



Art as Propaganda in “The Forgotten Man”

In the oil painting “The Forgotten Man”, the artist Jon McNaughton depicts President Obama with other former presidents of the United States. With the White House in the background flying the American flag at half staff against a dark, melancholy sky, Obama is shown stepping on the U.S. Constitution, while James Madison appears to be trying to save it. Meanwhile, several presidents such as Bill Clinton and Franklin D. Roosevelt applaud, while other presidents such as Ronald Reagan, Abraham Lincoln and George Washington gesture their concern toward a distraught young man sitting on a park bench. In “Ways of Seeing”, John Berger discusses oil paintings and the reasons why they were originally created. Although Berger argues that early oil paintings were originally created to show the wealth, power, and objects of the people who had them painted, McNaughton’s painting is for a different purpose: to make a political message. In doing this, McNaughton’s use of oil painting is similar to the use of advertising discussed by Berger, in that it tries to convince people to think or act a certain way. While McNaughton’s goal is not to persuade people to buy things as with advertising, he attempts to “sell” people his view about politics, President Obama, and wasteful government programs, and his painting thus functions as political propaganda.

McNaughton’s painting is different from the early paintings that Berger shows in Ways of Seeing in that the paintings Berger shows did not have the goal of making a political message. While Berger argues in Episode 2 and Episode 3 that old paintings were created to show the wealth of their owners or women as objects, “The Forgotten Man” has a different purpose, which is to make a clear political statement criticizing President Obama, wasteful government

spending, and government having too much power over people's lives. This is shown by several aspects of the painting: the dollar bills on the ground symbolizing waste; the aloof and distant Obama, stepping on the Constitution; and the despondent young man on the park bench, who appears distressed about his condition and the future. Through these elements, McNaughton's painting is an example of art being used for political propaganda purposes, in this case to criticize Obama and his policies. This painting was made in 2010, after the passage of the Affordable Care Act, and conveys the artist's dismay and sense of hopelessness about the policies of Obama, as exemplified by the distraught man on the park bench. In addition, although McNaughton's painting has a different purpose than old oil paintings, they both use a similar technique of showing objects and people in detail and very realistically. The painting shows people and objects, together with the White House in the background, in a very realistic way, almost as if the painting were a photograph.

McNaughton's painting is also similar to the use of advertising in an important way. Berger explains in Episode 4 of *Ways of Seeing* how in advertising, photography is used to persuade people to buy things. Berger argues that while old oil paintings showed what their owners already had, such as their wealth and things, advertising appeals to a way of life that we aspire to, or think we aspire to, but do not have, and tells us that we must spend money and consume to achieve this life. Advertising, through suggestive imagery, sends the message that we can have the glamorous life shown in the advertisement by buying the product advertised, encouraging us to spend money to buy the product. In "The Forgotten Man", McNaughton's purpose is not to persuade people to buy any physical object, but he is still trying to sell something: his criticism of Obama and his policies. For example, by showing the distressed young man on the bench, McNaughton tries to persuade people that Obama's policies such as

Obamacare will lead to a bleak and hopeless future. In doing so, he hopes people will “buy” his view of limited government and opposition to Obama’s policies.

This painting also demonstrates a point Berger makes about paintings and photography: recreating paintings through photography can change their meaning. In Episode 1 of *Ways of Seeing*, Berger explains how photography affects how paintings are viewed in several ways. First, by allowing paintings to be reproduced and viewed widely, photography frees paintings from being images that exist and can be viewed only in one place, and instead allows paintings to be viewed everywhere, allowing their meaning to be transmitted. Moreover, the camera is able to focus on only one part of the painting, which can manipulate its meaning. In McNaughton’s painting, for example, if the camera zooms in and shows only the presidents applauding President Obama, the painting’s meaning becomes entirely different and appears to support Obama. Photography allows a painting to be used to support different views. This is more difficult to do when the only way to view a painting is to see it physically in a gallery, because in that case one sees the entire picture and is less likely to misinterpret its meaning based on seeing only a part of it.

One technique used by McNaughton in “The Forgotten Man” to convey his message is through contrasts, or juxtaposing opposite images against each other. For example, several applauding presidents are contrasted with several presidents showing their concern about the distraught man on the bench. In addition, an aloof, smug President Obama, with his arms folded, is contrasted with a president right behind him expressing alarm about the Constitution that Obama is stepping on. The use of contrasting images is similar to the situation that Berger describes in Episode 4 of *Ways of Seeing* where advertising of glamorous objects are contrasted with images on the page right next to them of refugees, starving children, and other problems.

The juxtaposition of opposite images right next to each other highlights their differences and gives the message that the world is a place of opposite realities and situations that do not mix with each other. The stark contrasting images have the effect of making people focus and choose one over the other, thus taking sides.

This paper has discussed a number of ways in which McNaughton's painting is intended to convey a message to persuade people and in this way is similar to the advertising discussed by Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. Having considered these, the question that we must consider is whether McNaughton's message is effective. McNaughton is not subtle about the political statement he is making in the painting. He is very critical of big government and wasteful spending, as shown by the dollar bills strewn on the ground at the front of the picture. Similar to advertising, the artist is trying to sell something and make his audience think like him, although it is not goods he is selling, but rather his political philosophy. However, many people already hold very strong political views one way or the other, so I think most people will either strongly agree with McNaughton's message, or strongly oppose it. It seems to me that the painting, for most people, will reinforce their beliefs, not persuade them to change their beliefs. Nonetheless, the painting is very provocative in its imagery and is sure to make people think about its meaning, so to the extent that it at least encourages people to think about and examine their beliefs (even if they confirm their beliefs in the end), it serves an important purpose.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger discusses the historical background in which oil paintings arose and the purposes for which they were originally created. Although, Berger argues, early oil paintings were created for the purpose of showing the wealth, power, and objects of those who had them painted, Jon McNaughton's "The Forgotten Man" serves a different purpose, to make a political message. In doing this, the painting shares a similar

purpose with advertising discussed by Berger, to convince people to think or act a certain way. While McNaughton's goal is not to persuade people to buy things as with advertising, he does attempt to sell people his political views, this making the painting an example of political propaganda. Whether or not one agrees with it, "The Forgotten Man" conveys a strong, provocative political message, and makes people examine and think about their beliefs.