# Propagandizing Propaganda: Interview with Aleksandar Macasev

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*The Joseph Goebbels(TM) project, the brainchild of Aleksandar Macasev, is a multimedia attack on the information and disinformation glut that uses the infamous Nazi minister of propaganda and enlightenment as its poster child. Dredging up the Nazi past is always charged, but plastering Belgrade's streets with posters featuring Goebbels is asking for trouble. Here Macasev (who was graduated from the faculty of architecture, University of Belgrade, in 1998 and now teaches interactive design at the BK Academy of Arts in Belgrade) addresses the issues raised and the responses received. More information on Macasev's work can be found on Black Pixel.*

 *This project was part of BELEF 05 (Belgrade Summer Festival), visual arts selection (curated by Anica Tucakov).*

**Heller: Why did you launch the Joseph Goebbels(TM) project?**

I had been thinking a lot about the nature of mass communication and contemporary media culture because I had been working for a number of advertising agencies. The conclusion I reached (and it may seem obvious to some) was that the truth has become totally irrelevant in the present state of mass-media culture. The first obvious thing that came to my mind was propaganda. And when you say the word "propaganda," it is highly possible that the image of Joseph Goebbels will pop into your mind. I like to use icons, so I decided to try and use the icon of propaganda—Goebbels—to say something about media. First I made a small web art piece called, "Unstable Portrait of Joseph Goebbels", which was exhibited at the WebArt festival in Podgorica, Montenegro. That piece drew some attention and it was included in a selection of artwork for Hz magazine, so I figured I could pursue the idea further, this time in the form of an advertising campaign–the very means that I am talking about.

**Heller: Goebbels may not be known to many in the current generation. Why didn't you base your iconic image on Hitler himself?**

I think that Goebbels is becoming more known to the current generation because of the 60th anniversary of the fall of fascism and the movie Downfall. That movie is very important for my concept because all the famous fascist villains were represented as human beings.

Why not Hitler? Hitler's iconic image will always be remembered as an ultimate 20th century villain. No more, no less. Joseph Goebbels was the media mastermind, not Hitler. On the other hand, I was fascinated by Goebbels: an ultimate opportunist. He was a left-wing (almost Communist) activist at the beginning. Realizing that he didn't need a weathervane to tell which way the wind was blowing, he switched to a much more plausible option: the fascist one. And he was a totally non-Aryan type: crippled, refused from the army service, black-haired and brown-eyed. But he had a hypnotizing voice of a messiah–spooky, but fascinating. You can easily recognize the type in many of today's politicians and media personas.

**Heller: By elevating Goebbels as an icon of information and disinformation, might you be creating a hero rather than a villain?**

I am not trying to achieve either of the above, but part of the point is that I can create a heroic icon out of a villain, by using the power of an iconic advertising image. You place a convincing huge outdoor image in front of the masses, presented in the form of a positive campaign, and people are likely to perceive the image as heroic. But I think the majority of the people who saw the campaign still perceived him as a villain. My attitude in the whole project was to avoid dichotomies: villain-hero, truth-lie, good-bad ? I am just offering imagery and a broad statement. Joseph Goebbels is much more about the Joseph-Goebbels state of media culture and not about the man himself.

This is where I get concerned about unintended consequences. Advertising plays on ambiguities and the public's lack of long-term memory. When you say you are able to make a hero out of a villain—even to show it can be done—doesn't that mean that some people will succumb to the myth? Isn't this a little like creating Frankenstein's monster?

Well, all this seems like playing with fire, and I was very aware of all that when I started it. I will say it again: it is not about the particular man; it is about media culture. He is just an iconic carrier of the idea. People are very often fascinated by Nazi iconography, but they are ashamed to admit that. Talking about monsters: Joseph Goebbels was a monster, according to the historical documents. Are we capable to look in the face of the monster and recognize ourselves and the society we live in?

**Heller: Do you really believe that the way propaganda was practiced under Goebbels is the same as what is practiced today in politics, government and commerce?**

I don't personally know what kind of propaganda was practiced during Goebbels' era, I can only read documents and see images ("history" is just a bunch of documents and vague personal memories that I don't want to accept as the ultimate truth). But based on my reading and my experience with the present media culture, I believe propaganda is more or less the same now, as it was then.

The famous Goebbels' quote, "A lie repeated a thousand times becomes a truth," can be applied to any contemporary mass-media activity. Let's say that you, many times, see a soap advertisement that will make your skin look younger, and it is made of purely natural ingredients. After a while, you may want to buy it and try it. You will not be upset if your skin doesn't get younger and if you discovered that the soap is made of synthetic chemicals. You

bought the idea and that's enough. The actual truth/lie has nothing to do with it. To paraphrase Goebbels, " A message repeated a thousand times becomes the truth." Which means that everything and nothing is truth. Ergo–there is no truth.

**Heller: Be honest, can this kind of art/design project truly have an impact on people? Isn't commercial branding such an integrated part of life that any attempt to critique it in this way is futile?**

Contemporary art in general has very little impact on the broader audience. Mass-media and graphic communication, however, have a greater impact, and that's why I try to use it in art. I think the greatest and broadest impact has the political activity in epic tones broadcasted to the millions. A series of performances by Marina Abramovic will move a lot of art lovers, critics and theoreticians. The latest Diesel campaign, however, will move a horde of fashion victims, trendy teenagers and some common people. The speech of George W. Bush about ultimate evil coming from the east will move half a world (ok, a third of the world). My intention with Joseph Goebbels was activist in nature, but basically it was artistic.

**Heller: What are you hoping to accomplish? Are you saying that people must be aware that they are being lied to, or is there a deeper message?**

The power of the media is such that people often believe what they are told. That's the power of media. You cannot see with your own eyes or experience personally every single detail about some news that you have heard or seen. In theory, you can choose to believe in it or not by using your common sense. My message is that there is no truth or lie. Everything is just a story or a message and you can choose to believe in it or accept it. Healthy skepticism for a healthier life.

I remember my professor of geometry who once said: "Don't believe everything I tell you. You have to try it yourself." I was shocked: "But, geometry is a very exact and unquestionable discipline," I said. "Exactly. Especially because of that."

**Heller: Okay, I understand where you're going, but I still wonder what your moral responsibility is. Is it to make people aware they are being duped and that all hope for truth is lost? Is it to stimulate people to be more proactive in what they accept as truth and to fight for greater truth? Or are you simply being kind of nihilistic in saying here it is, do what you will?**

The bottom line of the Joseph Goebbels project is: Joseph Goebbels' methods of propaganda were very efficient and are the most remembered. There is always a moral responsibility in communicating messages to the broader audience. I have taken a relatively morally indifferent position, if such a thing is possible at all. Indifferent in terms of not accepting black/white view of the world. I have offered imagery and challenged the audience's moral and common sense. The imagery is a portrait of Joseph Goebbels made of randomly chosen media company logos, logo of the campaign that is four loudspeakers that resembles Nazi iconography and the title which is Joseph Goebbels, a sort of a trademark. I will quote disclaimer from the Joseph Goebbels website: "Joseph Goebbels deals with

nature of media and mass communication and it doesn't intend to propagate principles of Nazism or any similar ideology. If you get a different impression after visiting this web page, that's your problem." Responsibility of the consumer.

Before the campaign started, we wrote a letter to the Jewish community in Serbia stating that this is a work of art and it has nothing to do with promoting Nazi values. The answer was: "We are not for it and we are not against it." Good enough.

**Heller: Now that the Soviet bloc has turned capitalist, what has changed in terms of the propaganda?**

Let us clear something up first: we talk much about propaganda, but it is actually about media culture. Propaganda has always very negative connotations, while media culture has not. Media culture uses almost all the principles of propaganda.

It is interesting that you ask me about Soviet bloc, the ultimate nemesis of the American democratic system. As I see it, capitalism and communism are forms of economic system. But capitalism is more "economical" phenomena (a natural one I may add) while communism is more political and ideological. This is very roughly considered because borders between politics, ideology and economy are more than blurred.

Russian switch from socialism to capitalism changed nothing in terms how media culture functions. Only imagery is not so "totalitarian" any more. But let's go back to America for a moment. When you have lost your "ultimate nemesis" you had to invent a new one: evil coming from the Middle East. I find Michael Moore's point very interesting: American government is controlling masses by distribution of fear. If I would be a paranoid conspiracy theorist I would say that Michael Moore is an invention of United States government. The best way to control things is to invent them.

I grew up in former Yugoslavia, the only non-aligned country in Europe respected and accepted both by the east and the west. Maybe that's why I like to take a cozy position of not accepting any of the poles in good-evil or truth-lie dichotomies. During the '90s, we faced some sort of totalitarian parody and its very obvious media manipulation. Unfortunately with very bloody consequences.

**Heller: What has been the response to the project? And has it surprised you in any way?**

Oh, there are a whole variety of responses to this. Since Joseph Goebbels was a media campaign, I appeared on a lot of television and radio interviews. The Serbian media did not know how much to praise the work or how harsh to be. The funniest thing was the random old lady asked for the opinion for national television. She said in a low voice "Isn't that a German? Why didn't they put up some of our people?" She probably thought of some "lost" war

criminals that the Hague Tribunal is trying to catch. Art critics had the most boring response. There is a discussion on a Serbian designer's online forum about this being totally confusing and stupid. "Why did he use Vodafone and Microsoft?" I was always more interested in opinion of the journalists of some non-cultural pages and of common people.

I was walking the streets with a friend taking photos of the posters and billboards around the town. There was one guy, probably my age, commonly dressed, completely average looking. He was peeling the posters off the wall. I was taking photographs of him and he didn't react to it. My friend asked, "So, how do you like it?" He said in a completely indifferent voice, "For god's sake this is Joseph Goebbels and my family name is Ishmael." I was stunned. That was actually my first real experience with the ultimate villain-victim relation as is Nazi-Jewish. Like a Stockholm syndrome. I thought that we (note that I say "we" although I am not Jewish) have a capacity after 60 years to maybe try to look at the historical narratives from other perspective. Maybe I was wrong.

I had an interview in a chief police station because of a pile of complaints from disturbed citizens. The inspector (a woman) was very polite. At the end of interview, they all became my fans. I told my American friend I was called into the police station, and he was shocked because he thought you can never be investigated by the police because of your art in democratic countries. I just wonder what would have happened if I had put the Joseph Goebbels image in Times Square?

Reactions from abroad were much more affirmative. I've received a lot of fan mail from the United States. Some people in the Netherlands were intrigued by Joseph Goebbels, but when I met them they were not quite sure if I could create a public campaign in the Netherlands the way I did in Serbia. A Slovenian journalist used the news about my artwork to point out the radical media restrictions of the new Slovenian government. Israeli designer Dan Reisinger, my idol as a teenager, was fascinated and he took some of the posters with him to Israel. That meant a lot to me. Recently the artwork was printed in Print magazine. It was on the cover of the article "Belgrade confidential" about Serbian design.

The valuable part of the whole project is actually the reaction. And to see the difference between my intention and what really happened. The whole media clipping will be published on www.goebbels.info in February or March 2006.

So I can say to all of you now: "Don't believe me: See for yourself."

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**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century (Phaidon Press), The Education of a Comics Artist co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition and The Education of an Art Director (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).