

Research Article

From Brushstrokes to Pixels: Analyzing the Evolution of Political Propaganda in Visual Media

Ala Beshank Ahmed ¹ , Shajwan N. Fatah ^{2,*} , Atta. A. Ahmed ³ 

¹ Department of English Language, College of Education and Languages, Lebanese French University, Erbil, 44001, Iraq

² Language Center, Charmo Center for Research, Training, and Consultancy, Charmo University, Chamchamal, 46023, Iraq

³ Department of English Language Teaching, Tishk International University-Sulaymaniyah, Sulaymaniyah, 46001, Iraq

*Corresponding Author: Shajwan N. Fatah, Email: shajwan.nariman@charmouniversity.org

Article Info	Abstract
Article History	Leaders, particularly those associated with fascist ideologies, employ visual media as a tool to construct and propagate certain doctrines within the general populace. In this scholarly endeavor, our pursuit revolves around elucidating the profound interplay between art and photography as potent instruments of persuasive communication. First, readers will meet a brief historical background of both mechanisms. Later, in the literature review, several studies will be presented in which critics have shed light on art and photography as effective ways for political propaganda, by analyzing their synergistic relationship and impact on individuals. The argument will be integrated with the works of both Roland Bathes and Walter Benjamin. In the final part of this paper, we provide a few visual representations of both Western and Eastern political figures – King Henry VIII, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, and Saddam Hussein – who have framed the population's perception through the impact of their artistic weaponry.
Received May 31, 2023	
Revised Jun 18, 2023	
Accepted Jun 22, 2023	
Keywords	
Propaganda	
Politics	
Art	
Photography	
Fascism	



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1. Introduction

Across the annals of history, statesmen have employed portraiture and photography as instruments to shape and disseminate specific political ideologies. The question one might ask is how those doctrines have been transmitted to the audience – to what extent does supremacy transition from political figures to the viewer through the medium of images and subsequently exert influence upon them? In order to answer this puzzling question, we need to understand the signs and symbols behind photos and then the concept of propaganda. It is essential to begin with the tools that are used to take those photos and how they carry the message between the figure and the public. The former – portraits – are artistic depictions of individuals; they can be created in a variety of media, including classic oil paintings, photos, sculptures, and even mixed

media. Portraits can display partial figures, such as the sitter's head and shoulders, but they can also depict the entire character. In a group portrait, they can also show more than one individual¹. The latter, photography, is the art of using a camera to capture light in order to generate an image, typically using a digital sensor or film, even light waves like ultraviolet, infrared, and radio that are undetectable to the human eye, which can be captured on camera with the correct tools. Historically, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce made the first-ever permanent photograph (Figure 1) in France in 1826 (other accounts state 1827). It displays a sunlit building's roof. With the introduction of Eastman Kodak's "Kodachrome" film in the 1930s, color photography began to gain acceptance and accessibility. A few photographers who walked the line between chemists and alchemists had been utilizing specialized methods to obtain color images for decades before that, but most photos were monochromatic before that. These scientist-magicians, the pioneers of color photography, are far from the only ones exploring the boundaries of this relatively new form of art. The development of photography into the contemporary period was led by artists and inventors throughout its history.

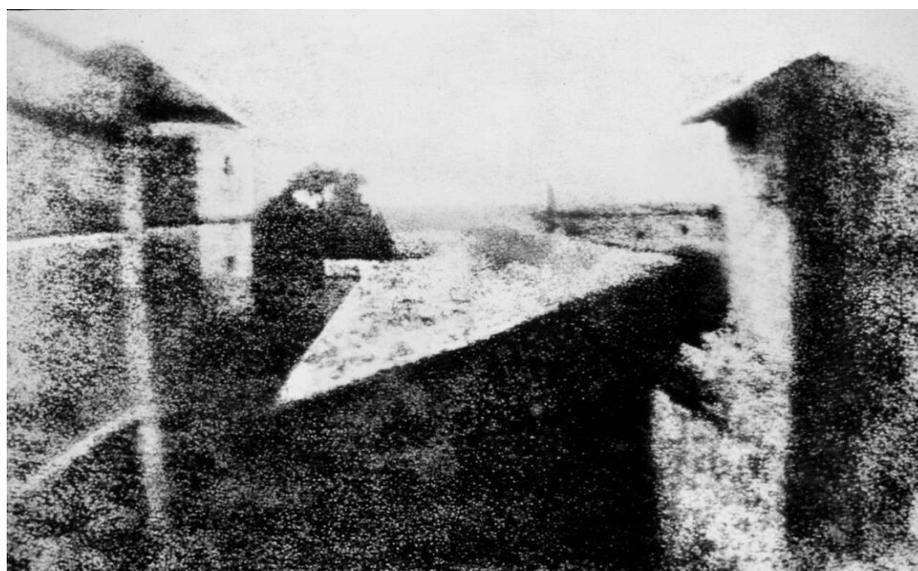


Figure 1. “View from the Window at Le Gras” by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce²

Dorothea Lange (1895 –1965) is one of the well-known documentary photographers in history (Figure 2) and the creator of one of the most celebrated pictures, among them: “Migrant Mother” (Figure 3).

¹My Learning.org <https://www.mylearning.org/stories/portraits/97>

²Photography Website. <https://photographylife.com/what-is-photography>



Figure 2. “Dorothea Lange pictured in Texas, circa 1934.”³

Lange states: “the camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera” (Cox, 2022). In other words, her statement on the subject of the camera evokes the paradox, which has been studied by the French philosopher, Roland Barthes, in his, *Image-Music-Text*, as he states: “the photographic paradox can be seen as the co-existence of two messages,” he points out, “the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the rhetoric of the photograph)” (Barthes, 1977). This creates an ethical conundrum – despite the photographic image's pretense of objectivity and neutrality, it always carries certain cultural implications and notions. A photograph's basic ideas and values are always historical since they reflect the civilization in which it was created. For this reason, images seem to provide information about a society's culture. Barthes examines a number of techniques that enable the photographer to communicate thoughts about reality: either by manipulating reality itself (montage effects, positions, and objects) or by applying codes to the image (photogenia, aestheticism, syntax). Besides Barthes, Walter Benjamin's essay, *A Short History of Photography*, (1931) did not seek to chronicle the evolution of photography, rather, he considered the significant consequences of photography's invention on global culture. He introduces several concepts that he would later illustrate in his written piece *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* – in particular, the notion of “aura,” in which he explains the ab-

³ NPR Website <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126289455>

sence of the real experience that fades from the actual moment the work that is created. According to Benjamin, the emergence of photography brought about the renewal of artistic language and intensified formal explorations: “as the scope of communications increased, the informational importance of painting diminished”. In response to photography, the latter began by emphasizing the image’s-colored elements. Painting, as impressionism gave way to cubism, created a broader domain for itself, into which for the time being.

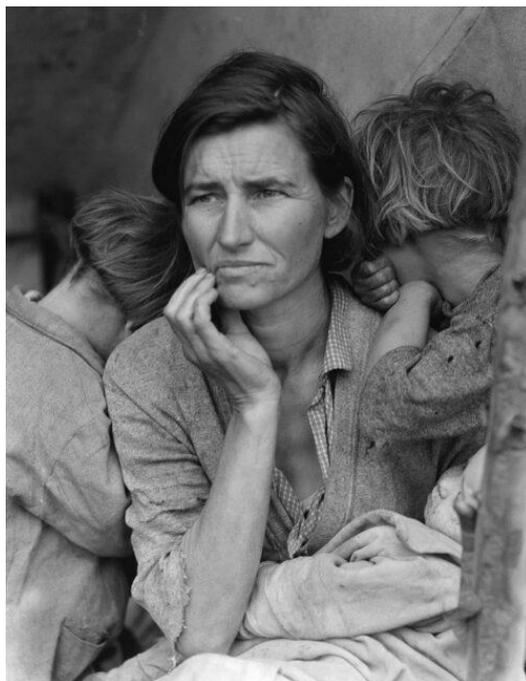


Figure 3. “Migrant Mother” by Dorothea Lange⁴

2. Materials and Methods

This paper employs a qualitative approach and a close reading for analyzing the content – selected paintings and photos – through decoding the signs and symbols and investigating the elements of the visual means.

2.1 What is Political Propaganda?

The expression – political propaganda – seems to be sophisticated, particularly, in the modern era. In order to analyze this term, first, we need to decode it into politics and propaganda: the former proposes the notion of the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties in terms of power- relations. The latter can be defined as information, mostly biased or misleading intelligence used to advance a political cause or point of view.

⁴Photography Life website. <https://photographylife.com/what-is-photography>

In Common sense, political propaganda has been applied in various ways – whether subtly or obviously. According to Bryder (2008), this notion is the manipulation of symbols to affect public opinion in environments marked by dominance, influence, and authority connections between individuals and communities (p. 102). From this perspective, it seems plain that propaganda is a hoax that is used as a tool to spread fear and dominate the public by an authority figure. Scholars agree that the concept originated with ‘religion’ – the first use of the word was in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV. He organized a sacred congregation De Propaganda Fide which is translated to Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, its mission was to convert non-believers of the West to Roman Catholicism. The acknowledgment they spread among the people was known as ‘Propaganda’ (Staal, 2018).

Historically, from the ancients, Plato describes a demagogue as: “one who sows fear among the people and then presents himself as the people’s protector” (as cited in Stanley, 2015, p. 41). Thus, the term means someone who is part of spreading profound propaganda among the population. From this quotation by Plato, we can fathom that the concept has been employed by authorities centuries ago, to maneuver facts and realities of the public for the sake of their political hegemony. Propagandists usually do not communicate their messages ostentatiously, rather, they manipulate signs and symbols. This shows that propagandists imprison the population within certain political ideologies. Eventually, civilians are rigged into thinking they have formulated their own ideas. The reality is that they have been forced into believing incorrect messages – counterfeit facts.

Lasswell (1927) describes the ‘theory of political propaganda’ as a series of symbols that represent significance. These signs can be represented as body language, voice tones, or pieces of writing. Furthermore, the use of these significant symbols is known as generating persuasion. There are many different theorists that have different interpretations: like the political scientist Harold Lasswell, who wrote about this topic after the W.W.I. in his book *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927), which discusses the implications of such ideologies by propagandists – he was interested in arguing the concept that is directly related to psychological manipulation rather than changing any conditions of the environment (Staal, 2018). The sociologist Jacques Ellul also has similar ideas to Lasswell – he relates the issue to psychology, he declares:

Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, mentally unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization (Staal, 2018, p. 80).

From this point of view, one can grasp that propaganda is a hidden factor; it is done skillfully to manipulate communities and to achieve a political or social goal.

Art is a broad and multifaceted form of human expression that includes a variety of mediums, techniques, and styles. It is a creative and inventive way of transferring perceptions, sentiments, and experiences. In this context, with the integration of politics and art; propaganda appears to be represented in many forms, authorities throughout history have taken advantage of literature, films, paintings, and photographs. Critics have related art to propaganda, for instance, Arnold Hauser, claims that all art seeks to evoke and arouse emotions and urges to action or opposition in the spectator, listener, or reader (Meszaros, 2016, p.128). In other words, art creates a certain ideology as we observe and elevate our thoughts. Lewis (2005), argues that sometimes it might not be straightforward to draw differences between art and propaganda. That is to say, they have been both intertwined. Like Hauser and Lewis, Wilcott (2013), thinks that art has been used as means of propaganda for centuries, however, it was not until W.W.I back when people became aware of the magnitude of the situation – during that time “American artists played a significant role along with the government to transform art into a “powerful weapon” of persuasion” (p. 30).

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Hans Holbein the Younger’s “Henry VIII” (1537)

Hans Holbein the Younger is known for drawing several portraits of King Henry VIII and his court. One of his renowned murals of the King is one that reflects his desire for a male heir – the full-body painting shows exaggerated masculine features (Figure 4). Through his stance, body language, and luxurious clothing we can understand the dominance of the male figure. This type of authority and masculinity is a way of propaganda, which the Tudors wanted to show. As Ella Muir declares: “through Holbein’s paintings, Henry was able to convey both the conspicuous control and unreadability integral to his supreme status”. In the painting, the king is facing forward – staring at the viewer with a confident stare. He is standing with supremacy, with his legs far apart, which suggests sexual empowerment. The artwork promptly directs the

viewer's focus towards the subject's codpiece, which conceals his male genitalia, with the intention of capturing the viewer's attention. The codpiece is exaggerated in its big size, suggesting sexual symbolism. Thus, the painting gives an illusion that might remove all the negative thoughts that the audience has about Henry VIII's sexual inabilities. This type of depiction of a King proves how people with authority use art as propaganda for their own privileges. The depiction in the image extends beyond the representation of sexual symbols, encompassing opulence through the conspicuous display of extravagant rings and necklaces. This portrayal suggests that the figure remains impervious to societal norms, aligning with the propagandistic strategies employed to highlight King Henry VIII's immense wealth and authoritative status, where lavish jewelry, ornate embroidery, and luxurious fur serve as emblematic symbols (Kim, 2015, para, 4). During the 1530s, there was discreet speculation circulating within court circles, suggesting that the monarch was afflicted by an apparent sexual inadequacy (Wilson, 2013, para. 102).



Figure 4. “Henry VIII” by Hans Holbein’s workshop, ca. 1537, via Liverpool Museums

The King, in an attempt to deflect any blame or personal guilt, shifted the responsibility onto his wives for their failure to produce male heirs. Nevertheless, it was evident that he harbored deep-seated insecurities regarding this matter, as evidenced by his deliberate efforts to present himself in the most fa-

avorable light through commissioned portraits. Following the dissemination of these rumors, the King developed an all-consuming preoccupation with altering public perceptions of his sexual prowess. This manifested in increased engagement in athletic pursuits and the ostentatious display of exaggerated masculine attributes, exemplified by the prominent adornment of his attire with enlarged “codpieces”. It is essential to note that the King’s fixation on his sexuality extended beyond his personal sphere, as its repercussions reverberated throughout his Kingdom (Wilson, 2013).

3.2. Jacques-Louis David ‘s “The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries” (1812)

Napoleon Bonaparte, who rose to become Emperor in the political vacuum following the French Revolution, is represented in statesmanlike quietude rather than a more spectacular incident in his legendary career. A painting by Jacques- Louis David in which the set position and full-length format suggest formality (Figure 5). The portrait's location and time—inside the emperor's private study in the early morning hours—give an intimate glimpse of this highly public man. The painting's sumptuous fabrics, textures, crisp colors, and enamel-like surfaces create a realistic and vibrant effect. Napoleon moved into the Tuileries Palace in Paris after becoming Emperor in 1804, the year depicted in this painting. As seen by the clock at 4:13, the lamp’s a nearly extinguished candle, and the early dawn light sneaking into the chamber on the left. He grasps a gilded snuff box, the contents of which would have kept him awake. The ruler’s hair looks rumpled, and his stockings are slightly bagged around his ankles. The details of the visual art’s elements show the supremacy and civic endeavor which are transformed to the audience through the conception of political propaganda.

3.3 Hubert Lanzinger’s “The Standard Bearer” (1934-1936)

The third example of artworks that depict persuasive communication is “The Standard Bearer” (figure 6) by the Austrian artist Hubert Lanzinger. Adolf Hitler is pictured riding a black horse, dressed in the armor of a 15th-century knight, and holding a Nazi banner that billows behind him. Hitler is represented in the picture as a messianic figure, gazing metaphorically into a brighter future for Germany. It is an oil on a wood painting that was completed between 1934 and 1936. The painting was originally shown publicly in 1937 at the Great German Art Exhibition in Munich. Later, Heinrich Hoffmann created a postcard of “The Standard Bearer” in 1938. It is part of the United States Army Center of Military History’s collection in

Washington, DC. It was one of 10,000 pieces of Nazi propaganda and German military art seized by the US Army in 1945.



Figure 5. “The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries,” 1812, oil on canvas, by Jacques-Louis David, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1961.9.15⁵



Figure 6. “The Standard Bearer” by Hubert Lanzinger⁶

⁵ National Gallery of Art Website. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/david-the-emperor-napoleon-in-his-study-at-the-tuileries.html>

⁶ Facing History.org <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/standard-bearer>

With a closer look at the image, one could realize that Hitler's face is painted from one side and his facial features look symmetrical – with no expressions – this also arouses a sense of oppression within the viewer. The flag he is holding represents the dominance of the Nazi regime. Though the whole shape of the horse is not clear, however, from the references to Greek mythology, it appears to be the symbol of power, wealth, and property. The male figure is looking forward with an authoritative gaze – the direction of his stare signifies the sense of temporal dimension – future – that is to say, the time ahead will be dominated by his influence.

3.4 A photograph of Adolf Hitler (1935)

Besides the painting, the photograph which was taken during the party congress at Nuremberg in 1935 (Figure 7), shows the impact of political propaganda; the Nazis have attempted to keep Jews and other 'undesirables' out of public life. Enforced biological segregation began in 1935, ushering in a new era. Hitler introduced legislation denying Jewish people citizenship and forbidding marriage or sexual connections with persons of "German or related blood" during the annual Nuremberg gathering. Anyone with three or more Jewish grandparents was affected, regardless of religious affiliation. Hitler described the legislation as an attempt to "achieve legislative regulation of a problem that, if it breaks down again, will then have to be transferred by law to the National Socialist Party for the final solution". To put it differently, such speeches would exert a direct influence on the general populace, leading them down specific ideological trajectories, and thereby eroding their capacity for autonomous self-expression. The propagation of racial discrimination among Germans can be attributed to the deliberate dissemination of politically manufactured propaganda.

3.5 Tile Mosaic of Saddam Hussein

A giant framed wall mural made out of colored square tiles depicting Saddam Hussein clothed in a black homburg hat, coat, jumper, and tie with a white shirt and wielding a hunting rifle in his outstretched right hand (Figure 8). Below Hussein's figure is a gold dome of a mosque, surrounded by a border of geometric patterning and bordered by a green coniferous tree. Prior to glazing, the frieze was manually painted onto the surface of each relevant tile in the design. A tile with an unknown Arabic writing in the

lower right-hand corner of the frieze. The tiles are kept together in groupings of 10 4x4 tiles and 4x5 tiles with wire mesh support on the reverse.



Figure 7. Adolf Hitler delivers a speech during the Party Congress at Nuremberg in 1935⁷



Figure 8. Tile Mosaic of Saddam Hussein.⁸

⁷bbc.co.uk <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/adolff-hitler-man-and-monster/zbrx8xs>

⁸ IWM. Website <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30107099>

The figure – Saddam Hussein – seems symmetrical, his stare seems to be active, nevertheless, he is not looking at the viewer, which signifies a sense of apathy. In other words, the gaze exhibited by the leader implies a disregard for the freedom and thoughts of the populace, while his demeanor engenders a paradoxical impression wherein the audience appears conspicuously absent from his perceptual and political considerations. Moreover, he is wearing a hat with a professional dress code which symbolizes a man from a higher social class.

However, the focal point of the painting seems to be both the rifle and the dome of the mosque – which is historically known as Al-Aqsa Mosque in the eastern part of Jerusalem. In this context, we ignore such conventions, instead, we focus on the philosophical side of both elements in the painting which shows the concept of power that shifts back and forth between politics and religion. Moreover, the male figure is standing behind the firearm and the mosque which depicts the manipulations that operate behind the religious and political propaganda. Concerning the hierarchical scale in the painting, the male figure seems to be on the highest status compared to the other elements in the painting.

3.6 A photograph of Saddam Hussein (1991)

The photo of the Iraqi former president (Figure 9), depicts the concept of political propaganda that is shown by his pose, holding a firearm, and standing in front of the audience. The denotations of this image clearly attempt to construct certain dogmas within the thoughts of the population, which aims to confirm that hegemony is achieved by weapons. This seems to be related to Barthes's work on the impact of photography on public ideology; this dominance is transmitted from the figure through the pixel of the camera and then to the audience. The object – the weapon – seems to be decoded into war, coercion, and racial prejudice. The pose with the facial expression appears to be another signification that manufactures certain doctrines among the folk. The “loss of aura” also functions as Benjamin explains, that is to say, in the context of photographic capture, the objective was to exert influence over individuals' cognitive processes; however, the present interpretation of such photographs elucidates the profound effects of political propaganda conveyed via visual media.



Figure 9. Former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein holds up a gun in this 1991 photograph by his personal photographer Lazim Ali⁹

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we attempted to present a brief historical background of both art and photography as means that are used as political propaganda. We shed light on several politicians from different nations and different periods of time: King Henry VIII, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, and Saddam Hussein are representative figures who have constructed a set of ideologies through their strategies. Strikingly, both brushstrokes and pixels have an implicit and direct impact on the perceptions of the audience. Our work was limited to political context – as we presented few works depicting such Ideological manipulation through the theories of Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and several critics.

Declaration of Competing Interest The authors declare that they have no known competing of interests.

⁹ NBC News. Website <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna3708671>

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