An English approach to national identity and cultural image discourse system: from Shakespeare to the 20th century

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Abstract The difficulties of representing national identity and cultural image in the mass media are universal. Are there, therefore, any universal general principles and techniques for the construction of hegemonically-robust cultural messages? It is suggested that there might be. Using the transmission of mass media messages in England during World War II as a case study of one such technique, an approach is outlined. In this instance, a certain presumption of hostility and negativity to cultural communications that attempt to reinforce national identity is addressed by a nuanced approach allowing measures of ‘realistic’ negativity to ensure positive response.

Keywords National identity · Patriotism · Cynicism · Propaganda · Persuasive messages · Realism

The presentation of national identity through the mass media, including its culture, presents all societies with a number of difficulties. As Benedict Anderson (2006) has argued, identity in this context is ‘imagined’—and the media, as modes of representation, reflect this imagining leading, perhaps easily, to different understandings among receivers (i.e. individual audience members, readers etc.). Certainly, the construction of hegemonically-robust cultural messages which ensure the decoding of those perceiving them is uniform and reflect what the producers—be they individual artists, journalists, official sources etc.—intend is never assured. This is so even within a nation and is especially so cross-culturally.

However, I want here to suggest that the possibility of a negative rejection of the communication can be contained, or at least mitigated, in certain circumstances, by the use of specific techniques. I wish to highlight one such which I believe has

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characterized a certain English approach to the difficulties of creating hegemonic understanding of national identity through media. I do so in the light of the commonality of much human culture and the shared modalities across cultures of media representational codes in the modern world. It is not that this example points to any superiority; rather it is that a comprehensive, comparative investigation of the means deployed across the globe—including this instance—to address the problem of media cultural communication might prove valuable. The case study is offered to demonstrate, at a strategic level, one possible approach to utilizing mass media's potential to mold public opinion.

In the much of the West, there has been a long tradition of allowing organs of opinion to operate outside of detailed official oversight. Although always constrained by certain legal requirements (at a minimum, prohibitions against defamation, obscenity and sedition—which are, it must be said—ever-changing). At this time, there are, for example, some 60 laws which impact on free expression in Great Britain, e.g.: prohibited racist, pro-“terrorist”, misogynistic utterances; film and video-game ratings and licensing, broadcasting codes of practice etc.

Nevertheless, a distinction is usually drawn between official and unofficial mass media use and unofficial media communications; and unofficial expressions are valued—or assumed to be valued—more highly by the public than are official ones. One can perhaps trace this attitude to authority to the English Civil War of the 17th century (1642–1651). Following due legal process, at the behest of the Parliament, the king, Charles II, was beheaded. Not only did this event dramatically deny the concept of any royal “divine right”, it inculcated a sense of independence. By the following century, it was possible for the savant and journalist, Samuel Johnson, famously to remark that: “patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel”, dismissing unthinking loyalty both to the throne and the nation (Boswell 1775 [2008], p. 254). Even exceptional circumstances—of the nation at war, say—could not entirely temper such cynicism. Although millions enlisted in the British army in 1914, nevertheless the classic statement of war-time patriotism—the ancient Roman poet Horace's belief that “it is sweet and right to die for one's country”—could be used by the most famous of the English WWI poets, Wilfred Owen, as the bitterly ironic title of the best known poem about the horror of the trenches. (Owen 1920 [1994], p. 29) He entitled it, in Latin, “*Dulce et Decorum Est*”¹.

It is therefore the case that, in Britain, even during war-time, a certain presumption of hostility and negativity to cultural communications that attempt to reinforce national identity might be met by a significant proportion of the population with, as best, a certain skepticism. And it is how this difficulty can be dealt with that exemplifies an aspect of English cultural image discourse.

In Shakespeare's great patriotic play, *Henry the Fifth*, two scenes are juxtaposed which reflect what would become a specific English way of responding to the challenge of representing national identity and cultural image. *Henry the Fifth* was written for a noble patron and it was licensed for performance by an official of the Royal Court; but the acting company of the Globe Theater—and what Shakespeare wrote for it—were not otherwise controlled. Nevertheless, the play, although it deals

¹ Horace's Latin in full is: *ducle et decorum est pro patria mori*.

with events that happened nearly 200 years before he wrote, was of considerable political import. England was at war Spain and in Ireland and it had only lost its last foothold in France (Calais) 30 years earlier. A huge Spanish invasion fleet had been defeated barely a decade or so before. The story of an heroic English victory over the French clearly resonated with Shakespeare's audience. It was, in fact, a sort of "call to arms", should that again be needed.

In the play, on the morning of the great battle of Agincourt (1415) between the French and Henry's vastly outnumbered English army, in his camp, Henry—he is also called "Harry" less formally—exhorts his troops with the famous "Saint Crispin's Day" speech. Inspired by his rhetoric, the English, against the odds, will go on to beat the superior French force:

THE EARL OF WESTMORELAND: O that we now had here
But one ten thousand of those men in England
That do no work to-day!
KING HENRY: What's [= *who is*] he that wishes so?
My cousin, Westmoreland?
No, my fair cousin; If we are marked to die, we are enough
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.

The king concludes with the rousing words:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition [= *make him a lord*]
And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day [= *a minor Catholic saint's day*].

This speech is a completely straightforward restatement of Horace's claim that is it right and proper to give one's life for one's country. The call for bravery and sacrifice in the face of a national enemy in eloquent and stirring words is exactly what a leader in times of war might be expected to say to his troops and, more broadly, to his country. Of course, Shakespeare's language is exceptionally effective, but what he is doing with it here is unexceptional—simply moral-boosting. However, this has to be put into the context of the play and that context is what makes it exceptional. The "St Crispin's Day" speech must be understood in the light of the immediately previous scene and it is the combination of the two which illustrates the peculiar English technique in such communications that I wish to examine.

In this prior scene, it is the night before the battle. The king puts on a disguise and visits his troops to gauge what they are thinking. The play's CHORUS, who narrates the action, explains that he is bringing his troop "a little touch of Harry". The group he joins, though, is far from convinced of the *dulce et decorum* argument for risking

one's life. They are scared, unhappy and worried about the battle to come. In short, their fears are realistic and Shakespeare even writes the scene in realistic prose, not heroic blank verse. They, not knowing who he is, share their unhappiness at having to fight in the morning:

COURT, a soldier: Brother [= *friend*] John Bates, is not that the morning which breaks yonder?

BATES, a second soldier: I think it be [= *is*]: but we have no great cause to desire the approach of day.

WILLIAMS, a third soldier: We see yonder the beginning of the day, but I think we shall never see the end of it..... Who goes there?

KING HENRY: A friend.

WILLIAMS: Under what captain serve you?

KING HENRY: Under Sir Thomas Erpingham.

WILLIAMS: A good old commander and a most kind gentleman: I pray you, what thinks he of our estate [= *situation*]?

KING HENRY: Even as men wrecked upon a sand [= *beach*], that look to be washed off the next tide.

BATES: He hath [= *has*] not told his thought to the king?

KING HENRY: No; nor it is not meet [= *appropriate*] he should. For, I think the king is but a man, as I am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me: his ceremonies laid by [= *his status ignored*], in his nakedness he appears but a man. Therefore when he sees reason of fears, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish [= *sharp taste*] as ours are. Yet, no man should find in him with any appearance of fear, lest [= *in case*] he, by showing it, should dishearten his army.

BATES: He may show what outward courage he will [= *appear to be as brave as he likes*]; but I believe, as cold a night as 'tis [= *it is*], he could wish himself in Thames up to the neck; and so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures [= *in that case*], so we were quit here.

KING HENRY: By my troth [= *truthfully*], I will speak my conscience of the king [= *I will say what I think the King must think*]: I think he would not wish himself anywhere but where he is.

BATES: Then I would he were here alone; so should he be sure to be ransomed, and a many poor men's lives saved.

KING HENRY: Methinks [= *I think*] I could not die any where so contented as in the king's company; his cause [= *argument against the King of France*] being just and his quarrel honourable.

WILLIAMS: That's more than we know.

BATES: Ay, or more than we should seek after [= *try to find out*]; for we know enough, if we know we are the king's subjects: if his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us.

So, immediately before we hear the king's heroic speech, we share the realistic fears of his men.

Common sense tells us not everybody would have been enthusiastic for the battle, for facing possible injury or death. Yet it might be thought that any effective cultural discourse strategy to encourage people to confront danger unflinchingly would, before anything else, ignore or disguise negative opinions and attitudes. But Shakespeare does the opposite. This is summed up in the speech:

I believe, as cold a night as 'tis [= it is], he could wish himself in Thames up to the neck; and so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures [= whatever it would take], so we were quit here.

For the audience the acknowledgment that this man would sooner be back in London, in the freezing River Thames up to his neck, rather than sitting in a field in France waiting for a battle in which he might lose an arm or a leg or even his life provides a context for the "St Crispian's Day" speech.

It is this contrast between the patriotic rhetoric of the king in one scene and the realistic worries of the ordinary soldiers in the other that makes Henry's call for bravery effective rather than merely bombastic. The idea of judiciously admitting negatives the better to convey positive messages is the mark of this technique. In the mind of the audience, the king's speech sounds a note of truth and authenticity—is effective as a moral-booster—exactly because the previous scene accords with what the audience can well understand as the ordinary soldier's natural fear. The realistic negative (= wanting to be safe in England) secures Henry's positive message (= it is a fine thing to die for one's country). Together, the two scenes offer an example of the "dissemination, diffusion especially of some principle, belief or practice" which (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) is the definition of "propagation". In this case, patriotism is the principle being diffused in the social discourse. And I note that "propagation"—which the dictionary defines as the breeding of plants or animals from parent stock—is at the heart of "propaganda".

I do not use the term "propaganda" in any negative sense but in its original meaning in Europe, i.e. (to quote the Oxford Dictionary again):

any association, systematic scheme, or concerted movement for the propagation of a particular doctrine or practice.

The word only acquires its negative meanings in English in the 20th century but I here follow Jacques Ellul's classic work *Propaganda* (1965) (in French, originally) where he uses the term without making a value judgment. Ellul draws a distinction between "direct" and "indirect (or "sociological") propaganda". (p. 15) For him: "Sociological propaganda can be compared to ploughing, direct propaganda to sowing". Shakespeare, therefore, is being used here in the former sense. The scenes are not directly asking, much less ordering, the audience to act. Rather, the juxtapositioning is designed to influence the belief system and opinion of the

English who might become involved in a war. It is, therefore an example of what Ellul calls “indirect propaganda”. And, two and a half centuries after *Henry the Fifth* was written, this message was still held to be potent enough for the play to be filmed, in 1944, as part of the war effort of the British film industry during WWII.² Its relevance to the period in which it was filmed is made clear from the very opening frame dedicating it to the commandos and air-borne troops then fighting for the country’s survival. Filmed in Ireland on a budget of \$2 million, it was the most expensive British feature to that date and functioned, almost automatically given the time, as a morale booster for the British public and the Allies. Shakespeare’s message about sacrificing oneself for the sake of the nation—although his words were written 400 years earlier about a war several hundred years before that—were still needed. Moreover, it can be argued that, by the time of World War II, the Shakespearean contextualizing of positive messages by judiciously admitting negatives had become, at least on occasion, a preferred discourse mode for the authorities. Consider the extent to which it infuses the most effective of war-time documentaries—those directed by Humphrey Jennings for the official Crown Film Unit of the Ministry of Information.

Even though unofficial communications dominated national discourse strategies, obviously times of war created exceptional circumstances for official communication outlets, especially to the (neutral) outside world. Anyway, it had not been uncommon in 20th century Britain to find official exploration of new media potential being undertaken in parallel with unofficial exploitation. Most effectively, with radio, the British government was heavily involved in establishing the network in the 1920s (via the BBC). Film, too, albeit it far less effectively, was also explored as a medium. The British General Post Office (GPO)—an official organization—established a school of documentary filmmaking in the 1930s under the overall direction of a producer called John Grierson.³ The GPO films were very successful at least critically and are remembered as constituting a major—if not the major – British contribution to early cinema. So a government film organization was therefore already in existence when the war with Nazi Germany broke out in 1939. The unit was transferred a new Ministry of Information (MoI). It must, though, be remembered that this ran against British tradition. Such a department of government was seen as being un-English and was only created for the duration of, first, WW I and then again for WW II. But there was no “official” newspaper and the press remained independent—with, of course, stricter censorship, especially of military news, put in place. This also applied to the BBC despite the fact that it was publically funded. And it certainly applied, say, to the film industry.

Of course, during the war, there was also a huge increase in official communications and a whole Ministry of information was set-up. There was no

² *Henry V*—1944 | 135 min | Drama | Colour. Directors: Laurence Olivier and Reginald Beck. Producers: Filippo Del Giudice and Laurence Olivier. Script: Dallas Bower, Alan Dent and Laurence Olivier (from the play by William Shakespeare). Music: William Walton. Starring: Laurence Olivier, Renée Asherson.

³ The use of the term “documentary” to describe (in English) a specific form of non-fiction film is usually credited to Grierson, a Scotsman who was working in the USA at the time, in New York newspaper film-review in 1926 (Grierson 1926 [1981], p. 24). Prior uses, however, have been noted (Winston 2005, pp. 8–9).

government department of such size before the war. In the British documentary film archive, there are numerous examples of how the problems of public opinion management were addressed by the MoI in these difficult circumstances often using the technique of juxtaposing positives and negatives.

Humphrey Jennings was one of the MoI film unit directors. He died young in 1951 (aged 42) having completed less than 10 documentaries and most of them are short subjects. However, the two longest—*Fires were started...* (in 1943 about the Nazi “blitz” on London)⁴ and *Diary for Timothy* (in 1944/5 about the end of the war and post-war reconstruction)⁵—are widely regarded as masterpieces of the classic Anglophone documentary form. Jennings himself is seen as the most important of the documentary filmmaker of his era and one of the greatest of all British film directors. But he was, in Ellul’s terms, a propagandist—and a brilliant one: not least because he is never referred to as being one!! The films, as a whole, show a nation united in the face of a common enemy, the Nazis, and do so so effectively that (in Lindsay Anderson’s famous words): “This is what it was like. This is what we were like—the best of us”; but this “one nation” is something of a myth (Anderson 1954).

Maintaining this myth was an important task because under the Nazi aerial bombardment, the *Blitz*, the social fabric of Britain was tightly stretched and the British authorities remained constantly deeply concerned that a breakdown in social order would occur. As it is was there was a rise in crime statistics and more days were lost in strikes—an absolutely number—in 1944 than had occurred before or again up to the present. Moreover, one must remember that the great economic depression of the 1930s had barely been corrected when this war started. Much effort was therefore devoted in the mass media to maintaining morale and reinforcing this idea of one nation—unwillingly—“under arms”. However, although major difficulties (e.g. strikes) were not mentioned, nevertheless, the Shakespearean contextualization of this needed positive message with hints of negative realities persisted.

Let me also correct an impression that I might have been giving. I want to talk about a particular technique of mixing the mythic with the actual in propaganda messages but that does not mean that all British propaganda communication were of this nature. The enemy—the Nazis—were demonized and mocked, of course. There is a famous mock MOI “newsreel” in which footage of Hitler and the Nazis at military parades (from Leni Reifenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935)⁶—see below) is joltingly re-edited so they appear to be doing a popular dance of the day, “The

⁴ *Fires Were Started....*—1943 | 63 mins | Drama-Documentary | B&W (originally entitled as *I Was A Fireman* but shorted and retitled for release). Director: Humphrey Jennings. Producer: Ian Dalrymple. Script: Humphrey Jennings (with Maurice Richardson). Music: William Alwyn. Starring: Fred Griffiths William Sanson, Johnny Houghton* (*fireman seconded to the making of the film, not professional actors).

⁵ *A Diary for Timothy*—1945 | 40mins | Documentary | B&W. Director: Humphrey Jennings. Producer: Basil Wright. Script: E.M. Forster. Original Music: Richard Addinsell. Narrator: Michael Redgrave.

⁶ *Triumph of the Will/Triumph Des Willens* | 119 mins | documentary | B&W | Producer/Director/Editor: Leni Riefenstahl. Original Music: Herbert Windt.

Lambeth Walk”.⁷ But Jennings’s work for the Ministry, whose documentary film production capacity grew from a pre-war unit attached to the Post Office, offers the best examples of this subtler—let us term it ‘Shakespearean’—approach. So, for example: his film, *Diary for Timothy*, was designed to lay out ideas for post-war rebuilding but it does so by promoting the idea of one nation united in their support of the war-effort (as well as looking forward to the peace).

It is a rather strange film in that its commentary is written in the form of a “diary” being addressed to a new-born baby “Timothy”. Because of the cumbersome nature of sound film equipment in the 1940s, all the scenes involving synchronous sound had to be carefully set-up; but they are all based of prior observation by Jennings and another writer, Maurice Richardson, and realistic behavior was meticulously recorded (Winston 1996). The “one nation” theme is most vividly addressed in a sequence where the people we have met are filmed in a variety of locations (pub, farmhouse, homes) making a Christmas toast—“Absent Friends”:

[Newspaper headline: “Major German Attack: American Line Holed” followed by shots of countryside ect]

Commentator (voice-over): In those days before Christmas, the news was bad and the weather was foul [= bad]. Death and darkness; death and fog. Death across those few miles of water for our own people and for others, for enslaved and broken people. The noise of battle getting louder. And death came by telegram to many of us on Christmas eve. Until out of the fog dawned... loveliness.... whiteness—Christmas Day.

[Farmhouse]

Farmer: Here’s a toast: absent friends!

Family {reply}: Absent friends

[Pub]

Air-raid warden: No, I haven’t seen him now for two or three months. Don’t quite know where he’s got to. Oh, well! Absent Friends.

Listeners {reply}: Absent friends

[Worker’s house]

Locomotive Driver’s wife: Absent friends

Locomotive Driver [replies]: Absent friends

[Bourgeois home]

Timothy’s Family: Absent Friends.... absent friends.... And Tim.

The essence of the “one nation” theme is embedded in this sequence because everybody in the film, whatever their class etc. uses the same toast: “Absent Friends”. But, I note, that this was realistic at one level. People did all use this toast, and the class structure is realistically reflected also because they all have different drinks. The bourgeois families drink sherry; the locomotive driver and the working class Air-Raid Warden have beer; the locomotive driver’s wife appears to have a “port-and-lemon”, a popular work-class women’s drink of the time. However, this

⁷ *Schichlegruber and his Hep-Cats—Doing the Lambeth Walk* 3 mins| fake “newsreel”| B&W| Director: Charles Wright. [Schichlegruber was Hilter’s real name.].

sequence—although completely, in its quietness, in contrast to the heroics of the “St Crispin’s Day” speech—functions in the same way. It give a positive reflection of the “one nation” concept which underpins the film’s approach—but, therefore, it is not the entire truth. Despite the different drinks, it does not really reflect the reality because it omits much. The “truthfulness” (as it were) of the toasts obscures the film’s failure to talk about the stretched social fabric. One could say, this was inevitable as the film was designed to correct such problems not illuminate them. However, it does not ignore the negatives entirely.

The sequence of toasts functions as the quiet equivalent of the St Crispin’s Day speech in *Henry the Fifth*. But—note—it is preceded by the equivalent of the negative scene with the ordinary soldiers. The commentary begins by talking about bad news—the German counter attack and “the noise of battle getting louder”. The audience is reminded that British soldiers were still dying—“and death came by telegram [the equivalent of today’s email] to many of us that Christmas eve”. Again, the positive of the “one nation” messages is grounded in the reality of the horror and dangers of war.

This constant juxtaposing of negative and positive messages is well illustrated by Jennings’ other masterpiece, *Fires were started*....about firemen during the German bombing of British cities in an early phase of the war. The Ministry wanted a film to show that civilians would die because of the raids but that there was a need to remain calm and carry on. The film unit decided to locate the film with the fire service. So how does Jennings suggest the negatives—the less than heroic attitudes of the men who will undergo danger and death? He does so very subtly in repeated minor moments. For example, we see a group of volunteer firemen at work at the fire station in the morning (the Germans raided at night). They are cleaning the equipment but one says to the others: “We mustn’t work too hard, my friends. We’ve got to make this last till 1 o’clock”.

“We mustn’t work too hard”! This is, of course, an ironic joke and not really meant. It is, however, also a realistic negative moment. Not everybody worked their hardest all the time—and the audience would know this and acknowledge the truthfulness of the scene. But the film goes further. It also lays out more serious negatives—for example, it deals, very subtly, with the illegal “black-market”. Food and all goods were rationed, including clothing. It was illegal to buy anything without a coupon. But here is the jokey “lazy” fireman, nicknamed “B.A.” engaged in this illegal selling in the canteen of the fire station:

“B.A.”: How you fixed for braces [= suspenders in American English], boy.
BILL, a new fireman: Well... braces? I got a belt the other day.

“B.A.”: Ah, but in this “business” [firefighting] you need belt and braces. And what a pair.

JOHNNY, another fireman: What’s the point here?

“B.A.”: What’s it to you? [= mind your own business]

JOHNNY: Up to the old game again, eh, BA? Listen, Bill, I bought these braces off him a fortnight [= 14 days] ago and all they’re good for is hanging yourself.

“BA” is not punished in anyway. The black-market was a fact of life as the original audience fully understood. But, as with King Henry, the impact of the positive—the myth of one nation—is made stronger by such negatives. It is, in effect, made to seem less of a myth. It too becomes realistic. The message of the film overall is that people should be united and brave, enduring hardships with humor. They should also be calm and in the English context this meant being stoical. Nothing is supposed to upset or scare the English. They should always be unemotional. The phrase is that people should have a “stiff-upper-lip”. Looked at objectively this can seem rather unnatural. In fact, “stiff-upper-lip” behavior—very much stereotypical of the unemotional English—can strike a stranger as comic.

The most extreme example of this in *Fires Were Started...* is when a nearby bomb causes the ceiling to collapse in the fire-station. A volunteer firewoman, one of those running the office and supporting the firefighters, is seen on the phone reporting the situation in her area to headquarters, “Control”. The bomb explodes and she dives under her desk. At Control, another firewoman says down the phone: “I can’t hear you.... I can’t hear you...”. The first woman emerges from behind her desk, her forehead gashed, but she picks up her phone and calmly continues: “Control!.... Control! Oh, yes; I am sorry for the interruption. We have another message for you. Our TTL [= *type of fire engine*] is out for Trinidad Street”.

I know it seems rather impossible—apologizing when you have just nearly been killed by a bomb (and I also know the make-up is terrible—as a government film unit they couldn’t afford a proper make-up artist)—but the incident was witnessed. People really did behave like that and there is more than one example of it—in fact, it becomes a minor theme—people ignoring the bombs—reported on in the papers and therefore possibly then copied. And, again, note the accents. The younger woman is lower middle-class but the lady at Headquarters is upper-class, the sort of woman who would not be working at all before the war. It is these subtle references that allow for the re-enforcement of the myth—not just of one nation but of a people who are steadfast, stoically and unemotional—people with a “stiff-upper-lip.”

Many Western film scholars, if asked for the name of the greatest propaganda documentary, will likely say: *Triumph of the Will*, the film of the 1934 Nazi party rally in Nuremberg made by Leni Riefenstahl which I mentioned above. But in my view they are wrong. My “proof” of this (as it were) is that Riefenstahl—herself a film-star and Hitler’s “favorite film director”, is always, exactly, referred to as a great “propagandist”—not, of itself now seen in the West as any sort of good thing because in common understanding “propaganda” has become a synonym for lies. Jennings, on the other hand is never seen as a propagandist in this negative sense so well disguised is he. Instead, he is a great “documentarist” and, implicitly therefore, not a “liar”.

Triumph shows thousands of men—members of the para-military Nazi-SA movement marching about interminably—for one hour and 59 min. It is a spectacle but a very repetitive one, made no more exciting by being broken only by boring political speeches when the marching about pauses. As such, it is without question an example of direct propaganda but, contrary to much received opinion, not an effective one.

The Nazis had organized two main para-military groups—the SA (the Brownshirts) and the SS (the Blackshirts); but the SA, the socialist element in the movement, had become an embarrassment and a few weeks before the Nuremberg Rally Hitler had massacred its leadership—200 men killed in the so-called “Night of the Long Knives”. The thousands of others seen in the film are Brownshirts—Hitler wears a Brownshirt uniform throughout—and the meeting was designed to assert his authority over them. Riefenstahl was faced with an impossible social discourse—public relations—problem in filming this political event. She needs to demonstrate that Hitler was in full control without showing why he needed to demonstrate this. She is not helped by the fact that the leadership can only assert that all is well—when it was not. Hitler rants in code about a “shadow that has come over our movement” and the man who has put in charge following the bloodbath can only parrot loyalty:

Viktor Von Lutz {the newly appointed SA leader} My Führer! Just as we served dutifully in former times, we only await your orders in the future. And we, comrades, know of nothing else, but to carry out our Führer’s orders, and to prove that we are the loyal ones Our Führer, Adolf Hitler, *sieg heil*

Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda chief, was against the filming because he wanted the destruction of the SA leadership forgotten by the general public, not illuminated.⁸ The film’s spotlight had the opposite effect. My point is that Riefenstahl does not find a way to acknowledge enough of the truth to make the big lie stick. Shakespeare, because he deals with the truth of the men’s feelings, does “sell” the idea of sacrifice (which one might think is also something of a lie). As does Jennings. In his war-time documentaries, despite their omissions, it is claimed that you can see the truth: “this is the way we were the best of us” (Anderson 1954). The key to effectiveness in both English instances, it can be argued, is the acknowledgment of a measure of negative reality with which the receivers can identify better enables the hegemonic positive messages to be transmitted.

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⁸ Goebbels was also hostile to Riefenstahl personally as he felt his authority was threatened by her privileged access to Hitler. Riefenstahl, however, was able to use this hostility with naïf American interrogators during her de-Nazification hearings after World War II to demonstrate her “independence” of Hitler.