

The CBC's Love, Hate, and Propaganda

Six-Part Series on World War II Propaganda

A DVD Review by

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Love, Hate & Propaganda: WWII For a New Generation

CBC Television and Radio-Canada, the Hour's George Stroumboulopoulos, 2010.
English and French, Colour and Black & White, Six-Part Series.
Product ID: ETD0C00161.

Part 1 -- The 1930s: The Strong Men

Written, Produced and Directed by Ryszard Hunka.

Produced by Wayne Chong.

Duration: 42 m. 30 s.

Product ID: Y8R-09-14.

Part 2 -- 1939/1940: Selling War

Written, Produced and Directed by Susan Teskey.

Produced by Lynne Chichakian.

Duration: 43 m. 00 s.

Product ID: Y8R-09-15.

Part 3 -- 1941: Meet the Enemy

Directed by Lucie Gagnon and Mireille Ledoux.

Written and Produced by Mireille Ledoux and Raymond Saint-Pierre.

Duration: 42 m. 30 s.

Product ID: Y8R-09-16.

Part 4 -- 1942/1943: Truth and Total War

Directed by Léon Laflamme.

Written and Produced by Claude Berrardelli and Léon Laflamme.

Duration: 42 m. 30 s.

Product ID: Y8R-09-17.

Part 5 -- 1944/1945: Hiding the Horrors

Written, Produced and Directed by Julian Sher.

Produced by Lisa Ellenwood.

Duration: 42 m. 00 s.
Product ID: Y8R-09-18.

Part 6 -- 1945: Changing the Story

Directed by Jo-Ann Demers.

Written and Produced by Jo-Ann Demers and Achille Michaud.

Duration: 44 m. 00 s.
Product ID: Y8R-09-19.

In March and April 2010 CBC broadcast a six-part documentary special program “Love, Hate & Propaganda” with an off-screen subtitle, “World War II for a New Generation” (the on-screen spoken tag line, repeated to begin each episode, was “70 years later: Why World War II matters”). The website www.cbc.ca/lovehatepropaganda further explains, “This primer on the art of mass persuasion is aimed directly at a media-savvy generation”. In other words, this was to be a history lesson on World War II, pointed toward younger viewers through a focus on how governments during that brutal era used visual and audio communication to influence their citizens’ belief systems and control and mobilize their actions—with any direct relevance to present-day modes of persuasion left to the spectator to intuit. A French language version, “Amour, Haine & Propagande”, aired on Radio-Canada during April-June and both language versions again were broadcast in fall 2010.

First, some vital statistics: Each episode runs approximately 43 minutes, for a series total of around four hours, 20 minutes. The English version (screened for this review) is narrated on camera and through voiceover by CBC television personality George Stroumboulopoulos, also known, to Canadian media, as Strombo. Every episode is distinct in that no producer, writer, director, or editor worked on more than one, although stylistic and textual consistency prevails. Listed as historical advisors for the entire series are British academics Aristotle Kallis and David Welch, French scholar Fabrice d’Almeida, all of whom have published extensively on World War II and propaganda, and David Earhart, a Vancouver writer on Japan and the Pacific War. Nearly three-dozen specialists from eight countries, by my count, appear on camera as talking heads in the English version; a largely different cast of experts speaks on the French edition, which is narrated by Catherine Mercier.

This ambitious undertaking, as may be seen, has at least two large purposes. A primary goal is to recount the origins, conduct, and outcome of World War II for an audience presumed to be unfamiliar with the war’s basic facts, which are, even with more than four hours of screen time, necessarily truncated. Italy, for example, features in the first episode recounting the rise of Fascism and Mussolini’s appeal, then almost completely disappears as a protagonist or theatre of war; China likewise appears early as Japan’s victim, then drops away; Australia and New Zealand’s roles go unmentioned.

Given the program’s fundamental requirement of narrating primary details of the war’s course, propaganda becomes more of a lens through which to view events and battles than a subject for extensive definition and analysis. It is not until the fifth episode that the viewer comes to know that the series title derives from remarks by John Grierson, the British producer and director of documentary films and founding Commissioner of Canada’s National Film Board, and to entertain the possibility that propaganda, as Grierson believed, could have positive as well as negative connotations.

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The first episode, “The Strongmen”, centres on the growth of fascism, or its militarist equivalent, in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan, beginning in the early post-World War I years. Hitler is described as a figure who initially withheld images of himself, to retain an aura of mystery, and then built a myth around himself through carefully posed photographs published in a series of books by photographer Heinrich Hoffman. After the Nazi seizure of power came Leni Riefenstahl and the film *Triumph des Willens*, and then the campaign against Jews orchestrated through radio broadcasts, the anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer*, illustrated books for children, and fiction and documentary films. Joseph Goebbels takes command of these efforts as Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Goebbels, according to the program, considered the mass of people to be stupid, easily manipulated, indeed actively wishing to be bamboozled.

One of several possibilities for exploration in greater depth that the program foregoes, in its swift survey of countries, leaders, policies, and aggressions, is the idea of mass, as in the masses and mass media. Both connotations of the word pervaded concepts of public behaviour and communication in the mid-twentieth century, but now have largely dropped out of usage in an era of individualism and niche media. The “media-savvy generation” might have usefully considered a more articulated comparison between its own atomized experience and an earlier time when mass politics played to huge crowds and mass media to huge audiences, while governments regimented their populations away from individual identity toward conformity with the mass.

Instead, the series seeks to appeal to media-savvy youth through what one might call hip stylistics. The editing pace throughout all the episodes is swift and hectic, enhancing archival footage and still images with digital special effects involving superimpositions (for example, placing photographed faces on buildings or walls) and colour manipulations, colouring part of an image (i.e., a red flag in a black-and-white shot) or gradually colorizing a black-and-white sequence (or vice versa) as it plays on screen. While these techniques are flashy and eye-catching, here again it seems to me that the program’s makers miss a bet. While international movie industries developed colour technologies in the 1930s, colour film stock also became available to newsreel cameramen and amateur moviemakers. Some of the colour footage in the series clearly appears to be rare original colour rather than present-day digital colorization, but it is sometimes difficult to tell for certain, and there’s no discussion of colour in the narration. It would have been of interest to consider the impact of colour for propaganda, and why propagandists chose to use colour, or rejected it in favour of black-and-white, in their image productions.

The second episode, “Selling the War”, centres on the outbreak and expansion of war in 1939-40. It argues that the German people were not “keen to fight” and that Goebbels’ propaganda machine developed strategies to overcome this reluctance. One such was relentlessly to claim in newspapers and newsreels that Poland was the aggressor and was attacking Germany, the opposite of actual circumstances. An interesting assertion in this segment is that the aim of this propaganda was not so much to foment enthusiasm or assent—to create “true believers”—as it was to discourage dissent, to keep people in line, to persuade them, so to speak, to tune out (leading perhaps to the post-war “I didn’t know” excuse). One might wish to compare this tactic to U.S. and British government propaganda prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which emphasized the (non-existent) danger of imminent attack as justification, and advised citizens, in the U.S. at least, that their patriotic duty was not to alter their lives one bit, just keep on shopping.

Emerging in the second episode is a major theme that will carry through the remainder of the series: The Nazis’ policies of systematic murder, mainly but not only of Jews, on racial and

eugenic grounds. The initial focus is on what has been seen as a trial run for the Holocaust, the killing of mentally ill and disabled Germans by injection and by preliminary versions of the gas chambers, portable gassing wagons. What becomes astonishingly clear—a further leitmotif of the series—is the ubiquity of cameras recording as motion pictures and still images gruesome scenes of victims and killing operations. The series notes without deeply interrogating this apparently obsessive desire minutely to record—it was not just a German quirk, the same was true, for example, of the U.S. government's extensive visual documentation of the rounding up and internment of Japanese-Americans later in the war. Were they confident that this footage could be edited and narrated so as to function as effective propaganda? Was there a kind of magical thinking about the value of the visual record (for history, for science, for honour and medals)?

Canada's role in the war enters the story with the third episode, "Meet the Enemy", which begins with the Battle of Britain and reports that one hundred thousand Canadian soldiers participated in the war. This segment further highlights the filmmakers' strategy of leavening the larger geopolitical picture with personal stories and quotations culled from letters and diaries, read as voiceover by actors using appropriate accents, German, Russian, Japanese, or French as the real-life character warrants. Thus we learn of Yvonne Greene, from Montreal, who went to London, became a spotter, and died in the Blitz. The role of women's war effort is emphasized in this segment, in Russia, with an account of a famous female sniper, and on the Canadian home front, where women were recruited to work in war industries and Veronica Foster became their symbol as Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl.

Then Canada's role in the war becomes controversial in the fourth episode, "Truth and Total War". The focus is on the Allied landing at Dieppe on August 14, 1942, in which more than 80 per cent of the attack force was Canadian. Was it a propaganda effort to assuage public opinion, impatient for action against the European enemy? Was it an experiment, so to speak, to gain experience for a future major invasion? Was it simply badly planned, managed, and led by the British in command? After nine hours of battle, 900 Canadians were dead, 2,000 taken prisoner, and the total number of Canadian casualties amounted to two-thirds of its force. How were these devastating losses communicated to the Canadian people? According to the program, by lies and deception. Newspaper headlines, wittingly or unwittingly, blared the official version that the raid was a success. Canadian Press reporter Ross Munro, who was at Dieppe and thus knew the facts, nevertheless used his eyewitness credentials on a cross-country lecture tour to bolster the government line. Of this episode the program asks rhetorically, "Can we be expected to know the truth and act on it?" It is big question, and the series is not prepared to give an answer. Perhaps we might have been offered some learned speculation on how Canadians might have acted had they known the truth. Is truth an absolute, or do lies in this instance contribute to a greater truth? The makers of documentary films, which, it is no secret to say, often utilize manipulations and fabrications to enhance their effectiveness, ought to have views on this subject.

Episode five, "Hiding the Horrors", does turn attention to Canadian documentary filmmaking. On the home front, the establishment of the National Film Board in 1939 was closely linked to the war effort, and Grierson, its head, is described in the film as the greatest propagandist of the war on the Allied side, who "wanted to beat Goebbels at his own game". The NFB employed eight hundred staff and produced five hundred films over the six years of the war, highlighted by the "Canada Carries On" series. On the battlefield, hundreds of Canadian reporters, photographers, and cameramen were deployed by the time of D-Day, and six members

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of the Canadian Film Unit were killed during combat operations, with eighteen others wounded. On one occasion, the program reports, German soldiers surrendered to a cameraman.

The theme of “Hiding the Horrors” applies to Canadian combat cameramen, in the program’s terms, by their playing down the extent of civilian casualties in the Allied advance after D-Day. But other segments of the fifth episode are much more pertinent to the subject of hiding horrors. Another sequence deals with covering up the Holocaust, most specifically with reference to the Nazis’ effort to clean up and make attractive the Terezin-Theresienstadt concentration camp in the former Czechoslovakia prior to a 1944 inspection by the International Red Cross. The program shows film of children at a playground and an orchestra performing, among other scenes, but it might have been much more forthcoming in describing the provenance of this footage. It was shot by Jewish filmmakers on Nazi orders and was planned as a (fake) documentary on Jewish resettlement; it was never completed, although twenty minutes of footage survive. Not so the filmmakers, who were gassed at Auschwitz. A third sequence deals with the racial hatred fomented against the Japanese people in the U.S., which undergirded scorched earth military tactics like the March 1945 firebombing of Tokyo.

The final episode, “Changing the Story”, wraps up with various aspects of the Allied victory: In France, retribution against a Vichy propagandist; in Germany, Goebbels’ mad effort to produce a historical epic film in colour, *Kolberg*, requiring troops to be diverted from the front to perform in battle scenes; the fall of Berlin to Soviet troops, filmed by thirty cameramen whose work went into a feature length documentary; the discovery of concentration camps and the seizure of German documentary footage—that compelling urge to record even the worst atrocities, noted earlier—that was screened as evidence at the Nuremberg trial of Nazi leaders. “All these years later”, Strombo signs off, “are we still living in a time of love, hate, and propaganda?”—unfortunately a rather lame coda for which the series offers the viewer no assistance to assess.

An evaluation of “Love, Hate & Propaganda” must necessarily be mixed. Kudos to CBC for the very fact of its existence, for the successful effort to create a substantial multi-part historical documentary for a general television audience, in a time when similar non-fiction productions are relegated to specialized cable channels. And it appears that, having chosen to make the series, CBC executives adequately financed searches of worldwide archives and recruitment of international experts to give the work an exemplary variety and breadth of images and voices. However, I question whether the stylistic presentation, as described earlier, needed to be quite so “sexed-up” (to borrow a present-day term of propaganda art) with special effects that are more commonly used in television advertising. Is superimposing the face of a murdered child on a doorway more effective for “media-savvy” viewers than simply showing the face?

One final comparison might point to the program’s value. A 2010 documentary, *A Film Unfinished*, by an Israeli director, attempts on a smaller scale something similar to “Love, Hate & Propaganda”. It recounts the Nazi filming of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942 for a propaganda work, never completed, purporting to show Jewish degradation and class conflict. Some footage was recovered after the war, and it was accorded “truth” value, that is, it was assumed to illustrate actual conditions in the ghetto. But the point of *A Film Unfinished* is that new visual material has come to light showing Nazi filmmakers at work behind the scenes, making clear that this was propaganda, its images shaped for Nazi purposes.

In the United States, the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA), an arm of the Motion Picture Association of America, assigns a rating to all films released in theatres, as an advisory to parents and an injunction to theatre operators on whom to admit or exclude. CARA

controversially gave *A Film Unfinished* an R rating, mandating that “children under 17 require accompanying parent or guardian”, on the grounds that it contained “disturbing images of Holocaust atrocities including graphic nudity”, to be withheld from young viewers. CBC, in contrast, deserves credit for understanding that such images, indeed disturbing, are essential to be shown to any viewer, and perhaps particularly to a “New Generation”, to provide accurate and uncensored historical knowledge.

About the Reviewer

Robert Sklar, a film historian and critic, is Professor Emeritus of Cinema in the Department of Cinema Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. He is author of the prize-winning film history books *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* and *Film: An International History of the Medium* (also published as *A World History of Film*). His other books include *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* and *Prime-Time America: Life On and Behind the Television Screen*. A contributing editor of the film quarterly *Cineaste*, he is a member of the U.S. National Society of Film Critics. He is also a member of the National Film Preservation Board, which advises the Librarian of Congress on annual selections to the National Film Registry, and has served on the selection committee for the New York Film Festival. He holds a Ph.D. in the History of American Civilization from Harvard University.

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