Visual Propaganda – definition, mechanisms and selected influence techniques based on poster analysis

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ABSTRACT
The aim of the analyses presented in this article on social communication and media is the sociotechnical attractiveness of visual propaganda. The author’s theoretical goal is to try to define the term “visual propaganda”. Based on a review of historical definitions and emphasizing the visual channel within this intentionally persuasive communication, the author has identified the contemporary types of visual propaganda messages (static and dynamic) by media from the perspective of technological determinism. The research questions asked concerned the basic mechanisms of propaganda’s influence on the perception, emotions and behavior of recipients, narrowed down to visual channels. The qualitative methods used in the study included a review of the literature and a content analysis of propaganda posters reproduced in the online press. These posters referring to the Russian-Ukrainian war, published in the Polish press shortly after the outbreak of the war in February 2022, constituted the research material. They were arranged according to their persuasive orientation and the identified visual propaganda influence techniques, described in the theoretical part. The theoretical model of persuasive techniques was verified. The results of the study describe the characteristic features of contemporary static visual propaganda messages. It has been shown that the visual propaganda is characterized by extreme emotions and simplification of ideas. As regards propaganda techniques, the one most commonly used is stimulation of emotions like fear, pride and courage. Moreover, the information content is minimal and the reception context is assumed in advance.

KEYWORDS
visual persuasion, propaganda, social influence, poster, Russian-Ukrainian war
The images of kings on coins were minted and then withdrawn from use. Gigantic buildings such as pyramids or triumphal arches were erected and then demolished. Caricatures of gods and kings on walls, papyri, books, leaflets and the press were created and then destroyed. There were also parades, processions and crowds of spectators watching the public administration of punishment that were gathered and then dispersed. These are just some historical examples of fight by images.

Historically, the first method used on a large scale was imaging, followed by visual media with a one-sided message, praising or condemning a given politician or idea. Such methods guaranteed clarity and unambiguity of interpretation by recipients who, not being able to read, could only watch the world. Today, of course, visual propaganda is still alive and well in the public space as political actors use the world of images to shape the perception of potential recipients according to their preferences (Seo, 2020). Many of the old methods remain in use, while the 20th century achievements of media and social communication studies as well as psychology allow us to better understand what underlies the power of iconographic representations in media circulation.

David Welsch in his book *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion* (2013, p. 5) sees the power of primary visual representations in what he calls “visual eulogy.” It is the use of image structures intended to reflect the power and superiority of glorified objects, which are characterized by hyperbolization of visual motifs, e.g. those related to power are presented as strong and powerful through centrality and superiority in composition or size.

The historical conditions of propaganda are the focus of several Polish publications, e.g. books by Łukasz Szurmiński (2009, 2023), and articles by Ewa Szkudlarek-Śmiechowicz (2019) and Marcin Poprawa (2020).

Contemporary visual propaganda can be analyzed in terms of formal features arising from the very nature of the medium and of compositional properties. Both of these areas underline the activation of social influence mechanisms. The article focuses on the visual modality within propaganda techniques and analyzes the phenomenon of visual propaganda, but it is not intended as a historical review. It describes the categories of persuasive orientation in propaganda messages that are aimed at the sense of sight. These categories were verified in a non-representative study of posters reproduced in the Polish media following the outbreak of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022.

**Types of visual propaganda messages**

“The image, in its numerous varieties and types, has become a fundamental element of the culture of the contemporary world. At the same time, its durability and value have become relative” (Zwoliński, 2004, p. 24). The image is dialectical in nature (Mitchell, 2009, 2015), therefore the context of the analysis, indication of the sender, purpose and potential recipients are important here. In this study, image is understood as the central element of propaganda messages, and more specifically, as a static message: street poster reproduced in the online press.

Table 1 presents the types of media that can by analyzed in terms of visual propaganda, based on the typology developed by Osińska (2012), which distinguishes three basic types of visual messages: static, dynamic and interactive. The same typology was also used in the work of the author (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2021) on visual public relations.

Propaganda messages can be divided into static, which are aimed at the recipient’s sense of sight that do not move on their own, and dynamic, which, thanks to the technologies used are perceived as moving in two-dimensional space (e.g. computer screen) or three-dimensional space (e.g. an event in public space). Visual propaganda messages are present in the press, television...
and the Internet, especially in social media, as well as in outdoor media and 3-D material objects displayed in public space.

Table 1 Static and dynamic types of visual propaganda messages by media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propaganda medium aimed at the sense of sight</th>
<th>Static visual message</th>
<th>Dynamic visual message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>press</td>
<td>photograph, infographic</td>
<td>information (moving infographics used in online press)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>television</td>
<td>reportage photograph</td>
<td>video material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social media on the Internet</td>
<td>photo, meme</td>
<td>gif, animation, short video posted on social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outdoor</td>
<td>street poster</td>
<td>poster on LED screen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3D objects in public space</td>
<td>board, installation, sculpture, architecture</td>
<td>special event (e.g. military parade, show trial, demonstration)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author’s own work.

Including the latter is based on the understanding of the medium proposed by the Canadian school of technological determinism, and especially by Marshall McLuhan, who defined medium as an extension and enhancement of human senses. This “extension” can be a person’s clothes or car, but also a design or a designed public space. This approach to the medium in the context of art (including visuality) is discussed by Kukielko-Rogozińska (2014). According to McLuhan, “media cause serious and often unconscious changes in our experience of the world. To counteract this we have to focus on analyzing their influence” (as cited in Kukielko-Rogozińska, 2014, p. 50). In the context of analyzing visual propaganda, this is particularly important because of the concept of the numbing effect of the media extensions of human senses, developed by McLuhan. The concept is explained by evoking the myth of Narcissus, who having lost control over his life, put himself in control of the mirror, which was an extension of his own sight, and as a result fell into deadly stupor: “The mirror reflection took control over him, just like modern extensions take control over us” (Kukielko-Rogozińska, 2014, p. 50).

Media in cultural practice

Technological determinism also refers to looking at the media in the context of cultural practices. Examples include gatherings during which participants carry banners with caricatures of their enemies, prepare protest performances, displays symbols like national flags, and dress in colors reflecting their identity (e.g. uniforms at a parade). In addition, today everything is filmed and spread on social media or shown on television, e.g. reports from the regime’s propaganda parade (Dayan & Katz, 2008), which become a media event.

Thus, we watch three-dimensional visual messages as if in the field, in public space. Initiated by a propagandist, media events are reflections of cultural turmoil in social space: “Media events affect the international image of the society in which they take place. (…) Media events socialize citizens to the political structure of society” (Dayan & Katz, 1994, p. 201). They influence public ceremony, collective memory, diplomacy and the position of leaders. An important element of event space design is placing posters, banners and flags in it. In moments of historical importance (e.g. the outbreak of war) the media not only report social changes like protests or other forms of civic activism, but also the activity of public institutions interfering in the social environment.
For McLuhan, media is everything that enhances and intensifies a bodily organ or sense (including sight) and its functions. It expands the reach and increases the effectiveness of the body, acting as fillers which allow us to organize and interpret our social existence. The Canadian theorist anticipated not only the era of the global village, but also the triumph of the image culture. In his words, rendered by Kukielko-Rogozinśka, “the new race of visually oriented discoverers of time and space emerged from the ‘caverns’ of Guttenberg’s technology” (McLuhan, 2005; after Kukielko-Rogozinśka, 2014, p. 133).

The contextuality of visuality technology becomes crucial for the analysis of the phenomenon of media images (Rogowski, 2014). In the case of this study, the context is propaganda. Therefore, as shown in Table 1, a visual event becomes a dynamic medium addressed to the sense of sight, which may be initiated by a propagandist. Examples include a war parade, a protest in front of an embassy and a performance by activists, such as dousing themselves with paint or public self-immolation.

In current media studies, there is a noticeable niche in academic reflection on the development of old propaganda techniques, particularly in the context of the intensification of propaganda after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. There is a visible lack of organized thought showing the influence mechanism of redefined propaganda messages, which, after all, have evolved with the development of the media themselves. It is worth taking an conjunctive strategy approach to the models describing this multidimensional phenomenon, using terms derived from visual communication and developmental history of propaganda but also social influence psychology.

**Methodology, questions and research objective**

This study poses two research questions: (1) What are the basic mechanism of propaganda influence on the perception, emotions and behavior of recipients, narrowed down to visual channels? and (2) What are the characteristic features of static visual propaganda messages ranked according to persuasive orientations?

This study is both theoretical and empirical in nature. Its aim is to examine the phenomenon of propaganda in terms of social influence mechanisms directed to the sense of sight. The text consists of a summary of the subsequent stages of the analysis conducted by the author. In the first stage, the static and dynamic types of propaganda messages aimed at the sense of sight were analyzed, which was then followed by an attempt to define propaganda based on a review of the literature. In the next stage, four basic propaganda techniques were described in terms of the categories proposed by Renee Hobbs (2021) but used in a novel way, i.e. referring strictly to visual messages. Finally, the basic orientations of persuasive influence techniques as identified by Grażyna Habrajska (2020) were discussed based on the research corpus, i.e. anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian posters published in Polish online press in April 2022, shortly after the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine. In this part, the analysis of the literature was combined with the content analysis of the press (Klepka & Idzik, 2019). Also, the theoretical model of visual persuasion orientations developed by Habrajska was verified with reference to current media phenomena occurring at an important historical moment.

**Posters – research sample**

Due to the variety of signs used in different types of visual propaganda messages (characterized in Table 1), only the static medium of outdoor poster was selected for the study.

As noted by Ferenc, Dymarczyk and Tomczyński (2011): “The factor common in all posters is the clarity of the message and the maximum restriction of interpretative freedom. The recipient of the poster is to perceive it in the way intended by the sender” (p. 13). The study of the literature...
and the resulting tally of selected models of visual persuasion are intended to enable an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of influence of iconic media images.

As the latest armed conflict in Europe, the war in Ukraine is a current topic of propaganda communication. Therefore, the author used posters related to this conflict, published in online news media two months after the outbreak of the war, as research material. The study was conducted in April 2022. Due to the media perspective of the enquiry, the sources chosen for the study came from the opinion-forming daily “Rzeczpospolita”, which presented the analyzed photographs of pro-Ukrainian posters, and the i.pl. news portal. Of course, this does not exhaust the possible research sample. However, while the scope is limited to online press, the two sources have different publishers.

Selected visual motifs used in war posters present in the public space in both Poland and Ukraine were discussed according to seven persuasive orientations. The sample is not representative and should be considered as merely an example of the visual propaganda techniques indicated in the theoretical part. In April 2022, it was these selected media that presented numerous reproductions of Ukrainian war posters in their online galleries. “The expressiveness of the poster is based on the Manichean vision of the world. The poster clearly specifies what is good and what is evil, therefore the presented content is polar, bright and grotesque, without any space that could be misinterpreted by the recipient, i.e. understood contrary to the intentions of the poster’s creator” (Ferenc, Dymarczyk, & Tomczyński, 2011, p. 13). Although the corpus of research material is strictly defined and limited, learning about the visual techniques characterizing the modern propaganda war poster may become an inspiration to expand the scope of the study. Despite being strongly rooted in the historical context and the ongoing media narrative regarding the war in Ukraine, the present article aims to become a contribution to a broader inquiry into the processes of visual propaganda.

**Defining propaganda in the context of visual media**

In order to undertake an attempt to define propaganda focusing on the influence techniques targeting the sense of sight, it is worth referring to the review of historical definitions cited in the international educational project on propaganda “Mind Over Media”, financed by grants from the European Union (Mind Over Media, n.d.). This current online education project on propaganda uses numerous visual messages and presents a changing understanding of the phenomenon over the years, from the mass media era to today’s online media.

As defined by political scientist Bruce Lannes Smith and media scholar Harold Lasswell, authors of *Propaganda, Communication and Public Opinion*, in the 1940s “Propaganda is one means by which large numbers of people are induced to act together” (Mind Over Media, n.d.). Harold Lasswell, today considered as the founding father of the structural-functional trend in media studies (Mrozowski, 2020), is also the author of the concept of rational propaganda and the so-called subcutaneous influence model (McQuail, 2007). In the 1960s, sociologist Jacques Ellul, author of *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* saw the phenomenon as “a form of information that panders to our insecurities and anxieties” (Mind Over Media, n.d.). In 1980s, media scholars Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell in their book *Propaganda and Persuasion* stated that “Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Mind Over Media, n.d.), whereas for the techno-pessimist Neil Postman, author of *Technopoly*, it was “intentionally-designed communication that invites us to respond emotionally, immediately, and in a either-or manner” (Mind Over Media, n.d.). In his definition from the 1990s, media expert and marketing specialist Richard Alan Nelson, author of *A Chronology and
Glossary of Propaganda in the United States, uses the terminology of communication science and psychology to depict propaganda as “a form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels” (Mind Over Media, n.d.).

Media historians Steven Luckert and Susan Bachrach emphasize that „Propaganda appears in a variety of forms. It is strategic and intentional as it aims to influence attitudes, opinions and behaviors” (Mind Over Media, n.d.). The authors add that propaganda can be beneficial or harmful, use truth, half-truths or lies because it uses our deepest values, fears, hopes and dreams. In turn, the 21st century media scholar Stanley Cunningham, author of The Idea of Propaganda emphasizes that “Propaganda is indifferent to truth and truthfulness, knowledge and understanding; it is a form of strategic communication that uses any means to accomplish its ends” (Mind Over Media, n.d.).

Co-creator of the Mind Over Media in EU project, Renee Hobbs from the University of Rhode Island, who is a long-term promoter of media education, co-organizer of international campaigns within NAMLE (National Association for Media Literacy Education), and the author of textbooks Media Literacy in Action (2021) and Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age (2020), stresses the importance of context in understanding propaganda communication. She points out that propaganda may be harmful when it perpetuates stereotypes and conspiracy theories, intentionally supports terrorism or incites war (Hobbs, 2021, pp. 125–128). Propaganda can also have entertainment functions, in which case it takes such forms as war films or memes, and perform educational functions through e.g. social campaign posters, and even support art through visual activism (Szcześniak, 2017) and street art.

Looking for the advantages of the discussed phenomenon, early 20th century scholar Edward Bernays in his book Propaganda, published for the first time in 1928, perceives propaganda as a democratic practice, or in his words: “The mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale is propaganda, in the broad sense of an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine” (2020, p. 29). Among the visual tools of propaganda, Bernays, who is considered one of the founding fathers of public relations, mentions cinema, television and press photographs (especially of politicians) as well as organizing and showing special events to the public, particularly in museums and schools (Bernays, 2020, pp. 130–140). The historical context is therefore important, especially when the phenomenon is discussed by researchers from Central and Eastern Europe, where propaganda not free media ruled during the communist era. As Hobbs writes (2021): “The term propaganda is situational and contextual, and it adapts in response to changes in technology and society” (p. 128).

Author’s definition
Contemporary homo videns (Sartori, 2009), living in the iconic culture and surrounded by screens, is in the crosshairs of visual propaganda. Today’s media consumer is attacked by numerous stimuli at every turn. If we add to this the claim, often repeated by psychologists (Francuz, 2013; Młodkowski, 2015) that most information is acquired by humans through the sense of sights, it can be concluded that we are witnessing the phenomenon of visualization of social life (Spencer, 2013). As Sztompka, a sociologist of visuality states: “In the world so saturated by images, looking at images becomes a more frequent activity than reading texts” (Sztompka, 2012, p. 12). Many studies by representatives of different sciences (particularly, art history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics and media studies) have found
that numerous phenomena of contemporary culture are indeed characterized by the primacy of visuality (Chmielecki, 2018).

Taking into account the primacy of visuality and pictoriality1 in contemporary communication and based on the definitions collected for the Mind Over Media project, the author undertook an attempt to define visual propaganda. The definition reads as follows: Visual propaganda is a communication technique that induces large numbers of people to act through information encoded in the image and based on anxiety and uncertainty. It consists in systematically and intentionally disseminated attempts to shape visual perception. For this purpose, images are manipulated, which influences emotions, cognition and especially behaviors of recipients, seen as reactions desired by the propagandist. Visual propaganda is intentionally designed persuasive communication, which is strictly one-way and not necessarily based on facts, but encourages immediate affective, polarized and unambiguous reactions, influencing the attitudes and actions of recipients through static or dynamic media channels. It is a form of non-objective strategic communication, dependent of the social and technological context and using all visual means to achieve its goals.

It should not be confused with public relations, i.e. ethical communication by organizations based on credibility and institutional strategy (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2021), outdoor advertising or social advertising in visual channels, which often reveals the sender, e.g. non-profit organizations (Łukasiuk, 2014) and serve pro-social, humanitarian or aid purposes.

**Propaganda techniques**

So, how to recognize propaganda techniques and not identify them with PR or advertising? PR specialists care about credibility in dialogue-oriented communication, act in the long term with view to building a relationship, and are guided by ethics. Propagandists do the opposite. Social advertising raises awareness or warns recipients of something, pursues social goals, does not attack different or hostile attitudes, and does not demonize opponents unless they are perpetrators of violence. Advertising refrains from extreme simplification of ideas and often encourages reflection (e.g. social campaign against drinking and driving).

Based on an analysis of contemporary visual and social media, researcher Renee Hobbs (2021), distinguishes four basic propaganda techniques. Firstly, propaganda activates strong emotions. Hence visual channels disseminate images of violence (war fighting), suffering (photos of victims) or attacking the innocent and the weak (wounded children and animals, destroyed nature). The images refer to negative primary emotions: fear, anger, disgust, sadness, but also joy, often combined with the sense of previous loss or hope for the future. The fear of suffering and the stereotyping of opponents are intended to move and persuade viewers.

The world of iconic signs in visual propaganda is black and white, to put it metaphorically. There is a clear division into good and bad guys, who should provoke clear and strong emotions in viewers. In their latest publication, presenting one hundred techniques of social influence, Doliński and Grzyb (2022), identify the emotional states that most effectively induce people to behave in accordance with the intentions of the persuaders. These are: sense of guilt and shame, embarrassment, anxiety and fear, regret, anger and disappointment, but also relief, humor and good mood.

The second propaganda technique is the simplification of information and ideas, achieved by simple visualizations of linear stories with an unambiguous ending, which are based on facts, half-truths or lies. The repetition of visual metaphors, simplifications and schematic presentation

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1 The use of the word pictorial in the definition is intended to refer to the work of W.T.T. Mitchell in publications and translation by Polish cultural scholars (cf. Kurz & Zaremba, 2015).
of images (e.g. historical references to photographs of dictators, liars, saviors of the nation, but also artists or fictional pop culture characters), as well as common symbols like blood, skull, star or sun, do not contribute much, if at all, to the viewers’ knowledge and represent poor quality. An example of this is a meme with a blurry screenshot of a scene from a movie (e.g. *The Game of Thrones*) or a political speech with an added comment (e.g. Adolf Hitler with his hand raised in the Nazi salute). Such messages have low artistic value because they allow minimal interpretative freedom: it is clear at first sight what they are about. This is achieved by the use of iconic signs and highly realistic images as well as avoidance of abstraction and ambiguity of images.

Visual propaganda is supposed to be eye-catching and easy to remember and copy in other media e.g. by taking photos, creating similar memes or collages and posting on social media profiles. Excessive simplification of visualized information does not encourage critical viewing and reduces the complexity of the imaged world. As a result, the message becomes more effective in producing quick and unambiguous visual perception and its intended effects.

The third propaganda technique consists in appealing to the needs and values shared by recipients. The sender makes a direct appeal to a specific social group, race, nationality, ethnic identity and aspiration groups to ensure that the message is received in the most personal way by the target recipients who identify with these values. In the context of visual messages, this involves the presence of symbols that are important for a given group, e.g. flags or emblems, images of people and places related to its history (leaders, significant places). The figures of people presented in such messages are intended to remind the recipients of their identity by being “typical” or even “stereotypical” representatives of a given group. For instance, a little girl representing the group of Ukrainian children suffering in the war will typically have blond hair tied in a ponytail or braided and wear a skirt.

Finally, an effective propaganda technique is to contrast good and evil and strongly attack the opponent, one-dimensionally shown as aggressive, cowardly, cruel or stupid. The most controversial features of the opponent’s identity are visualized and enhanced by hyperbole and exaggeration of mimics or gestures in order to provoke the reaction: “it’s either us or them.” Discrediting, disfiguring the opponent’s face or body parts and cultivating negative visual features is intended to clearly attribute evil to the opponent, and evoke hatred or exclude indifference towards the person shown.

Therefore, if propaganda changes its form depending on the social context, then not only its historical conditions (the primacy of visual messages in the history of propaganda communication), but also the modern technologies of visual communication dominating the media (Mirzoeff, 2016; Aiello & Parry, 2020) should be important areas of media studies. The primacy of visual activities in culture derives from their communicative attractiveness.

According to Rogowski (2014, p. 17–21), visuality has great information potential. This refers to both static images reproduced by traditional media and visual data coming from the observation of dynamic matter or carnality in the public space (e.g. female activists with their bodies covered in blood lying in front of a Russian embassy). Conveying meanings through the visual channel not only engages the senses and attracts the recipient, but also has entertainment potential, stimulates, intrigues and arouses emotions (extremely positive or extremely negative in the case of propaganda). Finally, visuality also represents sociotechnical attractiveness, the ability to influence recipients through images.

**Orientations in persuasion theories and the propaganda poster**

According to Grażyna Habrajska (2020) and her proposed review of the forms of communication influencing the recipient (i.e. persuasion and manipulation), there are seven orientations
organizing the theory of attitude change. Based on the studies by the renowned authors of the ELM model, Richard Petty and John Cacioppo (1981), the researcher enumerates the following orientations organizing the vast field of contemporary persuasion theories in the communication model: conditioning and modeling orientation, message and learning orientation, perception and evaluation orientation, motivation orientation, attribution orientation and self-persuasion orientation (Habrajska, 2020, p. 79). Later in the article, all these orientations will be discussed in terms of the employed propaganda techniques, as identified by Hobbs (2021) and presented in this text (i.e. activation of strong emotions, simplification of information and ideas, appealing to needs and values, and attacking the opponent), using the selected media material as illustration.

The research material in question comes from two sources: an article by photojournalist Paweł Rochowicz in the opinion daily “Rzeczpospolita” (Rochowicz, 2022) and a photo gallery prepared by Tomasz Dereszynski on the i.pl portal, which is an information and entertainment platform within the Polska Press Group (Dereszynski, 2022). The selection was informed by the uniformity of the display time (April 2022), the topicality of the communication activities (the ongoing war in Ukraine) and the informative and opinion-forming nature of the medium. Another important factor was the availability of the research material, which had previously operated in public space on Ukrainian streets, i.e. on a point-by-point basis. Reproduction in online media greatly increased the reach of these propaganda posters. However, due to the adopted goal of this study the conducted analysis did not cover the text present in some posters, which was in Ukrainian. It is one of the limitations of the present study, which is further discussed in the summary.

Each subsequent orientation is discussed with reference to an example of a poster and to the typology of propaganda techniques developed by Renee Hobbs. It should be emphasized that the examples of posters cited exemplify the orientations discussed, but do not exhaust the volume of the research sample. However, they may be used for further inquiry.

**Conditioning and modeling orientation**

The conditioning and modeling orientation is the first one listed by Habrajska (2020, p. 79–89). Within this orientation persuasion is used to reward “proper” opinions and behaviors and sanction those that are contradictory to the sender’s expectations. How can this be shown in a poster? Assuming that people strive to maximize profits and minimize losses in the social world and that they seek positive reinforcement, then a war poster should show military success. The poster with the slogan “Glory to the Heroes”, hanging on the Lviv Opera building and dedicated to the defenders of Snake Island (Rochowicz, 2022), was clearly designed this way.

In the upper part of the poster we can see a group of men in Ukrainian army uniforms, looking as if they were standing on a green and rocky island seen from a bird’s eye view. A strip of yellow color under the image is the background for an inscription in Ukrainian. The manipulation of composition, the brevity of presentation and the focus on showing the correct civic attitudes in a country attacked by the enemy are clearly visible. The soldiers stand in a tight, stable group, some smiling and looking straight ahead, all uniformly dressed and depicted not as individuals by as a model community. The techniques used here are reduction or simplification of information, referring to group values and activation of emotions, in this case, national pride.

**Message and learning orientation**

Orientation towards communication and learning requires visual attention and predisposition to understand persuasive content on the part of the recipient. It shows the so-called “logical proof” and contrasts emotions (Habrajska, 2020, p. 81) so that the message becomes obvious after
visualizing evidence pointing to its correct reading, favored by the sender. In the case of a poster, this is achieved by limiting the text and using basic forms of representation such as a drawing in order to convey the logical proof to the widest possible audience, even those with minimal communication competences.

An example of a message-oriented poster is “Gypsies stole a horse”, which makes a playful allusion to the abandonment of military equipment by Russian soldiers and its takeover by Ukrainian citizens (Rochowicz, 2022). The poster is in red, which attracts attention and contrasts with the black silhouette of the horse pulling a tank with the letter Z. Its clear message reduces information and attacks the opponent, i.e. the Russian war machine, which is defeated by the agricultural power of Ukraine.

Among the posters published on i.pl website, collected by Dereszyński (2022), the learning orientation is represented by poster no. 7, with a horizontal composition consisting of two cells like from a comic book. There is no slogan, but in the left cell we can see a boxing bag in Ukrainian colors (yellow and blue, drawn with a satirical line) and Vladimir Putin hitting it with red boxing gloves. The figure of the dictator is not signed, but the characteristic features of his appearance are well marked: closely-set eyes, a large hairless head, no smile, bare torso and military trousers. A similar image of Putin was presented in official photos, showing him half-naked on a horse in a winter Russian landscape. Here, he is a boxer beating the bag – Ukraine. However, the cell on the right shows the bag hitting him back in the face, causing him to turn red and lower his boxing guard. These two drawings convince the recipients how the military conflict will end for the attacking opponent. The poster also has entertainment value.

Perception and evaluation orientation

According to Habrajska (2020, p. 82), orientation towards perception and evaluation, focuses on the way the message is interpreted by recipients and takes their point of view into account. The propagandist uses knowledge about the existing attitudes of the audience (e.g. pro-Ukrainian) and juxtaposes their views with those presented in the poster. This orientation is also based on the effects of contrast and assimilation, two perceptual distortions known to psychologists.

In the first stage of reception, we evaluate the persuasive message by relating it to ourselves. If it is close to our hearts and consistent with our beliefs, we assimilate the message, but if the attitude presented in the message is distant, then we become even more antagonized toward it. When looking at propaganda posters recipients are not supposed to consider correcting their attitude, especially when faced with the black-and-white posters collected by Rochowicz (2022) titled “The spirit of freedom is eager to fight” and “Its truth and strength and freedom”, where the last word in Ukrainian is “volya,” means both freedom and will.

Simple graphics on a white or black background, as if photocopied, show in the center of the composition figures of masked soldiers in helmets (shown from the waist up), facing the viewers, who are supposed to identify with soldiers guarding their security. The poster is not emotional but rather calm in expression, although some anxiety is aroused by the style of the drawings, reminiscent of brutal comics by Frank Miller. However, first of all the poster corresponds to the values and needs of recipients and identifies the group of soldiers fighting for their country. It is not stylized as a professional, digitally processed message, which increases the effect of assimilation in viewers. It gives the impression of being made and reproduced at home, not prepared in a printing house.

The effect of contrast was used in poster no. 1 from the i.pl gallery (Dereszyński, 2022). It is a painted representation of an iceberg in the geographical shape of Ukraine, with a black-and-white ship with the letter Z and two Russian banners stuck in it. Like in a nautical painting, the
horizontal composition is dominated by blue, a shade known from the flag of Ukraine. Only a small, intensely yellow fragment (the northern part of the country) protrudes above the water, but most of the iceberg is hidden under the surface so that the ship has to crash on it and sink, because it is larger than the ship although partly invisible. The axis of the composition is the contrast of the large iceberg, like the one that tragically sank the Titanic, causing its tragedy. The persuasive techniques used here include the simplifying information and appealing to the values of the viewers.

Motivation orientation
Another persuasive orientation is that related to motivation, in which the needs of recipients are considered decisive (Habrajska, 2020, p. 82). As shown by Cialdini (2001), recipients of persuasive communication are guided by commitment and consistency. This means that a person looking at a visual propaganda message is supposed to feel strengthened in their attitude and convinced about their choice, which matches the aims and position of the propagandist. Two examples of this orientation are posters no. 2 and no. 3 from the i.pl collection (Dereszyński, 2022). Both show the supportive, pro-Ukrainian attitude of Polish men and women in the conflict in question. They are done in the style of a street charcoal drawing, using a thin, spontaneous line on a gray background.

The first one presents two female figures, shown half-way, embracing. One is wearing a T-shirt in Polish colors, the other in Ukrainian. They have similar hairstyles (braids associated with the so-called Slavi beauty) but different facial expressions showing emotions. The Polish woman looks into the distance with an expression of surprise, while the Ukrainian buries her sad and suffering face with closed eyes in her companion’s arm. The second poster also refers to cooperation, showing a Ukrainian family of a mother and three children, drawn in Ukrainian colors, under a white and red umbrella. Numerous bombs in the colors of the Russian flag fall around them, but there is none under the umbrella protecting the refugees, shown quite statically, without any panic signaling dynamism. The central figure of the mother is upright, with the youngest child on her left shoulder and the remaining children (a daughter and a son) right next to her. These posters refer to the technique of activating emotions (gratitude for support, courage in the face of the attack) and resonate with the needs and values of recipients. They are attractive from the socio-technical point of view due to the color limitation to white, black and the national colors as well as the minimization of individual features in the presented characters, which strengthens the motivation to help and seek comfort in viewers from Poland and Ukraine, respectively.

Attribution orientation
Attribution orientation convinces recipients that they are actually behaving according to the desired pattern and is based on self-fulfilling prophecy (Habrajska, 2020, p. 82). The propagandist shows in favorable light those who represent the supported attitudes. This can be seen in poster no. 4 from the i.pl gallery, which shows the painted in pastels figures of a male and female Ukrainian soldiers, dressed in camouflage and Ukrainian colors, slightly smiling. They are both holding long guns and looking straight ahead with a slight smile as if posing for a photo. The poster was created in the image of photographs from the Ukrainian front shared on social media. Since attribution has to do with the assignment of meaning, the function of the poster is to maintain the already circulating meanings by rendering motifs known from combatants’ photos as a painting. It shows a close relationship between a man and a woman, their friendship in the face of war. We can observe here activation of emotions (soldiers’ self-control) and appeal to values (friendship, courage) as the main propaganda technique.
Self-persuasion orientation
The attribution orientation discussed above is closely related to self-persuasion orientation (Habrajska, 2020, p. 83), where the key is to persuade in such a way that recipients believe they are persuading themselves, without being forced to do so. An example of this is poster no. 5 (Dereszyński, 2022), where on the left we can see a huge head of Vladimir Putin with a mouth smeared in blood like a vampire. Opposite him, on the right side of the poster, is an elderly woman in a gray and worn-out outfit. Her head is wrapped in a bloody bandage and her hand is behind, holding a little girl in a red coat. The older victim shows Putin the middle finger with her other hand and fearlessly looks straight into the face of the despot, which dominates the civilians.

According to Baele, Boyd and Coan (2020) the use of iconic signs and the repetition of selected rhetorical tropes increases the persuasiveness of images. The posters discussed are devoid of any abstract forms and dominated by visual signs which are easy to read as imitating real objects e.g. human figures such as a political leader or a refugee and material objects like bombs and tanks. The above review of the orientations reveals the bipolarity in the visual representations of the parties of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: the aggressor (the Russian leader, his soldiers and their military equipment), the defenders (Ukrainian soldiers and citizens and their attributes such as guns or animals), and the supporters of the defenders (Poles, civilians). There is no international context, e.g. reference to the role of the US or the EU in the conflict, and no historical narrative broadening the understanding of current events by relating them to past events like the annexation of Crimea or old Polish-Ukrainian conflicts.

The visual propaganda of static media messages such as the posters in question, is dominated by clear symbols like the national colors of the countries involved (yellow and blue for Ukraine, red, blue and white for Russia and white and red for Poland), figures of soldiers and casualties of war (women and children) and the material attributes of war e.g. tanks, warships, weapons and bombs. The interpretation of the event must be unambiguous, ideas and information simplified, needs and references to values clearly defined and directly indicated.

Summary
The article proposes a definition of visual propaganda based on a review of historical definitions but taking into account the context of visuality as transmitting and receiving modality of messages. The classification of persuasive orientations (Habrajska, 2020) was used to make this description helpful in the understanding of the mechanisms of influence in the selected research corpus, which consisted of anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian posters reproduced in the Polish press after the escalation of the war in 2022.

In order to take a critical look at the data obtained, it should be noted that it does not refer to a complete literature review of all existing studies on visual influence. The findings are based on the existing review of definitions (Hobbs, 2021) and emphasize the visual aspect in communication. Answers to two research questions were obtained in the study. The first one identified the basic mechanisms of propaganda influence on the perception, emotions and behaviors of recipients, narrowed down to visual channels. The second indicated the characteristic features of static visual propaganda messages, ranked by dominant persuasive orientation and based on the content analysis of the press presenting propaganda posters.

The analyzed empirical material is current and concerns the conflict which broke out in 2022, when the writing of this text began. Social polarization related to the Russian-Ukrainian war arouses keen interest among media recipients and may also be an inspiration for researchers.
studying the content of media messages. Similar phenomena are also occurring in other countries around the world (Fletcher & Jenkins, 2019). It seems that we are witnessing an increased importance of research on propaganda in times of war taking place near the boarders of the European Union. However, the motif of Poles helping Ukrainian refugees and the changes in European foreign policy observed in recent years make the topic of persuasive influence both becomes both increasingly important and locally contextualized. The classification used in the study and the description of influence techniques may constitute the basis for further research, both transnational and multimedia. It is worth expanding the corpus of research material by adding other messages aimed at the sense of sight, both static (e.g. infographics or press photographs) and dynamic (e.g. video reports and gifts).

The study distinguished several basic persuasive orientations in visual propaganda by applying the classification of Grażyna Habrajska to media analysis. Her conditioning and modeling orientation, learning orientation, perception and evaluation orientation, motivation orientation, attribution orientation, and self-persuasion orientation (Habrajska, 2020, p. 79) were the basis of the description of war posters shown in Polish online press. They were also discussed in terms of the propaganda techniques used (Hobbs, 2021). It has been found that posters often resort to activation of strong emotions, simplification of information and ideas, appealing to needs and values, and attacking the opponent. The first two of the above techniques are the most common. Visual propaganda is filled with extreme emotions, simplified ideas (e.g. the idea of nationality reduced to the symbol of a flag or a leader; patriotism reduced to the figure of a soldier). The analyses conducted have shown that the most frequently used technique is stimulation of emotions such as fear, pride and courage, while information is simplified and the context of its reception is assumed in advance.

In further studies, it would be worth using an in-depth methodology of visual semiotics to describe the levels of meaning that can be interpreted by recipients: denotation, connotation and ideology. The analysis could concern, for instance, the myths of combat, stories of heroes, suffering of victims and help in times of need, activated in visual propaganda. Images in visual propaganda do not function as pure representation, but rather as carriers of a clear message harbored by the propagandist. Today, mimetic reflection and the representation of the world are slowly losing their importance as the basic functions of images. Their mainstay is reportage photography, but in the case of posters we can see the domination of relational and sociotechnical functions over informative.

In our times, globalization and multiplication of images, increasing pluralism as well as cultural and esthetic nomadism make the image-simplifying visual propaganda an attractive form of communicating ideas and values. Thanks to modern technologies of reproduction and creation of messages, it can use images created by pop culture with a certain freedom of borrowing, limited only by law and esthetics. Propaganda campaigns are dominated by the functionality of visual representations: they are supposed to work, arouse emotions, remind about what is important for the sender, indicate patters and blame the opponent. Images circulate between the boundaries of social group, particularly in the case of outdoor posters and their reproductions in social media. They are borrowed and remixed, transmitted and changed, created and co-created for political reasons.

Visual propaganda activates and divides people more that it unites and calms them. It is emotional by reducing social complexity to several leading motifs, repeated over and over again (e.g. national colors). Visual centrism, which organizes the experience of recipients, is the specificity of the visual medium serving propaganda purposes, based on affects and half-truths, offering “safe” unambiguity of the message at the service of a disturbingly practical senders and their sociotechnical goals.
Bibliography


