Historical Propaganda and New Popular Cultural Medial Expressions

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In connection with an exhibition about Leni Riefenstahl in the period 12th of September to 26th of October 2008, the Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities (HL-senteret) in Oslo, Norway, tried out a teaching structure based on ideas of reflective historical consciousness. The pedagogical intention was to let the students/pupils explore the historical embeddedness of propaganda and thereby analyze the constructions of insiders and outsiders within propaganda by deconstructing the images and texts. The concept of historical consciousness and its three different levels are elaborated in Körber's essay in this volume. The target group was 14 to 16 years pupils from the Oslo area who visited the centre for one full day.[1]

The pedagogical goal was to enable the pupils to work in different ways of relating to history as developed through the concept of historical consciousness by Jörn Rüsen and others. We attempted to design the assignments given to the pupils in such a way that they would work either on the past, on history or on the present/the future – in either a reconstructive or deconstructive mode. These concepts will be presented in depth later on.

1 In addition to the visits of pupils at the centre, we also organized two teacher training courses – one for teachers with pupils aged 13-16 and one for teachers with students aged 16-19. The last-mentioned course was arranged so that there was a research conference the following day. The aim of these courses was how to use popular cultural expressions in teaching history, arts, Norwegian language, and social sciences.

In this article I will describe the pupils' stay at the centre and how the day was organized, thereafter the background of this concept, and at the end I will present my evaluation of the pedagogical program through an analysis of the pupils' presentations.

The present study is an evaluation of how the pupils related to and learnt from history. Our goal was to use the specific genre of propaganda and narrative features in general as a prism for the pupils to explore the past. The narrative features explored were the differences between an active in-group ("us") and a passive or threatening out-group ("the others"). The final products presented by the pupils served as the basis for the evaluation of whether they were able to create and communicate their understanding of the past through analysis of narrative structures.

This article will be looking at the ways in which the students interpreted narratives of the past and discuss them to decide to what degree the teaching exercise was successful.

The program of the visit

The exhibition *The Myth of Leni Riefenstahl* was shown partly at HL-senteret and partly at the Norwegian Film Institute for a brief period of time during autumn 2008 in Oslo, Norway. The HL-senteret entered into a partnership with the municipality of Oslo in order to develop a framework which could convey the content of the exhibition to 14-16-year old pupils. This exhibition was the first one ever made on the theme of Leni Riefenstahl's life and productions which was not controlled by Leni Riefenstahl herself.

In practical terms, the visit of the pupils was organized as follows: First the pupils were guided through the permanent exhibition of HL-senteret and the Leni Riefenstahl-exhibition. During this guided tour, the pupils were shown examples of propaganda and the concept of popular culture was introduced.[2] Here we would use posters showing either the

2 The notion of "popular culture" also has its historicity (as does the notion of propaganda). We did not try to establish any definition of "popular culture" with the pupils. Rather, we tried to provide examples and explain though these examples. As for the term itself, it is obviously meant as an opposition to "elite culture" or "high culture". I would here suggest a sketchy definition that relates the term "popular culture" to 1) the rate of reproduction of the phenomenon, 2) consequently to the lack of dispute amongst its public as to what is original and what is a copy, 3) the diffusion, and 4) its ephemerality – it is not intended to last even though (or because) it is spread everywhere. Propaganda is addressed later.

French General Dreyfus portrayed as a snake and traitor as an example of propaganda, or German children's books depicting Jews as sub-humans or as a threat to the pure people's community as examples of both popular culture and propaganda in popular culture. In order to place the exhibition in a historical narrative and to help the pupils in their work on and in the exhibition, we gave a 45-minute lecture introducing the distinction between "us and the others". Here, we used *Tintin in Congo* (1931/1946), Nazi election posters and propaganda posters, Stalin area posters, Khmer Rouge posters, and selections from Donald Duck, as well as *Rambo* and *24*. Examples which all clearly implied who or what is represented as the ideal and who is seen as subordinate. These examples and the tour in the exhibitions made up the basis for our presentation. Here we addressed the issue of how the assumed recipients of the message where made to identify themselves with the producers of the different pieces of propaganda. The need to create a sharp division between "us and the others" was also elaborated towards finding some propagandistic-political message – and this was in turn used in the exercises.

There are huge differences between the language of medial expressions in the 1930s and 40s and today. In displaying examples of the formal rules of expression within that particular historical period, we aimed at liberating the (Nazi) content from the typical aesthetics of the period where the fit male was used as a symbol of the fit nation or the healthy people. In this way we hoped to pave the way for an easier access to the historical topic by removing some of the pupils' preconceptions about Nazi Germany as some a-historical entity. Thus we decided to show the cultural context in which Nazi aesthetics existed. This was done by showing Communist posters and posters for the Maccabiah Games in the 1930s.[3]

The integration of modern popular cultural expressions – and especially examples from movies, videogames, and TV after 9/11 – made up large parts of the continuing lecture. The examples were used to make the students discover what we mean with "propaganda and (new) popular culture".

In the presentation we drew upon classical narrative competence, i.e. who is the narrator, how are the different protagonists portrayed in the movie (and how are their opponents portrayed). Our main aim was to investigate how the others are depicted in modern popular cultural expressions and which – or how cultural codes are used in order to render

3 The Maccabiah Games are an international Jewish athletic event similar to the Olympics, held in Israel every four years under the auspices of the Maccabi Federation.

(violent and degrading) action legitimate. The pupils were shown film clips from *Rambo 3* and *24*. In *Rambo 3*, the US soldier does not succumb to torture, while Jack Bauer in *24* is a torturer himself committing these acts in order to save US citizens. In *Rambo 3* the bad guys are using torture – and it does not work, while in *24* it is the good guys who are the tortureres – and it works! The obvious points are: To show the change in the means the good guys resort to; to show that torture is a crime; to show that in propaganda the hero is never wrong; and that in popular culture it is the main protagonist's moral dilemmas that are addressed – there are seldom shifts in narrative perspective which would make the character's other sides visible.

Exercises

After this elaborate introduction the pupils were given exercises on three different levels.

1. Analysis of historical propaganda from the *Mythos Leni Riefenstahl* and the permanent exhibition.
2. The history of Leni Riefenstahl; create a biography where she is good and another where she is evil.
3. Ironic production of propaganda for contemporary use.

The students could use different types of media in working towards their presentation. They could draw posters; make movies or radio; create a PowerPoint, a collection of pictures; or other ICT-based presentations.

The pupils' presentations were held in a plenary session with their teachers present. The main objective here was to see how they interpreted the past, and ask them questions concerning their products relating to both the past, history, or present/future and following up both the reconstructive and the deconstructive mode and to the genre. Below I shall elaborate on the didactical concepts and ideas forming the background for the exercises presented here.

Pedagogical background and ideas

The construction of this didactic framework took as a point of departure the insight that "research has shown that the pupils' historical consciousness is not primarily created at school, but rather at home through

contact with movies, books, and games".[4] We accepted this insight and started looking at popular movies, TV-series, cartoons, computer games in order to find out what the products forming and influencing the pupils might be. We then proceeded to collect examples from different popular cultural forms of expression which could make up the context of propaganda in and through the media in which we wanted to present the work of Leni Riefenstahl.

Furthermore, we followed Jörn Rüsen's understanding of what constitutes an historical narrative:

> "The general competence concerned with 'making sense of the past' can be divided into three sub-competencies. These can best be defined in terms of the three elements which together constitute a historical narrative: form, content and function. With respect to the *content*, one can speak of the competence for 'historical experience;' with respect to *form*, the 'competence for historical interpretation;' and with respect to the *function*, the 'competence for historical orientation.'" (Rüsen 2004: 69).

The lecture and the tour of the exhibitions were thought of as moving towards content and form of the historical narratives. There could have been alternatives to such a lecture, i.e. that the pupils worked on the topics of propaganda in and through the media before arriving at the centre, but from experience we know that this can be a great threat to the overall success if the preparations are not carried out. Since the main objective in our work with the pupils was concerned with historical orientation and consequently with contemporary and future orientation, we wanted to leave it to the pupils to discover the functioning of propaganda through their own work in the exhibitions and to discuss the functions further during and after the pupils' presentations of their exercises. Therefore the main focus in the lecture needed to be questions of form and content in order to leave the function to be discovered by the pupils.

The different exercises correspond to work on three different levels: Past, History and Present/Future (see also Körber's contribution in this volume where the six-field matrix is developed). We tried to translate the different foci from Körber's didactical insights into assignments. Our choices when it comes to such a translation were:

4 Original: "Forskning har visat att elevers historiemedvetande i första hand inte skapas i skolan, utan i hemmet genom kontakt med filmer, böcker och spel." (Hägelmark & Johansson 2007: 17).

Table 1: The exercises analyzed from the theoretical methodical competences

Exercise	**Historical orientation**	**Re-construction**	**De-construction**
1. Analysis of historical propaganda from the *Mythos Leni Riefenstahl* and the permanent exhibition.	*Focus "past"* Ascertain features of the past.	Establish how propaganda was used.	Go through the narrative of the exhibitions with the aim to identify historical propaganda.
2. The history of Leni Riefenstahl – create one biography where she is good and another where she is evil.	*Focus "History"* Transforming past things to history.	Create a coherent narrative where Leni Riefenstahl is viewed in relation to her time.	Establish how different stories present specific narratives.
3. Ironic production of propaganda for contemporary use.	*Focus "Present/Future"* Connecting past and history to the present and the future.	Establish how propaganda is used in the contemporary political climate.	Analyze what are the cultural codes of today that are used to influence choices.

These are specifications of the ways of what Körber calls methodical competence which "spans from the perception of any uncertainty referring to time via the activation of earlier insights, concepts and categories to the start of the methodically controlled process of re- and deconstruction" (Körber in this volume).

With "focus" in the table above, we try to emphasize the specific temporality that the students were supposed to work on. As should be obvious, the past is connected to the future in history (and vice versa) rooted in the present. All three levels involve the full employment of historical learning, but the pupils will have their assignment and consequently their presentation tied to past, history and present/future as analytical categories. There are no differences in value in the sense that one or each of these is more or less difficult than the others, but during the presentations it will be clear whether or not the pupils are aware of using mainly reconstruction or deconstruction.

One small note on why we set some clear limits as to how they could work: It is vital in our understanding of history and in the pedagogical

ideas underlying the work of historical consciousness that one learns to ask questions based on the historical material that one encounters. This is what is called inquiring competence. Inquiring competence "spans from the perception of any uncertainty referring to time via the activation of earlier insights, concepts and categories to the start of the methodically controlled process of re- and de-construction" (Körber in this volume).

In order to stimulate this competence we asked open-ended questions, asked them to make descriptions, or asked them to produce some material themselves.

Popular culture, values, and propaganda

When it came to the contents of popular cultural expressions, it was of great importance to show how the cultural stereotypes and hierarchies were represented. Here it was significant to show the transfer from historical examples to contemporary ones. In using the dichotomy between "us" and "the others", we postulated continuity in reading and interpreting history. This is the level of historical consciousness described as *traditional* by Rüsen: "Traditional orientations present the temporal whole which makes the past significant and relevant to present actuality and its future extension as a continuity of obligatory cultural- and life-patterns over time." (Rüsen 2004: 71). Here the permanence of history was explored. As explained above we used cartoons, video games and movies/TV-series, in order to stress how aesthetical forms always stand in a relation to the society in which they are created. We presented history as tradition, but in a critical way where the pupils were shown how aesthetic forms and elements formed a link between popular culture and ideology. In order to make this link clear and visible we had to show how the content of one such expression had changed with the ruling ideology. This is then an introduction to what Rüsen calls exemplary historical thought and it "discloses the morality of a value or a value system culturally embodied in social and personal life by proving its generality" (Rüsen 2004: 74).

In general the project "Historical Propaganda and New Popular Cultural Medial Expressions" can be said to operate within the exemplary type of historical consciousness, but within a critical variation as specified above.

Our concept of propaganda needs some explanation. In the debate of how to understand propaganda, our heuristic definition will problematize the focus on the intent of the sender – we will follow the definition

applied by Gulseth from Jowett and O'Donell to the Rwandan genocide: "Propaganda is a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (2004: 27). The reason for such a modification is that since our material was made up of popular cultural expressions such as movies, games and comics, we would end up as conspiracy theorists if we tried to frame some sort of intent or premeditation. In our work with the pupils we aimed to explore the cultural codes within contemporary popular cultural expressions and the implicit values. The point was to leave the exploration of possible intention to the pupils (and to be approached in the discussion during presentation). Our goal was to make the pupils aware of how they themselves take contemporary medial expressions for granted by reflecting contemporary expressions in the light of historical expressions.

We aimed at challenging the pupils to try to orientate themselves in history through our introduction on content and form. This orientation would then consist in an uncovering of the interdependence between content and form, which would constitute a very high degree of historical learning and understanding – in the scholarly sense. In relation to propaganda, this would then consist in exploring the historicity (reconstruction) by comparing with other objects in the specific culture to grasp the issues taken for granted in that cultural sphere (deconstruction). Here we operate with a cultural relativist notion of truth. Such a truth notion created difficulties for the pupils when it came to making ethical as well as historical orientations, as I will show later. This understanding of truth is tightly connected to our modified notion of propaganda since the final un-covering of the object will be the equivalent to the annihilation of the object and thereby any question of intent will also evaporate since the intention must be seen to be the constitutive factor of the message that is contained within the expression. [5]

This understanding of truth is akin to what Rüsen is aiming at in the genetic type of historical consciousness where the temporality of past events stops being a threat to us, but becomes a potential for future choices (Rüsen 2004: 78-80). This associative characteristic of a diachronically self-reflectedness has also its counterpart in orientation towards contemporary analysis for future choices, as is elaborated elsewhere by Rüsen:

5 It follows from this that propaganda is then the claim that its authors/producers are "wrenching what is hidden from out of hiddenness", as Heidegger would phrase it (Heidegger 2002: 100).

"Synchronically identity integrates the different relationships of an individual or collective 'self' to others into a unit in which the self is aware of itself. It 'reflects' (bends back) the relationship to others back to the self thus furnishing an internal unity in the variety of its manifold relations to others. Diachronically this self-reflectedness is related to the change of the self and its relationships to others in the course of time. In this respect identity is a concept of continuity of the sameness of oneself in the changes that every person and group have to undergo in the course of their lives" (Rüsen 2007: 38).

In addition there is the issue of "identity concealment", i.e. that the "propagandists do not want their identity to be known" (Jowett & O'Donnell 2006: 44), which creates further challenges when it comes to disclosing the intentions of the sender.

The main scope of the project in teaching about propaganda is then to make the pupils aware about how past popular culture reflected and recreated the life conditions of that time and thereby making them able to see how their life conditions here and now are both reflected in and influenced by popular culture and, consequently, their choices and thus the future.

The pupils' presentations

Here I shall move from the project's general background towards what the pupils themselves did and presented. There are of course different ways of measuring success. And when it comes to exercise no. 3 – producing ironic propaganda – it is not easy for a group of pupils to produce both concepts and results in 90-120 minutes. On the other hand, these are challenges inherent in educating through exhibitions with limited time at our disposal. In addition, we had developed a program for 15-16 years old pupils, but the main age groups present were 13 -14 years old.

The first exercise: "Analysis of historical propaganda from the *Mythos Leni Riefenstahl* and the permanent exhibition" could be solved in many different ways, but the majority of the pupils included Nazi propaganda from the 1935 exhibition "Wunder des Lebens", brutal treatment of Jews and pictures of Adolf Hitler. It was a tendency to look for the strongest and most emotionally charged objects and not so much Nazi propaganda as such. This suggests that the focus "Past" is a difficult one for 14-year olds. Some had a good grasp on the difference between (more or less intended) documentation and propaganda, but the majority analyzed rather the objects in terms of "us" and "the other" than through the intention of the artists of producing propaganda. This insistence on

using the traditional level of historical consciousness can be seen as a result of our introduction. Instead of looking for the genre of propaganda, they looked for the continuity in exclusion – regardless of form. The pupils had problems in entering into both a reconstructive ("Establish how propaganda was used") and a deconstructive ("Go through the narrative of the exhibitions with the aim to identify propaganda") mode with focus on the past. With reference to Karlsson's contribution in this volume, we could interpret these findings to different uses of history. The pupils got very interested in the distinctions made by propaganda, and thus related to the images in either a moral or an existential manner. The scholarly use of history thus veined into the background.

The second exercise: "The history of Leni Riefenstahl – create one biography where she is good and another where she is evil" begs the question on what is good and what is evil. The following oppositional pairs were the main findings:

- She supported Hitler because she believed in him (good), but lied later about her own involvement (evil).
- She was a Nazi (evil), but a great artist (good).
- She supported Hitler and was a fan of an ideal body (evil), but a good photographer (good).
- Ruthless pursuing her own career (evil), but a good director (good).
- Worked for the Nazis (evil), skilful in marketing herself (good).
- Showed that the Nuba where strong people (good), but helped to stage Hitler's rallies (evil).

These different pairs are to some extent contradictory. Although, in the following dialogue with the pupils we discovered and elaborated on how history can be interpreted in different manners and how, in the case of Leni Riefenstahl, it actually is not easy to pinpoint exactly where her legal and moral responsibility for Nazi atrocities lies. On this basis one could argue that we had some success in working within the deconstructive mode ("Establish how different stories present specific narratives."), but when it came to the work of the pupils within the reconstructive mode ("Create a coherent narrative where Leni Riefenstahl is viewed in relation to her time.") they often created an epithet "Nazi" outside of time and space and with "evil" as the direct extension. There were of course some exceptions to this – "She supported Hitler because she believed in him".

This exercise can be said to constitute an intentional use of history as a source for morality (see Karlsson in this volume for the different uses of history)

For the third exercise, "Ironic production of propaganda for contemporary use", some groups chose to make films, others posters (drawn or ICT-produced) while a last category made illustrated stories in PowerPoint. Many of the propaganda products centered around the dilemma concerning how cool it is to be a part of the crowd and how being part of a crowd is "un-cool", which is very much a part of youth culture; others on how "un-cool" it is to be stupid and how stupid it is to be cool; others again touched upon commercials and their way of promoting lifestyles. One group worked on sexual preferences. No one made political propaganda, except in a broader sense of commenting upon societal trends that they dislike. Again the deconstructive part ("Analyze what are the cultural codes of today that are used to influence choices.") of the exercise was the one preferred by most groups. Maybe if we had changed our reconstructive understanding of this specific historical orientation to "Establish how propaganda is used in the contemporary cultural climate" we would have been closer to both what the pupils actually produced and what I believe we actually wanted to carry out, which was to make the pupils reflect on what they sense are the codes in popular culture used both in advertizing and propaganda.

Both in exercise 1 and 2 the historicizing around propaganda and Leni Riefenstahl did not fully live up to our attempt to create a space for historical orientation, since most of the solutions to exercise 1 were just pictures of victims or perpetrators from World War II. Combined with the ahistorical uses of the word "Nazi" this suggests that there might be more suitable topics than the Holocaust for opening up for historical experiences: The relation between some words like the Holocaust, Nazism and the phenomena they might be associated with can be understood as moving away from the phenomenal to the noumenal sphere, or universalizing the narratives about the Holocaust (Kverndokk 2007: 254-262). Hereby the specific historical crimes and atrocities are attached to a moral universe expressed in a battle between good and evil, and this battle becomes the focus of attention – instead of the mediums through which these evil persons and institutions conveyed their message and how this message refers to the past. The solution to these dilemmas might be found in distinguishing between different uses of history. Exercises tied to propaganda are related to the ideological use of history while our dichotomy between "us" and "the others" was presented by us as a historical continuity. From the start we put too much emphasis on the structure in the communicative situation and too little on the meaning in the communication – we stressed the structural similarities between *Rambo 3* and *24* without being able to go deeper into the genres or investigate the particularities of each phenomenon. Such a linear and

traditional presentation of history might interfere with the uses of history.

Furthermore it was difficult to see how the pupils approached the past as different from the present in all 3 exercises.

In hindsight I would argue that we should have presented some form of communicative semiotic model resembling Greimas' actantial model where there is focus on sender, message, receiver, but also on the role of helpers and adversaries, in order to open up for further analysis of propaganda. Hereby we could have focused on the axis of transmission where all types of communication consists of three parts (sender, message, and receiver) and on how these should be analyzed separately and in relation to each other. And further, we wanted the pupils to try to orientate themselves after having received a presentation focusing on the content and the form of propaganda.

However, in their deconstructive efforts the pupils demonstrated their capability of relating the content of a narrative to its form, especially when pointing to some of the clear dilemmas in youth culture. This capability is fairly advanced and shows that they have an understanding of society of which they are a part that is nonreductionist. The diachronically self-reflectedness was not used on a meta-reflective level by the majority of the pupils – which in my opinion depends on the material presented to them, still they were fully capable of showing a synchronical self-reflectedness.

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