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“Just what, if anything, do history films convey about the past, and how do they convey it?” (Rosenstone p 6). History films have become one of the most popular mediums of broadcasting history to a wide audience, and scholars such as Robert Rosenstone have dedicated their studies to the impact that historical films have had on viewers. With various modes of transmission, be it a historical epic, drama, biopic, or fiction, historical films have, in some way, shaped public perception of history. While many scholars and film directors disagree with the importance of history or historical accuracy in films, there is no question that films that pertain to history heavily influence the way the modern viewer perceives certain individuals or historical periods. In this essay, I will address Rosenstone’s question of what historical films convey about the past. I will specifically consider propaganda filmmaking during World War II, and focus on how different belligerent powers depicted the history leading up to the war. The paper will showcase what the goal of the propaganda was and how it was received by the audience. More specifically, I will examine the United States, Japan, Germany, and the U.K. and highlight important propaganda films that were made during World War II. This will allow me to trace the interaction between political agendas and the shaping of public opinion, and show how films not only reflect the socio-political contexts of their respective countries but also play a key role in influencing public perceptions as to the “noble” cause of their respective countries.

George Custen credits the success of American filmmaking towards its increasing focus towards the everyday man. Custen states that the reason that Hollywood is so successful is

because, “ [A]merican film industry is based on its adaptability to the changing apparatuses found in the ecologies of its leisure culture, its main method of survival has been its reputed ability to be in sync with the values and desires of ‘ordinary’ people” (Biopics 1960-1980 p 14-15). This strategy of appealing to the ordinary people worked for the film industry, and also helped to unite the British populace during World War II. From 1940-1941, the city of London was on the receiving end of over 20,000 bombs. These bombings ripped through the city, causing the death of thousands, and demolishing institutions throughout the city. With the war encroaching on the doorstep of the civilian world, the British government had a new agenda; boost morale and promote unity by strengthening the ordinary individual. By encouraging the everyday civilian, the UK could achieve a level of pragmatism and unity that they desperately needed. Additionally, the leaders wanted their citizenry to feel as if they were serving a higher purpose, even as they were living out their ordinary days. Frank Launder’s *Millions Like Us* is a British war propaganda that seeks to broadcast the importance of civilian efforts in the war. Jo Fox identifies these themes and expounds on them, stating, “In attempting to connect the wider populace with the war effort and the drive for unity, propagandists knew that representations of the ‘ordinary’ had to be realistic, creating an individualized, personal identification with the role of the ‘everyman’ and foregrounding ‘his’ experience” (Fox 1). The importance of focusing on the everyday individual not only promoted national unity and the desire for survival and to thrive but also spurred civilian participation in the war. These propaganda initiatives eventually saw civilians taking up positions in military factories and voluntary service opportunities, for both men and women. Fox identifies the success of propaganda films on civilian participation when writing, “In every sense, wartime cinema provided a space in which the complexities of defining identities could be worked out, in which fantasy and the ‘ordinary’ combined to allow the

everyman to become a hero” (Fox 27).

Furthermore, Frank Capra’s film docuseries titled *Why We Fight*, was a seven film series documentary film, which spewed propaganda in order to influence the American public to support the United States’ involvement in another war on the European front. The war-weary Americans needed to know that their support during a second war was a noble cause to pursue. The seventh film in the series, *War Comes To America* begins by giving a patriotic overview of the history of the United States. Beginning with the Revolutionary War the tone throughout this overview is filled with passion. In addition to this overview, the narrator focuses heavily on the diversity and the vast array of ethnic backgrounds of Americans. Despite the highlighting of diversity and the imposition of patriotism, the *War Comes To America* conveniently skips over the Civil War during the recap of American history. It would appear that Capra intentionally chose to forego highlighting a war that divided the country internally as this would undermine the effort to show the greatness of the American body when operating holistically. This strategic oversight helped to foster unity and promote the American attitude of a “world police officer”: the strong country pursuing honorable goals. The film also displays numerous different polls taken by the American Institute of Public Opinion. At the onset of the film, the overwhelming majority of American citizens, approximately 95% of those who took the poll, voted against America taking part in the war. After showing several film snippets of Axis leaders demonstrating over-dramatic speeches and quotes taken nearly a century prior such as, “The world must come to look up to our emperor as the the great ruler of all nations. Lord Hotta from 1858” (War Comes to America 29:50), *War Comes to America* then showcases a new poll of American support for increasing the strength of the military, with 85% of the population in favor. Claudia Springer describes the tone of the *Why We Fight* series as they make “[S]weeping

generalizations that dramatize old dichotomies between right and wrong, good and evil, and the 'free world versus the slave world.' Their overall tone is bombastic, and they frankly manipulate the viewer's emotions... World War II films focus on the evil fanaticism of the enemy by representing the enemy's beliefs and goal" (Springer p 2). *War Comes To America* is a brilliant propaganda movie, which succeeded in invoking hostility towards the enemies of freedom and garnering massive support for American involvement in World War II.

Propaganda films were not restricted to the Allied powers of World War II. In fact, many of the most influential propaganda films during World War II came from the Axis powers who also sought to prove their cause as worthy. Leni Riefenstahl was Germany's most influential Nazi German propaganda filmmaker and garnered a reputation as Adolf Hitler's favorite propagandist. Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* is in a sense, Riefenstahl's "masterpiece". *Triumph of the Will* was a film commissioned by Hitler's Nazi party. The film follows several different Nazi leaders, including Adolf Hitler and Rudolf Hess, as they deliver passionate speeches about the prosperity of German industries and the strength and resilience of Germany. The film begins with Hitler's arrival at Nuremberg, where he is greeted by hundreds of thousands of loyal Nazi supporters. Hitler's arrival and reception, coupled with his passionate speeches of Nazi supremacy and the Third Reich's leading Germany to greatness, Riefenstahl paints the Nazi party, and Hitler, in a religious fashion, where the supporters are fully devoted to the cause. *Triumph of the Will* reflects Kracauer's notions on German filmmaking, where he notes that, "The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media... The manipulator depends upon the inherent qualities of his material; even the official Nazi war films, pure propaganda products as they were, mirrored certain national characteristics which could not be fabricated" (Kracauer p 1-2). Kracauer's description of German propaganda

films articulates exactly the type of reception that Riefenstahl intended. *Triumph of the Will* is not a film with a linear plot; instead, the jump cuts between Nazi party leaders talking about the strength of German industries and the economy, and the depiction of hundreds of thousands of Nazi soldiers marching and displaying their might is the center of the film. David Gusten speaks on the efficacy of the film saying, “Then came that stupendous masterpiece of film propaganda *Triumpf des Willens* (Triumph of the Will-1934-35), a ‘paean of praise’ for the Nazi cult that was expressly commissioned by Hitler... tremendous impact can still arouse almost any audience: even those who profess to be profoundly bored with the whole thing are seldom reacting completely objectively, and must also admit to vague feelings of disquiet when the screening is over, the rantings and cheerings silenced, the banners and torches stilled” (Gusten p. 11). The arousal of the audience that Gusten references was the intent of Riefenstahl’s film. The support garnered from the film is a direct reflection of the socio-political state of Nazi Germany. Countless young men and women flocked to the Fuhrer to give their undying support, spurred on in support of their country’s honor.

Additionally, Masahiro Makino’s 1943 Japanese war propaganda film *Ahen Senso*, or *The Opium War* was a propaganda masterpiece, demonstrating the full nuances of presentism, within his national policy film. *Ahen Senso* follows protagonist, Rin Soku and his movement to liberate Canton from British opium drug lords, Charles and George Elliot. The film itself is riddled with notions of propaganda, from the actual plot down to the cast. Not even a decade after the rape of Nanjing, Makino, a Japanese director, creates a movie about the opium war, a war involving Britain and China, having nothing to do with Japan. Not only was the plot an appropriation of history, but the film cast exclusively Japanese actors to play both Chinese and British people. In addition to this, the film adopts a national policy strategy, meaning it was a film produced by the

state in order to disseminate national policies that the government wanted supported. *Ahen Senso* strategically utilizes presentism as a means to justify their aggressive imperialistic actions, and to paint themselves as the savior of Asia, against the West. In Andrew B.R. Elliot's writing about the return of epic films, he quotes James Chapman's description of presentism as "A truth universally acknowledged . . . that a historical feature film will often have as much to say about the present in which it was made as about the past in which it was set" (The Return of the Epic Film 10). *Ahen Senso* uses the Opium Wars, a historical conflict occurring several years prior, in order to assert the notion of the evils and cruelty of the West, and the need for an Asian savior. Scholar David Dresser explicitly points this out in his writing saying, "Clearly intended to demonstrate the evils of the British Empire and by extension, the need for someone to step in to halt European aggression, *The Opium War* also implicitly states the case for Japan as China's Savior. Thus the film would obviously function on the home front as a kind of 'Why We Fight'" (Dresser 13). *Ahen Senso* has several dynamic roles that it plays in regard to film propaganda. The effectiveness of these tactics lies within the skillful usage of presentism, which preys upon the vulnerability of many Asian nations, asserting Japan as their hero and defender of good.

These four films provide incredible insight into the socio-political motivations of propaganda filmmaking designed to convince the viewers that their country was on the side of good. *War Comes to America* garnered real success in the influence of public opinion. During a time of isolationism for the United States, the government needed the backing of public opinion in order to engage in another war across the world. *War Comes to America* showcases, via polls taken during the time period, how the general American sentiment did not want to engage in another war. Capra's seven-part docuseries inspired a shift away from this isolationist view by showcasing how the Axis Powers wanted nothing more than to destroy democracy. Lewis

Jacobs, in regards to the effect of film propaganda in the United States said, “They furthered the military effort by conveying information about war and increased the public's awareness of what was going on. Their real opportunity came in emotionalizing the war situation. This led to an exposure of the nature of the enemy and his assaulting ideology, a more realistic treatment of Allied efforts, and a more dignified portrayal of the fighting men” (Jacobs p 21). Thus *War Comes to America* had an active effect on influencing public opinion about the war efforts with the goal of strengthening resolve in the pursuit of righteousness.

In addition, the British were one of the last European allied powers to stand towards the end of World War II. Facing constant bombing from Germans, the city of London was in shambles, and the British required greater domestic efforts in order to support their front lines. In order to fulfill their soldiering needs, women were required by law to register for the Ministry of Labor and were quickly ushered into factories to support war efforts. In addition to working in factories, many women were even conscripted to work from home as well. The British government's agenda was to fight against the public backlash, requiring women to support the war, and set out on a new initiative: create films that inspired the populace and encourage resilience in their factory work. Judy Suh notes the manipulative tone of the film by pointing out how “The film directly addresses women's potential frustrations with conscription and spends a good deal of time in the workplace, but its own invocation of authoritative male voices is considerably less baffled and condescending. *Millions Like Us* declares with no fuss and no surprise the necessary reorganization of domestic labor and the national value of women's factory work” (Suh p 8). *Millions Like Us* drives a clear line between the political agenda of the British government and attempts to manipulate the public by magnifying women's duty to serve in war factories for the honor of their families and country.

*Triumph of the Will* had a different purpose than the other films previously mentioned. The film was commissioned by Hitler himself, and was pushed throughout Germany and ended up being a huge commercial success within Germany. The film was very well received by members of the Nazi party, as it was an attempt to sell Hitler and his regime as a sort of mythical figurehead. The message within the film is quite brazen, where its stunning visual shots give undertones of Hitler serving as some sort of deity. Alan Sennett notes the god-like portrayal of Hitler within the film saying, "The film situates Hitler physically above, and also apart from, the people and the party. While the German nation is depicted as a crowd, lacking in individual properties, Hitler is given a god-like presence through the use of close-up shots of him speaking" (Sennett p.9). The portrayal of Hitler as this unifying figurehead served not only as an encouragement to the people of Germany but the worldwide recognition of Riefenstahl's work gave him a much larger platform to spew his Nazi propaganda. With over 100,000 German citizens rushing to theaters in the first several weeks of the film's release, the political desires of the German government were satiated by the popular reception of the German citizens. Ultimately the film coincided with Hitler's popularity peaking during the mid-1930s, and helped to propagate the Nazi idealism showcased within the film.

Lastly, *Ahen Senso* (The Opium Wars) has a very straightforward depiction of the political agenda being pushed by the Japanese government. With Japanese aggression on the rise within the Pacific, many civilians were left in wonder as to the motivations of the government. Japan left a ruthless and violent reputation in the mouths of many Southeast Asian states, and needed an excusal on their behalf. *Ahen Senso* served as their vessel to positively influence the public perception of their country, which asserted themselves as the savior of Asia over the West.

History is the discipline of studying the past, and film history gives us a different



perspective and a new lens through which we are able to interact with the past. Propaganda films during World War II give the viewer a direct insight into not only the socio-political landscape of the country in which it was filmed but also influence public opinion of said country. Rosenstone backs up this assertion saying, "Film shows history as process. The world on the screen brings together things that, for analytic purposes, written history often splits apart... This makes history like life itself, a process of changing relationships where political and social questions are interwoven" (Rosenstone p 27). *Millions Like Us*, *War Comes to America*, *Ahen Senso*, and *Triumph of The Will* are historical propaganda films that do exactly what Rosenstone refers to: they document the changing relationship of the political and social landscape. To capture the audience's support, the films played on noble causes and ordinary people behaving heroically. Whether the historical film is focusing on the everyday individual in order to spur greater initiative in the British homefront, gain sentiment against American isolationism, broadcast Nazi supremacy, or assert Japanese imperialism as the savior of a whole continent, propaganda films directly influenced the socio-political landscapes of Allied and Axis powers during World War II by directly augmenting the viewers' sense of honor to oneself and country.

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