# THE IMAGINARY OF WAR AS DEPICTED IN AMERICAN FILM POSTERS FROM 1914 TO 1918

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the cinema was a mere two decades old and had entered a decisive stage of technical, industrial and aesthetic transformations. It was the first time that a war and its atrocities were filmed, whether for the purposes of propaganda, fiction, documentaries or newsreels, and this resulted in a considerable increase in film production. However, most of this film footage no longer exists, as it is estimated that around 80% of the movies made in the years from 1914 to 1918 have disappeared (EFG1914 Project: web). And the percentage of film posters that have survived to the present day is even lower.

The objective of this article is to offer an analysis of the posters for the most prominent movies filmed in the United States in this period that focus on war as a general theme, whether adopting a pro-war or a pacifist attitude. This analysis will make it possible to identify the existence of a particular graphic style associated with military conflict that contributed to the construction of an imaginary of war, expressed in a series of film posters that exemplify that style.

Since the birth of cinema in the late nineteenth century, the film poster has been one of its biggest allies, becoming an inseparable accessory essential for the promotion of films which, like any other product, are designed for consumption by a target audience. Film posters have thus always had a clearly commercial dimension as advertising.

The film poster fulfils two functions, since it is at once a means of communication and an instrument of persuasion, which "at the same time informs (title, actors, director, etc.) and persuades (the 'star system', genres, producers, etc.)" (GÓMEZ PÉREZ, 2002: 203). It can thus be subjected to two readings: a denotative (informative) reading, and a connotative (persuasive) reading. This is the view taken by Enel (1977: 16) when he suggests that

"the poster should not merely present the plot, but should above all be suggestive and provocative. Within a single configuration it combines intentional symbols that constitute a denotative statement: the representation of the product, its functions, its qualities [...] and interpretative symbols that constitute a connotative statement." Ruiz Melendreras (1985: 30) echoes this idea when he notes that the image contained on a poster operates on two levels: "one of a semantic, denotative nature, often made explicit with the help of text that facilitates appropriate interpretation of the other level, the aesthetic or connotative." While the semantic level provides information related to the film, the aesthetic level grabs the receiver's attention and, in the cases of the posters to be analysed here, contributes to the creation of an imaginary of war that has endured over time. In the film posters produced during the First World War, in general terms, efficacy of communication and propaganda prevailed over artistic quality.

## IN THE FILM POSTERS PRODUCED DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR, EFFICACY OF COMMUNICATION AND PROPAGANDA PREVAILED OVER ARTISTIC QUALITY

This persuasive dimension was especially evident during the First World War, a historical moment when films were turned into veritable weapons of propaganda, along with the posters that promoted them. As noted by Vaccaro (2008: 920) "movie theatres were turned into shop windows for patriotism" par excellence; indeed, for screenings of the official war films produced by the Committee on Public Information (CPI), many theatres were adorned profusely with American flags. This committee made use of posters, among other methods, to secure public support for the war.

Film posters during this period could be considered "extremely valuable cultural artefacts, because they make it possible to reconstruct the image that one film or another offered of itself, and the context in which it was presented to its target audience" (SÁNCHEZ, 1997: 12). The poster, more than any other form of artistic expression, fulfils the dual role of having an impact on society while at the same time reflecting that society (TABUENCA, 2009: 28). In the analysis of a mass medium like the poster, its formal aspects cannot be separated from the political and social realities in which that medium is developed and expressed, and this was certainly true during the period of the Great War.

Enzensberger considers that the posters formed part of what he calls "the Consciousness Industry" (V.A., 2007: 17), as this type of graphic medium makes it possible to change the beliefs of viewers about the world around them. For Coronado and Hijón (2002: 21), "while the primordial function was to reinforce the advertising system itself, the poster would also contribute to changing the beliefs of the individual [...] producing the latent appearance of a second, equally important function, the social function, and the cultural contribution that its image has represented for society as a whole [...]. The poster can effectively change our perception not only of the product or the message announced, but also of the conception we form of our society and of ourselves."

The First World War represented the introduction of the poster as a means of consciousness raising, a trend which also affected film posters, many of which clearly reflect the exaltation of the homeland and of the combatant as a hero.

## 2. THE UNITED STATES IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The United States initially distanced itself from the events of the First World War, to such an extreme that American newspapers referred to it as the "European War".

The first change in the US attitude towards the First World War would come with the sinking of the Lusitania on 7 May 1915. The Lusitania was a British trans-Atlantic passenger and cargo liner which travelled on a regular basis between the United States and the United Kingdom, but which had also been designed to be used as an armed merchant cruiser. When it was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine, resulting in the death of 1,198 people, including 123 Americans, public opinion in the United States turned against Germany and opened up the possibility of US entry into the war.

President Wilson tried to maintain US neutrality, but two German initiatives would bring an end to that neutrality and lead to the declaration of war by the United States against Germany on 6 April 1917. The first was Germany's decision in 1917 to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, attacking and sinking British and American merchant ships without prior warning. The second was the German offer to Mexico of an alliance and help in the event that the United States declared war on Germany, in the famous Zimmermann telegram. The telegram was intercepted and decoded by British intelligence and, when made public, swayed US public opinion in favour of a declaration of war against Germany.

As noted by Brunetta (2011: 234) "the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, but the actual participation of its troops in the conflict would not begin until more than a year later. In the period from 1914 up until its actual intervention, the United States—in view of its multi-ethnic population and its declared neutrality—was the stage for a veritable media war between German and British propaganda, in which the cinema played a predominant role."

Conscious of the different ethnic origins of the US population, and of the different opinions with respect to intervention in the war among the different groups by reason of those origins, or by reason of their religion, political views, or even whether they lived in the North or the South, Wilson created the Committee on Public Information (CPI), also known as the Creel Committee, after its director, George Creel. The CPI would be the biggest propaganda machine ever established up to that time, its objective being to influence US public opinion in favour of intervention in what was now being called the World War. The CPI employed every means at its disposal, including the cinema. And it thus contributed, with three films, to the establishment of the language of the war propaganda film targeting the rearguard of public opinion.

## 3. DENOTATIVE ANALYSIS OF POSTERS FOR US WAR FILMS

As will be shown below, US war films produced in the years from 1914 to 1918 and the posters for them accompanied and sometimes formed part of the evolution of the American attitude towards the First World War.

Two different periods of films can be identified: the period prior to US entry into the war (1914-1916); and the films produced after the declaration of war on Germany (1917-1918). Within the second period, in turn, it is important to distinguish between the films produced by the CPI, which we will call government films, and commercial pictures.

### 3.1 Period 1 (1914-1916): historical and pacifist war films

The examples discussed below reveal a clear evolution in the attitude towards the First World War in the United States prior to its entry into the conflict.

The posters for the first two films, both from 1915, contribute to the construction of the image of the hero (or heroine), although they do so by employing a medieval European imaginary that has nothing to do with the First World War. How-

Figure 1

ever, the next two, from 1916 (subsequent to the sinking of the Lusitania), although not set in the First World War, present an opinion on it, and contribute to the creation of a different type of image of war, an image of the values being fought over; either the values being defended—peace, the home, the family—or being fought against, i.e., the atrocities committed by the enemy.

The poster for *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) portrays a Ku Klux Klan member as a liberating hero. The dynamic composition, diagonally oriented against a blue sky background, of a Klan member on a rampant horse viewed on an angle, dominates the poster. Symbolism completes the message: a cross in flames in the "liberator's" right hand and the symbol of the Klan appearing as many as four times on the vestments of the horse and rider. The film's title, and the director's name in a smaller text, all in serif typeface at the foot of the poster, complete the composition. The equestrian portrait is a recognisable icon for the depiction of liberators or founding fathers or for the exaltation of national leaders, and it is used here quite clearly in conjunction with the title of the film. The medieval templar inspiration of Ku Klux Klan imagery is reflected in the poster.

The plot of the film *Joan the Woman* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1915) does make reference to the First World War, but it is through a British soldier appearing in the film who, the night before a suicide mission, has a vision of the life of Joan of Arc. Thus, the references both in the narrative and in the poster itself once again evoke images of an idealised medieval Europe.

The poster, with a classical, quasi-symmetrical composition in which the sword forms the axis, shows the evolution of Joan of Arc from peasant girl to heroine. The foreground, on the right side of the composition, depicts the ghost of Joan of Arc who appears to the soldier in the film, vested with all the attributes of the warrior heroine: shining armour, cape and helmet, kneeling with her gaze lifted towards the hilt of the sword.

There is no reference to the horrors of war; only the exaltation of the figure of the heroine.

And also present is the exaltation of the leading actress: in the text at the bottom of the poster, the actress's name appears in text larger than that of the film title, both of which are larger than the names of the director and producer.

*Civilization* (Reginald Barker, Thomas H. Ince, Raymond B. West, 1916) is a pacifist picture that narrates the story of a submarine commander who refuses to carry out the order to sink a ci-

Figure 2

vilian ship supposedly carrying armaments for the enemy country of the imaginary kingdom of Wredpryd. The parallel with the sinking of the Lusitania is obvious.

The image that dominates the poster plays with contrasts for dramatic effect. A contrast in the composition is achieved through a narratively static scene showing a soldier kneeling who appears to be receiving a blessing from an old woman, but with a compositional dynamic introduced by the crossing of the main diagonal line (formed by the heads, the hand giving the blessing and the body of the soldier) with a secondary diagonal line (the gun with bayonet held by the soldier). There is also a contrast of colour and light, with a dominance of warm, brightly lit colours of human figures in the foreground, and a background that shows vague hints of a family home fading into black.

The text acquires significance on the poster not only due to the size and compositional dynamism of the title, but also due to the various subtitles, especially those highlighted in yellow, framing the film's intention with words like "Peace", "Epic", "Humanity", "Mothers" and "the Dead".

*Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916), while not directly addressing the topic of war, is nevertheless an especially significant film given its pacifist message in a year when the United States would enter into a global conflict. Through four stories set at different moments in history, alternated with the story of a woman unjustly separated from her husband and son, Griffith denounces the injustices of intolerance. The dramatic effect of the poster is a precursor to those of the commercial pictures produced after the United States entered the war, in terms of showing the atrocities committed by the enemy. A terrified woman holds her son in her arms in a protective posture as she stares at a threatening and grotesquely deformed hand. The use of colour and chiaroscuro contribute greatly to the dramatic effect of the scene: warm colours saturate the foreground, while cold dark and black tones flood the background. The superimposed text, with the director's name almost the same size as the film title, merely frame the dominant central image.

Figure 3

### 3.2 Period 2 (1917-1918): government films (CPI)

The Committee on Public Information produced three documentary films within a very short period of time. All three premièred in 1918: the first, *Pershing's Crusaders*, in May; *America's Answer* in July; and *Under Four Flags* in November.

There is a clear narrative evolution in the three posters. The first shows the arrival of the hero, the second the advance of the troops (still only Americans) and the third the exaltation of the attack alongside the Allies. These three could practically be shots from the same narration: the troops in rank and file before the battle, the advance and the battle itself.

Each of the three posters would establish a model for the war film poster.

The poster for *Pershing's Crusaders* is the exaltation of the hero, identified explicitly for the first time as a real person: General Pershing, who is shown in the foreground, on horseback in front of his troops, viewed from a slightly low angle to increase his dominance over the scene. The accompanying symbolism is at once obvious, explicit and effective: a large US flag and two crusaders appearing as spirits, enhancing the sense of liberation. The text on the poster leaves no doubt whatsoever: the title, Pershing's Crusaders, superimposed in large, pure white typeface. And smaller text makes the origin of the film explicit, referring to its product under the auspices of the US government as the first official American war picture.

The poster for *America's Answer* would also become a prototype image for war picture posters. The image presents a backlit side view of troops advancing and holding a large flag. The epic image is enhanced by the yellow background, an exhilarating colour suggestive of a dawn or dusk, and the forced advance of the troops over difficult terrain with explosions above. And dominating the space, in this case at the top, in large capital letters in red bordered with white and blue—the

colours of the United States—is the word "America's" and the reason for the action: "Answer".

Finally, the poster for *Under Four Flags* combines elements of the first two, with a frontal, low-angle view of troops advancing, but with a new twist. Four soldiers, dressed in characteristic elements and uniforms that make their countries of origin recognisable, advance towards the viewer. In the background, the explosions of the battle they are leaving behind them, are ensuring victory. And at the bottom, as in the first poster, with white print over a black background and filling up a third of the composition, is the title that makes the message clear: "Under Four Flags". Curiously, the image does not show the flags; the only reference to these in the image is the small graphic flag symbol to the left of the letter "A" in the title. The rest of the supporting text identifies the official nature of the film as a CPI production.

### 3.3 Period 2 (1917-1918): commercial pictures

Within this third group we will analyse the posters of films released in 1917 and 1918 that featured the Great War as a backdrop, but with a markedly commercial nature. Films that encouraged men to enlist and women to contribute to the war effort were well received. Also popular were films in which the male lead turned into a heroic American citizen who demonstrated his loyalty to his homeland and to the flag.

*The Pride of New York* (R. Walsh, 1917) belongs to this category of heroic citizen films. The film's poster presents the protagonist in action, in a strong, sturdy and upright pose as he shoots at the enemy, and showing the weapon used in the battle rather than the destruction caused by the conflict or the defencelessness of its human victims. Once again the focus is on the illustration, while the text is relegated to the bottom of the poster, with capital letters in sans serif font indicating the name of the film, the production studio and the stars, the last of these appearing

Figure 4

in larger print. The dominant yellow tone reinforces the energetic nature of the action depicted and alludes to the strength and pride of the soldier.

Adopting a similar approach is the image used for *Over the Top* (W. North, 1918), notable for the warmth and energy of the colours used, which reflect the heat on the front caused by the gunpowder. The poster presents a heroic soldier at the front advancing with bayonet in hand, and its structure responds to the same pattern as the previous one: an absolute domination of the illustration over the text, which is located below, melting into the image so as not to distract attention from it.

The last few months of the First World War saw the release of two films that became the most popular pictures on the war: *Hearts of the World* by D.W. Griffith; and Charlie Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms!*, both made in 1918, and both representing a continuation of the direction taken in *To Hell with the Kaiser* (George Irving), whose poster had already reflected the identification of the Germans, represented in the figure of the Kaiser, with demons. Also observable in this poster is the tendency to depict the Prussian enemy with a moustache, and the combination of colours reinforces his aggressive nature.

*Hearts of the World* was considered the paradigm of propaganda films produced to support US intervention in the war. The film was exceptionally well received by audiences, who were highly receptive to patriotic stories. In the two posters that promoted the picture, both of which reproduce scenes from the film, the Germans are depicted as savages capable of the worst atrocities, annihilators of family, harmony and happiness. Both posters for the film show violent scenes featuring the German enemy, always represented with large moustaches and brutish faces. The illustration is the absolute focus of attention, while the text is relegated to the background at the bottom, centred in both cases and in light-coloured capital letters. Both posters make use of a recessive and subdued palette of colours that reinforces the gloomy nature of the scenes depicted.

## THE GERMANS ARE DEPICTED AS SAVAGES CAPABLE OF THE WORST ATROCITIES, ANNIHILATORS OF FAMILY, HARMONY AND HAPPINESS

*Shoulder Arms!* was a film that was both critical of the war and at the same time moving, a mix of pacifism and exaltation of war. The film satirises the Prussian military stereotypes and, at the same time, accepts certain aspects of the military logic. Brunetta (2011: 246) suggests that "in the panorama of American war movies, *Shoulder Arms!* shows that, beyond the American's acceptance of the military duty on the basis of the social pyramid, there exists, above all, the hope for peace. In this sense, Chaplin triumphed where Griffith had failed and offers the best interpretation possible of the intention of the American government and nation which, even while it dons the uniform, has no sympathy for the military warrior spirit, and declares itself ready at

Figure 5

any time for a humanitarian solution to the conflicts between peoples."

In the two versions of the film poster we find Chaplin dressed as a soldier, clutching a gun and wearing an army helmet. Both are based on an illustration with the title of the film and the name of its star in red at the bottom, but without interfering with the iconic image, which will thus be easily remembered. The text is kept to a minimum so that the image carries the full impact. The result is a warm atmosphere in spite of the presence of the gun, which contrasts with the actor's smile and cheerful pose.

Also among these films is *Heart of Humanity,* a picture from 1918 directed by Allen Holubar, which tells the story of a family separated by the Great War. The protagonist is an American woman who is horrified by the ravages of war when

she becomes a nurse and is posted overseas. The film's poster contrasts with the harshness of the film. The featured image is a large red heart behind the silhouetted picture of the female protagonist, who in turn holds her hand over her heart. The illustration of the angel that flanks the title softens the tone of the graphic composition, which is further enhanced by the elegant, feminine typeface used, quite unusual for the period. The result is a very sweet, feminine poster that contrasts with the brutality of the war and which contains no elements that could be associated with conflict.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The posters for films produced in the United States from 1914 to 1918 reflect the nature of the film, either through the images (nearly always illustrations or drawings) or through the headings and advertising phrases they contain. Colours also became an important language for the creation of a particular atmosphere, along with the realistic or symbolic composition represented in them.

Posters for films on the war or with war themes used certain codes in which patriotic images exalting moral values predominated. Many resorted to common clichés about warfare, such as troops advancing, or the flag flying. They foreground the hero, represented in the figure of the soldier whose mission is to protect the weak. Posters for official films produced by the Committee on Public Information depict soldiers fighting to defend freedom and justice.

Posters for pictures that addressed the theme of the Great War but that were not actually war films made use of certain codes characterised more than anything by affection and compassion, with a conventional depiction that appealed to mainstream audiences, employing figures and compositions that were understandable to the masses. They presented stereotypes and emotions like family love, love of nation or personal affection.

In both cases figurative images were imposed, as these were more familiar to mainstream audiences, and reflected values indicative of the story told in the film. They were clearly recognisable, with flat colours and font types that were often designed by hand.

Posters that combined text and image were far more common than those based only on illustrations or words, as the interaction between the two elements made it possible to communicate the message more effectively because any potential ambiguity in the images was thus avoided. However, the image on the poster was the main element, and the title was the most obvious textual component. Textual content was very short, kept to a minimum, as all the work was left to the illustrations. In the first decades of cinema it was hard to find posters containing more textual information than the title of the film. Later, the names of the film stars, directors and producers began to be included, used as a way of "branding" the pictures. Little by little, tag-lines began being included on posters.

The text generally ran across the breadth of the poster. The title usually appeared in the bottom third of the poster, although in some cases it was placed in the top third. The film's title tended to be the largest text, although after the establishment of the "star system" it was not uncommon to see posters on which the actor's name was larger.

There was also a tendency to use capital rather than lower-case letters, block letters rather than cursive and sans-serif rather than Roman fonts. However, any font style might be used on a film poster provided that it responded to the persuasive and communicative needs pursued.

In terms of the use of colour, generally and with very few exceptions, the most common palette was recessive and subdued, in an effort to create a gloomy atmosphere that would evoke the brutality of the conflict. Warm colours were used for the purposes of contrast or dramatic exaltation.

The graphic design of these posters aimed above all to create an impact, using dominant images that would help viewers to remember the film much better in spite of their limited exposure to the poster. The main objective of the poster was thus to "leave an effective mark that would serve to remember the product easily, and instil in [the viewer] a series of unconscious values that would aid the persuasive function" (GÓMEZ, 2002: 214). In the case analysed here, these unconscious values were, on the one hand, affection, love of nation and love of family and, on the other, bravery, patriotism, heroism, rejection of the Germans, etc. All of this facilitated the creation of an imaginary of war that would be consolidated decades later with the Second World War. ∎

## NOTES

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## THE IMAGINARY OF WAR AS DEPICTED IN AMERICAN FILM POSTERS FROM 1914 TO 1918

### Abstract

The objective of this article is to offer an analysis of the posters for the most prominent movies filmed in the United States during the First World War (1914-1918) that have any kind of military conflict as their main theme. This analysis will make it possible to identify the existence of a particular graphic style associated with military conflict that contributed to the construction of an imaginary of war, expressed in a series of film posters that exemplify that style. The films produced and released in the United States during this period can be divided into three main categories: historical war films; government war films; and commercial pictures, generally characterised by a more pacifist message. For all three categories film posters played a key role, not only from a commercial point of view, but also in the creation of an intentional denotative discourse, whether social, political or even philosophical.

### Key words

Film poster; First World War; Imaginary of war; CPI; Committee on Public Information; Pacifist films; Government films.

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## EL IMAGINARIO BÉLICO A TRAVÉS DE LOS CARTELES DEL CINE NORTEAMERICANO ENTRE 1914 Y 1918

### Resumen

El objetivo del presente artículo es ofrecer una aproximación a los carteles de las principales películas filmadas en Estados Unidos durante el período en el que transcurre la Primera Guerra Mundial (1914-1918) y que tienen como tema principal cualquier tipo de conflicto bélico. El estudio nos permite determinar la existencia de una gráfica específica de la guerra, la cual permitió la construcción de un imaginario bélico, manifestado a través de una serie de carteles cinematográficos seleccionados a modo de ejemplo. Durante este período el cine realizado y estrenado en Estados Unidos presenta una triple vertiente: de un lado tendríamos el cine bélico historicista, de otro el cine bélico oficialista y, finalmente, el cine comercial, que presenta un carácter más pacifista. En las tres corrientes el cartel cinematográfico desempeñó un papel esencial, no solo desde el punto de vista comercial, sino también en la creación de discurso intencionado, de carácter denotativo, ya fuera de índole social, política o incluso filosófica.

### Palabras clave

Cartel cinematográfico; Primera Guerra Mundial; imaginario bélico; CPI; Comité de Información Pública; cine pacifista; cine oficialista.

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