

# Symbols and Propaganda

Symbols have a very great propaganda value, and play an important role in advertised and rightly understood it helps the rational propaganda but if they are wrongly understood, then irrational propaganda stand to gain. Simple folks are incapable of equating the symbol with the things it represent and propaganda take full advantage of this lack of understanding of the people. Most of the cosmetics which are nothing but wool fat and water beaten up into emulsion are sold at exorbitant rates with the help of commercial propaganda, who instead of talking of the natural virtues of emulsion give it a fancy name and present some fascinating pictures of some attractive females and as such mislead the common man. The manufactures actually take the advantages of some natural and universal hope and wish

of looking beautiful and attractive to other sex, of fear of being sexually repulsive, and by assuring the people of the fulfilment of hopes and promising release from their fears, they sell their products. So in reality the manufacture sell hope, prestige, good fellowship, brilliant witty conversation and culture. People of course are misled and pay heavy amounts to overcome their fears, fulfil their hopes and transform their illusions and dreams into reality. Rites and pomps of religion also fall into this category of symbols. They are disproportionately impressive and captivating and are responsible for creating and strengthening faith. The beauties of unholiness are not less impressive and the yearly Nuremberg rallies of Nazis were of this type. Keats' ideas of truth and beauty do not have any place in political and theological propaganda where beauty is attached with nonsense. In commercial propaganda the help of captivating symbols, some beautiful drawings

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and photographs, is taken as these appeal to the masses whose capture is their only aim. Children being ignorant, unfamiliar with the ways of world fall into their trap easily. It is easy and extremely profitable to catch them young as their critical faculties are not yet developed and after some time they have to grow up, earn and buy the products of industry.

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Effective rational propaganda becomes possible only when there is a clear understanding on the part of all concerned, of the nature of symbols and of their relations to the things and events symbolized. Irrational propaganda depends for its effectiveness on a general failure to understand the nature of symbols. Simple-minded people tend to equate the symbol with what it stands for, to attribute to things and events some of the qualities expressed by the words in terms of which the propagandist has chosen, for his own purposes, to talk about them. Consider a simple example. Most cosmetics are made of lanolin, which is a mixture of purified wool-fat and water beaten up into an emulsion. This emulsion has many valuable properties : it penetrates the skin, it does not become rancid, it is mildly antiseptic, and so forth. But the commercial propagandists do not speak about the genuine virtues of the emulsion. They give it a voluptuous name, talk ecstatically and

misleadingly about feminine beauty, and show pictures of gorgeous blondes nourishing their tissues with skin food. 'The cosmetic manufacturers', one of their number has written, 'are not selling lanolin, they are selling hope.' For this hope, this fraudulent implication of a promise that they will be transfigured, women will pay ten or twenty times the value of the emulsion which the propagandists have so skilfully related, by means of misleading symbols, to a deep-seated and almost universal feminine wish—the wish to be more attractive to members of the opposite sex. The principles underlying this kind of propaganda are extremely simple. Find some common desire, some wide-spread unconscious fear or anxiety; think out some way to relate this wish or fear to the product you have to sell; then build a bridge of verbal or pictorial symbols over which your customer can pass from fact to compensatory dream, and from the dream to the illusion that your product, when purchased, will make the dream come true. 'We no longer buy oranges, we buy vitality. We do not buy just a car, we buy prestige. And so with all the rest. In toothpaste, for example, we buy not a mere cleanser and antiseptic, but release from the fear of being sexually repulsive. In vodka and whisky we are not buying a poison which, in small doses, may depress the nervous system in a psychologically valuable way; we are buying friendliness and good fellowship and brilliant, witty conversation. With our laxatives we buy the health of a Greek God, the radiance of one of Diana's nymphs. With the monthly best seller we acquire culture, the envy of our less literate neighbours and the respect of the sophisticated. In every case the motivation analyst has found some deep-seated wish or fear whose energy can be used to move the consumer to part with his money and so, indirectly, to turn the wheels of industry. Stored in the minds and bodies of countless individuals, this potential energy is released by, and transmitted along, a line of symbols carefully laid out so as to bypass rationality and obscure the real issue.

Sometimes the symbols take effect , being dispro-

proportionately impressive haunting and fascinating in their own right. Of this kind are the rites and pomps of religion. These 'beauties of holiness' strengthen faith where it already exists and where there is no faith, to conversion. Appealing, as they do, only to the aesthetic sense, they guarantee neither the ethical value of the doctrines with which they have been, quite arbitrarily, associated. As a matter of plain historical fact, however, the 'beauties of holiness' have often been matched and indeed surpassed by the beauties of unholiness. Under Hitler, for example, the yearly Nuremberg rallies of the Nazi party were masterpieces of ritual and theatrical arts. 'I had spent six years in St. Petersburg before the war in the best days of the old Russian ballet', writes Sir Neville Henderson, the British ambassador to Hitler's Germany, 'but for grandiose beauty I have never seen any ballet to compare with the Nuremberg rally.' One thinks of Keats—'beauty is truth, truth beauty'. Alas, the identity exists only on some ultimate, supra-mundane level. On the levels of politics and theology, beauty is perfectly compatible with nonsense and tyranny.

In commercial propaganda the principle of the disproportionately fascinating symbol is clearly understood. Every propagandist has his Art Department, and attempts are constantly being made to beautify the hoardings with striking posters, the advertising pages of magazines with lively drawings and photographs. Those are no masterpieces, for masterpiece appeals only to a limited audience, and the commercial propagandist is out to captivate the majority. For him the ideal is a moderate excellence. Those who like this not too good, but sufficiently striking, art may be expected to like the products with which it has been associated and for which it symbolically stands.

Children, as might be expected, are highly susceptible to propaganda. They are ignorant of the world and its ways, and therefore completely unsuspecting. Their critical faculties are undeveloped. In Europe, during and after the World Wars, soldiers used to be referred

to as 'cannon fodder'. Their little brothers and sisters have now become radio fodder and television fodder. In my childhood we were taught to sing nursery rhymes and, in pious households, hymns. Today the little ones warble the Singing Commercials.

'I don't say that children should be forced to harass their parents into buying products they've seen advertised on television, but at the same time I cannot close my eyes to the fact that it's being done every day.' So the star of one of the many programmes beamed to a juvenile audience. 'Children', he adds, 'are living, talking records of what we tell them every day'. And in due course these living, talking records of television commercials will grow up, earn money and buy the products of industry. 'Think', writes Mr. Clyde Miller ecstatically, 'think of what it can mean to your firm in profits if you can condition a million or ten million children, who will grow into adults trained to buy your products, as soldiers are trained in advance to respond when they hear the words 'Forward March' ! (1040 words)