

A Visual Analysis of a World War II Poster

"Keep this Scary from Your House," an American propaganda poster produced throughout World War II, uses lots of visual and textual elements to encourage Americans to purchase war bonds by representing the Japanese as rapists. The author of the piece is unknown, however it is obvious that the creator of the poster carefully selects the color, patterns, scale, text, and representation of the piece to send a very strong social and political message. There is little doubt that the underlying message was directed towards all Americans during The Second World War, and not towards a single community or group of people. The audience does not need an art background or perhaps the slightest political awareness to understand the meaning of the poster. Rather, the poster is easy and simple. The main focus of the poster is on the Japanese man, whose facial features are clearly overemphasized to instill fear and disgust in the eyes of the audience. In contrast, the scared and vulnerable expression of the American female, who is powerless in the grasp of the Japanese soldier, fuels the viewer's hatred for the Japanese even more. Its message is palpable to the extent of the quickest glance, yet there is more evidence hidden beyond the surface of the poster. Its complete visual capacity can be realized only after analyzing the various visual and textual aspects in exacting detail. After analyzing and checking out the poster in depth, it ends up being obvious that the color pattern plays an essential function in appointing the role of the victim and of the enemy. The Japanese soldier has really dark skin whereas the American woman being threatened and possibly raped has fair skin. The dark versus light contrast always seems to represent the struggle between wicked and great. The technique in which the creator of the poster utilizes in juxtaposing the dark skin of the Japanese soldier with the light skin of the American woman completely attains his intended function. Further inspection reveals another dark versus light contrast. The Japanese soldier uses a black army issued hat while the American soldier on the lower ideal corner of the poster wears a white cap, unconsciously recommending that the Japanese army is evil which the American forces are excellent. The blood red color of the background, the bright red lips of the Japanese soldier, and the reddish hue on the American girl's cheeks all seem to allude to the sexuality of the poster. The use of the color red symbolizes blood, violence, and rape. Besides the red background and the dark versus light contrast of the Japanese soldier and the American girl's skin colors, the "placards" that read "Invest 10% in War Bonds" and "Back up Our Battleskies!" are the only other colors represented on the entire poster. It is interesting to note that the color of the two placards matches the color of the American girl's skin. The entire poster is dominated, if not limited, to these three colors: red, dark, and light. This allows the viewer to focus on and to look beyond the color scheme and recognize its symbolic meaning, rather than just to admire the colors of the poster without delving beneath the surface meaning. Scale and pattern also play an important role in defining our perception of each character in the poster. For example, the Japanese soldier's hands are so large that they appear to envelop the American girl's face, causing the viewer to feel threatened. In addition, the Japanese soldier's teeth are jagged and massive, immediately drawing attention to his beast-like, merciless expression. One may even draw the conclusion that the Japanese soldier represents some kind of wild animal, as his posture and expression seem too cruel to be human. His frightening and imposing figure in conjunction with the phrase, "Keep This HORROR from Your Home" gives the reader the feeling that both his own country and home are being threatened by the Japanese. At this point, the text and the font size and style of the text become very important to the overall meaning of the poster and make it a very effective propaganda poster. In assigning the word "HORROR" a larger font size than the words around it, the artist wants the viewer to focus on the word "Horror," which instills a sense of fear and insecurity into the viewer. Italicizing the word "Your" gives the viewer a sense of identity with his country and inspires a sense of pride and obligation in defending his own home, his own nation. That's where the genius of the poster comes in. Following the feeling of anxiety and urgency that the poster pushes onto the viewer, a simple solution is offered: "Invest 10% in War Bonds." The artist obviously designed the poster to stimulate the sales of war bonds, and he succeeds in doing so because he presents such a morbid and exaggerated scene, climaxing with the threatening phrase "Keep This HORROR from Your Home." In a literal sense, the phrase, "Invest 10% in War Bonds," is analogous to the denouement of the poster's "plot." After

analyzing the poster in full detail, one understands all the aspects of the poster. Questions as to why the artist used certain color schemes, why he presented the characters like he did, and why he used such powerful text are answered. Like most typical World War II propaganda posters, this poster, capitalizes on the nationalistic pride of the people in defending their own nation. In doing so, it exploits the stereotypical view of the Japanese soldier and paints a cloud of sin to rouse the spirits of Americans. Racial inferiority, hate crimes, and discrimination are the end results of such propaganda posters. Does the artist carry out his intended goal of selling war bonds and stirring up emotions of anger and fear in Americans? Without a doubt... But whether such use of propaganda is ethical and justified is an entirely separate question.