

Andrew Goodman

Out of Darkness

Propaganda in Pre-Cinema

As the nascent 21st century emerges before us, illuminated by the flickering glow of the 24-hour media cycle and swaddled in the simulacra of global capitalist hegemony, we may be excused for looking upon the idea of propaganda with jaded indifference. For many citizens of the 21st century, propaganda is just one more frequency in the never-ending drone of media; it washes over us in such unending waves as to become a part of our fundamental being. Irradiated as we are by the rhetoric of the spectacle, the possibility of an alternative is both tantalizing and elusive. Is it possible to extricate ourselves from this unending procession of psy-ops and punditry? Does such a world exist, can we even imagine it or are we consigned to eternal occupation at the hands of “the military-industrial-entertainment complex”

These questions are not to be taken lightly, and to suggest that they may be resolved in a single work such as this would be nothing short of bald-faced bravado. Rather this text is intended to serve as the foundation for future works, a beachhead from which to stage incursions into the vast territory of *Media*. With this in mind, the majority of the text will focus on the evolution of propaganda and pre-cinematic media via two case studies: Robertson’s Phantasmagoria at the Convent of the Capuchins, and Wagner’s *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth. Both case studies offer rich insight into the historical relationship between propaganda and *Media*, knowledge that may prove useful in future endeavors to both understand and undermine the apparatuses of 21st century subjugation.

We start with Robertson's phantasmagoria, specifically his performances at the Couvent des Capucines in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution. Positioned at the nexus of culture, politics and *Media*, Robertson's Phantasmagoria represents an unparalleled glimpse of a Europe in the midst of transformation. As Tom Gunning aptly states:

The French Enlightenment and the Revolution—had reached its ironic and bloody climax. The old religion had been overthrown and Reason had been enshrined as the new Goddess of the Revolution. The power of the Church had been crushed, its minions expelled.

Indeed Robertson's own metamorphosis from "Abbé Robert" to scientist-showman "Robert-son", mirrors these greater socio-cultural changes to such an extent that we may come to see Robertson as a paragon of Reason's ascension over the archaic forces of Superstition and Faith.

This association is critical to our analysis; not only does it show us a Phantasmagoria infused with the rhetoric of Reason, it reveals to us an Enlightenment consumed by the conjuring of horrors. One sees evidence of this throughout Robertson's performance, from the space itself, to the "chamber of science" preceding the funereal performance space, to his opening proclamation:

That which will occur shortly before your eyes, Gentlemen, is not a frivolous spectacle; it is created for the thinking man, for the philosopher who likes to lose himself for a moment, with Sterne, among the tombs.

The tombs that Robertson refers to are far from figurative, rather the former convent that was home to Robertson and his Phantasmagoria was also host to the graves of

nuns and royals. It was through this gruesome terrain that guests would pass on their way to the cloisters containing the Phantasmagoria. Once there, patrons would be treated to the "chamber of science", in which numerous optical effects and auditory illusions were on full display alongside demonstrations of the "miraculous" science of "Galvinism". Upon the appointed hour, the great hieroglyphed doors of the Phantasmagoria would open and the audience ushered in. With the aforementioned speech the room's single lamp would be extinguished and the show would begin.

As Gunning deftly observes, it is darkness that serves as the conduit of Robertson's phantasmagoria, not only technically but in the greater rhetoric of the age. The Enlightenment, as its name suggests, was immensely preoccupied with the idea of light, both as phenomenon and allegory for the illuminating power of Reason. And yet the very idea of light implies the presence of darkness, suggesting that the Enlightenment may have been a Phantasmagoria in its own right, haunting the darkened theater of the world with the "Fantascope" of Reason. For Robertson darkness was vital to the Phantasmagoria, not only did it make his projections more vivid, it concealed their origins and created an environment of suspense which served to heighten their effect. At no time did Robertson ever willingly reveal his secrets to the public, yet the rhetoric of science and Enlightenment remained a constant presence within his show. It is here that we may come to see the propaganda of an "enlightening" science played out amidst the entrails of religion, cloaking itself in the language of Reason while conjuring the bloody phantasms of a violent past.

We now shift forward in time to the summer of 1876 where, in the sleepy Bavarian town of Bayreuth, the composer Richard Wagner is in the midst of presenting a mu-

sical festival that will have profound artistic, cultural and political reverberations in the 20th century. Much like Robertson before him, Wagner and his Bayreuth festival were at the epicenter of immense social and political change. The German Empire, christened only a few short years before upon the successful conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War, was coming to grips with its newfound unity and power. For many, Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* represented a much longed for identity. With its strong pagan imagery and epic scale, the Ring cycle not only spoke of German culture, but of a burgeoning German nationalism. As the Bayreuth historian Frederick Spotts notes:

..to the fanatics, Wagner offered not just a religion of art but a political ideology as well. In the wake of unification in 1871, Germany was awash with musings about national greatness, the 'German soul', the 'German spirit', 'national redemption', 'national salvation'. Wagner's dramas and prose writings had something to offer on all these topics. It was also perfectly natural to compare his struggles in launching the Festival with Bismarck's efforts in founding the Reich and to regard the success of 1876 as the cultural counterpart of the military and political triumph of 1871.

Such was the political and cultural power of Wagner's first Bayreuth Festival, however just as important was the presentation of the work itself.

Early on in the development of the Ring cycle, Wagner settled upon the idea of creating a structure specifically for the presentation of his new operas. This conceptualized space possessed several key features that would ultimately find their way into the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth and come to define the Ring cycle experience. Chief among these was an orchestra pit concealed beneath the stage so as to provide the audience

an unobstructed view of the stage. For Wagner it was incredibly important that the stage have precedence over all other facets of the performance space, which is why, in addition to removing the "distraction" of the orchestra, he also sought to disengage the viewer from their surroundings. Previously the majority of opera houses were structure on a U-shaped format allowing audience members to have clear site-lines to each other as well as to the stage, thus allowing patrons to see and be seen. To remedy this situation, Wagner instituted amphitheater style seating and required that the audience be enveloped in complete darkness.

Once again we are presented with a performance space in which the primary goal is the subjugation of the viewer to illusion.

Between him and the picture to be looked at there is nothing clearly discernible, instead, only a shimmering sense of distance...in which the remote picture takes on the mysterious quality of a dream-like apparition, while the phantasmal sounding music from the 'mystic gulf', like vapours rising from the holy womb of Gaia beneath the Pythia's seat, transports him into that inspired state of clairvoyance in which the visible stage picture becomes the authentic facsimile of life itself.

This description (Wagner's own) of the ideal Bayreuth experience reveals to us what will come to be a recurring theme, one in which all notions of self are suspended and consciousness surrendered to spectacle. In many ways the opera at Bayreuth can be seen as a precursor to cinema, merely substitute the bright light of the screen for the bright light of the stage and the parallels become almost uncanny. Rows and rows of uniform seats stand at attention in the darkness while invisible music engulfs the theater; the

audience is treated to a legion of special effects and scene changes complete with jump cuts.

All the while the audience sits in silence, transfixed by the succession of light and sound, their entire existence resting in this moment of spectation. It is darkness once again that occupies the vital role of medium. While light may be the source of the effects, it is the presence of darkness that makes this possible, not only in terms of the play of light and shadow, but in the surrender of the audience as well. As we shall see in the 20th century, Wagner's vision of an "art-work, which seems to become life itself," will inevitably plunge the entire world into darkness.

As we conclude our investigation of these two case studies, let us take a moment to reflect upon those aspects that may prove useful in our continuing efforts to understand the relationships between propaganda and *Media*. In our exploration we have come to see the rhetoric of Reason and the fervor of identity carried out in the name of science and art. Both actively sought to impose their vision upon an audience via special effects and employed darkness extensively in their efforts. It is this duality of visual subjugation and obfuscation that not only marks the works of Robertson and Wagner, but those of Disney, CNN, LucaseArts and countless others.

The propaganda of Robertson and Wagner is that of a singular vision insisting upon its universality. It is the fixed gaze, the belief that what is seen is all that is, in essence: illusion. This is the beating heart of the simulacrum, the relentless pursuit of ever grander illusions in the name of reality. The darkness of Robertson and Wagner is no longer restricted to the stage, rather it is the darkness amidst the undulating light of

the television screen, the gaps between the unending waves of data. What makes *Media* so insidious is not its unending hum, but its insistence that that is all there is.

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