing Lab at Purdue university (OWL @ Purdue, https://owl.purdue.edu) for information about proper referencing formats (either MLA and/or APA as preferred).

The propaganda art could be shared with the larger school community in a special exhibition at the school, at a local library or a community centre.
# ACTIVITY RUBRIC: ART FROM THE HEART

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## Thinking and Inquiry

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## Communication

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# EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

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<tr>
<th>COURSE</th>
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| Grade 9-12 English | • generate, gather and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience.  
• use editing, proofreading and publishing skills and strategies, and knowledge of language conventions, to correct errors, refine expression and present their work effectively.  
• plan presentations for specific purposes and audiences. |
| Grade 10 Civics | • analyze a variety of civic contributions, and ways in which people can contribute to the common good.  
• develop attitudes that foster civic engagement. |
| Grade 11 and 12 Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology | • use a psychological perspective to explain how diverse factors influence and shape human mental processes and behaviour.  
• use a sociological perspective to explain how diverse factors influence and shape individual and group social behaviour.  
• use a sociological perspective to explain patterns of socialization. |
| Grade 11 & 12 History | • analyze the impact on the lives of people of the world of some key social, economic and political issues, trends and/or developments.  
• analyze key causes and consequences of various global and regional conflicts as well as the effectiveness of efforts to maintain peace.  
• analyze some significant developments related to human/citizenship rights and cultural identities in societies.  
• assess the impact of some key instances of conflict and international cooperation.  
• analyze interactions between various groups and how key individuals and social, economic and political forces have affected those interactions.  
• analyze the development of the rights, identity and heritage of different groups around the world. |
| Grade 11 & 12 Politics | • explain the political importance of some current issues and analyze various perspectives associated with these issues.  
• analyze some issues of political importance in terms of their causes, their impact, and ways in which they have been addressed.  
• analyze the objectives and strategies, and assess the influence of individuals and groups in addressing issues of political importance.  
• demonstrate an understanding of factors that facilitate and present challenges to democratic political change.  
• analyze the role of civic awareness and responsibility among citizens and non-governmental stakeholders in the national and international community. |
| Grade 12 Challenge and Change | • explore topics related to the analysis of social change.  
• demonstrate an understanding of the causes and effects of social change.  
• demonstrate an understanding of how forces influence and shape social patterns and trends. |
| Grade 12 Equity and Social Justice | • explore topics related to equity and social justice, and formulate questions to guide their research.  
• demonstrate an understanding of a range of perspectives on and approaches to equity and social justice issues, and of factors that affect inequity and social injustice.  
• analyze, in historical and contemporary contexts, the dynamics of power relations and privilege as well as various factors that contribute to power or marginalization.  
• assess the impact of media and popular culture on equity and social justice issues.  
• analyze a range of historical and contemporary equity and social justice issues and the impact of economic and environmental factors on these issues. |
| Grade 12 Law | • explain the principles underpinning human rights law and the legal significance of those laws, in Canada and internationally.  
• analyze issues associated with the development of human rights law, in Canada and internationally.  
• analyze various contemporary issues in relation to their impact or potential impact on human rights law. |
| Grade 11 & 12 Philosophy | • demonstrate an understanding of the relevance of philosophical questions, theories and skills to their everyday life and to the community and broader society.  
• demonstrate an understanding of connections between social and political philosophy and other areas of philosophy, other subject areas and various aspects of society, including everyday life. |
| Grade 12 World Issues | • analyze the influence of governments, groups, and individuals on the promotion and management of social change.  
• analyze impacts of selected agents of change on society and quality of life. |

The Overall Expectations listed above are from the *Ontario Curriculum*. Complete course descriptions, including all Overall and Specific Expectations can be found at: [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/curriculum.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/curriculum.html)