

Propaganda: Theoretical Analysis on *Miral* Movie

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Abstract

The article represents a theoretical analysis of propaganda on *Miral* movie. The aim of this article is to illustrate the concepts of war propaganda, by identifying the instruments of propaganda presented in the film and their effects. I also consider that this analysis represents an important topic because it concerns the Israeli-Palestinian war, which unfortunately has not ended yet.

Key Words: propaganda, instruments of propaganda, movie,

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"We must remember that in time of war what is said on the enemy's side of the front is always propaganda, and what is said on our side of the front is truth and righteousness, the cause of humanity and a crusade for peace."

Walter Lippmann

Short movie summary:

Miral is a 2010 movie directed by Julian Schnabel and screenplayed by Rula Jebreal, based on her novel. *Miral* is the story of four women whose lives intertwine in searching for justice, hope and reconciliation amid a world overshadowed by conflict, rage and war. The story begins in 1948 in Jerusalem, when Hind Husseini opens an orphanage for refugee children, whose number grew alarmingly from one day to another. One of these children is Miral, seventeen years old teenager, who arrived at the orphanage at the age of seven, after the tragic death of her mother. During the period when the Intifada resistance movement was established, the girls from the orphanage of Mrs. Hind were sent to ensure the education of children in refugee camps. Miral was sent to Ramallah, a camp located in the eastern Balkans. Here she met Hani, a political activist with who falls in love. Taking part in the daily atrocities of the war, Miral finds herself in a personal battle that reflects her own dilemma: to fight like those before her or to follow the teachings of Mother Hind, namely that education is the only solution that open the way to peace.

1. Propaganda concept

Along the years propaganda concept collect a lot of definitions and dimensions. A suitable definition of propaganda that applies very well with our movie analysis is mentioned in *Art and propaganda in the twentieth century*. Here Toby Clark highlights that "wartime propaganda attempts to make people adjust to abnormal conditions, and adapt their priorities and moral standards to accommodate the needs of war. To achieve this, propagandists have often represented warfare by using conventional visual codes already established in mass culture. Thus, recruitment posters have often been designed to look like advertisements or movie posters"(Clark, 1997: 103). Another definition of propaganda comes from Jacques Ellul. He defined propaganda as "a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization" (Ellul 1973: 61).

First developed by the Lumière brothers in 1896, film provided a unique means of accessing large audiences at once. "Film was the first universal mass medium in that it could simultaneously influence viewers as individuals and members of a crowd, which led to it quickly becoming a tool for governments and non-state organizations to project a desired ideological message"(Taylor, 1979: 30-31). This connection between propaganda and ideology is important because "propaganda is commonly understood as discourse serving ideology" (Burnett 1989:127).

According to Franck Stern, films are effective propaganda tools because they establish visual icons of historical reality and consciousness. Furthermore he consider that propaganda define public attitudes of the time at which they were filmed. Also the purpose of propaganda is to mobilize people for a common cause, or to bring attention to an unknown cause (Stern, 2001).

As we have seen propaganda concepts vary. What we have to note here is that the propagandist purpose is to influence the attitudes and the behavior of the target group, while the target group is formed by individuals who are an integrated part of the society.

2. Propaganda instruments

Propaganda instruments are defined as deliberate and functional instructions and ways of interaction for influencing people. In the literature about propaganda it is common to refer to the seven propaganda devices defined by *The Institute for Propaganda Analysis* on 1937 (Jakhall, 1937: 217-223): name calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonials, band wagon, card stacking and plain folks. Such classification is not conceptual and the wording is also more suitable for popular sciences. According to the propaganda model there are three levels of manipulation, namely, socio-cultural context, social and technological.

The socio-cultural context level is a cognitive one and more specifically it arguments are based on symbols and stereotypes deriving from that. The importance of symbols in propaganda is based on the “understanding that ideological signs are connected more to symbols and less to issues” (Conover and Feldman 2004: 213). Closely connected to symbols are the stereotypes. Stereotypes are generalizations, particularly the “attribution to an individual of characteristics ascribed as universal to a group from which that individual is drawn” (O’Shaughnessy 2004: 57). In his book, *Public Opinion*, Lippmann says that “people are searching for the first familiar sign and after that stereotypes fitting to that sign are applied” (Lippmann 1997: 59).

The social level is an ideological one and concerns the possibility to guide the behavior of people directing them to act according to the role model set by opinion leaders. In case there are no trusted leaders, people tend to base their decisions on behaving and thinking styles concerning the values presented by the other members of the same social group. “This mean that people tend to decide on the right and the wrong relying on others” (Cialdini 2005: 121).

The technological level is based on either censorship or on manipulating with facts and with their interpretations. According to van Dijk “media chooses facts which are in accordance with the interests of elites, influencing by that the mental models of broader public, while the possibilities for minorities to present their cause in mass media is limited” (van Dijk 2005: 218).

2.1 Etiquette:

Etiquette is defined by experts from the *Institute for Propaganda Analysis* as "the method, whereby an idea that was labeled in a bad way, in order to make the receiver to reject, to condemn the idea without giving any attention to any arguments which support" (Lee, 1937). By using this method, the distraction seeks from a sensitive issue to a point that throws discredit on people who support the ideas of that sensitive issue. A very good example is the usage of the word “terrorist” when we talk about “someone who fights for liberty”.

Name Calling: Terrorist, Terrorism

The concept of terrorism is frequently used nowadays by many people. Searching upon the origin of this term, we notice that this is a French word, which referred specifically to state terrorism as practiced by the French government during the 1793–1794 Reign of terror. Through years the meaning of this word has changed. "Terrorism is a distinct form of political modern action intended to threaten the ability of one state to ensure the security of its members." (Townshend, 2002: 5). Laquer point out that "in the case of terrorism the subjects base on fact that they are not known and identifiable" (Laqueur, 1987: 146). We observe in film the same situation, concerning Fatma, Jamal's sister. She was convicted for terrorism because she placed a bomb in the cinema. When she did this thing, she based on the fact she's a women, and nobody will suspect her of brewing a real attack. But her attempt failed, the bomb did not explode. She received two life sentences and another one because she hasn't stood up in front of the judge. She spent ten years in prison. After that she was banished out of country, without the right to ever return.

Uri Avnery, co-founder of Gush Shalom peace group, qualified Israeli government's strategy of targeting terrorist infrastructure as nonsense: "terrorist infrastructure exists in the hearts of millions of Palestinians" (Townshend, 2002: 121). Thus we understand why Lisa's father is convinced that all Palestinians are terrorists.

Scholar consider that any "act of violence or threat of violence against a person or group of persons; which are not engaged in a military role (paramilitary); in order to manipulate the population or government policy satisfy the definition of terrorist act" (Arădăvoaice, Naghi, 2002: 66). It is noted here, the car explosion near an Israeli settlement, intentionally caused by Hani, Miral's friend, member of Intifada. This is therefore ranked as an act of terrorism. Incidentally, Miral is also accused of being part of a terrorist organization, because she was seen in the presence of Hani.

2.2 Testimony

Miral movie is inspired by the novel with the same name written by Rula Jebrel and presents Miral Sahin testimony regarding the political situation in the Arab world, namely the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how the course of events changed her life. Film ends with the memorable phrase: "This film is dedicated to both sides who still believe peace is possible"

In order to understand the life of the protagonist the movie presents three life stories of some Palestinian women who have influenced Miral's life. It is about Hind Hussein, or Mama Hind, as she was called by Miral; Nadia (the mother of the protagonist) and Fatma (Miral's aunt).

2.3 Glittering generalities

In his work, *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, Lee consider that glittering generality (also called glowing generality) is an emotionally appealing phrase so closely associated with highly valued concepts and beliefs that it carries conviction without supporting information or reason. They ask for approval without examination of the reason" (Lee, 1939: 147). Shortly, the glittering generality refers to associating an idea, an action or a product with a word which has a strong

emotional amount. All this for making the receiver unconditionally accept the idea without examining other arguments or proofs.

Glittering generality is reflected in this film in the sequence in which Jamal, Miral's father, surprises her on the street with Hani. Arriving home, Jamal attempts to make Miral to realize that it is not good to talk to an activist that attempts to solve state problems through violence. The next moment, Miral associate all the actions that Hani did and continue to do, with the notion of "patriot". Basically she tries to make her father to accept that all actions that her boyfriend had done are acts of patriotism.

2.4 Transfer

Transfer is the technique in which the prestige of widely accepted ideas, told of a respected person, is transferred to other ideas or people, for the latter to be more easily accepted. In simple words, the transfer involves a process of association. An idea or a product is related to something upon people have favorable attitudes.

The transfer concept is present in the movie through the simple fact that the Mama Hindi's idea, namely that "education is the one that opens the path to peace" is adopted by Miral. She accepted the scholarship in Italy offered by Hind, and becomes model for children generation who study and have shelter in Dar El-Tifl orphanage nowadays.

2.5 Plain Folks

Scholars highlight that through the appeal "plain folks" the communicator wants "to persuade the one to whom it is addressed, that his ideas are good because they are shared by ordinary people" (Lee, 1937). In general the communicator is an ordinary person, that belongs to group or a community and his message comes as natural as his normal behavior.

At the audience level we can say that the movie is a propagandist one, because through the main character (Miral, an ordinary girl) the viewer is trying to belief that peace on Israeli territory would be possible if the two sides reach a consensus.

2.6 Biased selection

In his book *Propaganda*, Jackhall explain that biased selection involves "selecting and using certain facts or arguments, namely, only those who support or, conversely, discrediting an idea, a program, a person, a product" (Jackhall, 1995). This kind of technique usually seeks to manipulate the audience perception of an issue by highlighting a side and repressing another.

An eloquent example of biased selection we find in Miral movie. The books and the documents given by Hani to Miral, are propaganda tools designed to do the latter to recognize the evil that Israel has done to Palestinian people. Again Hani is the one who intentionally caused the explosion of a car in the vicinity of a Hebrew settlement. Towards the end of the film, Hani is discredited by members Intifada, because he changed his opinion at negotiations.

2.7 Chain effect

Chain effect is often used in wartime to convince people that all make sacrifices for the war, even with the price of their lives. The nations involved in war need a hero to raise their moral. If they have no hero, they chose a candidate and make him the hero by exaggerating his facts.

We note that Miral joins the group Intifada, being convinced that what her friend, Hani, makes is an act of patriotism, and that all who belong to this group fighting alongside to their hero for the good of all Palestine.

3. Power and direct effects

Strong and direct effects have dominated thinking upon the issues of mass communication in the first half of the twentieth century. They are dependent simplistic communication models, inspired by the behaviorist paradigm. Talking about the power and direct effects, scholars highlight that mass media exposure can alter behavior by affecting beliefs and/or preferences. One of those strong and direct effects is illustrated by the magic bullet theory.

3.1 Magic bullet

Magic bullet theory is rooted in theories of stimulus-response type of psychology, therefore behaviorist paradigm. The theory has not been systematically formulated by a scientist, but it was rather a belief, an explanatory paradigm of mass communication, embraced by the early twentieth century specialists. This theory suggests a powerful and direct flow of information from the sender to the receiver. As it names says the bullet mission is to penetrate the audience head with the appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response.

As Tankard Severin notice in his work, "a message of mass communication has not the same effect on everyone. Its effect on someone depends on the number of things (including an individual's personality), and different aspects of the situation and context" (Severin, Tankard 2004: 126). Thus, we understand why the Palestinian-Israeli war manifested differently from individual to individual. We note that although they had the same purpose, to establish peace, the movie characters react differently to the information transmitted by the media. If Mama Hind believes that peace can be established through education, the Infatiada group members believe that peace can be established only by violence, by imposing respect to the enemy.

4. Limited effects

4.1 Two step flow communication

The theory was originally stated by P. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson and Gaudet in *The People's Choice* (1944), which has accumulated results of extensive field research of the political effects of mass communication. The main idea of the theory is that the flow of information from the media propagates in two steps: first from the media toward the influential individuals which frequently is pursuing mass communication and who are relatively well informed and were called opinion leaders. The second step comes from these leaders, to other individuals, less exposed to media messages through interpersonal communication channels.

In the film, this theory is frequently encountered. We see Mrs. Hind, explaining the girls from the orphanage the political situation that the state is facing and also she bring the attention on a negative thing, namely Infatiada a newly formed group. Later, we get acquainted with Hani, the leader of the Infatiada, which constantly inform about the group of actions that take place in different parts of the world concerning the situation of the Palestinian state.

4.2 Cultural Theory

Cultural theory of media has developed within the field of cultural studies. The focus is mainly on mass culture (folk) on message, media discourse and mass communication analysis from the perspective of the receiver, the audience. Furthermore, culture becomes a part of human everyday life, and the most cultural changes appear when people adapt to new events and situation that affect their community.

Although the film is dedicated to "both sides (both Palestinians and Israelis), for those who still believe that peace is possible", the movie managed to provoke controversy worldwide. Some see the film as anti-Israel movement, simply because the story revolves around four Palestinian women. For others it is just a biographical movie, which tells the story of Hind Hussein's life and orphanage which she founded.

Personally I think that the film is complex, encompassing a variety of shapes intertwined so that the transmitted message is one of peace, as said Deborah Young, Hollywood Reporter journalist. I believe that the purpose of the film is to make us realize the value of dramatic violence that dominates the current Israel for more than 60 years, all this seen through the innocent eyes of a Palestinian teenager (now journalist and writer, Rula Jebreal).

5. Complex effects

The complexity consists in "difficulty of assessing effects, their measurement and awareness of socio-cultural context in producing and sending messages"(Chelcea, Iluț, 2003).

5.1 Cultivation Theory and the concept of *mean world*

Cultivation theory is a social theory which examines the long-term effects of television. "The primary proposition of cultivation theory states that the more time people spend 'living' in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television" (Cohen, 2000).

This theory emerged following the studies on television violence (1960-1970) and was enunciated by George Gerbner. Core of this theory is that television shapes (grows) people's beliefs, their behaviors, attitudes and perception of social reality. The author also argues that television has little effect, gradual, indirect but cumulative and long-term acting. Studies on the effect of cultivation were addressed in particular how the "presentation of violence on television leads to increased concern about this phenomenon" (DeFleur, 1999: 54). The resulting data show that those who watch television programs - especially large consumers of television - have exaggerated fears about the level of violence that is expected to meet in their neighborhood. This effect has been named the syndrome of "mean world" (TV program consumers consider that their world is more unwelcoming and violent than those who watch less TV).

The effect of the film upon the audience consists in modeling the perception of the reality concerning the Israeli-Palestinian situation. This leads many to fall and comment on the film after their own principles, or to shape their own opinions based on the social reality presented. Hence some of the audience can be copped by the mean world syndrome. They can expect to take part of an event in their neighborhood, like they've seen in the movie, and all this for the simple reason that they have a Israeli or a Palestinian neighbor. Or worse, after viewing the film, racism or xenophobia can install in their souls.

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Links:

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