

## Lesson 5: The Power of Art

### PURPOSE

To introduce students to the concept that art is a unique and powerful aspect of what it means to be human.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand that art has a persuasive power to shape how one thinks and feels about the world.
2. Recognize the power of art to move and shape the world.
3. Identify how art was used for ideological purposes in Nazi Germany.

### MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- The Aryan Family [painting](#)
- Mendelssohn Violin [concerto](#) played by Joshua Bell
- [Video](#): 1935: Triumph of the Will - The Power of Propaganda
- [Video](#): Olympia Diving Sequence
- Who Was Leni Riefenstahl?
- How to Recognize Propaganda
- Interim Quiz 1

### VOCABULARY

- Creativity: the human power to use one's imagination and ideas to shape the world.
- Art: a means of communicating what would otherwise remain hidden; to reach beyond oneself towards the transcendent.

### PROCEDURE

**Step 1:** Review the previous lesson. Recall the main differences between intentional and non-intentional actions. Highlight what is wrong with Eichmann's "I was just following orders" defense.

**Step 2:** Introduce students to the nature and power of art. Art has the power to influence the way people perceive the world. Art can be used to influence people and culture, both for good and for ill. For instance, if the movies, funny videos, and music we listen to are all critical of some idea or value, it is easy for us to become critical of that idea or value as well. The reverse is also true, if art promotes certain ideas, its persuasive power will influence the people who perceive it to accept those ideas.

Before going deeper into the topic, show students this [painting](#) by Wolfgang Willrich (also available in the Materials), without providing the context of the painting (for example, the title of the painting, its author, the time in which it was painted, or its meaning). After looking at the painting, ask the following questions:

What do you think about the painting, do you like it?

Do you think it was technically well done, i.e. was it done by a professional painter following certain artistic rules?

Do you think the painting conveys a message? If so, what message do you think the painting communicates?

After hearing the comments from students, explain that this is the painting called *The Aryan Family* by a 20th century German painter Wolfgang Willrich. He was commissioned to portray the most important leaders of the German Armed Forces, among other subjects. Willrich was a professional painter and the painting itself can be said to be technically well done. It isn't considered a masterpiece, but it achieves the effects of a realist painting.

However, the message which the painting communicates is problematic. The painting depicts what could be described as an *ideal* Aryan family, with their sunshine-blond hair, strong jaw lines, chiseled "Nordic" features, and rosy-red cheeks. The clothing of the boy in the foreground seems to identify him as a member of the Hitler Youth, while the traditional rustic clothing of the others links them to the rural population so idealized by the regime. Symbols of hard work, fertility, bounty, health, vitality, and connection to the land abound. The family's home, a half-timbered, thatched-roof construction, exemplifies the *völkisch* (rural) vernacular architecture celebrated by the Nazis, and, as such, provides a fitting backdrop for this idyllic family scene.

If one understands the context of the Nazi ideology, it is clear that the ideology of the Aryan race promoted by this painting included discrimination and extermination of other races and peoples, such as Jews, Slavs, Roma people, etc..

This leads to the important conclusion that when critically examining art, one needs to understand the message it communicates and determine whether that message respects and promotes human dignity. Some forms of art exploit its persuasive power to promote ideologies which disrespect human dignity.

The fact that art can promote certain ideas and its persuasive power can influence people to accept those ideas, shows that one should always be critical about the ideas promoted through art and determine if they promote or degrade human dignity. Art is a powerful force, so much so that throughout history, it has been one of the first things to be banned or destroyed in the effort to promote a particular political ideology. This powerful influence of art was well understood by the leaders of different political regimes. For example, Joseph Goebbels ran the “Ministry of Propaganda” for Nazi Germany, which, among other projects, used art and film to promote the Nazi ideology.

**Step 3:** Hitler and the Nazi Party understood well the power of art to influence people, ideas and culture. They did not simply use art to promote Nazi ideology, but also banned other artists and artistic styles, labeling it “Degenerate Art”. Some art was being labeled “degenerate” simply because it was made by Jewish or American artists. Hitler intended to cleanse the culture of so-called “degeneracy”, organizing book burnings, dismissing artists and musicians from teaching positions, and replacing them with Party members or collaborators. He funded certain artists who created the type of art he wanted (propaganda) and banned others. Many artists went into exile, forced to flee their country.

Play the Mendelssohn Violin [concerto](#) played by American violinist Joshua Bell with students in Brazil.

After hearing the concerto, ask students the following questions:

What did you think, feel or imagine while listening to this piece of music?  
Do you think that this music would have been labeled “degenerate”?

Explain that the music of Felix Mendelssohn, a composer, pianist, and conductor, was banned as dangerous “Degenerate Art” because he was Jewish. The Nazis even changed Mendelssohn’s original compositions, cutting out references to “Israel”, “Jehovah” and “David”. The Mayor of Leipzig (a city in Germany), Carl Goerdeler, tried to halt the removal of a monument to Mendelssohn in 1936. Goerdeler later became a leading opposition figure and was executed because of his role in the plot to assassinate Hitler.

The Violin concert is Mendelssohn's last large orchestral work. It holds an important place in the violin repertoire and is one of the most popular and frequently performed violin concertos in history. It represents a true work of art and nothing in this musical piece itself can be understood as "degenerate". This label is inadequate, and a result of ideological views forced on the musical piece, an idea based on discrediting the Jewish composer.

Ideology is a system of ideas which serves as a substitute for reality. The reality is that all persons have dignity and value. Ideology provides justification for the lie that says some people have more dignity and more value than others. Mendelssohn was a Jew, and Nazi ideology promoted the lie that only certain races of people have value or can contribute anything of value.

**Step 4:** Let us look at the work of another artist. Her name is Leni Riefenstahl. Leni Riefenstahl was a German actress and a very skillful film director. Her film, *The Blue Light*, impressed Adolf Hitler, who requested to meet with Riefenstahl and offered her the opportunity to direct an hour-long propaganda film, *The Victory of Faith*. A year later, Riefenstahl was asked by Hitler to make another film, *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary of a Nuremberg Nazi rally. *Triumph of the Will* is usually considered to be a classical example of the art of filmmaking used for propaganda purposes.

If there is time and you consider it helpful, add [Supplementary reading: Who was Leni Riefenstahl?](#) and read it aloud as a class.

Show the excerpt from the [video](#) "1935: Triumph of the Will - The Power of Propaganda" (from 10:17 to 16:05) to learn more about how propaganda was used in the movie.

After watching the video, highlight that the movie *Triumph of the Will* was artistically well done and that Leni Riefenstahl was a skillful filmmaker. However, it was not merely a documentary of the Nazi rally in Nuremberg, but used filmmaking techniques to convey a certain message. The movie opens with a caption trumpeting "German rebirth" and goes on to imply that Hitler was a kind of a godlike savior of Germany. For example, the film portrays Hitler as having a "divine status" by showing him descending from the heavens in an airplane. He is shown arriving in Nuremberg as a supported and adored leader. In the film, the military strength of Nazi Germany is exaggerated, and the propaganda attempts to show that the military is strong and powerful because of its connection and loyalty to Hitler.

Ask the students if they recognize any of the “Five Fallacies” they learned about in the third lesson, visually employed in the film. After listening to their comments, highlight the following two out of the Five Fallacies employed in the film:

**Appeal to the masses (ad populum)** – when Hitler enters the city of Nuremberg, when he speaks, etc. the crowds are shown as supporting and adoring him; after the final speech “The Reich is Hitler and Hitler is Reich” there is a loud and strong applause from the crowd. All of these scenes imply that Hitler is justified in his project, or that he is a great leader because of the support he received.

**Appeal to emotions (ad passiones)** – the movie attempts to evoke strong emotions in the viewer not by helping them to understand the truth about reality, but rather, by concealing some parts of reality (such as the atrocious persecutions and concentration camps).

**Step 5:** Highlight that propaganda is not always obvious. Take, for example, another movie made by Leni Riefenstahl called *Olympia*, filmed during the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. This was a film funded by the Nazis and heavily promoted for their propaganda, but the propagandistic messages behind the scenes are not all obvious. The scenes are uniquely cinematic, with slow-motion sequences, tracking shots, an astonishing number of different camera angles, and some extreme close-ups which were filmed afterwards and then spliced into the competition footage. This radical aesthetic approach culminates in a mesmerizing high-diving montage shot by Hans Ertl. What begins as a straightforward record of the competitors’ dives becomes more abstract and ecstatic until it is more like an aerial ballet, or a firework display. Riefenstahl even runs one segment backwards, in which a diver soars out of the water and into the air.

Show the Olympia Diving Sequence [video](#) to the students and lead the class discussion by asking the following questions:

**QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:**

- Have you recognized any elements of propaganda in the video? If yes, what are those?
- Riefenstahl’s films are aesthetically well made. Can one really blame Riefenstahl for accepting money from the Nazis to make her art, considering that she was not an official party member?

**Answer Key for the teacher**

**1. Have you recognized any elements of propaganda in the video? If yes, what are those?** Propaganda is, in fact, hardly visible in the whole film, and in the diving scene, there is hardly anything that could be considered propagandistic. However, a characteristic of truly effective propaganda is that it is subtle and that the manipulation is not clearly visible. The philosopher Joseph Pieper wrote, “The most perfect propaganda achieves just this: that the menace is not apparent but well concealed.”

Riefenstahl’s use of technique and imagery is so well done that it is easy to be impressed by her films from an artistic point of view! Leni Riefenstahl was a gifted filmmaker. It is precisely because she was so talented that her films are the best form of propaganda for the Nazis. There is hardly something to “disagree” with in her films – the “menace” is well concealed.

However, her film *Olympia* cannot be as easily classified as propaganda in the strict sense of the word. Even though there are a number of scenes which seem to suggest that the film is propaganda, in which shots of Hitler show him up in the stands, clapping and cheering when the Germans are doing well, drumming his fingers on his uniformed knee when they are not, there are also scenes which suggest that the film is not propaganda after all. For example, in the film, Jesse Owens, a Black American runner, is represented in an entirely positive light. He is described by the commentator as “the fastest man in the world”, and is shown winning four gold medals and beaming at the camera afterwards. All things considered, *Olympia* could hardly be propaganda in the strong sense, that is, in the sense of falsifying reality to promote evil ideas. The film could possibly only be understood as “soft” propaganda by giving a positive image of Hitler and Nazi Germany to the world, an image associated with the positive feeling evoked by great athletic performances and the values embodied in the Olympic games.

**2. Riefenstahl’s films are aesthetically well made. Can one really blame Riefenstahl for accepting money from the Nazis to make her art, considering that she was not an official party member?** It is clear that Riefenstahl’s films are technically and visually skillful. She was asked by Hitler to make films and she accepted the opportunity. Riefenstahl was willing to collaborate with him. That is, she was willing to “go along to get along”. Leni Riefenstahl was not an official member of the Nazi party, but (as we can read in the article in Supplementary materials) she attended parties at the home of Joseph Goebbels, head of the Ministry of Propaganda, and was in the same social circles of high-ranking Nazi officials, which makes it difficult to believe that she was ignorant of their ideological ideas and beliefs.

Riefenstahl must have known about the people, including artists, who were unfairly persecuted under Nazi rule. This unfair persecution is something she could have opposed, but did not... Risking her career to show solidarity with persecuted artists or targeted groups was not something she was willing to do. It is much easier to make judgements from a hindsight perspective, however, than to live and choose in the circumstances themselves. Riefenstahl heard Hitler speaking at a 1932 rally and was mesmerized by his talent as a public speaker. Her strong and positive impression of Hitler made it easier for her to collaborate with the Nazis.

**Step 6:** Give to students [How to Recognize Propaganda Worksheet](#). If there is time, read and discuss it together as a class.

**Step 7:** Summarize. Recall the persuasive power which art has and how this power can be misused. Recall the examples of the Aryan Family painting of Felix Mendelssohn and the films by Leni Riefenstahl, and how their art was either used or rejected because of ideological purposes.

#### **SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS**

Read and discuss the text [Who was Leni Riefenstahl?](#)

#### **FOLLOW-UP & HOMEWORK**

Ask the students to Fill in [Interim Quiz 1](#) at home and bring it to the next class. Let them know that solving the Interim Quiz will help them in the Final Quiz which will be given during the last class.

**WOLFGANG WILLRICH: THE ARYAN FAMILY PAINTING<sup>8</sup>**



<sup>8</sup> The Aryan Family (c. 1938-1939), available at [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=2040](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2040) (last visited Dec 2, 2022).



## Who was Leni Riefenstahl?<sup>9</sup>

Leni Riefenstahl was a German actress and film director. Her film, *The Blue Light*, impressed Adolf Hitler, who requested to meet with Riefenstahl and offered her the opportunity to direct an hour-long propaganda film, *The Victory of Faith*. A year later, Riefenstahl was asked by Hitler to make the infamous film, *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary of a Nuremberg Nazi rally.



Riefenstahl stands near Heinrich Himmler while instructing her camera crew at Nuremberg, 1934.

Riefenstahl went on to make the film *Olympia*, documenting the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics. Riefenstahl said the film had been commissioned by the International Olympic Committee, but it was funded by the Third Reich. *Olympia* was a huge success and widely acclaimed for its technical and aesthetic achievements. Riefenstahl was one of the first filmmakers to use tracking shots in a documentary, placing a camera on rails to follow the athletes' movement. The film is also impressive for its slow motion shots. Riefenstahl used slow motion in underwater diving shots, used extremely high and low shooting angles, panoramic aerial shots and tracking system shots to capture quick movements.

<sup>9</sup> Scheinberg, Robert (4 September 1997). "Award to German filmmaker spurs debate on her role as propagandist". *JTA News*. Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Retrieved 27 February 2017.

Many of these shots were relatively unheard of at the time, and set new standards in cinematography that are still in use today.

Riefenstahl's films were powerful because of their artistry. In a sequence of *Olympia*, divers leap in the air and soar like birds before effortlessly hitting the water. There is no narrator in these films, leaving the viewer to freely contemplate the Director's meaning and message. The films are so well done, they appear to be unbiased and neutral documents of history. But beneath the carefully manicured surface, the reality is that every sound and sequence of images gives an emotional cue to the audience. It is what is not shown that is as important as what is shown.

The international debut of *Olympia* led Riefenstahl to embark on an American publicity tour in an attempt to secure commercial release. She was received by Henry Ford in Detroit and *Olympia* was shown at the Chicago Engineers Club two days later. Avery Brundage, President of the International Olympic Committee, praised the film and held Riefenstahl in the highest regard. Walt Disney brought Riefenstahl on a three-hour tour showing her the ongoing production of *Fantasia*.



Riefenstahl in conversation with Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels, in 1937.

Riefenstahl was friends with Joseph Goebbels and his wife, Magda. She went to the opera with them and attended their parties. Goebbels thought highly of Riefenstahl's filmmaking, but was angered by her overspending on the Nazi-provided filmmaking budgets.

Riefenstahl later denied any deliberate attempt to create Nazi propoganda and said she was disgusted that *Triumph of the Will* was used in such a way. In the post-war years, she was declared a Nazi sympathizer, but never prosecuted. Riefenstahl insisted that she was not an *official member* of the Nazi party but others have noted that this was a tactic of the party itself, to feign unbiased representation.

"The point is no artist, no journalist, no filmmaker, no opinion maker of any kind was a member of the party. Goebbels was really smart. Goebbels was Hitler's propaganda chief. He was really smart, and he knew that party *sympathizers* were far more useful. [...] Riefentstahl was close to the party leadership for years. [...] So it's a question of being highly selective with the truth, which after all, is exactly what the Nazi regime was all about in the first place [...] The fact of the matter was she was the closest person to the party in the German film industry at the time, and she was perfectly able to commandeer the sorts of resources, with the help of Hitler, that allowed her to film the rally [*Triumph of the Will*]. The fact – the notion that she was ordered to make the film, I think, is really neither here nor there. In one sense, everybody was ordered by Hitler to do anything, right? But in another sense, she was perfectly placed to receive that order. It was no accident."<sup>10</sup>

So, who was Leni Riefenstahl? An artist of unparalleled gifts, a woman in an industry dominated by men, one of the great formalists of the cinema and a Nazi propogandist. "Without the Riefenstahls of the world in the 1930s", said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, "the Holocaust might not have happened. I would consider her an unindicted co-conspirator.'

<sup>10</sup> Brian Winston, the head of the School of Communication and Creative Industries at the University of Westminster, interviewed by Jonathan Man, CNN.

## How to Recognize Propaganda

Determining whether an artwork is propaganda is not always easy. However, there are a few general questions one can think about which can make it easier to recognize propaganda.

1. What is the message the artwork wants to communicate and does this message respect human dignity? Is the message the artwork communicates just and noble or does it promote unjust and immoral ideas?

To determine the message of the artwork, it is helpful and often necessary to know the context in which it was made. For example, if the Aryan family painting was made 300 years earlier in Sweden, it would probably be safe to say that it did not promote Aryan racial ideology. In the same way, the Swastika was used as a symbol for the Nazi ideology, but in some Eastern religions, it is considered to be a symbol of good luck, spirituality, and divinity. One should try to be attentive and careful in interpreting the meaning of the artwork. True art should always respect human dignity. Some of the greatest thinkers in the history of the world have argued that the beautiful and the good are always connected. If art does not promote human dignity or encourages moral evil, it cannot be considered true art.

2. Does the artwork elucidate some deeper aspect of reality or does it aim to conceal the truth about reality, substituting it with ideology?

As discussed in 9th grade, true art reveals a deeper and transcendent aspect of reality, which helps one to see reality more clearly and fully. True art elevates one's senses to perceive the invisible aspects of reality more clearly, while propaganda manipulates our senses and emotions, presenting a false image of reality. Propaganda causes people to see reality less clearly, and intentionally focuses on specific ideas or motives, leaving out or purposefully distorting the full truth. Thus, propaganda puts forth an artificial reality grounded in ideology.

3. What are the aims or purposes of the person making the artwork and who funded or commissioned its creation?

This question is sometimes the easiest to answer, but even after one answers it, it still does not give us a clear answer about whether something is or is not propaganda.

For example, Leni Riefenstahl was funded by the Nazis, but her film *Olympia* could not be considered as propaganda in the strongest sense of the word. Nevertheless, knowing if there are some political, financial, or ideological interests invested in making the artwork could help one to determine whether it is propaganda or true art.

Answering these questions will not always provide a clear and unambiguous answer, but the process of asking them will certainly help to critically evaluate whether or not a work of art has the characteristics of propaganda.

## Interim Quiz 1

**A. True/false questions**

1. T/F We are responsible for non-intentional actions.
2. T/F In Nazi concentration camps, guards never treated prisoners as subjects.
3. T/F "Intrinsic" means that human dignity is within us and it is with us our entire life.
4. T/F Felix Mendelssohn created degenerate art.
5. T/F Society which respects human dignity views human life in economic terms.
6. T/F Leni Riefenstahl was a leader of the White Rose movement.
7. T/F Animals can perform intentional actions.
8. T/F Adolf Eichmann took responsibility for his actions.

**B. Essay questions**

9. What is the difference between intentional and non-intentional actions?

**C. For each answer, make a correct question.**

*For example, if the answer is "The first letter of the alphabet", the question is "What is the letter A?". Or, if the answer is "A paste or gel used in conjunction with a toothbrush to help clean and maintain the aesthetics and health of teeth", the correct question is "What is toothpaste?"*

10. The actions knowingly and freely chosen, for which we are responsible.
11. The human power to use our imagination and ideas to shape the world.
12. Communication which aims to deceive the audience to promote a certain agenda
13. Errors in thinking, such as appeal to masses, appeal to emotions, attacking the person, making hasty generalizations etc.
14. Using persons for our pleasure, advantage or benefit.

**D. Multiple choice questions**

15. Societies which treat persons as subjects:
- a) Dispose of elderly, sick, vulnerable
  - b) Understand that persons cannot be owned
  - c) Recognize that everyone has equal dignity
  - d) Manipulate
16. When we want to prove something by saying that almost everyone believes it, this is:
- a) Ad hominem
  - b) Appeal to masses
  - c) Appeal to emotions
  - d) Making hasty generalizations
17. What is not the characteristic of intentional actions:
- a) They are worthy of praise or blame
  - b) We are responsible for them
  - c) They are always excellent
  - d) We use the power to think when performing them
18. Which of the following is true:
- a) Other persons need to be treated in the I-Thou mode
  - b) We need others to become fully ourselves
  - c) Proper relation to other persons is through I-It mode
  - d) We are not connected to others in any significant way
19. Which of the following is not a Nazi propaganda artwork:
- a) Triumph of the Will film by Leni Riefenstahl
  - b) Felix Mendelssohn's violin concert
  - c) The Aryan Family painting by Wolfgang Willrich
  - d) Man's Search for Meaning book by Viktor Frankl
20. For our thinking to be correct it has to be:
- a) Based on facts and logical fallacies
  - b) Based on facts and logically inconsistent
  - c) Based on facts and logically coherent
  - d) Logically coherent and factually incorrect

21. Who saved more than 1000 Jews during World War II?  
a) Hans Scholl  
b) Adolf Eichmann  
c) Oskar Schindler  
d) Sophie Scholl
22. To perform non-intentional actions, we need:  
a) Power to think  
b) To be alive  
c) Power to choose  
d) To embody habits of excellence
23. Which of the following is not a fallacy:  
a) Appeal to emotions  
b) Ad hominem  
c) Making hasty generalizations  
d) Logical consistency
24. Universal means that:  
a) All persons have dignity  
b) No one can take dignity away from us  
c) Dignity is with us our entire life  
d) Dignity is not earned
25. The author of the film Triumph of the Will is:  
a) Steven Spielberg  
b) Wolfgang Willrich  
c) Leni Riefenstahl  
d) Felix Mendelssohn



**Interim Quiz 1 - Answer Key**

1. F – we are responsible for intentional actions.
2. F – as Frankl shows, guards also sometimes treated prisoners as subjects.
3. T
4. F – he was making genuine art but was accused by Nazis of creating degenerate art because of being Jewish.
5. F – human persons cannot be viewed economically, they are worth the infinite.
6. F – it was Sophie Scholl.
7. F – only humans can perform intentional actions.
8. F – he wanted to avoid responsibility by claiming that he was just following orders.
9. Intentional actions are knowingly and freely chosen, while non-intentional actions are happening without us knowingly and freely choosing them. Only humans can perform intentional actions since they involve using specifically human powers, namely powers to think and choose. Animals cannot apologize to each other or say “I love you”. On the other hand, non-intentional actions do not require us to use powers to think and choose. That is why it is better to say that they are merely happening to us or in us, than that we are actively performing them. Non-intentional actions are also characteristic of the plants and animals: e.g. sleeping, breathing, feeling pain, etc. Intentional actions have some important qualities, which do not apply to non-intentional actions: we are responsible for them, they can be excellent or non-excellent and they are worthy of praise or blame.
10. What are intentional actions?
11. What is creativity?
12. What is propaganda?
13. What are fallacies?
14. What does it mean to treat persons as objects?
15. b and c
16. b
17. c – they are not necessarily always excellent, even though they can be.
18. a and b
19. b and d
20. c
21. c
22. b
23. d
24. a
25. c