A Very Proper Gander

By Karen Green

Friday September 10, 2010 06:00:00 am

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(No, there's not actually a direct correlation between James Thurber's wonderful fable and this week's subject, other than my always thinking of that story whenever I hear the word "propaganda." Just humor me.)

Do you know where the term "propaganda" comes from? I mean, other than it coming from Latin? (Yes, that's right: MORE LATIN. Two months running.) But do you know how the concept first tiptoed into our mental landscape? Our modern use dates back to the late 16th century, when the Catholic Church was spear-heading the Counter-Reformation in the face of All That Protestantism, and wanted to focus its recruitment efforts. After commissioning the Vatican's cardinals to "propagate the faith," a formal office was created by papal bull in the early 17th century, the Sacra congregatio de propaganda fide: the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, which became, among other things, the center of the Church's missionary efforts. In other words, a word heretofore associated with growing vegetables was now linked to an institutional campaign to persuade—if not compel—outsiders to conform to the views of that institution.

I bring up this brief history lesson partly because you know I never miss a chance to give a history lesson, but mostly because I've been reading Fredrik Strömberg's fascinating compilation, Comic Art Propaganda. Strömberg's conception of propaganda is a good deal broader than mine; he offers this Oxford English Dictionary definition in the introduction: "any
association, systematic scheme, or concerted movement for the propagation of a particular
doctrine of practice...[carried out] by an interested party, especially in a tendentious way in
order to encourage or instill a particular attitude or response.* That is true, in the strictest
sense, but, because it doesn't take into account the historical context of the word, it doesn't
make me completely comfortable--although that doesn't detract from the joys of the book.

Strömberg divides his volume into seven chapters, each examining specific aspects of
propaganda: ethnic/racial supremacy, the war effort, Communism, social standards, religion,
sex, and politics. Some of these categories work better for me than others.

What I kept wondering, as I read the various sections, was: how is propaganda different from
polemic (Chick tracts), or marketing (Standard Oil's "Blockbusters from Oil" comic), or PSAs
("It's Fun to Stay Alive"), or activism ("Brought to Light"), or simple editorializing (political
cartoons on the Op-Ed page)? Is, say, perpetuating racial stereotypes in any guise a form of
propaganda, or does it only qualify as such when used to further a specific social or political
or ideological end? On the left, above, is an image of stereotyped Chinese from a 1970s
Belgian Lucky Luke comic. Next to it is a guide drawn by Milton Caniff for the U.S. military
and handed out to American soldiers leaving for the Pacific theatre in World War Two. The
latter is G.I., government issue; the former, a tired stereotype long past its sell-by date,
drawn by an individual with no apparent institutional goal. My question: do they both function
as "propaganda"? Is propaganda institutional, or can anyone play?

Providing a useful taxonomy of African-American stereotypes (useful for comics, film,
literature, etc.), Strömberg includes, among others, the image of Ebony White, from The
Spirit, and, on the same page, notes that "these images were used as a collective tool of
propaganda to strengthen the ideas of white supremacy and reinforce status quo." But...used
by whom? I'm not entirely convinced, for example, that that was Will Eisner's goal in creating
the character of Ebony; I imagine, rather, that he was unthinkingly—lazily—using traditional
depictions of African-Americans for a humorous end. I doubt Eisner's African-American
readers found Ebony humorous, and certainly he is problematic for a much wider variety of
readers today. The casual racism of the 1940s prevented African-Americans from enjoying
the rights extended to Caucasian Americans, and Eisner's depiction of Ebony White certainly
contributed to the social atmosphere that kept that injustice in place, but was Eisner's intent
to do so? Does his use of Ebony White constitute propaganda? What would Eisner gain by
perpetuating that injustice? If society gained, by continuing to avoid the painful change that
the civil rights era would bring, does that make Eisner's stereotype propaganda?
Here’s another comparison. Strömberg includes an example of the common early-modern motif known as the Judensau, a hulking sow with Jews nursings at her teats and, often, eating her excrement. I first learned about the Judensau when I was in grad school, and discovered, to my horror, that this image had been carved on the city gates of some towns in Germany (a click on that link will give a list of churches and cathedrals that feature the image as well). A cruel and mocking caricature spread by an institution such as a municipal government, or the Church, is one thing, and unquestionably propaganda. The vicious imagery employed by Joseph Goebbels’ machine in Nazi Germany—as seen, for example, in a recent exhibition of the material—is also easy to identify as state-sponsored propaganda. But are those vicious images propaganda when an editorial cartoonist employs them, as in the drawing at top, from a 2008 Qatar newspaper? Is it an independent paper? A state paper? Does it matter?
What about J.J. McCullough's cartoon commentary on the controversial Danish "Mohammed" cartoons? Is one man's view of this highly-fraught situation considered propaganda? Does it depend on who published his piece? Does it count because the lack of equivalence McCullough shows isn't entirely legitimate (for example, the original Danish cartoon displayed Mohammed not smiling, but with a bomb for a headdress)? Is pushback to official responses also considered propaganda? Is protest?

To take another tack: I mentioned marketing above: consider the "Let's Go Shooting" comic published in 1956 by the Remington Arms Company. It leads off with a cheerful story of clean-cut adolescents Bill and Judy visiting their Uncle Fred at Gun Smoke Lodge, where young Bill will be taught the way of the gun and "we'll even teach Judy a thing or two!" (Oh, Judy! Girls don't need to learn how to shoot!) This seems to be a clear example of Remington using the comics medium as a hidden persuader—and reinforcing gender roles along the way—so...is this propaganda? Do corporations propagandize when they try to increase market share? Is all advertising propaganda? Does labeling these marketing techniques as propaganda reinforce or weaken the more significant and insidious propaganda wielded by governments and their mouthpieces?
The comic "Crime Does Not Pay" goes to great lengths to establish its bona fides, with endorsements from law enforcement plastered on its cover. The comic books, starting in 1942 and running through 1955, were based on a series of short subjects produced by MGM beginning in the mid-1930s, and bearing a stamp of approval from J. Edgar Hoover himself. These true crime comics had a massive circulation, reaching a high in 1948 of one million copies sold. Each issue demonstrated, under the benevolent eye of whichever solemn cop was giving the thumbs-up on the cover, that crime didn't pay and bad guys were always punished. The letters page, Strömberg tells us, was filled with testimonials from police officers and even former criminals, praising the comics' ability to promote law-abiding living. These stories, unlike the advertorial "Let's Go Shooting," or the sensationalistic EC "Crime SuspenStories," had a clear mission to uphold the status quo, the conventions of civic order, and seem to me to exist more comfortably with the label of propaganda. This publisher/law enforcement handshake was like the cooperation of movie studios with the standards of decency enumerated in the film industry's Production Code, standards which guaranteed that movies would support and reinforce those standards; similarly, movies made during World War II supported and reinforced the war effort, sometimes expressly at the request of the President of the United States. But where is the line drawn between propaganda and patriotism? What is the functional propaganda difference between the keep-the-home-fires-burning sentiment of "Since You Went Away" and the Cold War hysteria of "I Was a Communist for the FBI"?
War, of course, provides one of the most fertile environments for easily-detectable propaganda. The comic describing the American invasion of Grenada employs unrealistic dialogue to convey ideological talking points: a Grenadian family proclaims, "The People's Revolutionary Government is nothing but a puppet of Castro's Cuban Russia orders and Castro pulls the puppet strings!" Strömberg punctures the myth that this comic was air-dropped by the CIA during the invasion, but he doesn't doubt that it was commissioned by the CIA to help wrangle popular opinion once the invasion was over.

Compare this with the Superman-Hitler story told in "Overseas Comics" #44, produced by the U.S. military and distributed to the troops in 1945. The "Grenada: Rescued from Rape and Slavery" comic was distributed to Grenadians in order to reconcile them to America's actions. The wartime Superman story was given to American soldiers to help steel their fighting resolve. I believe that both of these ends are propagandistic, but is there a good and a bad propaganda? Does the propaganda that exhorts citizens to organize scrap metal drives and plant victory gardens serve a more honorable end than the propaganda that identifies a national scapegoat and encourages that target's destruction?

These are not easily answered questions, and that is the power of Strömberg's book. No, I don't agree with all of his choices (is Barefoot Gen propaganda or protest?), but that is the starting point of discussion and debate. This is what makes the book so valuable for a classroom—an instructor could point to any image in the book at random and ask a student to write a paper on whether the image is propaganda, and why. (This leads to my one real gripe about the book, which is the small scale on which most of the images are reproduced,
making many of them too tiny for these aged eyes to read.) It would certainly be useful if Strömberg had included a bibliography of further readings, or provided some academic context for the discussion of propaganda, but that is something any professor worth his or her salt can contribute. The ability to contextualize these materials is crucial and a worthy academic pursuit.

Another reason I embraced this book so happily: at Columbia, we have a required freshman course called University Writing. It is a combined freshman comp and research skills course, in which students choose an essay to serve as a "seed text," drawing out of that essay research topics on which they'll write an 8- to 10-page paper. A frequent choice from the seed text list is Susan Sontag's 2002 New Yorker article, "Looking at War." Sontag examines the uses of war photography: the sometime manipulation of images, their exploitation by governments, the purposes of exhibiting them. University Writing classes submit their research topics to a librarian, who meets with students to point them to the best resources for research—the Sontag essay often elicits requests for examples of propaganda. Thanks, Fredrik Strömberg, for making my life that much easier.

N.B.: If the Small Press Expo this weekend doesn't succeed in emptying out Brooklyn—or, if you are heading to Maryland but you're coming back early—I hope you'll swing by the Brooklyn Book Festival at Brooklyn Borough Hall this Sunday afternoon, September 12th. There are three panels of note for comics folk: the first, at 2 PM at the International Stage, "The International Graphic Novel: Drawing from Life," will be moderated by Matt Madden and the panelists are Josh Neufeld, Nick Abadzis, and Jessica Abel. Next, at 3 PM on the Youth Stoop, is a panel called "When It All Goes Wrong," and features the terrific Tracy White, whom I've written about, along with YA authors Adele Griffin and Sofia Quintero. And finally, at 4 PM on the North Stage, a panel moderated by yours truly and sponsored by the Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art (MoCCA): "Comics and Form: Is the Medium Still the Message?" featuring Ben Katchor, Jillian Tamaki, and Rob Berry. I'll look forward to seeing you there—come up and say hello!

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