

THE USE OF PROPAGANDA AS A POPULAR CULTURE TRANSFORMER:

THE FILM AVATAR

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Abstract

Propaganda which has begun to make its presence felt has been one of the most significant political and cultural tools of these days. The underlying economic interests broadened the effectiveness and field of propaganda. With the developing technology, the widespreading technology increased the effectiveness of propaganda in daily life.

With this increase, propaganda has been used in every field of life somehow. Clearly or unclearly, all the people are exposed to some propaganda activities. The efforts of controlling the thoughts of the masses accompanied the need of propaganda techniques for showing itself. Propaganda which manifests itself in the battlefield has been making its presence felt especially with the globalization process.

In the field of communication, especially, the cinema which is developing in the form of an industry is currently used as the most significant propaganda tool. Generally, the cinema shows its effects through addressing feelings and sub-consciousness. Thus, it not only affects the senses of the society but also changes the values. In the study, the use of cinema as a propaganda tool from the point of its effects on huge masses was evaluated and the propaganda elements were discussed on the film Avatar. The film Avatar was criticized and the existence of propaganda was introduced.

Key words: Cinema, Propaganda, Communication, War

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is one of the significant mass media institutions in current societies. The cinema industry which functions in accordance with the logic of capitalist market is under the control of big capital groups as the other idea generating tools and it is used on behalf of the dominant classes in order to both gain profits and for ideological manipulation. On one hand, namely, the cinema shapes the ideational structure through its content, on the other hand increases the profits of mass communication holdings through box-office return, advertisements etc.

The cinema with numerous dimensions at the beginning such as politics and cultural has the capacity to affect the audience since it employs both visual and audial elements together. However, it is impossible to talk about the activity of the audience. Hence, the practice of watching film is a passive activity. The audience only consumes the mass culture product given to him. Thus, the audience is integrated to the system, and the existing system is reproduced. This situation is an imperialism style which the Western countries export other mass culture products including cinema and both their products or their cultures to other dependent countries. As a mass communication tool, cinema is an industry which production, distribution and consumption occur. For that reason, an analyze to be carried out related to cinema should comprise all those details and should be done with a holistic perspective.

Thus, cinema developed itself through the progress of humanity and the development of new technologies. Nowadays, propaganda started to affect every field in the life of human beings. The propaganda which is applied to affect groups or individuals is especially used in a systematical and effective way in politics. Nevertheless, the communication processes between human beings may contain some propaganda elements.

This study, referred to the propaganda elements in the film Avatar from the point of view stating cinema is an ideological instrument. The reason why the film Avatar is chosen is the film has been frequently regarded as an anti-imperialist Hollywood production by both audiences and cinema critics. As seen in the other Hollywood films, nevertheless, the story of Avatar contains an imperialistic propaganda.

1. THE CONCEPT OF PROPAGANDA AND ITS HISTORICAL PROCESS

The word propaganda leaves a negative impression including the methods such as being affected, suppression and deception. The notion of art means a field of activities which aims reality, beauty and freedom for most people. Indeed, the negative and sensuous connotation of the term “propaganda” towards the feeling of human beings is new; they are related to ideological struggles of the XX.th century. The specific use of the word which means the systematically spread of belief values and application goes back to the XVII.th century. Nowadays, the word propaganda is used as a tool of psychological struggle (Clark, 2004)

Propaganda is a conscious behavior related to affecting, changing, and controlling the opinion, thoughts and behaviors of the other people by the propagandist through individuals and groups.

Propaganda is an organized and continuous indoctrination and activity to spread a doctrine, mentally win the target nations or groups and establish the desired effect on the mind and psychology of the opponents. For a shorter explanation, propaganda is “indoctrinating an idea to the target group through utilizing all types of instruments” (Özsoy, 1998).

Thus, propaganda confronts us as an interaction process in communication science. Propaganda which occurs as a result of social interaction means the messages received by the individuals from their environment and regulation of those messages. We can define propaganda as the behaviors in order to change the attitudes, behaviors and beliefs through pursuing a definite goal and in a conscious way; it may also be defined as a convincing communication type which is used in transferring ideas on the religious, ideational, social and political fields when it is considered from the point of communication. On the other hand, propaganda is activities of introduction, impressing and directing which the political parties carried out in order to achieve the sympathy of people and thus increase their vote rates or only win the elections (Güz, 2002).

One of the most important people to hit the headlines to propaganda in the history is Adolf Hitler. Thanks to Hitler and his Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, propaganda turned into an art with its specific rules. The Germans carried out broadcasts in order to keep the mood of their people up and high level assignments were made to achieve this goal. The regular speeches of Goebbels and Hitler were extremely effective on this matter (Akarcılı, 2003).

In the Germany of Hitler, propaganda was considered equal to the other instruments of war and was highly emphasized. Hitler has used an effective method to explain his ideology and being accepted by the public and he executed propaganda activities on the ministry level. Goebbels systematically worked with a team which was specially trained for propaganda and carried out propaganda mostly face to face and dominantly used radio (Kuruoğlu, 2006).

2. THE RULES OF PROPAGANDA

2.1. *The Rule of Plainness and Single Enemy*

First of all, propaganda aims to provide plainness in all fields. It desires to separate its doctrine into a few points which its proof can be determined as clearly as possible. It consists of short and consistent sentences; as a result of this, it may be kept in mind easily. The motto and slogan which are needed to be as short as possible and steady are two major elements which come into prominence. The motto summarizes the objective to be accessed while slogan directly addresses to political passions, ebullition and hatred. Later on, the symbols accompanied this process. Those symbols summarize a doctrine or an administration process. It is divided into groups in itself such as textual symbol, visual symbol, plastic symbol and musical symbol. Again, individualization of the opponent has provided huge benefits; people enjoyed meeting visible people rather than dark powers. Above all, the propaganda is much more effective if people are convinced that their real enemies are the leader of a party or a nation rather than that party or that leader. At this point, the rule of single enemy appears as one of the major rules of propaganda (Domenach, 2003).

2.2. *The Rule of Expansion and Corruption*

In the expansion rule, all kinds of messages to be transmitted are expanded, exaggerated and padded. The messages to be transmitted in the message are formed according to the individual of the group to be exposed to this message who has the capacity of thinking at the lowest level. Thus, comprehension of the target group will be achieved in accordance with the desire of the propagandist. In the corruption rule, the content and meaning of the message is corrupted and reorganized according to the desire of the propagandist.

2.3. *Arrangement Rule*

A message which has been organized in various forms is one of the high qualities of a propaganda campaign. A message will be successful so long as it is organized and repeated according to the target group. Processing a definite message, repetition of the messages in different forms organized according to the various groups and in numerous forms as many as possible and the repetition by all the propaganda organs are the basic characteristic of this rule. The things which are continuously heard are engraved in their subconscious as if they are true. For that reason, the repetition is effective on the target group. Whatever the situation is, the basic condition of a good organization is to prepare the tone and proof of the propaganda in a convenient way for the various groups.

2.4. *The Rule of Indoctrination*

According to this rule, it is significant to find and use the inclinations of the people to be exposed to propaganda; sometimes, the dimmest and silliest ones. There are some feelings in the souls of people, some of them are conscious while some others are unconscious and propaganda indoctrinates the messages he intends to transfer to the minds of people during he finds and uses them. Especially, they present digested news in order to gain the trust of the readers of the newspapers, reinforcement of their opinion.

2.5. *The Rule of Unity and Contamination*

The rule of unity means that the propagandists reflect the idea of a person as if it is general opinion of the society. It is possible to create a feeling kneaded with the enthusiasm which enforces the individual to share political ideas which almost everybody seems sharing and common fear. Some elements are needed to create this unity feeling. They can be listed as; flags and starboards, emblems and marks, writing and placards, uniforms, music, projectors and torches, greetings, words of "long live" and standing in silence (Domenach 2003).

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CINEMA AND PROPAGANDA

The use of mass media elements as the tools of propaganda inevitably provided the use of cinema as a tool of propaganda. Since cinema is a common and popular phenomenon, it socio-politically plays a very significant role in modern culture.

There are movies which narrate the political events but performed to achieve a political goal far from the artistic anxiety. People use cinema as a tool of propaganda in order to transmit and impose their prospects, opinion and life styles. The use of cinema as a tool of propaganda, indeed, results from the effectiveness of cinema. Since the presentation of sound and vision at the same time and the price to be paid in exchange for it is in small quantity; the propagandists who want to transmit a definite message have thought to access the large groups of people through cinema and they have succeeded in it.

The spread of cinema in the world as a media which vision and sound is connected, the tools of their use were also enriched. When cinema functions while generally appealing to emotions and subconscious; it shows that the groups are under such an effect. As a tool of propaganda, thus, cinema not only affects the attitudes and opinions of the people but also helps the values becoming established (Bektaş, 2000).

The effecting power of cinema on public is beyond comparison to the other mass media tools; because, it may reach to a large spectrum from luxurious halls of big cities to the open field places in the furthest village. From the point of the lowness in prices, it is easy to watch and duplicate; thus, it shows that cinema is a unique interval from the point of moral and social effects (Özsoy, 1998).

Presentation of reality in a highly strong and convincing manner in the cinema has created a great impact on the audiences. Cinema has changed our style of understanding the world, and in a broader sense, acting in this world (Monaco, 2001). This way, highly effective impressions were left on the audience and large groups of people were impressed by the power of the movie screen.

Especially, the propaganda executed during the process of war is related to the orientation of people to the abnormal conditions of war. In order to achieve this goal, the propagandists described the war using traditional visual codes which popular culture currently located. For that reason, enlistment posters were often designed similar to advertisements and movie films and the formulas of western and crime films were used in propaganda films. Film stars, singers, sportsmen personalities, and heroes of cartoons were used to deliver the official messages of the war attempt. Thus, the war was both made more familiar and it was presented as a positive and evocatory pattern through misusing, the massive entertainment, phantasm and passion habits. During this process, the alternative presentations have generally strictly been censored (Clark, 2004).

According to Wasko, cinema industry which plays a significant role in the formation of social consciousness is the transporter of the intellectual expression of the capitalist relations and it reproduces capitalism and its ideology through legitimizing the dominant ideology this way (2006: 192). In conclusion, Hollywood both makes cinema film as a property in the form of mass culture and makes the propaganda of capitalism to audiences as the culture and way of life and provides the formation of a consciousness to legitimize them (Yaylagül, 2010).

4. THE FILM AVATAR

The topic of the study, the film *Avatar*, is a Hollywood production. The *Avatar* which was filmed using new special effects in 3 dimensions is a film which has drawn attention of numerous audience since it is in the science fiction form which has been tried and highly accepted with its new technology and contains similar contents presented in every Hollywood production and internalized by the audiences.

Due to its production technique, the *Avatar* is the “most expensive production” has provided more than ten times profit than its cost with its worldwide box-office-return. The common budget of the film was \$237.000.000 while its worldwide box-office-return is \$2.730.425.412. The film with the production date of 2009 was produced by Lightstorm Entertainment Company and distributed by 20th Century Fox which is included in the News Corporation Company; a sector dominant global media company (<http://tr.wikipedia.org:2010>).

The film directed by James Cameron and starred by; Sam Worthington, Michelle Rodriguez, Sigourney Weaver, Zoe Saldana, and Giovanni Ribisi is 162 minutes long and is in the form of action science fiction.

The story of the film takes place in the planet called Pandora in the 22nd century. Pandora which orbits a gas giant hosts the Na’vi people who are 3-4 meters long, blue human-like, accepted the tribal culture and peace-loving unless they are attacked. Since human beings cannot breathe the air of Pandora, they create Avatar, a mixture of human that can be controlled through neural connection and Na’vi. Jack Sully (Sam Worthington), a paralyzed Navy soldier, volunteers to live in Pandora as an Avatar. Sully who falls in love with a Navy princess finds himself in the middle of fire between human army who gradually consume Pandora and Na’vi people. The thing mostly affects him is that he finally enters into a better body, he feels his paralyzed legs again (in the Avatar body) and run again. When he and Princess Neytiri start a relationship in time, Jake completely forgets the purpose of human beings and joins the Na’vi rebellion and organizedly resists human. Later on, Na’vi’s understand that Jake told him lies at the beginning and try to kill him but finally they gave up. At the end of the story, Neytiri and Jake reunite and Jake completely enters into the body of Avatar (<http://tr.wikipedia.org>).

5. PROPAGANDA ELEMENTS IN THE FILM

5.1. *The Rule of Plainness and Single Enemy*

People and events are completely expressed in a plain way from the beginning of the film, information is given about places and people and the audiences are helped to understand the film better.

In the film, there is a company which employs mercenary soldiers from various countries. This company wants to occupy the Pandora planet and dig the mines there. At this point, innocent Na’vi people are enemies according to occupying powers; however, the real enemy is the occupying power.

5.2. *The Rule of Organization*

Na’vis are shown extremely peace-loving. Grace Augustine, the leader of Avatar program, states that they don’t attack unless they are fired. The peace-loving aspects of the Na’vis are repeated during entire film. The emphasis on the desire of the capturing the planet where Na’vis have been living by the occupying powers may be evaluated within this rule.

5.3. *The Rule of Indoctrination*

The examples for the indoctrination in the film may be listed as Jake’s being on the side of occupying powers; later on, his adaptation to the environment of Na’vis and his resistance against occupying powers realizing that there is injustice on the against Na’vis; peace-loving manner of Grace Augustine, the head of Avatar program, and his defending Na’vi.

5.4. *The Rule of Unity and Blurring*

Jake, a soldier, helps the occupying powers at the beginning; later on he changes his mind and stands on the side of Na’vis. This is the contradiction to the rule of unity.

Jake, doctor and his team who envisage being blamed for impeachment by both Na'vis who envisage war under the harsh conditions but remain in their position where they live and occupying powers are emphasized.

The music used with the visual scene is a complementary element. The holy tree called Eywa, their gathering around this tree and greeting Jake by uttering some words in accordance with their belief all can be evaluated within this rule.

5.5. The Rule of Repetition

From time to time in the film, the leader of the occupying powers is shown; it is stated that their purpose is to capture mines in Pandora planet in any case and they envisaged everything for this purpose. Opposite to this opinion Grace Augustine and her team are highly peace-loving and they are on the side of Na'vis; this is repeated for many times in the film.

6. THE TYPES OF PROPAGANDA USED AVATAR AND QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

An external propaganda is made through emphasizing the invidious occupying of a land by the occupying powers and formation of a colony based on the occupying powers. Since the film is a Hollywood production, an inner propaganda may be mentioned when the status of America in Afghanistan and Iraq is considered. Presentation of both political and ideological messages in the film is considered within political and ideological propaganda. Resisting against the occupying is an example for that propaganda.

Propaganda of ambiguity is exhibited in the film. On one hand, the occupying powers are criticized and on the other hand America is only criticized by a veteran American soldier who resists against occupying powers, a few scientists and an American pilot; this criticizes and highlights Americans show the ambiguity related to topic. While critics are carried out on one hand, elevating is made on the other hand.

With reference to quantitative content analysis, the film Avatar reproduced and legitimized the class, sex and nation based inequalities as do the other media contents (McQuail, 1994). Among the 2199 scenes shown in the film, 1430 of them took place in open fields in the lands of Na'vis occupied by the imperialist country, 753 of them take place in the places such as military base, plane/tank/robots and laboratories which serve the purposes of the imperialist countries. The film which frequently takes place in such environments is the proof of the imperialist country has the technology of war, necessary scientific information and power to wars and colonization. Permanent places of the Na'vis are those open fields.

With reference to qualitative content analysis, two different types of societies are shown in the film which took place in Pandora planet in 2129. One of those society types is the capitalist society while the other is native Na'vi society. In the content of the film; the purpose of capitalist white people is to capture the valuable mine in Pandora and wants to occupy the lands of Na'vis. According to the capitalist point of view, those lands should be exploited and the booties should be captured.

As we have stated previously, capitalist western countries which have completed their technological development have been executing their activities related to the cinema, to a large extent, in accordance with the politics of their country and capital. Nearly all of those activities employ a propaganda element. Thanks to it, they maintained their efforts to continue their dominance on the world through strengthening their superiority with mass media activities.

7. CONCLUSION

As a result of communication, the desire of people to impress each other has shown since the day they existed. When the groups of people started to live together, this need emerged as affecting groups and this has led to the emergence of the perception of propaganda. The propaganda activities which were held using more primitive methods, started to be used more systematically and effectively with the involvement of especially mass media tools. Especially, the role of newspapers, cinema, radio, and television in the communication between groups enabled the propagandist to transmit the messages to the target groups easily and shortly. Among them, cinema has turned into an essential tool for the propagandists. While the activities of watching film which people regard as an entertainment, they perceive and accept the messages sent to them more effectively. The messages projected by Hollywood in the dominant position in the world are the preferable instruments for their propagandists. The political developments experienced after 1990 caused global results in the world and the system called single-pole from now on started to produce its own messages and started to market them to the countries in the world. Propaganda which is an element of the pattern of war found its place in the cinema sector through associating with the changing war techniques and showed itself in the course of cinema within the information wars instead of the wars of guns and bullets.

In the example of Avatar, an opposition to occupying and imperialism has been shown. However, there are also conflicts in the film. When the occupancy of America in Iraq and Afghanistan is considered to be criticized in the film, the opponents of those occupants are again always Americans. This situation enables the exhibition of an ideology in cinema films and, at the same time, reveals the transformation of an ideology into a propaganda tool.

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