

To what extent can immigration be understood by analysing the overt and subliminal messages in political posters using traditional fine art assessment criteria?



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Abstract

This essay evaluates the extent to which issues associated with immigration can be understood by analysing the overt and subliminal messages in specific political posters, using fine art assessment criteria such as composition or color. Posters from two different historical contexts are considered: pro-immigration posters encouraging the settlement in the Canadian Prairie provinces in the early 1900s and anti-immigration posters from Switzerland published in the last five years. The essay concludes that using criteria traditionally used in fine art assessment to evaluate the overt and subliminal messages of immigration posters was highly effective at understanding both historic and modern issues associated with immigration, such as the conflicted desire for a safe and prosperous place to live in and the fear of newcomers.

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Introduction

The small village of Crans-pres-Celigny, Switzerland welcomed 53 male refugees, from Syria and neighbouring Middle Eastern countries in November 2015. Getting to know three of these men individually encouraged comparisons with my family's history of immigration to Canada in the 1900's and my experience of immigration to Switzerland in 2011. The experiences of my family are very different from those of Syrian refugees. This essay explores part of the experience of mass migration by reflecting on the political context and resulting propaganda posters produced in the relevant countries at each of these times.

As a prospective fine art student it seemed interesting to consider the important global issue of mass migration through both artistic and historical lenses. This essay discusses the extent to which immigration can be understood by assessing the overt and subliminal messages in political posters associated with immigration using analytical criteria typically applied to fine art. Posters, produced recently in Switzerland, relating to the current refugee crisis in Europe and historically, in the Canadian campaign to encourage settlement in the western provinces in the early 1900s, are compared and contrasted. The political and historical context of each situation is discussed. The merit of the idea of using political posters to explore the topic of immigration is also considered. Finally, reflections and key learnings about the process of migration and about art and propaganda are shared.

One pertinent distinction to make when discussing migration is the difference between migrants and refugees. Migrants choose to leave their current settlement to find a new one. "Before they decide to leave their country, migrants can seek information about their new home, study the language and explore employment opportunities."¹ Migration allows individuals to return to their point of origin if they so wish. Refugees find themselves in a different situation. They are forced to leave their homes, belongings, and sometimes, loved ones because of persecution and danger. "The concerns of refugees are human rights and safety, not economic advantage".² When considering the context in which the posters were produced it is important to distinguish between

¹ "What is the Difference between a Refugee and a Migrant" *Settlement Services International* N.p., N.d. Web. 07 July 2016

² *Ibid.*

issues related to the current refugee crisis, and the historical context in Canada, which refers almost entirely to migrants.

Chapter 1: A Modern Perspective - Mass Migration of Syrians to Europe, Specifically Switzerland.

A series of demonstrations by young people and union members against governments in northern Africa and the Middle East, known as the Arab Spring, started in December 2010 in Tunisia. These protests were in response to dissatisfaction with ruling powers and concerns such as lack of freedom and inequality.

By March 2011 uprisings began in Daraa, a southern Syrian city, after groups of teenagers were tortured for painting pro-revolutionary slogans on school walls.³ These pro-democracy campaigners soon formed fighting brigades, escalating the violence across the country. “5000 anti-government protesters took to the main square of Homs, Syria’s third largest city, vowing to stay until their demands for change were met.”⁴ An aggressive crackdown by Bashar al-Assad’s government followed. Subsequently Syria spiralled into full-blown civil war involving international powers. It was no longer a disagreement solely between those for and against democracy. “It has acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the country’s Sunni majority against the President’s Shia Alawite sect, and (has) drawn in regional and world powers.”⁵ The jihadist group IS (Islamic State) caused further unrest. “A staggering 470,000 deaths have been caused by the conflict, either directly or indirectly”⁶. Use of modern technology ensures this conflict is one of the most violent wars in recorded history. Both sides have committed war crimes and IS continues to commit extreme atrocities.

To escape these horrendous conditions millions of Syrians are migrating to neighbouring countries and to Europe. Syria’s population was ~22 million prior to the conflict.⁷ “An estimated 13.5

³ Rodgers, Lucy; Gritten, David; Offer, James; Asare, Patrick. “Syria: The Story of the Conflict” *BBC News*, 11 March 2016. Web. 30 May 2016

⁴ Brynen, Rex; Moore, Pete M.; Salloukh, Basel F.; Zahar, Mari-Joelle. *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012. Print. Page 42

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Boghani, Priyanka. "A Staggering New Death Toll for Syria's War." *Frontline*. PBS, 11 Feb. 2016. Web. 30 Aug. 2016.

⁷ THE DATA TEAM. "Syria's Drained Population." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 30 Sept. 2015. Web. 31 Aug. 2016.

million people in Syria, including six million children, require humanitarian assistance and protection.”⁸ “About 10% of Syrian refugees, more than 1 million people, have sought safety in Europe”⁹ This war and related uncertainty in the Middle East have led to the current, heavily-reported ‘Refugee Crisis’.

The UNHCR reported that in the six months between July and December 2015 570,000 Syrian refugees applied for asylum in Europe. Of these, about 13,000 have claimed asylum in Switzerland¹⁰ and of these, 53 men ended up in my village (Crans-pres-Celigny -2014 population 2063)¹¹. Three of them are now regular guests in our house. Understanding the situation from the context of the UNHCR data, which provides descriptive statistics and then at the level of individuals in my village is challenging. To consider the collective suffering of the refugees, having heard three refugee’s stories, is overwhelming.



Our friends from the Refugee Center in Crans-pres-Celigny.

The Syrian Crisis and the response from European policy makers has stimulated related migrations from neighbouring countries where lower level conflicts exist, for example in Afghanistan, Iraq,

⁸ "2016 Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan: January - December 2016." *ReliefWeb*. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 29 Dec. 2015. Web. 27 June 2016.

⁹ Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, Asare. "Syria: The Story of the Conflict"

¹⁰ "UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response." *UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response*. N.p., Apr. 2011. Web. 31 Aug. 2016.

¹¹ "Bienvenue Crans-pres-Celigny." *Commune De Crans-pres-Celigny - Accueil*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Nov. 2016.

the Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Our three friends consist of two Kurds, and an Uzbek who worked with American forces in Afghanistan. For these three young men there is no clear distinction between 'migrant' and 'refugee' and it seems almost impossible to define rules to make such a distinction. People smugglers have thrived exploiting the desperation of refugees, putting further pressure on Europe to accept migrants.

Switzerland, a culturally diverse and tolerant country with four national languages and different religions remained neutral in both world wars. It is now a prosperous, peaceful place. The socially cohesive but diverse community of Switzerland is part of what makes it attractive. However, many Swiss citizens don't wish to accept refugees, worrying for their security, culture and prosperity. Of the 13,000 Syrian refugees seeking asylum in Switzerland only a handful have so far been formally accepted, including one of our three friends. This influx of people has generated strong divisive opinions. Europeans, including the Swiss, want to help end the suffering of the refugees but also wonder what the strain on their resources will be, whether it is possible to integrate the refugees into Swiss society and where else these people will find refuge. Political parties are debating these issues and are creating propaganda to promote their views.

Chapter 2: A Historical Perspective – Mass Migration to Western Canada in the early 1900's

Canada, the second largest country in the world, has a small population: 36 million in 2016.¹² The current population density is 4 per square kilometer.¹³ In 1900 the population was 5 million giving a population density of 0.6. This is too few people to build communities or exploit natural resources like land or minerals over such a large area. More people were needed to stabilize and expand the economy. Canada has been encouraging immigration for over a hundred years and continues to do so.

Following confederation of Canada in 1867 Sir John MacDonal, the first Prime Minister, encouraged people to settle in the newly acquired lands that became the Prairie Provinces and north of Canada, using poster campaigns. These campaigns were not successful as the economy in Canada went through a long depression of about 25 years with a net outflow of people, mostly to the United States. As the Long Depression in Europe eased and the railroads were completed, the economy in Canada grew rapidly. Sir Wilfred Laurier, the Prime Minister from 1896 to 1911 was desperate for immigrants to support this economic growth and establish sovereignty over the new territories. Companies like the Canadian Pacific Railroad needed more customers and were keen to transport people across Canada on their new railway line, so they too encouraged migration to western Canada.

Laurier appointed Clifford Sifton, as Minister of the Interior. Immigration greatly increased following his successful advertising campaign in the late 1890s.¹⁴ Sifton was from Saskatchewan, one of the empty Prairie Provinces that needed farmers to grow wheat, an increasingly valuable crop. The advertising campaign, which included print, posters, exhibitions at world expositions

¹² "Canada's Population Estimates, First Quarter 2016." *Government of Canada*, Statistics Canada, 01 Apr. 2016. Web. 31 Aug. 2016.

¹³ "Population density (people per sq. km of land area)". *The World Bank*. Food and Agriculture Organization and World Bank Population Estimates, 2015. Web. 28 June 2016.

¹⁴ Hall, David J. "Sir Clifford Sifton". *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. 22 Jan. 2008. Web. 02 June 2016.

and free visits for European journalists focussed on three major sources of agricultural immigrants: the United States, central and eastern Europe, and Britain.”¹⁵.

The Industrial Revolution enabled populations in Europe to expand quickly, not because birthrates were growing but because death rate was falling. Overpopulation was a problem, especially in Britain, where the effects of the Industrial Revolution were most prominent.

Immigration grew rapidly, however, some immigrants were more valued than others. Sifton wanted farmers and labourers. Many Canadians felt strongly connected to Britain and wanted only British immigrants. Companies like the North Atlantic Shipping Company were paid bonuses to send the best agricultural immigrants to Canada so they looked further afield than just Britain.¹⁶ Between 1897 and 1914 the population of Canada increased by 40% with over 3 million immigrants arriving from Great Britain, Poland, The Ukraine and Russia as well as other European countries, China and Japan.¹⁷

My relatives immigrated to the Canadian prairies at this time from Scotland, the Ukraine, Montreal and French speaking USA, apparently influenced by Clifton’s posters and associated news stories.

The migration to Canada at this time is massive and is both similar and different to the current European refugee crisis. Both migrations displaced millions of people, both inspired persuasive propaganda posters, and in both cases migrants were seeking better lives. The Canadian situation was not a crisis as migrants were keen to come and Canada was keen to receive them unlike the current situation in Europe where many people are not keen to receive immigrants. Unlike the migrants to Canada some of the migrants entering Europe at this time are real refugees, people without a country of origin, without a safe place to live, forced to move in order to stay alive.

¹⁵ “Advertising for Immigrants to Western Canada – The Early Years, 1870-1897.” *Civilization.ca*. Canadian Museum of History, n.d. Web. 02. June 2016.

¹⁶ West, Linda. “Laurier’s Government Welcomes Immigrants” *Canada History Project*. Artistic Productions Ltd, n.d. Web. 01 Sept 2016

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3: Posters as Propaganda, Posters as Art

Prior to arriving, the three migrants we befriended thought they would be welcomed. They are surprised to find they are not. Since arriving, though they are grateful for the accommodation, food and healthcare they are receiving, they are so far excluded from working. They do not speak any Swiss languages well, but do understand propaganda posters they've seen. The posters clearly communicate a strong message.

It is nearly impossible to measure the effectiveness of propaganda quantitatively but on a subjective level propaganda posters continue to be used to sway public opinion. It is often subtle, subliminal messages in propaganda that are most persuasive¹⁸. My family was formed because immigration posters influenced individuals as far apart as Ukraine and Quebec.

Propaganda is considered a controversial tool because of the use of subliminal messages. Subliminal messages are defined as “a message passed to the human mind without the mind being consciously aware of it”¹⁹

Propaganda can take many forms, for example advertising, editorials, speeches, and songs but is characterized by having a strong message meant to manipulate an audience. Merriam-Webster defines propaganda as “the spreading of ideas, information, or rumour for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person.”²⁰ Using this definition immigration posters would certainly be defined as propaganda aimed at either promoting or discouraging the “cause” of immigration or the “cause” of accepting or rejecting immigrants. To be able to fully evaluate immigration posters, this essay evaluates them as propaganda, looking at both overt and subliminal messages, the image and the context. “State propaganda, when supported by the educated classes and when no deviation is permitted from it, can have a big effect. It was a lesson learned by Hitler and many others, and it has been pursued to this day”.²¹

¹⁸ What are the Tools of Propaganda? *American Historical Association*, n.d. Web. 22.Oct.2016

¹⁹ *Collins English Dictionary*. Harper Collins Publishers, n.d. Web.27 Oct. 2016.

²⁰ *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 01 Sept. 2016.

²¹ Chomsky, Noam. *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. New York: Seven Stories, 2002. Print. Page 13

Art has a broader definition than propaganda. With contemporary movements like Dadaism and Minimalism, art can include almost anything, including propaganda posters or even advertising. Should we consider propaganda posters an art form? What can we learn about mass migration by using traditional art criteria to evaluate these posters?

If we accept that propaganda posters are effective at either encouraging or discouraging migration or the acceptance of migrants, can we understand what makes them effective by evaluating the posters using traditional fine art assessment criteria such as: color scheme, composition, narrative, and how the medium portrays the message within its own cultural context?

Chapter 4: Modern Swiss anti-immigration posters compared to historic Canadian pro-immigration posters

The extent to which immigration can be understood by comparing and contrasting political posters from two different periods and places will be tested using criteria typically applied to fine art.

Swiss propaganda posters from 2010 onwards.

In Switzerland referendums are held several times per year and Swiss political parties use posters to promote particular viewpoints to the electorate. Posters are hung at approved locations including train stations, village squares or next to busy roads. With so many referenda the production of propaganda posters is widely practiced. In February 2014 the Swiss held a referendum on mass immigration. Posters associated with this and related campaigns are still visible in Switzerland as the issue remains of concern.

One particular campaign, from the SVP party, is memorable perhaps because it is shocking. The photo below, taken by me near Geneva, in March 2016 shows a billboard near a busy road. Many people, including most students at my school, consider this poster racist and xenophobic.²² Geneva is an international city and this poster seems at odds with the local multi-national population. A citizen has spray-painted 'Honte'(Shame) on the poster.



²² Bachmann, Helena. "Bye-Bye, Black Sheep." *Time*. Time Inc., 21 Sept. 2007. Web. 25 Aug. 2016.



Hall, Allan. "Swiss Poised to Vote on Controversial Immigrant Law". *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 02 Nov. 2010. Web.

The style of these propaganda posters is that of a children's cartoon, positioning the viewers as young and naïve. The style simplifies the complex problem depicted by the cartoon. The simplistic style ensure the viewer quickly absorbs the message. Cartoons are an important part of the Francophone culture. Children learn to read using "bande dessinée" books which often contain moral lessons For example: 'The Adventures of Tintin' or 'Asterix and Obelix' so it seems natural to receive moral guidelines from a cartoon format.

The posters are divided diagonally which is aesthetically pleasing. The monochrome color scheme is accentuated by the bright red. Red is a color that connotes intensity and danger, and reinforces the key message. The use of red is powerful as it is a strong, passionate color and also the national color of Switzerland. The language is persuasive, using simple, bold fonts to reinforce a clear choice.²³



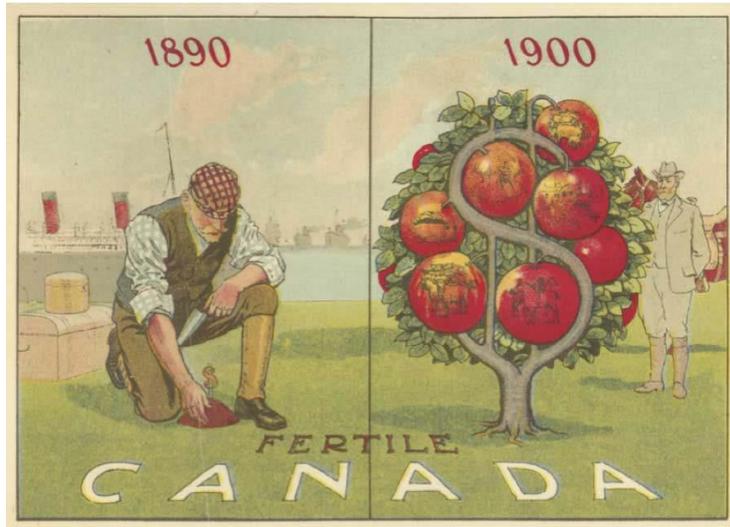
Lees, Kevin. "Swiss immigration Threatens Access to EU Single Market." *Suffragio*. N.p., 09 Feb. 2014. Web. 11 July 2016.



Lees, Kevin. "Swiss Immigration Threatens Access to EU Single Market."

Figures, where depicted, are threatening. The designer clearly chose to use black as the skin colour to connect racist images from earlier times.

²³'Sicherheit schaffen' translates to 'create a safe space'. 'Stopper l'immigration massive' translates to 'stop mass immigration'. 'zum Minarett-Verbot' translate to 'ban the Minarett'. Translated by author.



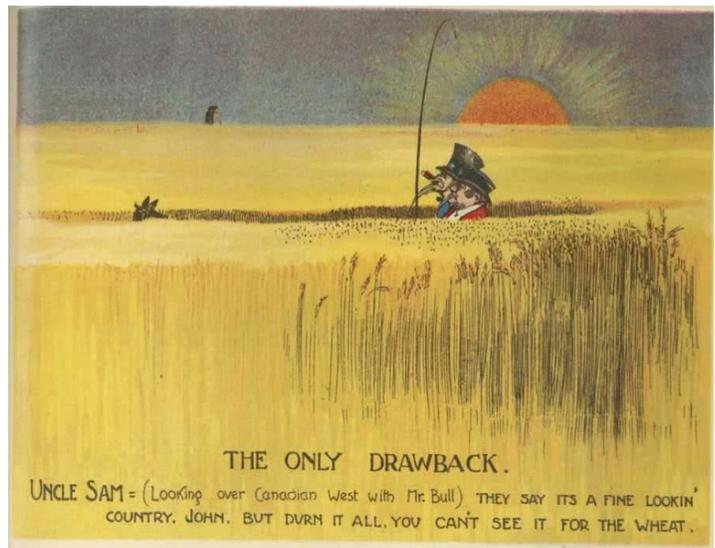
"Fertile Canada." – Prairie Immigration and the "Last Best West" N.p., 15 Dec. 1903. Web. 08 June 2016.

Canadian posters from the early Twentieth Century.

My great-grandparents emigrated from Europe to Canada in 1910, seeking better lives. They were influenced by Sifton's posters which inferred that hard work would pay off.

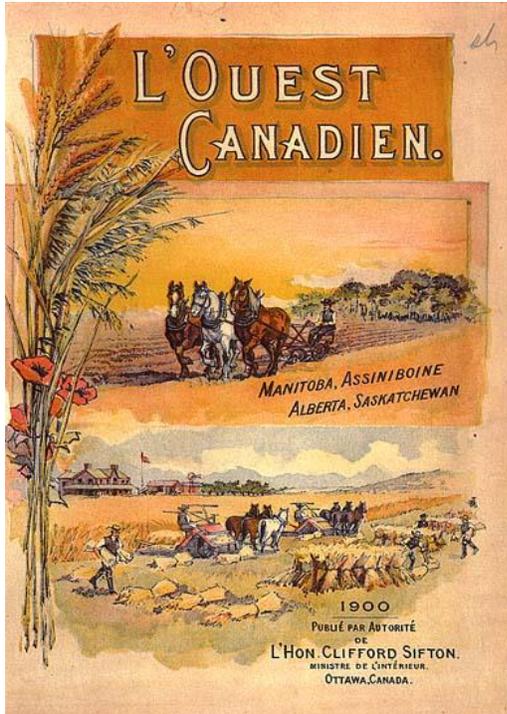
These posters, published by the Canadian Department of the Interior are very detailed, not only in style

but in meaning. Details attract the observer though they are not picked up immediately. For example in the fertile Canada poster: the ship in the background encourages migration and 'Fertile Canada' overlays both the before and after images implying Canada will always be fertile. These posters were hung in train stations or in main streets, where people would spend several minutes so have time to fully understand the messages.



"The Only Drawback." - Prairie Immigration and the "Last Best West" N.p., 15 Dec. 1903. Web. 08 June 2016.

The posters communicate that Canada is a melting pot. For example in 'The Only Drawback': neither character is Canadian. John Bull, a representation of Britain and Uncle Sam, America's spirit put into a character are featured promoting western Canada. At that



“Advertising for Immigrants to Western Canada – Introduction.” *Civilization.ca*. Canada Museum of History, n.d. Web. 15 July 2016.

time “The wheat belt of Western Canada is about 1,000 miles long by 400 miles wide, yet only a very small portion of this tract is under cultivation.”²⁴ The images depict large areas of greenery, and large fields, and the vast expanse of the prairies to reinforce the idea of plenty.

Warm tones over large spaces, are eye-catching yet comforting. The produce, apples or wheat are abundant and vibrant. The characters in the posters look rich and high status to subliminally inform the viewer that living in Canada will result in riches.

The landscapes, painted with painstaking detail, are picturesque. There is a narrative in all the Canadian posters. The viewpoint offers a ‘rags to riches’ story and follows the person who has migrated to Canada.



Elsley, Arthur John. “Home Team”. 1903. Oil on canvas. Christie’s. London.

The Canadian posters are drawn with reference to the forms of art popular during Queen Victoria’s reign of Britain (1837 – 1901). Whilst styles changed throughout her reign, paintings of this period showed outdoor scenes of attractive countryside with lots of detail and warm shades. Later on realistic portrayals gave way to more impressionistic realizations and the use of brighter colors and looser brushstrokes.

²⁴ "Prairie Immigration and the "Last Best West"" *TC2 Source Docs*. The Critical Thinking Consortium, n.d. Web. 03 Sept. 2016.

Differences between the older and newer posters, such as style and message are evident. The Canadian posters offer a narrative and complex message comparing rich life in Canada to poorer life before. The fine detail and large color range contrast sharply the Swiss anti-immigration posters which are blunt and simplified, in both medium and message. The use of monochrome colors and an eye-catching red reinforce the stark choice – yes or no. These posters are aimed to influence a vote rather than encouraging migration. The café in my village will not hire the refugees in case some customers feel the job should have gone to a Swiss citizens. The café owner wants to ensure they are a ‘white sheep’, not mixed in with the ‘black sheep’.

The historic and modern posters considered clearly capture a lot of the cultural context around migration but neither campaign tells both sides of story. They also fail to capture individual migrant’s experiences or more subtle issues like hardships in Canada or contributions to Swiss society from foreigners. Both campaigns also fail to communicate facts around migration like population density, cost of living or ease of integration.

Conclusion

Using criteria typically applied to fine art to critically assess the overt and subliminal messages in political posters associated with migration has been very effective for understanding the complexities associated with the current European refugee crisis and my own family history of migration. The contrast between the messages of hope in the historic posters and fear in the modern posters is striking but both are highly effective at persuading people of the creator's viewpoint.

The degree of consideration, used by the creators of both the modern and historic posters is profound. The sophistication of the subliminal messages and the range of techniques used to support the messages ensured that the posters were highly effective at persuading the audiences of the desired messages. In this respect the posters have a lot of similarities: the purpose of the posters was to persuade viewers of a specific message, in both cases message was more important than medium and finally fine art techniques such as composition, medium, color and tone were effectively used to support the overt and subliminal messages.

The differences in the styles of the posters can be explained by the historical contexts and different aims of the campaigns. Because people are now exposed to much more media than previous generations, modern posters have to be more extreme to catch our attention. The historic posters had time for narrative but modern posters need to be simple and direct as audiences only engage for a short period.

Assessing the posters using fine art criteria enables the viewer to reflect on underlying beliefs associated with migration. It is clear that the desire for a secure and prosperous lifestyle was a strong driver of migration in the early 1900s and continues to be so today for people from Syria and neighbouring countries as well as for my own family. The desire to protect the secure and prosperous lifestyle of modern Switzerland is also a strong motivator for Swiss voters. Many Swiss voters fear that current immigrants, both refugees and economic migrants, will consume resources normally allocated to Swiss people and will reduce security by refusing to conform to written and unwritten laws of Swiss society.

Even though a great deal about immigration could be understood by analysing political posters it is clear that viewers are being presented with biased, simplified and incomplete information. Other sources of information, such as individual's stories, economic data, statistics and written descriptions about social and cultural factors must accompany the posters if a full understanding of immigration is to be gained.

Whilst not totally effective, analysing the overt and subliminal messages of immigration posters using traditional art criteria provided a very good lens through which to understand historic, current and personal issues associated with immigration.



Three immigrants with three different stories. (I'm in the middle)

Personal Reflections and Evaluation

Subliminal messages appeal to desires and prejudices which viewers already hold subconsciously; in the SVP campaign the fear of foreigners and in the Canadian posters the desire to become rich. Neither campaign provides any balance to these biases, which is essentially what makes them propaganda. In the SVP posters there is no suggestion that rejecting refugees might damage Switzerland's reputation as a humanitarian country. In the historic case there is no acknowledgement that Canada's winter is brutally cold and it takes extraordinary determination to forge a new life there.

One conclusion we can perhaps draw is that propaganda is closer to advertising than to art. But is advertising art? Some modern art borrows imagery from advertising, where the message is often far more important than artistic techniques. As we have seen above propaganda similarly borrows from art. In my opinion propaganda and advertising are not art. For the purposes of persuading people to adopt an idea, art is, at most, a technique, an enabling technology. Art has developed ways for an individual to express complex and profound ideas to a wider audience.

Evaluating the immigration posters in their historical contexts, convinced me there is a difference between propaganda and art. Traditional art criteria are a valuable way of evaluating propaganda as deeper insight is gained into the subliminal and overt messages, but in the case of advertising or propaganda, art is just a technique being used rather than a form of expression. Propaganda and advertising have taken methods typically used to create art and applied them to the related, but different, task of manipulating the sub-conscious through images.

A final, worrying, thought is that propaganda may only work if it develops a prejudice already present in the viewer. The 'racist' posters of the SVP assume that racism still lurks in the sub-conscience of Swiss citizens. We all have internal prejudices, but is it possible that this can be exploited by the SVP posters?

Was it effective to look at immigration using political posters? The two campaigns examined took place under different circumstances. One was concerned with encouraging migration and appealed to the migrants while the other focussed on the citizens of the receiving country and was intended

to discourage migration. It could be argued that the comparison was therefore not appropriate. However for me the journey was a powerful and interesting one. The line between art and propaganda is not clear and well-defined, but it is still present. I learned that the propagandists were aware of art; both campaigns used art techniques to better communicate their political messages. They were using art as a medium.

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