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Original Citation

Hiles, David (2006) Narrative Manipulation of Images from the Iraq War. In: Narrative, Memory & Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics, Contexts. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 41-53.

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/4898/

4   Narrative Manipulation of Images from the Iraq War

DAVID HILES

> My personal feeling is that citizens of the democratic societies should undertake a course in intellectual self-defence to protect themselves from manipulation and control.   (Noam Chomsky, 1989a)

This paper is offered in the spirit of Noam Chomsky's plea that everyone should undertake a course in Intellectual Self-Defence. Welcome then to ISD101. We will begin with the observation that anyone in the UK who watched the 'breaking news' coverage of the second Gulf war with Iraq, in March 2003, could not have helped noticing that they were often watching live coverage from a battle zone in Iraq, ie. unfiltered, unedited and uncensored images direct from Iraq. On first reflection, this would seem to contradict a key feature of Herman and Chomsky's (1988) well known *Propaganda Model* - that such coverage needed to be heavily filtered and controlled. I will argue that in this new era of 24 hour breaking news it is no longer possible to control broadcast images, but it would seem that with appropriate media briefings the meanings can be 'fixed'. I therefore propose an expansion of the propaganda model, which incorporates Stuart Hall's notion of *fixing the meaning*. This is supported by an analysis of the narrative manipulation of images from the Iraq war over a seven-day period, early in the conflict. This analysis supports my claim that it is not the images that we see that matters, but it is what we are *told* that they mean, that really does matter. This has obvious implications for understanding the inter-relationship between narrative, memory and knowledge.

The Battle for Peoples' Minds

> Truth is the first casualty of war.   (Hiram Johnson)

> Maybe perception is its first fatality.   (Katovsky and Carlson)

Welcome to my introduction to *Intellectual Self Defence 101*. We will be concerned with the role of narrative in the propaganda war - ie. the battle for people's minds. Probably everyone is familiar with the idea that truth is the

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first casualty of war, but what we will be exploring here is the idea that it is perception that maybe the first fatality (Katovsky and Carlson, 2003, p.xi).

My story begins with my return from a short holiday in Canada in March 2003, the second Gulf war with Iraq was well underway. It was 7.30am, Sunday March 23rd, and I was still jet-lagged. Trying to catch up with events, I sat down to watch Sky News. To my astonishment I found myself watching live coverage from a battle zone in Iraq. It was clear that I was watching unfiltered images, i.e. unedited and uncensored news reporting. The notion that nearly all of the broadcast news we watch and listen to, and the newspaper reports we read, are carefully 'filtered' is a key feature of the Propaganda Model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988). On the face of it, what I was witnessing was contrary to their model. I used this model in my teaching of critical issues in cultural psychology, and found it indispensable as a tool to critically engage with the daily flow of news. I was immediately struck by the fact that it no longer seemed to be working. Had the battle for people's minds been lost by those in power? Could we be entering a new era of open news reporting?

Noam Chomsky and the Propaganda Model

> I would hazard a guess that the 'Propaganda Model' is one of the best-confirmed theses in the social sciences.   (Noam Chomsky)

I have long been a fan of Noam Chomsky, especially his dissident views (Barsky, 1997). For more than three decades Chomsky has been a leading critic of American government, American foreign policy, and in particular the part played by the media. He begins his book, *Media Control: The spectacular achievements of propaganda*, with:

> The role of the media in contemporary politics forces us to ask what kind of a world and what kind of a society we want to live in, and in particular in what sense of democracy do we want to be a democratic society. (Chomsky, 2002. p.9)

Chomsky has subjected the media to a sustained institutional analysis. With Ed Herman he developed the Propaganda Model, the essential ingredients of the model being five news 'filters' which are summarized in Table 1. The raw material of news must pass through these successive filters, leaving only the 'cleansed residue' fit to print.

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Table 1:   Herman and Chomsky's Five Filters

1.   Size, **ownership** & profit orientation of the mass media
2.   The **advertising** licence to do business
3.   Sourcing of news items from **government**, business, etc.
4.   **Flak** as a means of disciplining the media
5.   Anticommunism a national religion and control mechanism (ie. the politics of **fear** - terrorism, since 9/11, has replaced communism as the threat)

These five filters directly and indirectly control what is reported, they interact and reinforce one another. They fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and define what is newsworthy in the first place. It is the private ownership of the media, the blatant and subtle influences of advertisers' interests and government interests, the consequent fall-out when these interests are not served, and also what I call the *politics of fear*, that are in control of the news.

Chomsky's position is that these filters constitute a propaganda process, which unfortunately is an inevitable part of any democratic society, what he calls 'necessary illusion', or, the 'manufacture of consent' (Chomsky, 1989b; Chomsky and Barsamian, 2001). The real challenge is to understand and expose this process, to help people become more aware of the inevitable biases in the view of the world that is being offered to us, to 'liberate the mind from orthodoxies'.

My own concerns are less with the institutional practices, but originate from a focus on a critical psychological approach to understanding the human processes of meaning-making, especially with respect to the narrative re-constructions involved. The claim is that we do not simply communicate in narratives, but that we live in narratives, that we think in narratives, and our immediate experience of a world around us is constructed in narrative (Bruner, 1986; Hiles, 2005). This in turn raises the issue of the role played by the circulating narratives in our culture, especially those that emanate from the media. Indeed, are the stories that our media spins for us so persuasive that we are for the most part quite unaware of their influence on our thinking?

Embedded Journalists and the Iraq War

Embedded journalists were the greatest PR coup of the war.
(David Miller, Stirling Media Research)

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It soon became clear to me that what I was watching early on that Sunday morning was the consequence of a policy of emdedded journalists. Here, the award winning journalist, John Kampfner, in his book *Blair's Wars*, describes the situation:

> The twenty-four-hour media day would start in the field, move to London and end in Washington. Everything would be co-ordinated. [..] Such were the technological advances that broadcasters were now able to give real time updates from the front. The Pentagon and Ministry of Defence sought to harness that by 'embedding' reporters with particular units.
>
> This was a new, high-risk venture. The idea was that the 'embeds' would give the vivid, microscopic accounts. The big picture would be set out in a prefabricated warehouse in the middle of the desert. That was Central Command, Centcom, at the Americans' forward military base at Camp as-Saliyah, Doha. It was from a press centre inside the tent, replete with a multi-million-dollar, Hollywood-designed set, that the message was to be coordinated.
>
> (Kampfner, 2003, p.314)

Embedding is not really a new idea, but it is indeed a very new idea to embed journalists together with live satellite broadcasting facilities alongside front-line troops. Undoubtedly, this was a Pentagon policy decision designed to control media coverage of the war. The lessons of the first Gulf war included the difficulties of controlling independent journalists, and the unrestrained broadcasts by *al Jazeera* (for recent documentation and discussion of the issues raised by embedding, and the problems of reporting the war with Iraq in general, see: Katovsky and Carlson, 2003; Miller, 2004; Roberts, 2004).

I was sufficiently convinced that this policy of embedding journalists, and 'broadcasting live from the battle field', was taking us outside of the scope of the Propaganda Model, since the 'news' was arriving first, before the filters could really operate. Although some allowance for the intuitive editing process of the embedded journalists, and the prospect of the political and commercial fallout that might result, must be made. Nevertheless, I was so motivated by what I was witnessing, that I decided to send an email to Noam Chomsky to ask him for his views.

I wrote that I had been watching the coverage of the war with Iraq in the UK, and was immediately struck by the impression that the 'open' reporting and the use of embedded journalists and news gathering teams, on the face of it, ran counter to his Propaganda Model. The five filters did not seem to fit with this new era of 24hr breaking news - involving live unedited coverage of world events. His reply came back promptly. Here is part of his response:

> Reply: (Chomsky) I presume that the 'embedding' is just another technique to ensure that news is controlled by the invading army. I wouldn't be surprised if the Nazis and Russians used the same device. The 'embedded' journalist sees exactly

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what the boss wants him to. I suspect that a comparison of US with, say, al-Jazeera would be interesting in that respect. My feeling is that the 'propaganda model' isn't really relevant here. It's more direct control than that.

I suggested that, since representations are open to interpretation, it is then the ideological task to 'fix' their meaning. Did this idea of 'fixing the meaning' have a place in the Propaganda Model? My point was that this does seem to go much further than agenda setting, framing of issues, bounding the debate, etc. Noam replied:

> Reply: (Chomsky) There are lots of devices used to shape opinion and attitudes, once an agenda is set. They are all attempts to 'fix meaning' in the broad sense. The concept itself doesn't seem to me very helpful, but if you can do something with it, fine. Ed Herman's propaganda model (more his than mine) has to do with a different matter: factors that enter into setting a framework (agenda). Detailed work of his (mine, others) goes into specific devices that are used.
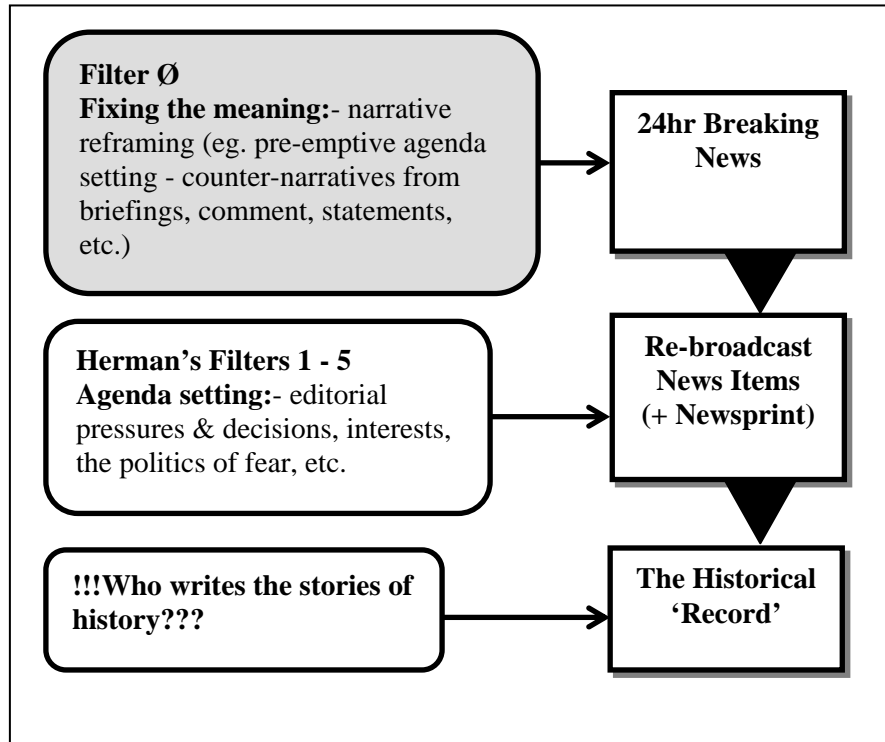
With his encouragement, I decided to pursue the matter further. I became more and more curious about the policy of 'image containment' that seemed to be at work. While it is clear that all of the five filters were involved in the control of the news coverage of the Iraq war, it seemed that another filter had been introduced, a filter concerned with fixing the meaning of live reports, a filter specifically concerned with *perception*. A filter constructed through counter-narratives, that I will call ***Filter Ø***.

This proposal, of course, is perfectly consistent with Chomsky's view that government secrecy is not really for security reasons, but is overwhelmingly concerned with preventing us from knowing what's going on. Or, as Mark Curtis has recently written: "We are clearly in an era of systematic government psychological warfare against the public" (Curtis, 2004, p.78).

An Extended Propaganda Model

> The first casualty of the information age has been comprehension - content without context.   (Paul Roberts)

I had noticed, as John Kampfner points out, that along with the vivid and detailed images coming from the embedded reporters, the big picture was being provided by the various news briefings, especially from Central Command (Centcom) in Dohar. This suggested to me that another filter seemed to be at work. A filter that is by no means new at all, but perhaps never before used on quite such a scale, and at such cost. The press briefing.

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**Figure 1:   Proposed Revision to Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda
                Model**

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                               │
│  ╭──────────────────────────────╮      ┌─────────────────┐   │
│  │ Filter Ø                     │      │ 24hr Breaking   │   │
│  │ Fixing the meaning:- narrative│ ───▶ │ News            │   │
│  │ reframing (eg. pre-emptive    │      └─────────────────┘   │
│  │ agenda setting - counter-     │              │             │
│  │ narratives from briefings,    │              ▼             │
│  │ comment, statements, etc.)    │      ┌─────────────────┐   │
│  ╰──────────────────────────────╯      │ Re-broadcast    │   │
│                                         │ News Items      │   │
│  ╭──────────────────────────────╮      │ (+ Newsprint)   │   │
│  │ Herman's Filters 1 - 5       │      └─────────────────┘   │
│  │ Agenda setting:- editorial    │ ───▶         │             │
│  │ pressures & decisions,        │              ▼             │
│  │ interests, the politics of    │      ┌─────────────────┐   │
│  │ fear, etc.                    │      │ The Historical  │   │
│  ╰──────────────────────────────╯      │ 'Record'        │   │
│                                         └─────────────────┘   │
│  ╭──────────────────────────────╮              ▲             │
│  │ !!!Who writes the stories of │ ─────────────┘             │
│  │ history???                   │                             │
│  ╰──────────────────────────────╯                             │
│                                                               │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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This suggests a modification, or an extension, to Herman and Chomsky's
Propaganda Model. In my proposal, the original five filters are retained, but I
have added another filter, one that we can call Filter Ø (see Figure 1). I also
have included provision for later filters concerned with who writes the stories
of history, etc., but I will not discuss this here.

Filter Ø is concerned primarily with 'news containment', with fixing the
meaning of 24hr breaking news. This idea of 'fixing meaning' comes from the
work of Stuart Hall (1997), another person who has a big influence on my
thinking.

Hall has continually stressed the crucial role of representation in the
making of meaning. He argues that representation is 'constitutive' of the
meaning-making process - especially for images (film, photographs, drawings,
caricature, etc.). Using Hall's idea, I want to argue that it is through
representation that meanings are made available, and that these meanings are
not fixed until narrative/ideological processes play their part in fixing the
meaning. Despite their iconicity, images are inherently ambiguous, and are

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open to wide interpretation until one particular meaning is given emphasis over others, such that the meaning becomes 'fixed'. I am suggesting that this is possibly one of the major 'battlefronts' in the war for people's minds.

The Analysis of Seven Days of Centcom Briefings

> Never in history was a war so well documented yet so poorly covered by the media.   (Paul Roberts)

Then I made an amazing discovery. The full transcripts and images used in the daily Centcom briefings, that I had myself watched day in and day out on my TV, were all available on the Internet. I realised that I could now explore my notion of Filter Ø in actual operation (Centcom Briefings, 2003).

I decided to make a close study of the transcripts of the briefings from the Dohar Media Centre, Qatar. I would analyse one week of these briefings, the seven days: 23-29th March 2003, ie. starting from the Sunday I had sat down to watch the live broadcast reports from Iraq.

The structure of each briefing was very similar. Beginning usually with an introduction consisting of prepared reports and statements, this was then followed by a selection of images and video clips released for wider dissemination, followed by questions. My analysis focussed upon describing both general and specific attempts to achieve, what I have called, narrativizing the image. It seemed that the Centcom briefings were aimed at offering interpretations of news reports and images that were already in circulation, offering 'counter images' of targets, weapon systems, success, precision, overwhelming force, liberation, humanitarian aid, etc., etc., to be placed before the media. Using an approach similar to that described by Smith, Jarman and Osborn (1999), these can be grouped as five core narratives, or emergent themes, (see Table 2).

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Table 2:   Five Core Narratives (Emergent Themes)

- operations/coalition/objectives/actions/combat/weapon systems/
    targets/progress/timeline/success/overwhelming force/

- attacks/advance/pre- & post- strike/precision/effective/courage/
    resolve/tenacity/

- losses/casualties/condolences/fallen heroes/resistance/

- freedom/liberation/humanitarian aid/supplies/relief/leaflets/
    broadcasts/the future/

- regime brutality/mistreatment/Geneva Convention/repression/
    atrocities/victims/oppression/terrorist death squads/

> The correspondents [at Dohar] were merely extras in a piece of theatre.
> (Phillip Knightly)

The following is a summary of some of my observations of the seven consecutive days of briefings that I analysed.

Centcom briefing - Sunday 23/3/03

All of the images used in this briefing were withheld from subsequent publication.

   This is a 'three-General' briefing, and is not a straightforward briefing at all. It is particularly uncomfortable for General Wall, UK Chief of Staff. The previous night an RAF Tornado had been shot down by a US Patriot missile, with all of the crew lost. Gen Peter Wall bravely tries to put a spin on events:

> Gen Wall: .. We don't know the full circumstances of the incident earlier today, but there is clear evidence to suggest that the US Patriot missile battery shot down an RAF Tornado GR-4. A detailed investigation is underway, so we must not rush to judge ... We mustn't forget that the Patriot missile system is deployed to provide an umbrella for the coalition ... Were it not for Patriot, many more lives could have been lost.

Centcom briefing - Monday 24/3/03

There are 16 images used in this briefing - 6 video clips, single shot clips of precision strikes, and 10 still images, mostly pre- and post- strike. Each clip or image is accompanied by a brief narrative to provide context.

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The basic narratives here are: operations, precision, accuracy, and preserving resources for the future of Iraq. Gen Franks explicitly acknowledges the 'story' structures he is using:

> Gen Franks: Yesterday the assessment team .. was able to enter into Iraq, do an assessment of the oil field, and has already shut down a gas-oil separation plant ... So we are down to only seven fires out of a total of 500 wellheads; again, a very important story for the future of Iraq.

Centcom briefing - Tuesday 25/3/03

Some 23 images are used in this briefing, including a map, 7 video clips, 15 still images. Each clip or image is again accompanied by a brief narrative to provide context.

Five of the video clips are single shots, and clearly convey precision narratives. However, two of the video clips use a simple edited sequence of shots. In comparison to the other five clips, this crucially adds a more explicit narrative structure to these two visual presentations. Indeed, the use of such a narrative device will increase as the days unfold. Here Gen Renuart seems to explicitly acknowledge the elaborate planning involved, and the need for an escort aircraft, to provide this footage:

> Gen Renuart: This is being filmed by an escort aircraft that was part of the package. Exiting the aircraft. We had a combat camera team inside the aircraft to give you an insight into what happens on a jump out at the back ramp and then the completion of operation. They continue their mission.

Centcom briefing - Wednesday 26/3/03

Only one single shot video clip was published from the many used during the briefing. No explanation is available for why the other clips were withheld from publication. The basic narratives here are: attacks, precision, accuracy, success, regime brutality, humanitarian supplies, etc.

The following is an example of what I will call the 'all-science' narrative (whatever that is!!!!):

> Gen Brooks: What I can tell you is ... We have a very, very deliberate process for targeting. It's unlike any other targeting process in the world. It takes into account all science. It takes into account all capability. And we do everything physically and scientifically possible to be precise in our targeting and also to minimize secondary effects, whether it is on people or on structures.

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Centcom briefing - Thursday 27/3/03

The focus of this briefing is clearly the core narrative of freedom - eg. liberation, humanitarian aid, etc. An unusually long, carefully edited sequence is shown - this editing clearly manipulates the narrative interpretation being presented. Gen Brooks offers three key narratives in commentary to this video and two still images:

- 'this is all the truth' narrative:
    > I am going to show you an entire video here ... I think it's truly worth a thousand words. And it shows the arrival of the humanitarian supplies to Safwan. This is a civilian affairs officer in this case .. There is no coercion in any of this. This is all truth. You see people who are tasting for the first time in their lives, what freedom is.

- 'good relations' narrative:
    > This is a free Iraqi forces person interpreting .. [he] did some interpretation and translation work, but mostly simply interacting.

- and, a good example of a proto-narrative:
    > There's no hostility

Centcom briefing - Friday 28/3/03

The focus today is the 'preserving Iraqi resources' narrative:

> Gen Brooks: Operation Iraqi Freedom continues this eighth day since the coalition ground forces entered Iraq. The coalition is setting the conditions for future operations, and we remain focused on the key objective of removing the regime and disarming Iraq ... Concurrent with our combat operations, our efforts to preserve Iraqi resources and our humanitarian efforts are picking up the pace ... Our firefighters are in the oil fields now .. They're doing dangerous work, very intense work, and it's the work of extinguishing these very intense fires ... Its very deliberate work, very intense work, and it requires some very skilful firefighters who are particularly well trained for this role. This is a U.S. and Kuwaiti combined team doing the work.

Centcom briefing - Saturday 29/3/03

At this briefing, a video of a strike on a Ba'ath Party assembly is shown. An estimated 200 people are 'destroyed'. The video clip was withdrawn from publication.

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There are also 6 still images used. The basic narratives for this briefing are: progress, pressure, success, objectives, humanitarian aid, heroism, courage, Iraqi terror organizations, and so on.

This was the last day of my detailed analysis. My overall conclusion was on the obvious emphasis of setting out the bigger picture, and the use of a preponderance of narrative devices to achieve this. Throughout this work, I found myself more and more in sympathy with this remark by the Canadian independent journalist, Paul Roberts, that I quoted earlier: *"Never in history was a war so well documented yet so poorly covered by the media"* (Roberts, 2004, p.5).

Implications

> A democratic civilisation will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection - not an invitation for hypnosis.
>
> (Umberto Eco)

In discussing the implications of this research, we would do well to take note of Umberto Eco's point above. The visual image is in particular need of critical reflection, and from the findings here I would especially like to stress that it possesses a strong susceptibility to narrative context.

The nature of the propaganda apparatus surrounding the Iraq war is now receiving some very careful scrutiny. For example, there has been a vast amount of analysis of the propaganda relating to the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq, particularly the role of PSYOPS (Psychological Operations) (see Rampton and Stauber, 2003; Miller, 2004). What I have been concerned with in this present study is a relatively new development. As I have stressed earlier, visual images are inherently ambiguous, they are open to multiple interpretations. A model of propaganda needs to account for how one particular meaning comes to be given emphasis over another meaning, how meanings becomes 'fixed'. One obvious strategy is in providing the 'big picture' within which these images will fit. This is particularly important in fixing the meaning of the uncontrolled images in breaking news.

Narrative clearly plays a key role in our grasp of ongoing events, and in turn it plays a crucial role in how we think, in what we know, and in what we remember. It would be well to remember that it is not only journalists that are embedded, but memories are being embedded in our minds as well. The focus of my proposed Filter Ø is perception, with how our understanding of events can be manipulated by the 'bigger picture'. In the case of the media coverage of the Iraq war, I am proposing that this filter is not merely a device - instead, the setting up of the Media Centre at Dohar was a crucial part of the institutional media practices involved. What is at stake here is much more than

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agenda-setting, and Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model therefore requires some expansion to take this into account.

Conclusions

> Public opinion wins wars.   (Dwight Eisenhower)

The manipulation of public perceptions and public opinions in times of war has a very long history indeed, and the kind of narrative manipulation of images that are the focus of this present study are not merely restricted to wartime situations. This type of narrative manipulation lies at the very foundation of our visual culture. The position that I would recommend that we adopt towards this is that the world is presented to us in at least two distinct ways:

- we can see what is there
- we are told what is there

and it is narrative that is the crucial device involved in our being told what is there. Narrative is therefore a crucial tool of propaganda, for the spin doctor, and for anyone else who sets out to influence our perceptions, who wants to fix the meaning of something, who tries to influence the way we think. So, in this first lesson for ISD101, we need to realize that it is not the images that we see that matters, but it is what we are told that they mean that really does matter in the war of perceptions.

> Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.   (UNESCO Constitution)

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