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Walt Disney and Propaganda: Creating Patriotism during the Second World War

Very few individuals significantly contributed and hold a larger place in popular culture on a global scale than that of Walt Disney, who has quickly and consistently integrated his iconic, beloved characters into the memories of numerous generations of the past, present, and future. His memorable cast of popular icons owe to Disney's creativity, imagination, and innovation in film and animation; yet, his products, whether it be characters or films, also connect with and speak to the national audience on an individual and more personal level. It was this ability to rouse a nation through animation and film that had marked the success and ongoing legacy of Walt Disney Studios during a crucial point in American history: World War II.

As the rest of America had mobilized its effort towards the war, Hollywood had taken the lead in producing morale-boosting films for soldiers and civilians alike. Perhaps the most forward and productive studio company to reach out to the nation during the war was Walt Disney Studios, with Walt Disney heading its success. Not only had his studio facilities become a literal war plant of industry, but Disney's films had significantly contributed to Americans' collective feelings of patriotism and iron will. Although most of these films were government-issued military training films, amidst Disney's works were several propaganda films; perhaps the most fascinating and effective product was his animated short film *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943). The film's comic nature, the animation style, use of caricature, and different symbols of potency enabled Walt Disney to offer an effective, yet mediated, glimpse of the lifestyle of the Nazi regime, hoping to educate, or rather impose, his belief onto the national audience that the Nazi Party is the real enemy of the war. Not only did this film express and speak to the popular anti-Nazi feelings of the 1940s, but it also influenced the wartime audience to develop a much greater appreciation for living in America.

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Indeed, these type of propaganda films presented Disney the means to shape and innovate animated entertainment to include an educational experience when watching the films. The opportunity to redefine the animation medium became a driving force in his enthusiasm for war propaganda, which in itself, confirms of his own political motivations and agenda in the formal elements of each film. Although *Der Fuehrer's Face* is reputable and praised for its aesthetic richness and cultural appeal, more importantly, it calls attention to the underlying politics and anti-Nazi sentiments existing in the making of a Disney film during WWII. The obvious satire and ridicule of Nazi culture would have appealed very much to the audience during WWII very well. As film critic Leonard Maltin put it, these jokes and attacks on the Nazi regime "rise to the forefront because it's our way of relieving aggression," (*Walt Disney Treasures* 2004).

The Style of Presentation of Nazism

Der Fuehrer's Face was Disney's first propaganda film to focus its subject matter on comically poking fun at Nazism and his choices in the film's presentation and style effectively impose the satire of the Nazi way of life whilst promoting life in America. The winner of the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Subject in 1943 (Baxter 64), the short film features "life" under Nazism, as perceived by Walt Disney, while the audience follows Donald Duck through one day as a Nazi. Right away, the audience picks up comedic cues that emphasizes the film's satire on what is believed to be "life" under the Nazi regime. The short film opens with a surrealist landscape shaped by Nazi iconographies and imagery including lampposts, fences, and bushes shaped as swastikas and a house that holds a striking resemblance to Adolf Hitler through his iconic facial features such as his nose and moustache (see fig. 1) (*Der Fuehrer's Face* 1943). Although the swastika held other meanings prior to the Nazi Party, it would eventually become the sign of "totalitarian malevolence" throughout the world (Baxter 61), therefore,

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the overdose of swastika imagery evoke the fantastical and comic nature of this other world that Disney had fittingly named "Nutziland." In a study of European influences in Disney films, Robin Allan connects the un-realistic landscape and setting with the artistic style of surrealism and allegory as it, comically alludes to the Nazification of all natural objects that we are so accustomed to seeing (Allan 186).

Through such imaginative and fantastical imagery drawn with this surrealist element, Disney delivers his message that a world under the Nazi regime would skew our own perception of reality. As if drawn from a child's imagination, normal objects from reality and its setting has transformed into some form of Nazi imagery in this Nutziland, which introduces the predominant comic nature of the film.

Not only does the surrealist presentation of Nazi life foreshadow the film's fanciful and comic satire of Nazism, but in the second half of the film, Nazi routines are presented in a more straightforward and over-exaggerated attempt to ridicule the Nazi regime to impose a better appreciation for American life. The audience follows Donald, working at an assembly line of ammunition shells, as he salutes Der Fuehrer whenever he sees a picture of him, (*Der Fuehrer's Face* 1943). Along with the comic delivery of Donald's constant saluting, the straining workload eventually starts to affect Donald's mental state as he rapidly breaks down in another comedic and over-exaggerated way. On the surface, the audience witnesses this overbearing industrial lifestyle reminiscent of assembly line factories of early 20th century America. This connection develops a relationship with those viewers who have lived during that time and the events on screen, empathizing for Donald and his struggles to keep up with the rate of production. On a deeper level, these viewers receive the over-exaggerated imagery and seclude themselves away from the Nazi ideology and lifestyle, returning to their own American culture.

Furthermore, in the next sequence, Disney takes a new style of animation to further reinforce chaos under the Nazi regime as a nightmarish reality of disorder. After heavy, strenuous work, Donald

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begins to mentally break down and the film goes into a drastically different series of imagery, reminiscent of the “Pink Elephants on Parade” sequence in Walt Disney’s film *Dumbo* (1942) (*Der Fuehrer’s Face* 1943). Only released one year earlier, the Disney classic showed its audiences series of nonsensical images of pink elephants haunting Dumbo’s drunken mind; essentially, the psychedelic scene was a terrifying disarray of madness and fear. Similarly, the sequence in *Der Fuehrer’s Face* would also startle viewers much like what Disney had done in *Dumbo* using contrasting colors, disturbing images of ammunition shells with faces, and a chained up Donald saluting to Hitler (see fig. 2). As a form of propaganda, the film does well in attributing chaos with Nazism and as with *Dumbo*, the audience’s fear for Nazism would continue to be reinforced with these disturbing images and rouse the viewers to support the war effort. As a product of Donald’s the grueling workload and stress, this scene transports the viewers into a world that is built on anarchy and chaos, which is only intensified through its abstract and expressionist images (Allan 186). Indeed, the viewers are thrust into this abstract Nazi world with no sense of order or logic.

However, at the end of this sequence, Donald wakes up to realize that it was only a nightmare and still resides in the United States (*Der Fuehrer’s Face* 1943). Surrounded by patriotic imagery such as Donald’s American flag pajamas and a miniature Statue of Liberty, Donald expresses his sincere appreciation for “being a citizen of the United States of America,” (*Der Fuehrer’s Face* 1943). This final sequence effectively finishes this propaganda film in its sharp contrast between Nutziland and America. Disney’s use of comedy and artistic style to present life under Nazism reaches out to the national audience as they all ridicule the nightmarish hell of Nazism, which forces a rethinking of--and greater appreciation for--the American way of life during WWII. As an American audience, we collectively conclude that life under the Nazi regime far exceeds reality based on the comic exaggerations in the

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settings and style of the animation to emphasize the over-abundance of Nazi influence over this Nutziland. In a successful attempt to show a grueling image of life under Nazism, Disney has created an overly exaggerated and comic film, *Der Fuehrer's Face*, which reinforces the perverse perception of the Nazi party and imposes onto its viewers a feeling of greater appreciation for America.

The Use of Caricatures

Another formal technique used in Disney's propaganda films were his extensive use of caricature and allegorical figures that serve to not only represent Nazism and its culture, but to also provide the audience with a visual manifestation that they can interact with while watching the film. Such caricatures allow for hyper-realistic to fanciful representations of their respective subject. Based on the setting and style of *Der Fuehrer's Face*, we can begin to understand that "[the film] is a caricature of life under Nazism, though based on actual conditions in Germany," (Baxter 65). Throughout the film, Disney creates caricatures of many objects in his distortion of their natural image as a fanciful image of Nazism. Perhaps the most notable caricature is Donald Duck, the main character of *Der Fuehrer's Face*, who serves to be a picaresque character experiencing life as a Nazi in place of the film's audience.

Walt Disney is best known for his use of animal characters in place of human figures in his focus of many films and *Der Fuehrer's Face* was no exception. Throughout the film, Donald Duck holds human-like appearances and mannerisms, becoming a personification and representation of a human. He wears the Nazi uniform, reads Adolf Hitler's novel *Main Kampf*, works at an ammunitions factory, and holds a human-like personality (*Der Fuehrer's Face* 1943). As film theorist Sergei Eisenstein suggests in his book that describes the use animated animal characters in Disney films, "[Disney's] beasts are metaphoric to people, i.e. to the comparison of man with animal. They are plastic metaphors *in essence*," (Eisenstein 49). In making use of the animation medium, Walt Disney creates a caricature similar to Aesop's use of

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animal fables in representing human-like conditions. The animation medium strengthens this metaphor and personification of animals as it combines elements of both the human-like movement and liveliness in this depiction of an animal.

Eisenstein further adds that “the personification of animals in this moralizing, fabulist manner, has as a sensuously nourishing subtext its own offshoot of totemistic belief in the ‘factual’ ‘regression’ into an animal,” (Eisenstein 53). This totemistic belief is the combination and unity of both the animal and the human. Therefore, in *Der Fuehrer’s Face*, Donald Duck represents the common Nazi individual as both an animal and an individual involved in the fable of Nutziland. In *Der Fuehrer’s Face*, he represents an “involuntary Nazi drone,” (Baxter 62) who grumbles into submission and only releases private opinions secretly. Forced by bayonet to salute multiple images of Hitler, the comedic actions of Donald as a caricature of a Nazi members reflect and poke more fun at Nazi Party members (see fig. 3). This over-exaggeration reflecting the saluting of Hitler offers an opportunity for Disney to ridicule Nazism. In repeating the action, Disney further emphasizes, caricaturizes, and ridicules the practice of saluting and worshiping a dictator.

In her book analyzing the success of the Disney brand, Andi Stein attributes the wide-spread popularity of Donald Duck to “his down-to-earth, earnest demeanor that resonates with people of all ages,” (Stein 54). Viewers find his same personality and mannerisms throughout the film, calling back to their memories of Donald Duck. Instead of outwitting Mickey Mouse, we find Donald Duck struggling to live under the ridiculous practices and ways of the Nazi regime. To the viewers, this action is seen as comical and rouses the audience toward finding humor in the Nazi party. Therefore this collective ridicule and use of comedy in the over-exaggeration of Nazi practices appeals the anti-Nazi sentiments of WWII, which contributed to great success of *Der Fuehrer’s Face*. Due to the animalistic appearance of

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Donald Duck, the audience is free from connecting with Donald based on physical appearances, but his human-like personality and mannerisms connect viewers with his struggles as a victim under the Nazi regime.

However, Disney's caricaturizing of the Nazi civilians through Donald Duck not only appeals to viewers' anti-Nazi sentiments, but it also to their consumerist and patriotic ideals. After Donald wakes up and prepares for his day in Nutziland, he prepares a breakfast consistent of coffee made from one bean, a scent of "Aroma de Bacon & Eggs", and a stale slice of bread (see fig. 4) (*Der Fuehrer's Face* 1943). This lack of products and supplies that this scene suggests is historically accurate to the actual conditions in Germany, but it also appeals to the consumerism of groceries and rations. In his study of the psychology behind Disney animation, Seán Harrington notes of the "direct appeal to the anxieties of American consumerism," (Harrington 187). With a consumerist mindset, Americans at the time were initially hesitant in contributing to the war effort, forcing the government to call for studio companies like Walt Disney Studios to encourage more action towards the war effort (*Cartoons Go to War* 1996). Connecting with this fear of during World War II, Disney calls attention to the fact that this anxiety is occurring in areas under Nazi occupation. To a national audience fearing the costs of the war at the home front, this message would seem particularly impactful as it victimizes the under-fed civilians under Nazi control while harking to the rationing supplies in America. With a similar anxiety, viewers would also connect either themselves or Allied soldiers with Donald Duck, struggling to eat a decent meal.

Likewise, viewers would also connect with Donald Duck as a patriotic figure, which contributed to the popularity, wide-spread success, and appeal of *Der Fuehrer's Face*. Throughout the film, Donald experiences several examples and gags alluding to the nightmare of Nazism (*Der Fuehrer's Face* 1943). Having watched several films featuring Donald prior to *Der Fuehrer's Face*, viewers already have a

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connection with Donald's trademark personality and hot temper. Now, seeing a beloved character under the regime of Nazism relates with viewers' anxiety over the world takeover of Nazi ideologies. Fortunately, it is not long before viewers realize that the film was all a dream as they find Donald back in America with a final message declaring his happiness to be an American citizen (*Der Fuehrer's Face* 1943). Using Donald Duck's national popularity as a patriotic figure, Walt Disney fittingly offers his final message promoting appreciation for American ideals. Indeed, Donald's popularity as a patriotic figure directly appealed to feelings of nationalism, patriotism, and pride in the viewer with the hope that these viewers incite in themselves motivation to support the war effort.

Other prominent figures in the film are the musical Nazi soldiers that play the totalitarian and authoritative caricatures meant to be menacing, yet their contrasting designs and mannerisms suggest the opposite, ridiculing key principles of Nazism. The film opens with the legs of soldiers marching across from the screen as they sing and praise their "master race" and everlasting world domination. However, the frame reveals the band to be caricatures of Nazi soldiers with distorted body types that contradict their "perfect" Aryan appearance as each band member is short, rotund, stout, broad chested, or thin, respectively (see fig. 5). Between the "superman" appearance that the Nazi soldiers held for themselves and their actual appearance, the contrast produces a situational irony that the audience finds comically appealing. With such conflated and over-the-top distortions of the body, Disney ridicules their perceived purity and rouses a national audience to join in on the joke against the Nazi ideology. The contrasting appearances not only satirize and ridicule the Nazi idea of a perfect race, the contorted and misshapen body parts also play a significant role in repulsing viewers away from Nazism. As discussed in *The Disney Fetish*, Harrington remarks that the combined use of the stylistic setting and the over-exaggeration of the caricatures repel the viewer toward a negative extreme (Harrington 186). Certainly, the disfigured

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design of these “human” characters greatly conflict our own accepted familiarity of the human body.

This tension that Walt Disney manipulates in his animation of the human body produces an uneasiness in the viewer that only reinforces their aversion and repulsion from Nazism, contributing to the effectiveness of *Der Fuehrer's Face* as an anti-Nazi propaganda film.

Symbols of Potency: Different Uses of the Phallus

In addition to the contortion of the Nazi caricatures to produce an uneasiness in the viewer, there exists another contrast between these authoritative figures and their own mannerisms that further troubles the viewer's accepted perception of power in the presence of phallic symbols. In associated with each caricature, Disney also implements symbols of potency to either belittle or empower specific ideologies. During this same opening segment of the film, the design of these soldiers suggest their authority and power over the viewer. This power comes from the image of the penis, a phallic symbol, formed from the distorted body combined with the soldier's round helmet (see fig. 6). As a symbol of potency, this depiction of the phallus makes the source of the soldier's power visible to the viewer; however, this power is immediately offset by their own mannerisms and behaviors. The caricature of Nazi general Hermann Goering possesses the potent and phallic appearance. However, his gyrating hips, long eyelashes, and baby face directly contradict his potency, implicating his childish nature and feminized masculinity (see fig. 7). As Harrington describes, the appearance of the character is a “warped symbol of potency...one that combines the overpowering phallus with the mutated feminized-male baby,” (Harrington 187). Much like the tension from the distorted body of the caricature and our own familiarity of the human body, this struggle between symbols of authority and the caricature's mannerisms disturb the viewer's pre-set notion of power. To the viewer, this unbalanced contrast and warped symbol of potency proves that there is no real threat behind the authority of the

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Nazi regime. In doing so, Disney integrates the repulsion for the Nazi party deeper into the mind set and psychology of the viewer during WWII. With an awareness of the fanciful caricature of the film, the audience can focus on its underlying messages, much like Brechtian pedagogical theater.

Another symbol of potency that Disney emphasizes throughout the Nutziland sequence are the rifles and bayonets, which proves to be the only real source of authority of off-screen Nazi soldiers. As the film enters an industrial ammunitions factory, viewers see a group of rifles and bayonets forcing Donald into the factory to work and salute (see fig. 8). Without actually showing the appearance of the Nazi soldier, viewers sense the amount of power and authority that comes from just the sharpness of the many bayonets. Therefore, while functioning as a symbol of potency for the Nazi soldiers, the bayonets also serve as an allegorical figure objectifying the Nazi soldier as the absence of a connected human body on screen dehumanizes the soldier. Indeed, the rifles and bayonets represent the Nazi regime, forcing their ideals onto its civilians at gunpoint with no actual human body to further confirm their potency, which suggests that the Nazi regime are mere objects expressing their authority. Only through bayonets and rifles (i.e. the sources of potency) can the Nazi party exert its power and authority over its own civilians. It makes sense why these Nazi soldiers force the production of more ammunition in the film; they force the creation of their own source of power from the citizens' fear. As the prominent force of "evil" in this short, the Nazi soldiers are not unique in the Disney canon. In her gender analysis of male heroes and villains of Disney films, Amy Davis names a class of villains who derives their strength from their "twisted souls and unbalanced minds, the megalomania that convinces them that they are at the centre of their worlds, that they deserve anything they desire, and that those around them are too far beneath to be worthy of anything but benign contempt," (Davis 224). Although the Nazi soldiers in *Der Fuehrer's Face* are more comical than other "criminally dangerous"

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(Davis 223) villains, their stereotype of villainy seems to suggest a self-entitlement of their own “superior” power. Their monstrosity comes from the lack of human emotions and becomes worse in the lack of a human body connected to their symbols of potency. In having to continually express this authority over Donald through threats, Disney also suggests that this Nazi power is only temporary. He essentially sends to his audience a message that the Nazi regime has nothing of an everlasting legacy ahead of them since they have to keep showing that they have “power” through rifles and bayonets, which are only mere objects of potent symbolism, nothing more. This depiction of bayonets and rifles as a source of potency is a rather accurate depiction of the authority and symbol for totalitarianism.

With so many expressions of faulty potency associated with Nazism throughout the film, Disney finally offers an acceptable source of power in the depiction of the Statue of Liberty as a phallic symbol, suggesting America’s own superiority and authority. As Donald Duck wakes up from this nightmarish hell that is Nutziland, he returns to his home in America where he shows his greater appreciation for America as he embraces a miniature version of The Statue of Liberty, surrounded by obvious patriotic imagery (see fig. 9). The potent symbol that the bayonets offer greatly contrasts with the potent symbol in the Statue of Liberty. Rather than bayonets forcing Donald to accept this authority and power, it is pure patriotism and love for his country behind his embrace of the State of Liberty figurine, thereby, embracing the potency and power associated with it. Rather than depicting a warped symbol of potency, the Statue of Liberty figurine presents a strong source of legitimate ideological power over all other ideological powers. In serving as a phallic image, the figurine also plays the role of the allegorical figure, representing the American ideals and principles that make the country so great. Therefore, directly appealing to the patriotic feelings of the WWII audience after presenting the horrors of life in Nutziland, Disney imposes onto his audience over-whelming patriotism, influencing a greater

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appreciation for the power and freedoms that make up the American culture during WWII. Indeed, with a constant lack of legitimate power in a film with many potent symbols, the film serves as an effective propaganda piece in the embrace and appreciation for the Statue of Liberty, an allegorical figure for the American ideology and a symbol of potency and power in itself.

Conclusion

Throughout the time that America involved itself in WWII, Walt Disney and his fellow animators had produced and released several films inciting patriotic feelings, anti-Nazi sentiments, and promoting support for the fighting men across the sea. Among the films satirizing the Nazi regime, *Der Fuehrer's Face* was perhaps the most commercially successful and effective of Disney's propaganda films. The running gags, solid animation and title song "Der Fuehrer's Face" had earned the Studios an Academy Award for best short subject (Shale 63). In appealing to these emotions and reinforcing viewers' anti-Nazi sentiments through the animation style, use of caricature, and appearance of potent symbols, Disney has created a lasting artifact of war. As Walt Disney would later recall, "one of the things we are fighting for is the right of peoples to think, read, and speak as they will, not to have others' views foisted upon them," (Shale 12). As a film, *Der Fuehrer's Face* is both comically appealing to both audiences of the past and present. However, as a piece of American culture during WWII, it presents the distilling truth behind the medium of film and animation in the speed of distributing ideas into the minds of a national audience. Both the Nazis and Hollywood were aware of this immense power of film. While both sides had harnessed this power for different intentions, the idea of spreading ideas to a national audience still lingers onto today through the use of various social media and the Internet. Indeed, social media has immensely revolutionized the spread of information in a global scale; in a modern sense, propaganda has simply changed mediums in the innovative development of technology.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Solarer111; “Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer’s Face | eng sub;” Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.



Snapshot from *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943) depicting “Nutzieland,” a world that Walt Disney had created in which Nazism and its symbols have skewed the perception of reality.

Figure 2: Solarer111; “Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer’s Face | eng sub;” Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.



A series of images from the dream sequence of *Der Fuehrer's Face* that would scare the viewers away from the nightmare that Disney perceived to be Nazism.

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Figure 3: Solarer111; “Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer’s Face | eng sub;” Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.



A caricature of Nazi party members, Donald Duck repetitively salutes multiple pictures of Hitler as they come through the assembly line.

Figure 4: Solarer111; “Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer’s Face | eng sub;” Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.



The small breakfast for Donald appealed to anxieties of American consumerism during WWII.

Figure 5: Solarer111; “Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer’s Face | eng sub;” Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.



Various members of group of Nazis displaying their imperfect appearance in contrast to the master race that Nazi teachings praise.

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Figure 6: Solarer111; “Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer’s Face | eng sub;” Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.



Several examples of the Nazi members depicting phallic symbols through their grotesque body and soldier helmet.

Figure 7:

Left: Solarer111; “Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer’s Face | eng sub;” Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.

Right: “Hermann Goering, half-length, in uniform;” Between 1930 and 1940; Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.; *Library of Congress*; Web; 2 June 2015; <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002714790/>>.



Left: Caricature of Hermann Goering, one of the top Nazi leaders during their reign and considered Hitler’s successor (Herman Göring). Right: Actual image of Hermann Goering.

Figure 8: Solarer111; “Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer’s Face | eng sub;” Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.



Symbols of potency found in the extensive appearance of rifles and bayonets, alluding to the threat and “power” of totalitarian ideologies such as Nazism

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Figure 9: Solarer111; "Donald Duck – Der Fuehrer's Face | eng sub;" Online video clip; *YouTube*; 4 Jan. 2011; Web; 31 May 2015; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg>>.



A final symbol of potency that appears legitimate and adequate that establishes the power America to the national audience.

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