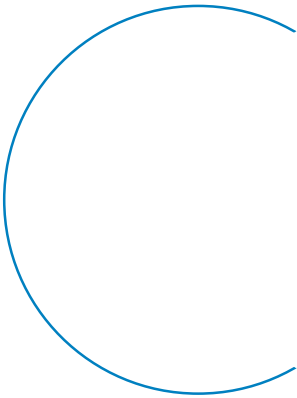


Lucas Huikeshoven

BAROQUE CINEMA
A Quest for Activist Propaganda Techniques



Baroque Cinema

A Quest for Activist Propaganda Techniques

THE MAGIC LANTERN (FIG. 1)

00:24:59:15

(FIG. 1)

Georges Melies

1903

France, Star Film Company



LAND IN ANGUISH

00:24:59:15

(FIG. 2)

Glauber Rocha

1967

Brazil, Mapa/Difilm



SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE

00:08:24:10

(FIG. 3)

William Greaves

1968

United States, Criterion



NOPE

00:06:51:04

(FIG. 4)

Jordan Peele

2022

United States, Universal Pictures



BAROQUE CINEMA

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Gerrit Rietveld Academie
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Introduction

Cinema has always been a medium of ambiguous nature. Its depictions of reality, either through fiction or documentary, have been questionable since the invention of the film-camera. Its initial scientific motivation for the invention of a machine to reproduce reality, has been subject of discussion. Like mediums prior to the invention of the film-camera such as theater, painting and photography knew periods of realism. This was for instance the case during the Baroque, where naturalism and theatricality were commonly mixed fashions. In that period, there was an interesting development to this ambiguity, when oppressive systems such as the Catholic church and monarchies used this ambiguity to create meta-perceptions with different perceptions of truth. These different perceptions and discourses were often created by artists from lower classes. The integration of this perspective made it possible for artists to hide in the meta folds. In Trojan horse-fashion, they found a way to sneakily critique their oppressors, and to counter their propaganda.

Although it is commonly believed in the artworld that there is nothing more than an egocentric motivation to art, I often question the purpose and goals of my own artistic practice. It was this question that started this thesis. Do I want to make art or do I want to contribute to activism or politics? Or can these two things be merged?

In my aversion to nihilist sentiments, I started researching and practicing combinations of the activism and art that I made. In *Noordside* (2021), a repulsive 'hood' video on gentrification in Amsterdam Noord, I referenced and appropriated the perspective of colonists arriving to an indigenous people's land by boat. And in my work *NEE-NEE* (2022), I tried to offer a post-modern reflection by presenting a forced feed of advertisement leaflet collections that included their own exhibition advertisement.

Around that time, I read artist Jonas Staal's 2010 essay *Post-Propaganda*¹. The essay is a post-modern statement that calls for an artistic critique of funds and institutions that are financially supported by the government. Just like the Baroque provides a meta-perception from within the common discourse. However the difference between the post-propaganda of Jonas Staal and what I conclude in this thesis is that political conviction can be executed by appropriation of a power, provided that it doesn't dictate the participation of a minority. This is because a lack of self reflection on the power of the artist within the work's context then makes the same mistake as the art world that you are criticizing. I believe people should abandon this naive western idea that you should change things in distant parts of the world. I believe we should focus on changing things in our local surroundings.

The western art-world is predominantly convinced of no other purpose of art than an individualist motivation, L'art pour l'art. I think this strict individualistic way of thinking about it is too arrogant and exclusive. And with that I do not mean to say inclusive in the sense that everyone has to like an artwork. It is more that there are different ways of perception that a spectator of art should be self-aware of, just like the artist and their work. Because this arrogance and exclusion by cultural capital is what is dominating the powerful world of art itself. To avoid this, an activist art work should therefore question something or have a conviction unless it is clearly subjective or artificial. Compared to classic propaganda, this is a more transparent way of doing things and therefore more nuanced.

Although widely recognized, I think *The Matrix (1999)* is a great example of what I am talking about in this thesis. It has an intrinsic self reflection through the philosophical narrative of a metaverse. The different perceptions of worlds that are visible in Morpheus's glasses want to tell the viewers it is multi-interpretable and subjective. Although it is easy to get lost in its conspiracy story, the Wachowski sisters have written a strong discourse of resistance that is hard to read for the majority of the world. Later when they came out as trans, the sisters shared their deeper personal view on the trans narrative of the films. Since the release, they have received a lot of love from trans people for the recognition of what they were going through. In an interview for Netflix, Lilli Wachowski explains that the corporate world was not ready for it at the time. She

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Jonas Staal *Post Propaganda* (Amsterdam, Fonds BKVB: 2010)

explains how art can provoke a letting-go process through the public dialogue it evokes about sensitive topics.² From what I have learned in my research I would say that there are a lot of reflections on Baroque propaganda in this film. For instance the woman in the red dress functions as a distraction from reality in the matrix. Or the reflection on the "Hollywood-like" corporate company that Neo works for.

By looking back to the revolutionary results of Baroque art through counter appropriated meta propaganda, I hope to beat the l'art pour l'art stigma. I am dreaming of a constructive hybrid of both modernist and conscious post-modernist art. A form that is hopefully able to tackle their naivety and nihilism to bring about something important and beautiful. In this thesis I will start by analyzing the historical Baroque propaganda from the sixteenth century, and then move to propaganda films and their influence on contemporary filmmaking. I hope to show the value of using Baroque techniques in my own activist and political convictions. As I think I am for a definition of art that does not only question but dares to state as well. In this way we also get rid of this annoying gatekeeping of what art is and has to be. There are a lot of people, and I mean people outside this privileged art world, that see art as something that states. I am more and more thinking of a form of art that is used to radicalize people (groups). And with this thesis, I explore the ways to slowly reach people that are far from radicalized, by appropriating the style of power and directing the discourse of a specific group. We can slowly build awareness to shape an opinion of important discussions and therefore attract people to a more radical activism. A locally oriented resistance with a global awareness.

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Interview: Why The Matrix Is a Trans Story According to Lilly Wachowski (Youtube, Netflix: 2020) <https://youtu.be/adXm2sDzGkQ> (accessed march 9 2023)



Figure 5. Lilly Wachowski & Lana Wachowski *The Matrix* (USA, Warner Bros: 1999)
Film-still - Propaganda in the meta-verse called the Matrix



Figure 6. Lilly Wachowski & Lana Wachowski *The Matrix* (USA, Warner Bros: 1999)
Film-still - A meta perspective on "reality" through a digital program

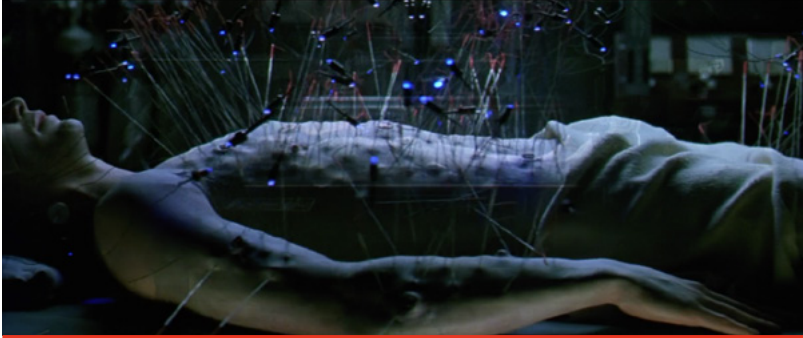


Figure 7. Lilly Wachowski & Lana Wachowski *The Matrix* (USA, Warner Bros: 1999)
Film-still - Often read as trans discourse on the proces of gender transition



Figure 8. Lilly Wachowski & Lana Wachowski *The Matrix* (USA, Warner Bros: 1999)
Film-still - Trans discourse on meta identity

The Origin of the Oppressive Powers During the Baroque Period

Hypothesis

I see a relationship between Christian and courtly propaganda techniques of the historical Baroque and cinematic propaganda. The mannered naturalism of art from that period that was used to convince, reminds me of the realist effects used in early propaganda films. For instance the use of news-reel footage, non-actors and actual street locations instead of studio sets, are important devices of propaganda from communist Russia, fascist Italy, and to a certain degree nazi Germany as well. Just like the naturalism in the Baroque, these effects convinced people of a certain truth. However, Baroque art is not only a style of realism. It is in fact based on the theatrical ambiguity of fiction and truth. People at the time saw their lives as roles they were playing in the theatrical Gesamtkunstwerk that the world was to them. It is known that the meta-perspectives of historical Baroque were used by some artists to communicate their critique on the monarchs to the lower classes of their society. This notoriously contributed to engagement and the rise of revolutionary resistance during the French Revolution. However, originally on the oppressing side, the church used the same devices to indoctrinate civilians, from colonies in particular. That meta-perspective used as a Trojan horse reminds me of the cinematic developments that came after World War Two, where different new cinema waves were used as social activist tools. I would argue that the discourse of these realistic effects that these movements were dependent on have been dismantled and have disappeared. However I believe that if we look at the popular discourses, and simultaneously to the exclusive discourses of marginalized groups of this current day and age in a metaphysical way we might be able to deploy a similar condition of political engagement.¹

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Kristin Thompson *Breaking the Glass of Armor Neoformalist Film Analysis* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press: 1988) P. 244

Definitions

In this thesis I use the term propaganda as a form of art and/or design that has the primary motivation to convince someone of the (political) opinion of the maker. This can also be done by evoking an emotional relation with the spectator. It is therefore a hyper-subjective perspective. The term is mostly used in the context of politics, but I think any form of convincing through art can be seen as propaganda. This is because I believe any form of communication is a subjective one and cannot reproduce reality for the simple reason that it has been translated to a medium. Propaganda is a deliberately created and/or used discourse. The power of propaganda is that it can contain multiple discourses at the same time. For instance one common discourse and another exclusive one. For instance in *The Matrix* where the common discourses of popular genre films are mixed with an exclusive discourse on trans life. This results in the fact that not everyone can decode it to the bare bones of the meaning of the work. Therefore, also from an activist side, propaganda can become a Trojan horse to sneak into a system of power. Most often, the word, "propaganda" is thought of in an intrinsic negative way. This is understandable, since the most famous examples were used to take over power for horrible, oppressive and imperial regimes: Napoleon, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler. Who are, not only known for their one-sided view, but for their abuse of lies and incorrectness as well. This abuse however does not take away the relevance of some of the artistic techniques they used. For instance to deploy as activism.

How I understand the definition of activism that it is something close to, however very different from, politics. I see politics as the arena or system of power that has influence on the actions and laws that form the way a country (or institution) is controlled and how tasks are distributed. The danger however is that there are powers that are coming from global systems of capital and goods. However, those powerful institutions can have unofficial and or hidden roles within a system. Not to be mistaken for activists.

Like I do myself, activism in my surroundings is associated with leftist resistance, but it could in fact be deployed by anything outside of the system it is criticizing. How I understand it, activism is a form of demanding or influencing actions on laws from outside and against the power of a system. That means it is using the power of a mass that is under the influence of the system it is criticizing or fighting against. This can be done in different ways. I do believe there are different degrees to radicalism that can influence the impact of the action. Not to be mistaken with the degree of risk the execution of an activist action has on the executor. Activism can also be done by hiding in the system it fights, such as through Baroque propaganda.

Aesthetic Origin: From Mannerism to Baroque Propaganda

Despite the fact that there is a lot to say about the aesthetics of the Baroque, I primarily focus on the philosophical and formal development of the Baroque as propaganda. The period of the historical Baroque, roughly from the beginning of seventeenth century until half of the eighteenth century, can be divided into two sub-categories: Baroque and Rococo. Prior to the Baroque period, art was dominated by the wave of high-Renaissance art and Mannerism. Mannerists derived their influence from the revival of ancient classicism and drew inspiration from linear perspective shading and mythology. They focussed on making convincingly realistic or naturalistic details. In contrast to the "high-painters", Mannerists were not purely motivated by scientific perfection, but rather used it as a manipulative aesthetic for devotional content.²

In Europe, the new demand for biblical art during the Baroque had to convince in realism, but simultaneously use this naturalistic aesthetic beauty to attract attention to the mythical pool of wealth that one would fall in through Catholic baptism. Visually, intellectual Baroque is recog-

nized by its theatrical extravaganza in colorful naturalism by reproducing natural beauty. This ran equal to the “exploring” of exotic nature as rational research and ordering as a science. That evolved in intellectual, courtly societies during the Rococo (1700 to 1785) to an early form of secularism called the Enlightenment. Not only European nature but also (stolen) goods from European colonies such as pearls, gold, gemstones and diamonds were physically used. For their unfamiliar “freaky” aesthetic as symbols of wealth, they were influential to Baroque aesthetics. The word Baroque then also originates from (second half of the sixteenth century) describing jewelry in a deriding way for its kitschiness and femininity. This was particularly the case for expensive, bulbous, and oddly-shaped pearls that became popular for their natural appearance. Perhaps they deployed the commercialization of these scarce products to both attract Europeans with wealth and to gain recognition or relevancy for the people they colonized. In a similar way to how tech company Apple nowadays deliberately decides to develop golden iPhones to attract the biggest gold markets of the world, India and China.³

Christian Propaganda

Prior to the start of this period of colonization, the most influential and powerful institute of Europe, the Roman Catholic church, was splitting up due to the backlash of Lutheran followers. The reformers believed in a more pure form of faith/religious practice, and focussed on the old testament of the Bible. Their practice included a ban on imagery of holy figures other than God. They also criticized the wealthy, “impure” lifestyle Catholics were living, and the exchange system of salvation for capital that the church was depending on. To secure this power and wealth a Counter-Reformation force was formed called the Jesuits, formed of cultural and religious troupes that were installed to maintain Catholicism in Europe and “propagate” (force) it to colonial populations. These troupes, called ‘missionaries’, were of huge value to the tactics of colonization by catholic countries. To execute this, the Jesuits needed a convincing way to communicate with the foreign heathens in the colonies.⁴ In retrospect of the twenty-first century, we can explain it as a need for propaganda

3 Robert Neuman Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture (USA, Pearson Education: 2013) P. 13/20 & 309

4 Robert Neuman Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture (USA, Pearson Education: 2013) P. 16/39

tactics.⁵ This need then drastically changed the arts and design of the time. Once the natives were violently colonized, the power of the catholic church was reinforced through the indoctrination of the inhabitants, and by violent threats through art. For instance engravings and theater screenplay of torture scenes and a variety of other aberrations were used as propaganda instruments in the conflict between the Catholic and Reformed beliefs. In early Baroque theater for instance the confusion between real and fake blood was a common trick that audiences loved.⁶

Monarchist Propaganda

Later on, due to the developments of the Enlightenment, Christianity was not the only religion to convince, since the European kings and queens were just as influential and powerful at the time. They however, had a rather unbelievable theology to sell: the validation of their superiority over their nationals, and on a courtly, individual level: their own identity. For the plebs this egoistic abuse of state wealth practically was synonymous to the scale of inequality they were living with. But how was it possible that it took them until 1789 to start a revolution?⁷ Were they still relying on the classical purism of the Renaissance, or were they truly proud of the nationalist colonial wealth that started to show off? Perhaps the answer can be found in the formation of monarchic traditions and etiquettes. Monarchies are a distinctive play of power and authority wherein every part of the society has a role. Everyone follows the script of traditions and etiquettes, according to their character. This theatricality is fundamental to the development of the Baroque artistic resistance.

5 William Egginton *The Theater of Truth, The Ideology of (Neo)baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford, Stanford University Press: 2010) P.3

6 Walter Moser Angela Ndalianis Peter Krieger *Neo-Baroques, From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster* (Leiden, The Netherlands Koninklijke Brill nv: 2017) p.57

7 Robert Neuman *Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture* (USA, Peason Education: 2013) P.16 & 333

Its overarching dictation of this fictional play, became the truth for all. But what were the possibilities for resistance if normal people were also the authors of that script?



Figure 9. *Bacchus and Ariadne*, Painting, Titian, 1522-23
Mannerist painting



Figure 10. *The Last Judgment*, Fresco, Michelangelo 1536-41
Mannerist fresco

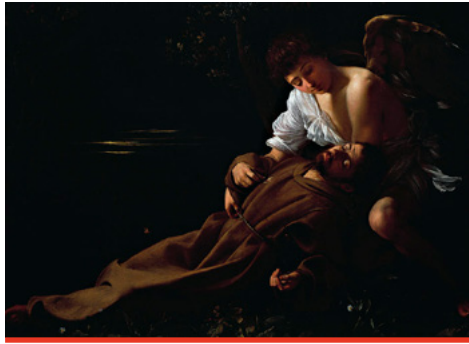


Figure 11. *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy*, Painting, Caravaggio, 1595
Counter-reformist celebration of holy Catholic figure Saint Francis of Assisi



Figure 12. *Saint Gregory the Great with Jesuit Saints*, Painting, Guercino, 1622
Counter-reformist art that celebrates Jesuit missionaries Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier



Figure 13. *The Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew*, Painting, Jusepe de Ribera, 1618
Threatening, violent scene



Figure 14. *Traité Des Instruments De Martyr*, Etching, Antonio Gallonio, 1591
Threatening, violent scene



Figure 15. *A Reading from Molière*, Painting, Jean-François de Troy, ca. 1728
Courtly show-off scene



Figure 16. *The Swing*, Painting, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, 1767
Naturalist/Enlightenment painting for the elite

Fictional Reality as Propaganda and Resistance in Meta Theater

Theatrical Meta-Consciousness as Artistic Resistance

Artists of the historical Baroque were never born as kings or queens, but their commercial success could bring them a carefree, wealthy life if they painted in between the lines of the courtly or Catholic coloring page. A network of artists and designers of all mediums convinced the glory of the kingdoms. They worked together on communicating the preach of the church and monarchs through architecture, jewelry, fashion as well as painting, sculpture, music and theater to create an immersive experience. A total work so immersive it was reality. This is similar to the advertisement industry in the 21st century, wherein almost all mediums are used to form a campaign. But now fame has become the equivalent to what Baroque knighthood was back then.¹

As it goes with adopting theater plays over time, they get contextualized according to their own current cultural background. What were artists who grew up in this play adding to it? A perspective of their own fictional identity. Artists must have found themselves in a confusing realist cycle of "mise-en-abîme". At the time the world itself was metaphorically seen as stage-play wherein people saw themselves as the actors in it. In the "theatrum mundi" from a christian perspective, God was in charge of the illusions they spectated. The others (higher class), more rational thinkers influenced by the scientific revolution, saw the play of life as directed by fortune and chance. This is for instance evident in the case of Bernini's *The Intermezzo of the Two Theatres (1637)*. Historian Koen Vermeer explains that "the audience saw on the stage another audience, facing them as if to watch a play. The actors both played for their own audience until they realized that their own audience was an illusion for the other."² As Karel Vanhaesebrouck writes in his essay, *Reconsidering Metatheatricality: Towards a Baroque Understanding of Postdramatic Theatre, Baroque*:

1 Robert Neuman Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture (USA, Peason Education: 2013) P.16

2 Koen Vermeer BJHS Vol. 38, No. 2 - The Magic Of The Magic Lantern (1660-1700) (Cambridge, British Society for the History of Science, 2005) P.130/131

The baroque is essentially about playing with rules, showing them, making them explicit and, where necessary, turning them upside down. It necessarily implies the presence of a meta-conscience, a medial self-awareness, both on the encoding and on the decoding side. It cannot be equated with an uncritical, almost senseless immersion. On the contrary, the baroque experience presupposes an awareness of medial codes and rules; it is a coded game with the limits of representation, a game in which the spectator is willingly implied in order to unveil the mechanisms of the game.³

A meta conscious art that is subtly aware of the fact that; “pretense is an appearance, and appearance a pretense” as William Egginton describes when dissecting the Spanish play, *Disdain With Disdain (1654)* by Agustín Moreto. The play reflects on the power dynamic of seventeenth century monarchy by deploying the same meta theatrical way of communication (performing within performing). It therefore resists the systemic power it exists in. Told through a metaphorical “love” story where a man (settler), tries to “conquer” a woman’s desire for his disdain by mimicking her behavior. Over time *Disdain With Disdain* contributed to a lucid awakening to the nightmare the spectators were living in. A dream of a pretense of truth, within a dream of independent truth.

Appropriation of Comic Low-Culture Theater

The comic theaters culture from the Baroque was heavily influenced by Italian street-theater Commedia De’ll Arte, which is known for its improvisa-

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Walter Moser Angela Ndalianis Peter Krieger Neo-Baroques, From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster (Leiden, The Netherlands Koninklijke Brill nv: 2017) p.53

tion and comic love stories of its stock characters.⁴ In cities its characteristic plays were very commonly played in courts as well. Its origin in Venetian carnival culture became fashionable in other parts of Europe too. Its famous masks were used at courtly parties as symbols of freedom to hide one's identity.⁵ However, the rules of the satirical street-culture was a discourse of the people. The actors could talk to their own class without direct notice of their oppressor. It was for instance forbidden to play it in French.⁶ A joyful form where a joke is not just a joke. Over time, comic theater stories became defined by the Commedia De'll Arte characters of masters and servants. The greatest example of influence through comic theater is undoubtedly *The Marriage of Figaro (1778)* by Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais.⁷ Beaumarchais, at the time, was a wealthy self-made writer who had experienced class differences himself. To preach for equality, he depicted the aristocracy as decadent, rotten people, through which he exposed their abuse of power. For instance the protagonist of the play, servant Figaro, states that he is equally good as his master. At first, French king Louis XVI tried to ban the play, but it was eventually shown in 1784, and immediately resulted in riots. A few years later, the de-facto leader of the new French Republic, Napoleon, described it as "the revolution already in action".⁸

The Magic Lantern

Like no other medium, the invention of The Magic Lantern (1660) seamlessly blended in with the fascination for theatrical illusion. At first, it was deployed merely in courtly settings, to enhance scientific lectures. Later on, as the lantern made its way to the lower classes, it became used for entertaining through illustrative symbolic expressions of magic in street-theater culture. Vermeir explains this development in contrast to Baroque's naturalism; "Truth and illusion came together at the surface of the phenomena and became two sides of the same coin." Especially through new mediums, such as the later photographic use of the magic lantern (ancestor of cinema), Baroque's illusory meta theatricality marked the invention of the strongest tool of conviction that exists to date. It

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- 4 William Egginton *The Theater of Truth, The Ideology of (Neo)baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford, Stanford University Press: 2010) P.49
- 5 Judith Chaffee & Oily Crick *The Routledge companion to Commedia Dell' Arte* (Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge: 2001) P.1
- 6 Robert Neuman *Baroque and Rococo Art and Architecture* (USA, Pearson Education: 2013) P.320 & 446
- 7 Judith Chaffee & Oily Crick *The Routledge companion to Commedia Dell' Arte* (Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge: 2001) P.1 & 118
- 8 David Coward *Beaumarchais The Figaro Trilogy* (Oxford New York, Oxford World's Classics: 2003) P.18/30

developed into an incredible propaganda tool so important, that we can't imagine society without its influence.⁹



Figure 17. *The Two Carriages*, Painting, Claude Gillot ca. 1707
Street-theater troops



Figure 18. *Masked Figures with a Fruit Seller*, Painting, Pietro Longhi, ca. 1760.
Courtly appropriation of Commedia De'Il Arte



Figure 19. *The Magic Lantern*, Painting, Paul Sandby, 1763
The Magic Lantern in courtly setting



Figure 20. *La Lanterne Magique d'Amour*, Painting, Jean Frédéric Schall, 1805
The Magic Lantern as meta theatrical device

Cinematic Realist Effects in Propaganda Narratives

The Illusory Theater Replaced

Before the film-camera was invented, the moving image was a medium of the Magic Lantern and “flip-books” from the seventeenth century. For instance, animated shorts that told fantastical and mythological stories, mostly shown as part of traveling street theaters. No wonder that this fashion of illusion continued as a photographic medium once the camera was invented. A continuation of the Commedia De’ll Arte plays, by and for the lower classes. Like how the fantastical master of this period, George Méliès, showed in his film *The Magic Lantern (1903)* in which two stock characters of Commedia De’ll Arte, Punch and Pierrot, find a massive magic lantern that they project a film with. In the story the actors use the magic lantern to trick the policemen that are seemingly after them by magically using the lantern to bring what is inside to life. In a way, this is a meta theatrical film projecting its Baroque origin.

Like photography, film was initially invented to capture actual reality. Realistic enough to scare people that a moving train is coming their way. In fact, any art recognized as realism is an effect created through use of conventional devices.¹ One could say cinema, with its manipulated reproduction of “reality”, inherently possesses a Baroque meta fictional tension. The popular theatricality of cinema in the beginning of the medium set the tone for what it was until that time. The photographic trickery, montage and decoupage made it a replacement of theater and literature or a way to document events. Unlike the lower class artist from street-theater, cinema was an almost priceless medium for its first seventy years. It required expensive equipment and film stock. Therefore it was an exclusive elitist medium, which influenced the perspectives and subjects of these films drastically. But approximately forty-five years later a new approach came about. This dangerous cocktail of fiction and documentary was again used to manipulate reality in favor of sentiments their filmer longed for; nationalistic, communistic, fascistic, anti-Semitic, anti-elite and socialist sentiments. Those examples are now the most prominent examples of what we think of as cinematic propaganda. A rather negative connotation for the fact that this manipulation was used to give a one sided view on ideologies. Where

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Kristin Thompson *Breaking the Glass of Armor Neoformalist Film Analysis* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press: 1988) P.197

the use of facts was often a minor focus, or completely absent. In some cases the propaganda was used by a minority and/or oppressed group to start a revolution. But in all cases, these groups took over and became very oppressing regimes themselves. The danger of the journalistic way in which some of these manipulated films were presented is something that we are dealing with to this day.

Propaganda Film

Russian director Sergei Eisenstein was employed by the communist regime of Vladimir Lenin to make Soviet propaganda films. Eisenstein's approach to this was a use of documentary footage, staged scenes with non-professional actors, and on-location shooting rather than using film studios. For his most notable work in this field, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), he deployed a new dramatic editing technique called "Intellectual Editing". He would juxtapose seemingly unrelated close-ups to encourage the viewer to make intellectual or emotional comparisons between them.

Fascist Italy, who was copying American cinema before the war, started using Eisenstein's dramatic documentary approach to its propaganda machine during WWII. For instance Roberto Rossellini (famous for neorealism), even made a fascist propaganda trilogy for the state cinema production company of Vittorio Mussolini (son of Benito) inspired by Eisenstein.

Neorealism's Realist Effects

Later on, after the war, this form of filmmaking inspired a political counter movement called neorealism. As Italy's most influential critic André Bazin noted that, aside from those cinematic techniques, realist effects such as imperfections as the result of long takes, characterized neorealism. With films such as *Roma Città Aperta* (1945, Rossellini), *La Terra Trema* (1948 Luchino Visconti), or *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948 Vittorio De Sica), the use of non actors and on-location filming became a major influence on avant-garde movements all over the world. However these films carry the title of real-

ist films. Contrary to Bazin, I would argue that they are not that realistic. Apparently they had a convincing natural quality to people that are unfamiliar to the lives of working-class people at that time. As argued by Kristin Thompson in her critique on Bazin's view of *The Bicycle Thieves*, *Breaking the Glass of Armor*, in comparison to Mannerist and Baroque paintings:

An artwork that deals with working-class or peasant characters is not automatically realistic, of course. In Shakespeare's plays, such characters were often confined to the comic subplot, and the Baroque era was full of poetry and oratorios on the picturesque, imaginary, nymphs-and-shepherds vision of the countryside.

The neorealist films are in fact heavily melodramatic and plot-driven, and they breathe more Hollywood staging than documentary qualities. If we look at the cinematic language that is used in neorealist films, we can conclude it is actually hiding a super American style. It has a perfect 3 point (studio) lighting, and smooth dolly and crane shots.² The social themes of the film made Bazin believe *The Bicycle Thief* was meant as a communist film.³ Despite De Sica's lack of clear ideological motivations for film, the fascist front of post-war Italy certainly got criticized through their own cinematic discourse. And in the end this led at some point to a greater socialist front.⁴

2 Kristin Thompson *Breaking the Glass of Armor Neoformalist Film Analysis* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press: 1988) p.212

3 André Bazin, Bert Cardullo André Bazin and Italian Neorealism (New York, Continuum International Publishing Group: 2011) p.65

4 Ken Friedman, "A History of Italian Cinema: 1945—1951," in *Literary and Socio- Economic Trends in Italian Cinema* (Los Angeles: Center for Italian Studies, Dept. of Italian, UCLA, 1973), p. 115.

Encrypted Rules Of The Game

Through Bazin's analysis it became clear that the neorealist wave was a follow-up to the "poetic realism" by for instance Jean Renoir. Luchino Visconti (before making, what some consider, the first neorealist film, *Osessione* (1943)) was assisting Renoir with directing. In the film *Toni* (1935), Renoir started involving effects of "realism" by depending on more obvious ways that we know from neorealism, such as "location shooting, working class milieus, and Depression-oriented subject matter"⁵ However *Rules Of The Game* (1939) may be the best example of Renoir's Baroque socialist critique. In the limelight of the threat of WWII, he tried to rebel against the aristocrats and their lack of taking accountability. The film stars a bourgeois group of people, rather than a distinct protagonist and an antagonist. Or perhaps the role of protagonist is made up of the two working-class characters and the bourgeoisie as antagonist as a result of the parallel narratives of the characters in the group. This group represents a class of power, money, and a lack of responsibility for the world. As Thompson explains, those parallels are a common foundation of French comic drama of the Baroque era, which involved;

mistaken identity, disguise, the frequent switching of romantic partners, and parallels between masters and servants. Rules adopts some of these devices, but in a selective, self-conscious way.

The film directly affirms this inspiration by citing *The Marriage of Figaro* in the introduction. Like in *Disdain With Disdain*; its underlying story about inequality and the rules of that "game" is disrupted by a catchy, frivolous love story about disloyalty. "A lie is a very heavy garment to bear" says Christine in the beginning of the film. This sets the tone for the international tension of the time that is reflected in the characters of the film. It speaks to us on the individualism of the aristocrats similar to the courtly prosperity of the historical Baroque. All the characters of "The Rules Of The Game" have different stories to hide and hold up about themselves.

The film starts with the two outsider characters Octave (played by Renoir himself) and André who enter a bourgeois scene that they don't really play in. That is, except for their role in the single rule of the aristocratic game: love. This brings them to the chateau where the film takes place. While the different love stories unfold, Octave is dancing in between the players and the household. As the camera mimics Octave's passes of interactions with the servants and aristocrats, he almost becomes the link between us, the spectators, and the film's characters - seemingly taking the position of an objective perspective. The long dynamic camera movements of carefully planned mise-en-scene and the use of "deep focus" sharply capture every element in the frame and the space behind it. This is a technique that this film, and after, realist cinema in general, became known for.⁶

Thompson argues that compared to neorealism the film gains a deeper sense of realism in spite of the obvious staging, that this ambiguity of the plot and lack of focus on characters is what gives the film its natural or real persuasion. However the reading of the film required such a specific exclusive intellectual cultural capital that except for some cinema critics, the film was completely misunderstood and flopped. As the son of successful painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Jean Renoir must have forgotten that his personal intellectual artist background was irrelevant to the class he might have wanted to speak to. Despite its comic slapstick qualities, *Rules* lacked a wisely targeted cinematic discourse.⁷

6 Alexander Sesonske *Rules Of The Game Commentary* (New York City, The Criterion Collection: 1989)

7 Kristin Thompson *Breaking the Glass of Armor Neoformalist Film Analysis* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press: 1988) p.219/220



Figure 21. Georges Méliès *The Magic Lantern* (France, Star Film Company: 1903)
Film-still - Can be read as a contextualization of the history of the Magic Lantern



Figure 22. Georges Méliès *The Magic Lantern* (France, Star Film Company: 1903)
Film-still - Meta reflection of the origin of the Magic Lantern: street theaters 'Commedia De'Il Arte'



Figure 23. Georges Méliès *The Magic Lantern* (France, Star Film Company: 1903)
 Film-still - Can be read as: soldiers that fight the rebellion of Baroque street-theater against the monarchy



Figure 24. Sergei Eisenstein *Battleship Potemkin* (Soviet Union, Goskin: 1925)
 Film-still - Intellectual editing, an insert of soldiers marching down the Odesa Steps



Figure 25. Sergei Eisenstein *Battleship Potempkin* (Soviet Union, Goskin: 1925)
Film-still - Documentary footage for a convincing effect



Figure 26. Sergei Eisenstein *Battleship Potempkin* (Soviet Union, Goskin: 1925)
Film-still - Fictional ending of the mutiny against the Tsar



Figure 27. Dziga Vertov *Man With The Movie Camera* (USSR, VUFKU: 1928)
Film-still - Formalist documentary style for meta propaganda



Figure 28. Dziga Vertov *Man With The Movie Camera* (USSR, VUFKU: 1928)
Film-still - Formalist documentary style for meta propaganda



Figure 29. Dziga Vertov *Man With The Movie Camera* (USSR, VUFKU: 1928)
Film-still - Formalist documentary style for meta propaganda



Figure 30. Dziga Vertov *Man With The Movie Camera* (USSR, VUFKU: 1928)
Film-still - Formalist documentary style for meta propaganda



**Figure 31. Luchino Visconti *La Terra Trema* (Italy, CEIAD: 1948)
Film-still - On site location with realist effect**



**Figure 32. Luchino Visconti *La Terra Trema* (Italy, CEIAD: 1948)
Film-still - On site location with realist effect**



Figure 33. Roberto Rossellini *Roma Città Aperta* (Italy, Minerva Film: 1945)
Film-still - Melodrama in an on-site location with realist effect



Figure 34. Roberto Rossellini *Roma Città Aperta* (Italy, Minerva Film: 1945)
Film-still - Melodrama in an on-site location with realist effect



Figure 35. Roberto Rossellini *Roma Città Aperta* (Italy, Minerva Film: 1945)
Film-still - Perfect Hollywoodian three point lighting

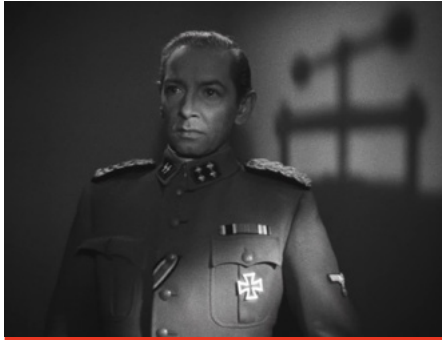


Figure 36. Roberto Rossellini *Roma Città Aperta* (Italy, Minerva Film: 1945)
Film-still - Perfect Hollywoodian three point lighting



Figure 37. Vittorio De Sica *The Bicycle Thieves* (Italy, ENIC: 1948)
Film-still - On-site location with realist effect



Figure 38. Vittorio De Sica *The Bicycle Thieves* (Italy, ENIC: 1948)
Film-still - On-site location with realistic effect



Figure 39. Vittorio De Sica *The Bicycle Thieves* (Italy, ENIC: 1948)
Film-still - Perfect Hollywoodian three point lighting



Figure 40. Vittorio De Sica *The Bicycle Thieves* (Italy, ENIC: 1948)
Film-still - Perfect Hollywoodian three point lighting and fake rain



Figure 41. Jean Renoir *Rules Of The Game* (France, Gaumont Film Company: 1939)
Film-still - Deep-focus mise-en-scene



Figure 42. Jean Renoir *Rules Of The Game* (France, Gaumont Film Company: 1939)
Film-still - Deep-focus mise-en-scene



Figure 43. Jean Renoir *Rules Of The Game* (France, Gaumont Film Company: 1939)
Film-still - Reference to silent film adaptations *Dans Macabre* & *The Skeleton Dance*



Figure 44. Jean Renoir *Rules Of The Game* (France, Gaumont Film Company: 1939)
Film-still - Reference to silent film adaptations *Dans Macabre* & *The Skeleton Dance*



Figure 45. Dudley Murphy *Dance Macabre* (1922)
Film-still - *Dans Macabre*



Figure 46. Walt Disney *The Skeleton Dance* (USA, Columbia Pictures: 1929)
Film-still - *Dans Macabre*

Meta Self-Reflections with Activist Motivations

Decodable Poetics

Another director inspired by the poetic realist movement is Pier Paolo Pasolini. He began working in film by writing for post-neorealist directors such as Federico Fellini.¹ In *La Ricotta* (1963), Pasolini continues to showcase his Baroque meta-theatricality. In *Neo-Baroques, From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster*, Karel Vanhaesebrouck defines the primary aspect of Baroque as “a self-reflective experience, questioning its own intermedial and theatrical nature.”² In *La Ricotta*, we witness a film being made that is a series of reproductions of Baroque paintings of the last supper and the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, that we jump in and out of. They are distinguished from one another by switching from black and white (behind the scenes) and color (fake perception of Catholic Baroque propaganda). The wealthy celebrity-groupies and everyone’s decadence on set suggests that the film is a commercial project. We see the famous director Orson Welles (USA’s post-war equivalent of Renoir) starring in the role of a director that has to represent Pasolini himself. To make us aware of Pasolini’s reasons, Welles literally explains it to a journalist that visits the set, and cites Pasolini’s own poems. The self-critical meta folds of Pasolini’s film makes us aware of ourselves as spectators and the tabloid industry behind it.

Aside from the self-reflective meta perspective, the story is told through a homeless character called “Stracci”. He is present on the set because he will play in the role of one of the thieves who will be crucified alongside Jesus. When all bourgeois extras dressed up as saints have eaten the last supper and Stracci doesn’t get anything. He tries to tame his hunger and steals in real life. While they are waiting for Stracci’s scene, the saints show themselves in contrast to their outfits as the most unchristian beings, when they bully him for taking food. After he finally manages to buy himself food (a full ricotta cheese), they spectate him as if he is an animal while they feed him the leftovers. Later on, when Stracci dies from overeating while hanging on the cross and still waiting for his shot, Welles says “He had to die to remind us he too was alive”. A Catholic metaphorical way of explaining the suffering of the oppressed marginalized people for the sal-

1 Gian Maria Annovi Pier Paolo Pasolini Performing Authorship (New York, Columbia University Press: 2017) p.112

2 Karel Vanhaesebrouck, Theo D’haen and Hans Bertens Neo-Baroques, From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster (Leiden, The Netherlands Koninklijke Brill nv: 2017) p. 51

vation of the rich. The Catholic church and government of the time called the film blasphemous. I assume it must have been for its anti-capitalist critique on their system and its history of the Baroque propaganda machine. Pasolini even got sent to prison for a couple of months.³ This, as well as his ambiguous sexual orientation as a christian in Italy similarly made him a spectacle for the tabloids.

(New) Formalisms

I believe Argentinian director Gaspar Noé directly references *La Ricotta* in his film *Lux Aeterna* (2019). In his film, he portrays the toxicity of the film/commercial industry by making a behind-the-scenes film about a fashion video shoot. Next to this featurette film, the project incorporates a "video essay" on cinema and an actual fashion film for the brand Saint Laurent, through which the whole project was financed and initiated. I would almost think of the name *Stracci* as a direct inspiration for *Lux Aeterna* because it literally translates to "rags" or "mops", and might even reference the centuries old textile market of the city Prato (close to Florence) that has a tradition of used fabrics called "Stracci". This is a big contrast to the wasteful market that YSL is part of. Both films subtly want to make us aware of our role as spectators in these systems of power and capital. In *La Ricotta* this is clearly distinguished by the difference in color use. *Lux Aeterna* does it by the unpleasant epileptic experience of RGB flashing lights. This effect disturbs our cognitive nervous system, through which the oppression of the fashion industry is metaphorically translated. The red green and blue lights literally speak upon the primal colors of the light that forms a film. But it also reminds me of the color palette of mannerist painters like El Greco that Noe's fashion-film scene seems to replicate. This cinematic formalism of hyper dynamic cinematography and (digital) manipulation is what Noe is famous for throughout his filmography. All his films are looking for a tense point of our existence in relation to what we think is normal. With themes of incest, rape, heavy violence, pornography or psychedelics, they all gain a hectic madness that can make your stomach turn. Often resulting in people rejecting his films as they expose taboos of our society. This element of the shock, for instance by use of violence, is also found in catholic propaganda of the historical Baroque. People had to find a way in theater to reach and affect viewers who were used to look at public scenes of torture and executions. For instance, the influence of Jesuit engravings of torture-scenes on buildings and on prints were used as propaganda instruments.⁴

3 Nina Power, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith Subversive Pasolini: *La Ricotta* and *The Gospel According to Matthew* (ninapower.net: 2012/23) P.2/3

4 Walter Moser Angela Ndalians Peter Krieger Neo-Baroques, *From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster* (Leiden, The Netherlands Koninklijke Brill nv: 2017) p. 56-59

The origin of this formalist cinematography of Noe lies parallel to Eisenstein's cinematic propaganda grammar. In Stalin's USSR, news-reel director and theorist, Dziga Vertov, developed a futuristic industrial vision of cinema that he called Kino-Eye. His revolution of the news-reel was based on representation of the camera as the most realistic vision and superior to the human eye.⁵ A futuristic ideology to serve as propaganda for the Soviet Union in resistance to the influence of previous media. In Vertov's most famous documentary *Man With The Movie Camera (1928)*, his camera personifies the character of the film. While it was Vertov's intention to step away from stories about men and their perspective, Kino-Eye heavily inspired filmmakers that used his formalism to tell particularly human-related stories.

Vertov was more or less forgotten after his death in 1954, until one of the prominent French "New Wave" directors Jean-Luc Godard, among others, found out about him. Together with Jean-Pierre Gorin, Godard started a cinema collective, the "Groupe Dziga Vertov" to put him back on the map. They were heavily influenced by his formalist works and vision for their radical collaborative marxist cinema.

Critical Decolonial Narratives

An influential collaborator of Godard and Gorin, Glauber Rocha, was one of the founders of the activist movement Cinema Novo (1960s/70s)⁶ in Brazil, who was also influenced by André Bazin's analysis of neorealism and French and Italian new wave cinema such as those of Godard and Pasolini.⁷ However Rocha's *Land In Anguish (1967)* was made before the films ascribed to Dziga Vertov Group. It is a very formalist film, as it plays with the differences between cinematic forms of film and TV. It is told through the perspective of a white bourgeois journalist, Paulo, and addresses the power of the audiovisual medium and its role in politics in Brazil. The main subject of this film is the susceptibility for populism that results from big class segregation. Similarly to Baroque plot structures, this film is told through flashbacks. This seems to reference the way political facts were perceived through news-reels, in a metaphorical way.

The journalist and others have a poetic way of talking that makes them

5 Dziga Vertov Kino-Eye *The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (US, The Regents of the University of California 1984) p.8

6 Anthony R. Guneratne, Wimal Dissanayake *Rethinking Third Cinema* (New York, Routledge: 2003) P.4

7 Walter Moser Angela Ndalians Peter Krieger *Neo-Baroques, From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster* (Leiden, The Netherlands Koninklijke Brill nv: 2017) p.104

look like actors rather than believable characters in this film. These scripted texts often get acted straight into the camera. Meanwhile, we sometimes abruptly jump out of the scene to a meta-observatory perspective that feels like we are behind the scenes. Rocha confronts us with our own spectatorship as we get presented to Paulo's actual propaganda work as well, which we can distinct by their titles. His directing differentiates the propaganda languages for the two different politicians in the story. The propaganda of the populist is shown through a newsreel/documentary camera perspective. Much like Paulo's film, "Better Days To The Poor And New Life To All My People," which is filmed in the streets with a crowd of real people. Throughout the film, a sound recordist is almost constantly in the frame of the "news" scenes, making us aware of the artificiality of journalism. But simultaneously, it convinces us of the authenticity of it being a news-reel as well. The propaganda of the other politician, a conservative technocrat, is told in a visual language that reminds me more of Nazi director Leni Riefenstahl. Much like in Paulo's film "TV Eldorado Presents - The Adventures of a Fortune Seeker", with its staged classicist scenes that are set to symbolize his ideals.

In a way, *Land In Anguish* feels like a response to Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960). Perhaps it is even critical of its self-pity, and the lack of activist social analysis of the Italian cinema movement prior to his. Not only in the orgy party at the rich man Julio Fuentes that made me think of the film. Paulo shares the liberal decadence of Marcello in *La Dolce Vita*. Both characters seem to speak of the nihilistic lifestyle of famous "journalists" that abuse their power/privilege for a lack of political conviction. The difference though, is that Rocha does not follow the decadent Hollywoodian cinematography that Fellini used for his films. In fact, his style of choice is what his film is about. As one of the first, Glauber Rocha critiques neorealist mannered cinematography and writing for its limp, unsustainable pretension of truth, before Thompson's neoformalist reassessment of Bazin's analysis that many of its "'realist" effects are the products of extreme artifice"⁸ in 1988.

Activist Discourse Over Time

These original forms of Baroque cinema were mostly speaking about class differences and the role of the Catholic church from a masculine privileged perspective. This is of course still relevant but we have finally come to a time where more and more people start to realize that there are other

forms of marginalization: of sex and gender, sexual orientation and identity, racial, cultural, and marginalizations of ability. In a lot of the films I have discussed earlier these perspectives are left out completely. Sometimes even contributing to discrimination of these minorities. Luckily due to the technical innovations that made film more affordable for a lot of people, films were starting to be made by people who were dealing with those marginalizations. However I do believe it is partly due to activist films and videos of the past 70 years that we are at a point (in the Netherlands) where people, especially younger generations, are more aware of the inequalities in our society. At the same time, I'm aware of the limits on my perspective as a white, middle-class, straight, cis man born in the capital of one of the richest countries in the world. I am wondering what echoes of Cinema Novo's, decolonial Third Cinema did in the world. I must say, it is dangerous to summarize something this big and versatile with my current amount of knowledge - I risk generalizing and globalizing it away.

Nevertheless, Third Cinema was a transcontinental group of political cinema movements in "third world countries": (former) colonized countries and the people who made up their diasporas. Many of the founders of early Third Cinema manifestos had, like their European contemporaries, been influenced by Italian neorealism. But what they foremost shared was the same transcontinental call to fight social injustice and colonialist abuse inspired by communist and decolonial activist-theorists. They had a calling to find a solution/contribution in cinema that would translate their beliefs as Anthony R. Guneratne describes in *Rethinking Third Cinema*:

There remains to be considered the most fundamental of assumptions made on behalf of Third Cinema; namely, the prescriptive insistence that there is a best theory of film and an optimal form of filmmaking practice to account for Third World issues and that both theory and praxis adhere to a conceptual framework that retains an unchanging, trans-cultural validity in all instances.⁹

This brings me to my goal for this research. Unlike Guneratne's description of the motives of Third Cinema, I'm writing this in search of an optimal activist cinema in a country like the Netherlands, all the while keeping the context of the rest of the world in mind. By looking back to Baroque as a propaganda form in relation to this time, I would argue that we have to ask

ourselves what the political and artistic discourse of our time looks like. The fashion in art of the late sixteenth century was focussed on technique that tried to replicate nature realistically. Later, with Mannerism, their naturalist paintings and sculptures for conviction of biblical sceneries and subjects. Partly influenced by the appropriation of street-theater with an exploiting goal, the culture of Commedia De'Il Arte emerged. In the following centuries, the fashion shifted towards a more theatrical form of art, but the naturalistic discourse remained similar.



Figure 47. P. Paolo Pasolini Ro.Go.Pa.G. - *La Ricotta* (Italy, CINERIZ - Rizzoli Film: 1963)
Film-still - Mannerist reproduction



Figure 48. P. Paolo Pasolini Ro.Go.Pa.G. - *La Ricotta* (Italy, CINERIZ - Rizzoli Film: 1963)
Film-still - Mannerist reproduction



Figure 49. P. Paolo Pasolini Ro.Go.Pa.G. - *La Ricotta* (Italy, CINERIZ - Rizzoli Film: 1963)
Film-still - Stracci on the cross



Figure 50. P. Paolo Pasolini Ro.Go.Pa.G. - *La Ricotta* (Italy, CINERIZ - Rizzoli Film: 1963)
Film-still - Stracci on the cross



Figure 51. Gaspar Noé *Lux Æterna* (France, UFO Distribution Potemkine Films: 2019)
Film-still - Meta perspectives in split screen with RGB flashing light

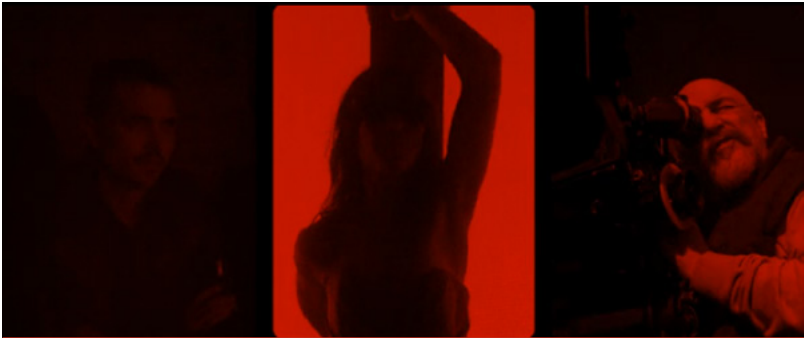


Figure 52. Gaspar Noé *Lux Æterna* (France, UFO Distribution Potemkine Films: 2019)
Film-still - Meta perspectives in split screen with RGB flashing light



Figure 53. *The Virgin and Child with St Martina and St Agnes*, Painting, El Greco, 1697-99



Figure 54. *The Purification of the Temple*, Painting, El Greco, ca. 1600



Figure 55. Glauber Rocha *Land In Anguish* (Brazil, Mapa/Difilm: 1967)

Film-still - Populist propaganda film *Better Days To The Poor And New Life To All My People*



Figure 56. Glauber Rocha *Land In Anguish* (Brazil, Mapa/Difilm: 1967)

Film-still - Populist propaganda film *Better Days To The Poor And New Life To All My People*



Figure 57. Glauber Rocha *Land In Anguish* (Brazil, Mapa/Difilm: 1967)
Film-still - Technocrat propaganda film *The Adventures of a Fortune Seeker*



Figure 58. Glauber Rocha *Land In Anguish* (Brazil, Mapa/Difilm: 1967)
Film-still - Technocrat propaganda film *The Adventures of a Fortune Seeker*



Figure 59. Glauber Rocha *Land In Anguish* (Brazil, Mapa/Difilm: 1967)
Film-still - Breaking 180-degree cinema rule prior (fig. 60)



Figure 60. Glauber Rocha *Land In Anguish* (Brazil, Mapa/Difilm: 1967)
Film-still - Breaking 180-degree cinema rule following after (fig. 59)



Figure 61. Glauber Rocha *Land In Anguish* (Brazil, Mapa/Difilm: 1967)
Film-still - Orgy scene



Figure 62. Federico Fellini *La Dolce Vita* (Italy, Cineriz: 1960)
Film-still - Orgy scene

Counter Appropriation of Baroque as an Activist Cinema Approach

A Naive Return to a Cinema Of Truth

As discussed in the previous chapter, in the first half of the twentieth century, a new powerful medium, cinema, started to be used in the form of propaganda. The directors of that time who were inventing the medium for political purposes took inspiration from art that is rooted in the historical Baroque and translated it to a “realist” cinema grammar. Eisenstein as well as Vertov’s formalist cinema had a continuation in documentary films from Canada, France, the UK and the USA with different translations of Kino-Pravda. But in general this movement is known as Cinema Vérité after one of the general figures of “true” cinema, Jean Rouch, made the film *Chronical of a Summer* (1961). In this film, he worked with the innovative DOP Michel Brault, who was the first to carry a camera by hand. Before this, it was impossible to do so because of the technical difficulties of the camera size, weight and electric requirements. In the documentary *Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment* (1999), Brault describes truth in cinema in retrospect as; “Truth is something unattainable. You can’t claim to write truth with a camera. What you can do is reveal something to your viewers that make them discover their own truth.”¹

Neo-Colonial Abuse of Kino-Pravda

Before this technical innovation, Rouch already made Kino-Eye inspired documentaries in the African continent. These films are known for their decolonial and new way of looking at African cultures. For instance in *Les Maîtres Fous* (1955) which is about the Hauka movement originally from formal French African colonies. In this case it is set in Ghana (independent

1

Peter Wintonick *Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment* (Canada, National Film Board of Canada: 1999)

from the UK only since 1957). In this movement, native Ghanaians mimic and mock their white colonial oppressors. Not in despair to become like their oppressor, but rather as a parody and appropriation that was meant as a form of decolonial resistance. The film was described by Rouch and many white anthropologist as:

open dissidence' and a "total refusal of the system put in place by the French?". Rouch's cinematic reproduction of this practice of subversive mimicry was, in Taussig's analysis, doubly subversive-and so threatening to colonial authority that the film was banned by the British government.

However, as cited in Ferguson's book according to anthropologist Fritz Kramer, there was a different version of the story on the reason for this ban:

when the film was shown in Paris in 1954 it was widely criticized. "Black students in the audience accused Rouch of reinforcing stereotypes of 'savagery,' and the film was banned throughout Britain's African colonies because of its 'inflammatory' content"²

This phenomenon of alternative truth designed by a western perspective sounds familiar. In *The Theater of Truth* William Eggington explains this by talking about the abstract, painterly styles, trompe l'oeil and anamorphosis of the historical Baroque art.

By way of these techniques, along with other versions of what José Antonio Maravall designated as the trope of incompleteness (Maravall, *Culture* 212), the recipient is drawn in by a promise of fulfillment beyond the surface, his or her desire ignited by an illusory depth, always just beyond grasp. It is this strategy that accounts for Maravall's seemingly exaggerated claim that the Baroque corresponds to an enormous apparatus of propaganda deployed by an alliance of entrenched interests in early modern Europe and the colonial world, dedicated to entrancing the minds of a newly mobile populace with the promise of a spiritual fulfillment to be had in another life for the small price of identifying with the interests of powerful elites in this one.³

The incorruptible truth of the world that lays behind quick and misleading appearances in the theater hall, makes it intriguing enough to stay relevant and even become pop culture. Especially because the "Baroque itself

2 James G. Ferguson *Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the "New World Society"* (Irvine California, Wiley: 2002) p.554-557

3 William Eggington *The Theater Of Truth, the ideology of (neo)baroque aesthetics* (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press: 2010) p.3

makes a theater out of truth, that is constantly demonstrating that truth can only ever be an effect of the appearances from which we try to free it."⁴ The same counts for cinema. We can never get to the essence of reality because the machinery we use to look at the essence of reality transforms the reality as you look at it.⁵ Vertov was already aware of this and played with it. He saw this aesthetic dramatic manipulation through the mechanical revolution of the camera as "the opium of the people."⁶

Decolonial Use of Kino-Pravda

My favorite Cinema Vérité director William Greaves from the USA was a star in his own country as a formal actor. But he refused to play what he would call "Uncle Tom" characters: racist caricatures that were meant to be funny and dehumanizing. So he decided to move to the National film board in Canada where he could learn to become a news-reel director. Eventually he became chief editor of "Candid Eye" (Canadian Vérité movement), and used his knowledge of theater drama to look for a truth in cinema.

Once the sixties civil rights movement was manifesting in the US, he decided to return. As a director he had a mission to use the Cinema Vérité as a tool to contribute to the movement. In a way, his goal was to bridge the human conscience and convince people of his political engagement. Something that he, as a Black American filmmaker, would not have been able to do at that time before moving to Canada. After he became a professional director abroad, he was accepted as such in his own country as well.

His film *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One (1968)* is one of the best examples of activist meta propaganda art. In the film, Greaves is seen as the director of the film and at the same time as the filmer from a behind-the-scenes/second unit perspective while simultaneously speaking to the behind-the-scenes camera. This is often visualized in what I call an edit room perspective: a split screen of all 3 perspectives. Basically, the plot of the film and the camera are instinctively directed by the current points of action during the process. This is especially the case if that action is present in the crew. Greaves would even include controversial dialogue in the scene that they were shooting to reveal conflicts and interesting dynamics behind the scenes. The first meta unit crew for instance, acts like they know much more about what kind of film they are directing than Greaves himself. In fact they act like he is stupid. But in reality, Greaves is actually making

4 William Egginton *The Theater Of Truth, the ideology of (neo)baroque aesthetics* (Stanford, California , Stanford University Press: 2010) P.2

5 Werner Heisenberg "Physics and Phylosophy: The Revolution Of Modern Science"

6 Dziga Vertov *Kino-Eye The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (US, The Regents of the University of California 1984) P.71

a film about them, and their rigid idea of how things work, especially in context where they have a different heritage and appearance from him. The crew even shot a scene without Greaves knowing to talk about the flaws of his role in the filmmaking-process. They even condemn him for acting differently when the camera is running compared to when it is off. Finally they confront Greaves with his lack of confidence in his capability to direct the film they are making.⁷

The film exposes the medium's subjective artificiality by playing an abnormal role in the hierarchical theater of cinema. This way, we start to question our own truth and we see the influence a film can have on us within minutes. How theatrically am I acting myself in life, or rather how truly do I behave? Like for instance how the actor in one of the scenes in the film speaks in a super homophobic way during a discussion about what kind of gay man he is supposed to play.

The film is not so well known, but to me it is powerful in a way that is similar to Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) and Les Blanc's *Burden Of Dreams* (1982), if they had been merged together to create an effect of mise-en-abîme. These films can't be seen apart from each-other. They are only great together. I think that Herzog and Blanc were aware of this as well. The project as a whole is basically about the neo-colonial role Herzog himself is taking on in this project. He is like a Baroque Jesuit missionary. Mimicking Fitzcarraldo's conviction of the superiority of Baroque opera.

Today naturalist cinema forms like Cinema Vérité are not truly convincing anymore. Although cinema, like any other art and design output, is subject to trends and the role of generations and their historical knowledge. Cinema Verité is not convincing also partly because they have exposed themselves. They are not convincing anymore since the political and cultural discourse has changed. We can look at Baroque to form a new convincing propaganda by appropriating the current political and cultural discourses/fashions and mix it with the meta formalist way of cinema to make the viewer aware of their role within this culture or politics.

Appropriation of a Mass-Discourse

In the beginning of this year 2023, the mayor of Amsterdam quoted the Dutch-Armenian hip hop musician RBJan from the northern suburb of Amsterdam in a speech to convince that she is there for the suburbs (read: lower class, marginalized people) rather than for the center. Quoting:

I come from piss-smelling stairwells and cockroaches. Watching out no one comes to take away your Air-Max, from about six years of ge constantly on my guard. From a one-parent-family constantly full of anger. Never had enough money for the swimming pool, so we sneaked in, never had enough money for what the rest had, so we stole. A dad simply fucked, hard to understand for a child.⁸

A smart move to quote a local icon with one of the biggest street credibility of the country. However, it is people like RB that this municipality is suppressing the most. The situation that he describes in his verse is one created by the political system that the Mayor, Femke Halsema, works in. We could ask ourselves whether she honestly means what she says, even though to be the head of the local political system doesn't equal absolute power in the whole country. However, her municipality has not shown any radical different policies to solve the problem RB describes. The incorporation of this quote in her New Year speech is a smart form of political propaganda. History can be empowering if you understand and reuse it well. And there are many in power who understand this. It is common that political and other powerful individuals and institutions adapt their discourse according to marginalized cultures to maintain relevance.

In Jean Renoir's homage to the origin of his Baroque theatrical cinema, *The Golden Coach* (1953), Renoir's usual themes of art and nature, acting and reality, are represented by two mirrors that reflect each other's images, making it difficult to distinguish where one ends and the other begins.⁹ The film is presented from our perspective as spectators, and the front curtain of a theater opens. We follow the historical Baroque propaganda machine of the Spanish colonization of Peru. An Italian street theater troupe gets shipped to Peru to perform for the Spanish royals and Peruvian natives. At first, the Royals hate the Commedia De'Il Arte since it does not match their decadent lifestyle. But since the king is bored and dreams of living a marginalized life, he ends up loving the play and falls in love with the leading actress of the play, Anna Magnani. Once it appears to be a great success, the king sees an opportunity for indoctrination and he goes for it. In the story, Magnani flirts with three powerful men of the city, a viceroyalty, the major (Felipe) and a local toreador hero (Ramone), whom the people love for his spectacular fighting. Through her (played) romantic advances and the success of their show, she manages to get a big house for the troupe and a super expensive golden coach that uplifts their social class. Despite their social uplift she decides to donate the coach to the Catholic church.

8 Ik kom van naar pisstinkende trappenhallen en kakkerlaken. Uitkijken dan niemand je airmax komt af pakken, vanaf een jaar of zes constant op mn hoede. Uit een één ouder gezin constant vol woede. Hadden nooit geld voor het zwembad, dus we glipte. Hadden nooit geld voor wat de rest wel had, dus we pikte. Een vader gewoonweg naar de klote, moeilijk te begrijpen voor een kind.

9 David Robb, *Des O'Rawe Clowns, Fools and Picaros* (Rodopi: 2007 P.145)

The film ends with a statement of stock character Pantalone stating that Magnani misses the lovers of the play Felipe and Ramone, but now that the play is finished they are only part of the audience. She is suggesting a relation between the spectators of the play through self-reflection as they both appear in the crowd and on stage. If I reflect this to my own position in the society I live in, living in the city of mayor Halsema, I do not want to be the street theater troupe that gains a certain kind of success by working for the powerful only to later lose it again, so to speak, to an even more powerful system/ideology (or rather lack of ideology) that rules our society: capitalist realism.

Counter Appropriation of a Mass-Discours

On the other hand this cycle of appropriation and mimicking of discourses can be used by marginalized groups themselves. Mimicry of the oppressor by the oppressed is a common coping mechanism to deal with marginalization. Not every individual chooses this approach, however I see it as a natural reaction similar to hiding. Like how creatures freeze or camouflage in order to not get eaten. In the historical Baroque we have learned how artists used the artistic fashion of theatrical naturalism of the time to lift themselves to a higher class. Currently, the discourse of power has changed from naturalism to something more action driven, and in a western scenery.

The majority of the current big blockbuster films from Hollywood are hyper-tempo, genre franchises and copy-paste productions like *Fast and the Furious* or *Bourne*. An example of early genre appropriation for political engagement is Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil (1964)*. In this western film, he mimics the American genre to tell an outlaw story about a marginalized native land worker in the countryside. When his boss tries to cheat on his payment, the main character decides to kill him to join a violent anti-government outlaw group that is out to kill authorities. The film is stylistically closer to a spaghetti western than a John Ford one and is not so much a meta Baroque film. It does however use violence, western scenery, and characteristics of the characters from spaghetti westerns to make the film attractive to a wider audience. Therefore, it manages to

show a decolonial narrative to an audience unfamiliar with this perspective. A good example of a director who manages to do the same with blockbuster production value is American director Jordan Peele. Peele, much like William Greaves, got famous for being an actor/writer in his iconic comedy sketch series *Key & Peele*, created together with Keegan-Michael Key, in which they held a mirror to the U.S. about topics like masculinity and racial stereotypes. But it is since Peele directed *Get Out* (2017) that he is THE best example of activist propaganda for me.

When I first saw Peele's second film, *Us* (2019), I was kind of unimpressed by it. To me it didn't have the same social relevance and statements as *Get Out* did. It appeared to be just a horror film from an Black American perspective (which is empowering in and of itself, of course). However, when I started thinking about it over the years and eventually rewatched it for my research, I came to realize that this film had actually pulled the cinematic Baroque propaganda trick on me. I barely know the deep layers of the Black American discourse, and I certainly didn't know it back then. Especially after the BLM movement and the years following, I started to read more about what it means to be a person of color in the U.S. and in Europe. So as I started to rewatch the film with more knowledge of the discourse, I began to see more layers in the film than I had seen before.

The film starts with a commercial of the Hands Across America program. This was an actual campaign by Ronald Regan preaching a social resistance of unity by holding hands. A typical, liberal charity program to make it seem like privileged Americans care about lower classes. In my opinion, charity as a rightwing solution to poverty is an inherently dishonest tactic. It is there to maintain the class differences and at the same time works like a propaganda machine to make people look and feel good about themselves. In *Us*, the Hands Across America program is a symbol of this disingenuous program of liberality that Americans believe Unite their States. And we should not forget that Reagan's program existed in the shadows of the apartheid program from this same president called "the war on drugs". As told in the film *13th* (2016), we see the results of the 13th amendment as a masked continuation of apartheid in the US turning scandalous amounts of Black Americans from enslaved to tethered "criminals" by redlining neighborhoods. Putting gun-, drug-, and liquor stores on every corner of a suburban block. And at the same time denying the existence of people that have been placed there by the privatized real estate system.

The title of the film, "*Us*", can be interpreted in a couple of ways. It might express the perspective of the film as told by the marginalized twins that live in the underground suburb. But at the same time, it might be self referential to the viewers: "Us" of the US, United States, and their role in this system that the film is critiquing. A reflection of "ourselves", to fellow

Americans through the metaphor of the mirror house.

Now, I understand, Us is primarily made for people that do know how to decode this discourse. This Baroque approach of a meta discourse, in the form of a popular genre blockbuster with its catchy elements of violence and scares. The good thing about this approach is that it reaches a super wide audience including people in power. But meanwhile it addresses some strong unpopular political opinions about these powers. However they are expressed both in a metaphorical and an emotional way. I believe that in this cinematic Trojan horse approach, which I would call activist, there is an actual opportunity to change people's opinions.

Meta Reflection Through Counter Appropriation of a Mass-Discourse

In Peele's third film, *Nope* (2022), we follow the story of OJ and Em, who are descendants of the first person in a motion picture: a black man on a horse (Eadweard Muybridge *Animal Locomotion* (1887)). They try to earn their place back in the film industry by recording a spectacle of an alien entity on their land. Their dad dies due to a 50c coin mystically falling from the sky and piercing a hole through his brain. Peele shows this "Jefferson Nickel" with the words engraved: "In God we trust - Liberty 1979". Ironically a few minutes prior the film started with the phrase from bible book *Nahum 3:6* "I will cast abominable filth at you, make you vile, and make you a spectacle."

Nope is a meta level commentary on our society's addiction to spectating others and the capitalist system that feeds it. In this case the knights of the Hollywood celebrity-scene in particular. Quite literally reflecting on us by the way we get introduced to Eadweard Muybridge's first motion picture through the eyes of the alien. The film is speaking to us in Baroque self-reflection as viewers since this is a blockbuster Hollywood production. No wonder the protagonist is called OJ: These initials can't be named without thinking of OJ Simpson, who was at the heart of one of the biggest celebrity spectacles in the history of the US. Throughout the film there are characters (animals) that have to deal with the humiliating experience of being used for amusement. For all of these characters, the way to deal with them is to

not look them in the eye. However they also respond aggressively if they are confronted with themselves. The alien reacts to reflective items such as the fake horse's eyes, OJ's hoodie, and the TMZ camera man who has a mirror helmet that reminds of the VFX ball that the horse freaks out from on the film-set. Peele is telling us about both sides of the spectacular industry. In *Capitalist Realism* Mark fisher writes about the role of spectatorship in TV reality with Kurt Cobain as an example.

Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it is a cliché. The impasse that paralyzed Cobain is precisely the one that Jameson described: like postmodern culture in general, Cobain found himself in 'a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, [where] all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum'. Here, even success meant failure, since to succeed would only mean that you were the new meat on which the system could feed.¹⁰

Jupe calls the aliens "the Viewers" since they watch humans, similarly to how we act as spectators to celebrity spectacles. Destroying people's lives like how the alien does to its spectators.

New Mediums And Their Lack Of Persuasion

In the past years there have been responses to life as a spectator of the cynical, nihilism of reality TV. For instance *The Eric Andre Show* and *Ziwe* appropriate the codes and style of talk show reality TV in the form of smart political pranks that can be surface-level consumed for their humor and absurdity. But at the same time, they process the hectic internet culture of

celebrity identity politics and its comparison to others through social media. More than anything, the internet has had a major impact on the development of political discourses through social-media and forums. Through these platforms there have been inventions of hyper-rapid mediums and they all have their different styles and discourses. #corecore, for instance, the meta self critical style (or in internet terms 'core') "that makes a "core" out of the collective consciousness of all "cores."¹¹ An emotional reflection on the nihilism that addictive mediums like TikTok produce. Although most of those styles and discourse are rooted in classic mediums such as cinema, slapstick, (reality) TV or satire, I think these current discourse have much more impact than what classical propaganda used to have.

A lot of the films that we have discussed so far have been about filmmaking itself. That is very entertaining for me, for the simple reason that I can relate to the process. We are at a point in time though, where in fact almost everyone is a filmmaker. Not even just a Cinema Vérité one with a rough handheld phone camera. Nowadays, there are quick and easy manipulations under our digitized finger tips. And since we are all condemned to an addiction of spectatorship, we have more supplies to "choose" from than ever. These two elements, accelerated by the instant global connection, give the power of propaganda to the hands of approximately two-thirds of the world population.¹² This population is formally known as the audience. As a result, the criteria for conviction of truth became concerned with who can prove the truth. But what if every possible truth is constantly manipulated and gate-kept by the self-learning entities through which we consume and create them?¹³ Perhaps we are left with no other choice than to metaphorically expose their power in an appropriation of their own medium. So, we can watch "its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure" while we have a discourse about what is really important.¹⁴

11 Know Your Meme site (Seattle, Literally Media Ltd), article on #corecore by associate editor Owen Carry, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/cultures/corecore> (accessed 7 march 2023)

12 ITU Press Release 2022 Internet use estimates (Geneva, International Telecommunication Union: 16 September 2022) <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/PR-2022-09-16-Internet-surge-slows.aspx>

13 **Hans Pool Bellingcat - Truth in a Post-Truth World (Amsterdam, Submarine: 2018)**

14 Walter Benjamin, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2008) P. 42



Figure 63. Jean Rouge *Chronical of a Summer* (France, Criterion: 1961)
 Film-still - First on site hand-held camera perspective by Michel Brault



Figure 64. Jean Rouge *Les Maîtres Fous* (France, Les Films du Jeudi: 1955)
 Film-still - So-called mimicry of a colonial oppressor



Figure 65. William Greaves *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (United States, Criterion: 1968)
 Film-still - A documentary about a documentary about a fiction film



Figure 66. William Greaves *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (United States, Criterion: 1968)
 Film-still - Three meta perspectives in split screen



Figure 67. William Greaves *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (United States, Criterion: 1968)
Film-still - Greaves's crew turning against him in the film



Figure 68. William Greaves *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (United States, Criterion: 1968)
Film-still - Three meta perspectives in split screen



Figure 69. Werner Herzog *Fitzcarraldo* (Germany, Filmverlag der Autoren: 1982)
Film-still - Sinking ship scene



Figure 70. Les Blanc *Burden Of Dreams* (United States, Flower Films: 1982)
Film-still - Behind the scenes of Fitzcarraldo: a sinking ship



Figure 71. Werner Herzog *Fitzcarraldo* (Germany, Filmverlag der Autoren: 1982)
Film-still - Baroque theater as propaganda in colonie Peru



Figure 72. Jean Renoir *The Golden Coach* (France, Panaria Films: 1953)
Film-still - Meta conclusion in the end



Figure 73. Jean Renoir *The Golden Coach* (France, Panaria Films: 1953)
Film-still - Meta conclusion in the end



Figure 74. Jean Renoir *The Golden Coach* (France, Panaria Films: 1953)
Film-still - Baroque street-theater as propaganda in colonie Peru

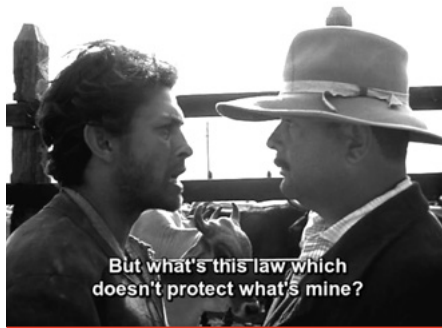


Figure 75. Glauber Rocha *Black God, White Devil* (Brazil, Entertainment One Films: 1964)
Film-still - Oppression of a farmer in Brazil



Figure 76. Glauber Rocha *Black God, White Devil* (Brazil, Entertainment One Films: 1964)
Film-still - A decolonial act



Figure 77. Jordan Peele *Us* (United States, Universal Pictures: 2019)
Film-still - Reproduction of liberal advertisement



Figure 78. Jordan Peele *Us* (United States, Universal Pictures: 2019)
Film-still - Horror style self reflection scene



Figure 79. Jordan Peele *Nope* (United States, Universal Pictures: 2022)
Film-still - TMZ reporter that reflects ourselves



Figure 80. Jordan Peele *Nope* (United States, Universal Pictures: 2022)
Film-still - VFX HDRI sphere that reflects ourselves



Figure 81. Jordan Peele *Nope* (United States, Universal Pictures: 2022)
Film-still - OJ shown as spectator



Figure 82. Jordan Peele *Nope* (United States, Universal Pictures: 2022)
Film-still - Oldfashioned photography techniques manages to capture the alien, Jean Jacket



Figure 83. Eric Andre *The Eric Andre Show Season 2* (United States, Adult Swim: 2012)
Film-still - Eric Andre's parody of a talkshow set



Figure 84. Eric Andre *The Eric Andre Show Season 2* (United States, Adult Swim: 2012)
Film-still - Eric Andre's hyper deconstruction of the American talkshow



Figure 85. Ziwe Fumudoh Ziwe Season 2 (United States, Showtime: 2022)
Film-still - Ziwe confronts Charlamane tha God with his misgyne

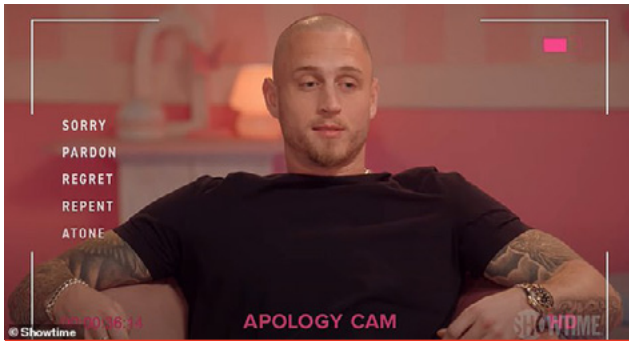


Figure 86. Ziwe Fumudoh Ziwe Season 2 (United States, Showtime: 2022)
Film-still - Ziwe puts Chet Hanks in a position to apologize

Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to trace back the post-modern meta propaganda to its origin via the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries historical Baroque. By providing a linear history, it has sketched the overarching meta folds of Baroque propaganda through the developed mediums until the arrival of online forums and social media. I tried to mirror its historical developments along with those of cinema. We have gone through the ever-returning struggle with the artificiality of conviction through realist effects, from naturalistic recreation in paintings, architecture and projection, to photography and eventually to Dziga Vertov and Jean Rouge. Which Kristin Thompson analyzes as: "in any given historical period, it consists of a new set of conventions that appear to depart from standard norms specifically by appealing to motivation that can be considered realistic."¹ After the Baroque invention of conscious spectatorship through theater, the meta perception was born and provided a solution for its problem of thought. William Egginton describes it "as a problem concerning the separation between the space of representation and the space of spectatorship."² Once the everyday people found out about this complex folding of discourses it revealed itself as an activist Trojan horse.

Nowadays, there are propaganda forms for individual motives of companies or governments, not even specifically for the system itself like how it used to be the case for communism and fascism.³ Although this is precisely what I have been looking for in my research. In the historical Baroque there was a certain unity in fundamental products that can be considered designed art, such as architecture or fashion. To perceive art that is not primarily made to be used in everyday life in a convincing way we need to be concentrated and pay attention. Unlike a film, Walter Benjamin states, architectural art is received in two modes: by "use and perception. Or better, tactilely and optically." Benjamin gives the example of how nazi Germany

1 Kristin Thompson *Breaking the Glass of Armor Neoformalist Film Analysis* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press: 1988) P.244

2 William Egginton *The Theater of Truth, The Ideology of (Neo)baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford, Stanford University Press: 2010) P.11

3 Mark Fisher *Capitalist Realism Is There No Alternative?* (United Kingdom, Zero Books: 2009) P. 19

used this gradual mastering of the masses by use, to indoctrinate and normalize the “attractiveness of war” and their anti-Semitic, imperial ideologies. The regular German civilians of that time accepted the art and design of the third Reich for distraction and functionality without questioning the content.

Thanks to liberal capitalism and the Enlightenment, this unity in design is not present anymore. However, I would argue that currently, distraction is one of the primal needs in the west. Everyone in this society uses distraction to maintain joy in their existence. In fact we are addicted to it.

The masses are criticized for seeking distraction [Zerstreuung] in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration. In the case of the masses, the artwork is seen as a means of entertainment; in the case of the art lover, it is considered an object of devotion to the spectator.⁴

Lets put this in perspective with the current state of art consumption. Everyone is constantly consuming visual and audible art. The enjoyment of distraction that art can provide makes it possible to learn how to perceive it differently. In a similar way of how use provides a different level of perception. Benjamin states “Wherever it is able to mobilize the masses, art will tackle the most difficult and most important tasks.” On the other side this convincingly explains the danger of this perception of art and design as propaganda. We have learned that it is stupid to deny and reject this way of perceiving popular art. Sadly I still see this happening too much in progressive leftist politics, and for instance extreme populist politicians provide from that.⁵ It is of great importance to prevent a similar tactic that Renoir used for *Rules of the Game*. To make art with activist purposes one should not focus too much on what is considered good in the art-world. Rather, we should focus on the general discourse and reading of popular artworks, while deploying a second layer of discourse that speaks specifically to the people that you want to reach. It is this second layer in a work, as like

4 [Walter Benjamin, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* \(London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2008\) P. 39](#)

5 [Walter Benjamin, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* \(London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2008\) P. 19/42](#)

an anamorphosis, to be the trojan horse of the oppressed you are speaking about. We have no choice but to keep following the popular post-modern cultures and use them to reveal our role in the game over and over again until people are at some point done with all the nihilistic participation as spectators. Similarly to how Amsterdammers are done with playing the role of participating citizens to validate the decision of the municipality. Even if their opinions are as far apart as Amsterdam and Wellington.

Like we have seen in Jordan Peele's films, the success you can get by appropriating Pop-culture discourses such as Sitcom's, reality TV, MTV, Youtubers or TikTok stars, etc, we have to expose the artificiality of the new pop mediums by appropriating its popularity of the western genre: kung fu and sci-fi, horror and thrillers, reality-tv and comic (street)-theater to sneakily expose neo-colonial power abuse, to normalize gender transition, to convince Black American citizens of the insincerity of capitalist liberal charity programs, to reveal of the artificiality of art that appears to be real, to sneakily expose aristocratic privilege and ignite a fire of a potential revolutionary change.

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