

Deterrence by Celluloid: Using Film Propaganda to Scare Refugees

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Global Research, April 13, 2015

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

“To be perceived, propaganda must evoke the interest of an audience and must be transmitted through an attention-getting communications medium.” – Leonard W. Doob, based on *Goebbels' Principles of Propaganda*



It is right out of the top drawer of the Reich minister for propaganda and enlightenment, Joseph Goebbels. The impact of televisual images on potential refugees is designed to improve their wretched lot – through the use of fear that hopefully immobilizes them. Don't come to Australia, or you will drown, be abused, or suffer an assortment of various indignities in detention. Leave the hellhole contrived by circumstance at your peril. Providence knows best.

The move by the Australian government into the world of anti-refugee propaganda is a fitting reminder what sort of regime is in power. As the presenter for ABC's Lateline program asked, “How did on-water matters become on-screen matters? How did the Immigration Department get into the movie business?”[1]

Truth to be told, this industry of loathing has a timeline. Under the Labor government, Customs commissioned a radio drama series targeting audiences in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The purpose there was to dissuade potential asylum seekers from getting onto boats destined for Australia.

In 2000, John Howard's conservative government enlisted Australia's bestiary of natural freaks in a campaign to convince asylum seekers that they were heading for an ecological nightmare. A series of videos were produced showing the lethal prowess of crocodiles, sharks and deadly snakes. Come to Australia, as a summation went, “and you'll be eaten, bitten or mauled.”[2]

Then immigration minister Philip Ruddock explained that the films, shown on television in Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, Syria and Iran, used “the most effective messages and images to use overseas while at the same time being sensitive to local cultures and their requirements.” A true anthropologist.

In the latest production venture, a telemovie, as it is being termed, has been commissioned

at the cost of \$4 million, ostensibly to target the people smuggling campaign that gets the immigration junta tetchy. A good portion of those arriving in Australia by boat tend to be products of what Australian officials call a “business model”, enterprising middle men who net the proceeds and pass on the human cargo for unsafe passage. No reference to international law is ever made in these observations – what matters are the words of repulsion and prevention.

The plot, if the film can be dignified by the use of that term, is bound to consist of the staple terrors. Asylum seekers will be pictured drowning at sea on route to the land of milk and honey. The target audiences will be in areas where the choice is between the quick and the dead: Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. These are deemed the “source” countries. Screenings will also be made in transit countries such as Indonesia.

A morally excited producer Trudi-Ann Tierney from Put It Out There Pictures suggested that “the impact this film will have on a person’s decision to attempt a journey by boat to Australia cannot be underestimated”. It will have such value in that it could help “save people from detention, disappointment and even death.” Such a wonderful, moral mission.

In a statement from Put It Out There Pictures to Lateline, Tierney and her crew insist on excising politics from the equation of human suffering. “This is about people, not politics.”[3] A prophylactic theme is emphasised, suggesting that the producers are somehow interested in preventing deaths by stifling the exercise of rights to asylum.

As for the use of film, Tierney believes in its force. “Film educates and engages like no other medium. It is a powerful and emotional way to explain the complexities of the current policies; the stories it tells moves, connects with its viewers.” Never mind the quality of what the film conveys – film is the moving reality.

Such institutionally accepted imbecility is the hallmark of many a propaganda unit – eventually, the producers begin to believe their own faithful messages. The fiction drugs the maker. Tierney should know, having herself been behind the Kabul US embassy funded anti-terror program *Eagle Four*, featuring the fanciful exploits of the Afghan police force.

Basing herself in Afghanistan from 2009, Tierney got into the business of producing that most dreaded of genres, the soapie, with *Secrets of this House*.^[4] Then came her chance in 2010 to air *Eagle Four*, which sought to deodorise the rather rank police forces of a failed state for a puzzled Afghan populace. This was a tall order given the common image in circulation of “corrupt, drug-taking thugs.” (Her own words.) In *Making Soapies in Kabul* (2014), Tierney explained how, “We would be well paid for this particular piece of propaganda.”^[5]

The more digging one does behind this venture, and the more fitting the union between Put It Out There Pictures and Canberra seems. Tierney has no room for politics largely because she is merely an extension of the political establishment that hires her, a fashioned mercenary of the mouthpiece. As she described her mission in Afghanistan, her production was aimed at, “Influencing (audience)... values and behaviour to suit the objectives of NATO and its allies.”

The ultimate rationale behind this propaganda splurge is self-defeating. Given a choice between death at the hands of Shia militants, Sunni groups, and stock standard authoritarian regimes, the risk of death at sea shrinks. The incentive to escape horror is all

powerful. Rather than focusing on efforts at peace building and rehabilitation, the Australian government continues its efforts to win its place in an already crowded moral purgatory.

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2015/s4213714.htm>
- [2] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/australia/1343756/Australia--uses-its-wildlife-to-scare-away-refugees.html>
- [3] <http://putitouttherepictures.com/#>
- [4] <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/03/27/3972776.htm>
- [5] <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2015/s4213714.htm>

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