



PROPAGANDA is an uncomfortable film and wastes no time tightening the psychological thumb screws. Purporting to be North Korean anti-Western propaganda footage funneled into a translator's hands by covert operatives acting under false pretenses, the film wastes no time launching into a biting, wince-inducing indictment of Western consumerism as mind control and distraction, an indictment that summons a prompt twist in the gut. The found footage motif, in this case a movie posturing as propaganda originating in communist North Korea, offers a chance for sly metatextual filmmaking, a propaganda film masquerading as a propaganda film, both films – real and faux – being blatant condemnations of capitalism, at least as it's used in a Western consumerist

context. Regardless of one's politics, PROPAGANDA grips your trachea with steel fingers, shoving your face in ideas disconcerting for the average, unquestioning Western mind. Only the discontented complain, so keep them happy and distracted with NEAT STUFF! and they will think they are content and therefore will not buck the system. And the next time they feel empty, why, they'll just go buy something else! Of course, it's not consumerism alone but the socio-political and economic cultural context of the capitalism. Beyond spending our suspicions away, we citizens, asserts PROPAGANDA, are also taken advantage of by the government via taxes, used to create hideous weapons with which to commit crimes against humanity. Case in point: the war on terror.

It's hard to ignore the resounding sense of truth that echoes around your skull as this movie bleeds into your brain through eyes and ears. Even if the viewpoint here is, at least in some regards, definitively far left wing, there are a number of good points herein. And an argument that the movie favors some libertarianism kept in check by at least modified socialism (and vice versa) and consumer-favoring safeguards. That's awfully specific, I know, and tinted by my own ideas, but art is interpretation and, hey, the movie cites Noam Chomsky multiple times, and I think his politics, if I'm not mistaken, are of a social-libertarian stripe. Beyond even these issues is the culture war and culture control represented by bad religion. The rigid minded need not apply at the ticket booth of PROPAGANDA. Whatever one feels about the film's own propaganda, the cutting genius of the movie is beyond any debate. God is a "psychopath with extreme personality disorder" according to one figure in the film, the pixel-faced man whose identity is being protected thanks to his portion in the film-within-a-film's propagation. The Roman Catholic Church comes under specific scrutiny, not surprisingly. On the evangelical (and political) side, George W. Bush takes an ideological beating. (So does Dad.) He did receive the message from God to go screw up the Middle East, after all.

The leftist egalitarianism of the movie bites deep, and not just for neo-conservative hearts. It feels like a call to conscience. Of course, the film could be taken to task for that stridence, but one would also have to ask: Which of the two films here is the strident one? Both? Or just the allegedly North Korean propaganda footage?

PROPAGANDA's obvious satirical nature makes one lean heavily in favor of answer (C) BOTH OF THE ABOVE. Regardless, that zeal is necessary for the film's effectiveness. It represents a legitimate viewpoint, regardless of whether or not it's the "right" or "wrong" viewpoint. The film is fairly critical of both ruling parties in the United States and even goes so far to say that the United States (like many countries we criticize as less free) is ruled by a one-party system, the Demo-Republican Party. Ouch and zowie! The truth hurts like hell. As soon as you feel settled in an interpretation, though, a new twist forces deeper analysis. When PROPAGANDA suddenly turns on entertainment – for example, criticizing Quentin Tarantino's violent filmmaking as a regurgitation of a Western "cult of death" – one is forced to re-evaluate. Surely a subversive film such as this is not seriously dragging out the old violent-art-is-bad saw; surely the straight face is fake. It must be only the "North Korean film" dissing Tarantino, right? I mean, I've criticized some of his films but only aesthetically, hardly morally. (And some of his movies are brilliant.) Where does the PROPAGANDA inside PROPAGANDA end and the outer, "real-world" PROPAGANDA begin?

The line blurs, and that's probably the point. It provokes thought as one attempts piercing, lucid analysis of the ideas on tap here. This is a Moebius Strip in coitus with the Oroboros, layers folding over layers. It's not the conclusion at which one arrives but the thought-stimuli encountered in the sifting. For the record, this isn't mere America bashing. The British, a small but powerful nation in the Western world, also take a lashing. Even Australia is deconstructed through a picking apart of the cultural myth of Australia's greatness as a way of glossing over the GIANT PRISON ISLAND origins of Australia as a going Western concern. (Nevermind the aborigines who didn't get treatment at the white man's hands to make the Native Americans jealous. The word, PROPAGANDA is happy to point out, is "genocide.") Much of the film's ideology boils down to deconstructionism. Break down patriotism, consumerism, politics, religion, capitalism, etc., etc., into their constituent parts and show them for the farce they are. Sort of like reductionist minimizing of human consciousness as little more than brain chemical byproduct. (Though rooted biologically in the nervous system, consciousness is nevertheless "greater than the sum of its parts", IMHO.) Thing is, we can break things down to their bare, ugly facts, but what do we do when we get there? Culture has to have its myths. It's the use or abuse of said myths that is at question, to my way of thinking. And if a viewpoint is useful, as Buddhism teaches, then that is fine and more True with a capital "T" than mere factual truth. Not that evil should be dismissed or ignored. I'm mad as hell at the way the powers that be, mad mediocre men elected by the mediocre majority, grind us down with hypergreed and power lust. But total reductionism has its downside too. Of course, if you can look the void in the eye and come back from it, you can find enlightenment. I'm pondering more than criticizing.

PROPAGANDA will confront you with an abyss. It may shock or scar you. It may change you. It's an exquisite example of art. Conspiracy theories abound, of course. Well, at least they're not scarce. But PROPAGANDA manages not to come off as wacko, unless you're a neo-con, perhaps. The frightening thing about the movie's conspiracy theories – not of its own manufacture, I believe – is the uncomfy reasonableness of them. The odds against them are anything but astronomical. This hour-and-forty-minute movie may be a little taxing to the patience of those who don't dig documentaries or viewers who aren't stimulated by politics, but its

material is compelling. PROPAGANDA is an attention getter, no doubt. For example, Israel and the West's dogged support of Israel is another divisive issue jumped upon by the film. Comparisons to fascist Germany are raised. Condemnation of Western support of Israel's 20th-Century nationalization comes in the form of rejection of pro-Israel propaganda that took the form of lauding the new nation as the Jews at-long-last return to Israel. To some, the criticism will be met with offense; others will find the rugged truth refreshing. International diplomacy, too, is a sham. Much of it anyway. So are idealistic anti-Commie shenanigans. Many, though, still believe in the legitimacy of the "manufactured [Korean] war". As if the usual arguments against the Korean conflict aren't enough, PROPAGANDA asserts that bio warfare research was conducted amidst the tumult.

Nuclear warfare comes under fire, as well, with the point made that only the United States has ever used nukes against other humans. That's not necessarily statistically significant but it's worth the wondering. America's imperialist tendencies are also highlighted by pointing out the multiple invasions for which the U.S. is responsible. And religion isn't the only opiate of the masses. Entertainment culture is loaded with mind drugs, like such addictive brain heroin as television. TV, says PROPAGANDA, is a pacification that creates "zombies". Shades of George Romero, anybody? People, according to this film, were at their happiest just before television took over the home. Back in the 50s, you know. Of course, from TV it's a short leap to advertising. Not a shocking target, especially with the established anti-consumerist perspective represented herein (by one or both films), but interesting to watch. The penetrating insight into the psychology of the advertising industry is fascinating, even if most of the ideas aren't new to me. Like I said, it's an obvious, but interesting, target. "Corporate propaganda." The cult of celebrity is another unsurprising but equally compelling subject for dressing down by the movie. It makes a good point about how some people are famous for no other reason than that they are ... famous. People like Kim Kardashian or Paris Hilton (a "narcissistic parasite"). Madonna, Tiger Woods, AHNOLD and others get scrutiny. Brad and Angelina are critiqued for "shopping for children" in foreign countries (instead of adopting at home) and allegedly making sure the press knows about it.

Smoking and Big Tobacco get hit, as well. Of course, the argument could be made that people can't be protected from themselves and must be able to make their own decisions. At any rate, the health culture rant continues with eyeballing our image-consciousness and the huge pressure on surface appearances – and the extremes to which we will go to obtain unobtainable perfection. Vapid reality TV culture is a natural target, too. It all comes back around to distraction. That's one of the major names of the game. If you're distracted, you're not paying attention and as the bumper sticker says, "If you're not angry, you're not paying attention," or some such. The games industry gets targeted and we have one of those cognitive dissonance moments as with the Tarantino talk. Games perpetuate the culture of violence and desensitize us, making us perfect fodder for military recruitment. "Us" being the non-rich. Of course, you could just blame the military complex rather than the games that appeal as non-destructive outlets for our shadow. A solid point is scored, though, in the pointed-out fact that many know more about celebrities than geography, etc.

I LOVE the discussion of terrorism as an alarmist distraction. It's not just entertainment that's used as sleight of hand. The media as a whole is capable of being manipulated to manipulate us. 9/11 may be the best thing that ever happened for the more controlling among the powers that be. Whether or not you believe it was staged, faked, whatever, it can't be denied it created a mindset of fear that made us all but beg for the government to take over and "protect" us. And compared to other forms of death, relatively few are terrorist related.

Whatever your vantage point, PROPAGANDA is a challenging, gripping film, a masterwork of meta-layered cinematic narrative. Rather than taking a traditional documentary approach, it chooses a subtextual, hiding-in-plain-sight approach that makes already interesting material all the more interesting.

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