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Mark Wollaeger: Modernism, Media, and Propaganda

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INTRODUCTION

MODERNISM AND THE INFORMATION-PROPAGANDA MATRIX

COMMON SENSE, that mysterious repository of unarticulated assumptions, may suggest that modernism and propaganda have little to do with each other. The case of Ford Madox Ford indicates otherwise. Ford is central to the larger argument of this book (and therefore receives extended treatment in chapter 3) because his passionate engagement with both literary aesthetics and the contemporary media environment reveals the sense in which modernism and propaganda are two sides of the same coin of modernity. Setting out to define literary impressionism (which is to say, modernism) early in 1914, Ford proclaimed that an impressionist “must not write propaganda.”¹ But within weeks of completing his modernist masterwork, *The Good Soldier* (1914), Ford began writing two books, *Between St. Dennis and St. George* (1915) and *When Blood Is Their Argument* (1915), for the propaganda operation run by C.F.G. Masterman out of Wellington House. With respect to style and narrative technique, the three books are indistinguishable. The conjunction of propaganda and modernist style is not in itself surprising. Just as Dziga Vertov’s film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is at once a brilliant city symphony and a piece of Leninist propaganda, so Picasso attacked fascism through the cubist abstraction of *Guernica* (1937).² But by grounding his theory of impressionism in a refusal to propagandize even as he wrote propaganda grounded in impressionist technique, Ford betrays a deeper connection between modernism and propaganda. Understood in relation to his belief that modern writers had a civic duty to repair a dysfunctional culture of information, Ford’s modernism and propaganda begin to look less like strange bedfellows than like conjoined twins.

Ford, like George Orwell and Joseph Conrad, wrote both as a novelist and as a propagandist, but whereas Orwell felt compelled to theorize the relationship between art and propaganda, and Conrad, like Virginia Woolf, felt threatened by their cultural adjacency, Ford largely shrugged off perceived tensions. With information overwhelming the processing capacity of consciousness, Ford’s impression is designed to resist the onset of the posthuman by reinvesting facts with feeling. That

is, where T. S. Eliot posited a dissociation of sensibility that began in the seventeenth century with the English Revolution, Ford, more attuned to recent media history, described a split between factuality and the human caused by the surfeit of quantitative data spewed out by the mass press, reference books, and sociology. In Ford's theory, the impression mediates between the human sensorium and a body of facts that otherwise cannot be held together by the mind; propaganda steps in later to manipulate the reunified individual into the greater unity of a collective cause. Rehumanized to appeal to the modern citizen's overtaxed powers of synthesis, the impression is Ford's less direct method for controlling reader response. Propaganda, in this understanding, is acceptable so long as it does not advertise itself as such. The British Ministry of Information (MoI), as I shall describe in this chapter, held a similar view.

This is not to say that the shared subjectification of the fact in impressionism and British propaganda elides all distinctions between the two. Even in Ford, who wrote for the government, friction persists despite the close meshing of gears. Rather, the ease with which Ford moved between impressionism and propaganda indicates how important it is to grasp what modern writers thought propaganda was. To some it recalled the dead hand of Victorianism; to others it heralded a new age (now recognizable as our age) of informatic indeterminacy. By tracing the concept's significance through a range of modernists, and by looking closely at the distinctiveness of the British propaganda campaign, this chapter seeks to show how modernism and propaganda were constituted within an information-propaganda matrix.

MAKING SENSE OF PROPAGANDA: FROM ORWELL AND WOOLF TO BERNAYS AND ELLUL

Understanding what "propaganda" meant to modernists requires us to see the word's problematic status in light of its complicated history in the twentieth century. Specialists in propaganda studies today disagree so much about terminology that some have argued that "propaganda" is useless as an analytic tool and use "persuasion" instead; but "persuasion," others counter, covers too much ground. In mainstream discourse, "propaganda" is regularly used to dismiss purportedly documentary accounts for their deceptive inaccuracy or deliberate bias, as if "propaganda" were the accepted name for the capacious category of politically motivated falsehood. But slinging the term rarely settles the case: one person's propaganda is another person's information, and the distinction between the two is often difficult to draw.

"Propaganda" has not always been so difficult to define. The English

word derives from a Latin term that originally referred to a committee of Cardinals, or Congregation of Propaganda, established by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 to propagate Roman Catholicism. The word was later extended to designate “any association, systematic scheme, or concerted movement for the propagation of a particular doctrine or practice” (*OED*). But with the professionalization of advertising in the late nineteenth century, and the emergence of public relations specialists and the rapid development of mass media in the twentieth century, “propaganda” became increasingly difficult to pin down. Although the word began to acquire some negative connotations over the nineteenth century owing to government distrust of secret organizations designed to sway public opinion, the *OED* does not record until 1908 the now-common definition of “propaganda” as tendentious persuasion by interested parties. At that time, with so much of modern society dependent on the rapid exchange of information, “propaganda” usually denoted persuasive information or mere boosterism. The information propagated might come from interested sources, but its integrity or reliability was not necessarily suspect. That would change over the first half of the twentieth century, when two world wars helped link “propaganda” to lies and deception without completely erasing the notion that “to persuade” might simply mean “to inform.”

By the forties, when the propaganda techniques pioneered by the British had been refined and deployed around the world for over two decades, propaganda seemed inescapable, and the sinister connotations it had begun to gather by the twenties were firmly established. For the Western world, Soviet domestic propaganda had begun to blur distinctions between propaganda and education, and the Nazi campaign added associations with obfuscation and systematic deception. With the surge in global propaganda in the interwar years, artists felt the pressure acutely. Themselves engaged in acts of communication within a media ecology that was changing rapidly, artists were forced to compete not only with increasingly pervasive new media but with organized efforts to use those media to manage the public. When in 1918 Ezra Pound referred to poets as “the antennae of the race,” he was already tuned in to the new medium of radio, which he himself exploited as a propagandist during World War II.³

But modernists responded to propaganda and the media that made it possible in diverse ways. D. H. Lawrence, for instance, was in one sense a born propagandist. He wrote entire books of doctrine urging readers to live their lives differently, and his fiction sometimes turns away from his characters to advocate alternative modes of being. Perhaps for that very reason, recruiting tactics during World War I enraged him. In December 1915 he spent some time in Battersea Town Hall at a recruiting station.

He was there because when British recruitment fell off drastically in the spring of 1915, Lord Derby, the newly appointed Director-General of Recruitment, devised a program under which men of military age would come forward “to attest” their willingness to serve if required. The so-called Derby Scheme was intended as a compromise between conscription and volunteerism. And so Lawrence, confident that his poor health would earn an exemption and needing to attest before he could apply for a passport to America, went to the town hall to proclaim himself ready and willing.⁴ But the next day Lawrence wrote to Ottoline Morrell that after waiting for several hours he left before securing an exemption because he “*hated* the situation almost to *madness*.” Lawrence was not put off by the recruiting officials or the potential recruits: “waiting there in the queue, I felt the *men* were very decent, and that the slumbering lion was going to wake up in them: not against the Germans either, but against the great lie of this life.” Taken out of context, Lawrence’s remarks simply repeat one of his familiar metaphysical points: men fail to live in truth because they do not live in harmony with their leonine passions. Yet the context of recruitment suggests that Lawrence’s visceral hatred—in the letter he underscores “hated” five times—was catalyzed in this instance not so much by the men’s capitulation to the bogey of mental consciousness as by their “spectral submission” to the untruth associated with war propaganda. The real enemy is not Germany but, as Stephen Dedalus puts it in *Ulysses*, the priest and king within. And like Stephen, Lawrence declares that he will not serve: “I had triumphed, like Satan flying over the world and knowing he had won at last.”⁵

Somewhat less satanic, George Orwell and Virginia Woolf both devoted relatively measured attention to propaganda. Woolf thought about the problem more than she wanted to, while Orwell devoted more attention to propaganda than any British writer of his generation. Although both were ambivalent, both sometimes wrote as propagandists, and their explorations of the blurred boundaries between art and propaganda shed light on problems of definition that were newly emerging as matters for public debate.

Orwell’s various writings reflect the polarized thinking of the thirties even as they suggest why it is difficult to generalize about relations between art and propaganda. In a 1941 BBC radio broadcast, “The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda,” Orwell tries to draw some conclusions from the propaganda wars of the previous decade. For Orwell, art since the 1890s took for granted the notion of art for art’s sake, even after the slogan itself was driven underground by the trial of Oscar Wilde. Writers still emphasized “technique” throughout the twenties, but in the thirties Nazism and the global economic depression made it impossible to preserve the “intellectual detachment” required by aestheticism: “any

thinking person had to take sides, and his feelings had to find their way not only into his writing but into his judgements on literature.”⁶ Orwell has mixed feelings about this development. Although he is happy to wave goodbye to the notion that literature ever could wholly detach itself from politics, the politicizing of literature, now “swamped by propaganda,” also caused “countless young writers . . . to tie their minds to a political discipline”—“official Marxism”—that “made mental honesty impossible” (*Collected Essays* 2:123, 126). Orwell draws the reasonable lesson that writers can neither remain wholly detached from their times nor sacrifice their “intellectual integrity” to political exigency (*ibid.*, 2:126). Unsure how to reconcile “aesthetic scrupulousness” and “political rectitude,” Orwell can only conclude that the decade’s events at least “helped us to define, better than was possible before, the frontiers of art and propaganda” (*ibid.*, 2:126–27).

Relatively inconclusive here, Orwell remains illuminating as a guide, in part because he refuses pat solutions to real problems, in part because he wrote both as an artist and as a propagandist. Orwell reflected at length on his dual identity in his diaries—and on whether his roles could even be separated. As a novelist, Orwell probed deeply into propaganda’s colonization of everyday life. *1984* is the most powerful novelistic indictment of propaganda ever written in English, perhaps in any language. But the most frightening and prescient element of the novel is not so much the state’s “rectification” of the news or the invention of Big Brother, for which the book remains famous. With Big Brother, Orwell simply anticipated Michel Foucault’s extension of Jeremy Bentham’s nineteenth-century fantasy of the panopticon from the prison to the whole of society, and “rectified” news, sad to say, was already a fact of life as Orwell was writing in 1948. More shocking is Orwell’s implicit claim that modern propaganda is able to restructure desire to such an extent that the very concept of internalizing authority breaks down. By the end of *1984*, the distinction between private and public no longer exists: Winston Smith truly loves Big Brother. Authority cannot be internalized when authority has always and already occupied the inner life of the mind. Or to borrow Stephen Dedalus’s formulation again, how can the priest and king within be killed if to do so means extinguishing consciousness itself?

Orwell nevertheless felt that propaganda had its uses: the object of his critique in *1984* is not propaganda per se but the totalitarian system it serves. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell expresses disgust over the fact that propaganda during the Spanish Civil War is being produced by noncombatants sheltered from actual bullets, but within five years Orwell (who *did* fight against fascism in Spain) was writing propaganda for BBC radio and confiding in his diary: “All propaganda is lies, even

when one is telling the truth. I don't think this matters so long as one knows what one is doing, and why" (ibid. 2:416, 411).⁷ Nietzsche never put it better. Nor did Orwell restrict himself to anti-Nazi propaganda. In August 2003 the Public Record Office in England released a list of "crypto-communists" that Orwell compiled in 1949 for the Information Research Department, a propaganda bureau that operated out of the Foreign Office. The important point for my purposes is not that a leftist would collaborate with the government to root out suspected communists. Although the notion of Orwell as a McCarthyite is alarming, there is no evidence that his handing over of the list did anyone any harm, and Orwell was not alone in believing that the Soviet Union had betrayed the left and that many British Marxists had in effect become Soviet nationalists.⁸ More significant is that Orwell, anticipating the analysis of Jacques Ellul, had correctly seen that modern governments cannot survive without propaganda. Rather than decry the decay of organic communities, he decided to help hold things together against the perceived threats of Marxism, fascism, and Nazism.

Orwell's ambivalence toward propaganda opens onto complex attitudes shared by many of his fellow writers and citizens in the early twentieth century. Orwell believed that literature should participate in politics, but he did not want to dispense with distinctions between the aesthetic and the ideological. His famous essay "Politics and the English Language" is based on the premise that the operations of language should not be subordinated to political exigencies and on the belief that language can shake off ideology.⁹ And yet, as Orwell knew, this was easier said than done.

Virginia Woolf found herself in a similar bind in the thirties. Feeling the unwelcome pressure of propaganda while writing "The Pargiters," Woolf decided that even though "this fiction is dangerously near propaganda," she could not "propagate at the same time as write fiction."¹⁰ But if she was dismayed with a new era in which "people must have things written in chalk and large and repeated over and over again,"¹¹ she was more than willing to enter the fray: with *Three Guineas* (1938) Woolf earned the title of "the most brilliant pamphleteer in England" from the *Times Literary Supplement* (*Diary* 5:148).¹² Not that Woolf would have appreciated being called the most brilliant *propagandist* in England. Keenly attentive to National Socialist propaganda, Woolf had come to see "propaganda" as a dirty word.

As I noted earlier, it was not always so. Before World War I propagandists began to professionalize the manipulation of public opinion, the Orwellian connotations of names such as Britain's MoI or the U.S. Committee on Public Information (CPI) did not yet exist: "propaganda" was typically used as "information" always had been, in a largely neutral

sense. During World War II, British officials still tended to use the words “information,” “propaganda,” and “publicity” interchangeably among themselves,¹³ but the popular view had long since changed, and the public was primed to accept Orwell’s now common assumption, canonized by 1984, that any official linkage between information and government is intrinsically sinister. As cultural pressures began to force a semantic shift, some intellectuals in the interwar years felt compelled to discount the common notion that there could be good and bad propaganda. Feeling the effects of what A. J. MacKenzie termed “the propaganda boom” of the thirties,¹⁴ Frederick E. Lumley undertook in *The Propaganda Menace* (1933) to disentangle propaganda from education and cultural boosterism by arguing that the word should be reserved only for “promotion which is veiled in one way or another” as to its origin, interests, methods, content, or results; “whatever promotional work has passed and now passes under that name had better be called something else in the interests of clear thinking.”¹⁵ Edward Bernays, it turns out, had already attempted to address the problem.

Nephew to Sigmund Freud and founder of public relations as a profession, Bernays realized the commercial potential of engineering public opinion while working as a propagandist for the CPI, better known as the Creel Commission.¹⁶ His first two books record his struggle to distinguish between the honorable work of public relations and its disreputable progenitor, propaganda. *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) opens as if Bernays intends to distance himself from the word by undertaking to explain the significance of “a new phrase”: “counsel on public relations.”¹⁷ In fact, Bernays himself had coined the title in order to give his new enterprise an aura of professional standing. Detecting a connotative shift underway, Bernays admits that the average person probably thinks of the public relations counsel as someone who “produces that vaguely defined evil, ‘propaganda’” (*Crystallizing Public Opinion*, 11–12). But rather than clear away a misconception, he simply continues: “And yet . . . there is probably no single profession which within the last ten years has extended its field of usefulness more remarkably and touched upon intimate and important aspects of the everyday life of the world more significantly than the profession of public relations counsel” (*ibid.*, 12). Bernays’s odd sense that the extended reach of public relations ought to quell fears about the vague evils of propaganda may explain why he remained stubbornly immune for so long to the increasingly negative connotations of the word. When Bernays published his second book on public relations in 1928, he titled it *Propaganda* and proclaimed without qualms that “propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government.”¹⁸ Yet *Propaganda* also suggests that Bernays was beginning to acknowledge the need to disentangle his profession

from the title of his own book. He therefore devotes over two and a half pages to a tissue of quotations from Funk and Wagnalls that emphasizes the neutrality of the term by recalling its original meaning: “‘Propaganda’ in its proper meaning is a perfectly wholesome word, of honest parentage, and with an honorable history. The fact that it should to-day be carrying a sinister meaning merely shows how much of the child remains in the average adult” (Bernays, *Propaganda*, 22). Grow up, in other words, and stop calling your sibling a bastard. Bernays is only too happy to seize on the dictionary’s puritanical allegiance to etymology in order to bolster the position Lumley would soon attack, that whether “propaganda is good or bad depends upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published” (ibid., 20). He is therefore unconcerned that by his own count half the stories on the front page of the *New York Times* amount to propaganda. And yet within a few pages Bernays decides that “new activities call for a new nomenclature,” and, harking back to *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, reminds the reader that “the propagandist who specializes in interpreting enterprises and ideas to the public . . . has come to be known by the name of ‘public relations counsel’” (ibid., 37). Only a few pages later Bernays suggests that those who conflate public relations and propaganda are missing an important distinction: “the stage at which many suppose [the public relations counsel] starts his activities may actually be the stage at which he ends them” (ibid., 43). In other words, public relations enables propaganda without actually engaging in it.

Insofar as common parlance today tends to equate public relations with spin and propaganda with lies, Bernays can be said to have won the battle over nomenclature. But Bernays’s tortured distancing of himself from the term, Woolf’s insight into changing norms of persuasion, and Orwell’s sense of the modern state’s dependence on propaganda begin to get at the more complex understanding that emerges in the following decades, particularly in the work of Jacques Ellul.

Ellul’s importance in propaganda studies derives from his focus on propaganda as a sociological phenomenon made necessary by the nature of modern society rather than as the political weapon of a particular regime or organization. Ellul’s landmark book *Propaganda* (1962) draws on Bernays, and his definition of “sociological propaganda” as “the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context” echoes Bernays’s account of “the new propaganda,” which “sees the individual not only as a cell in the social organism but as a cell organized into the social unit.”¹⁹ The concept of sociological or “integration” propaganda permits Ellul to set aside extreme solutions to problems of definition, namely, the notion that everything is propaganda because ideology permeates all spheres of existence and the rejection of the term altogether in favor of a yet broader term, such as “persuasion.” Slower and more dif-

fuse than political propaganda, integration propaganda operates through political, economic, and cultural structures, and produces “a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations, which unconsciously molds individuals and makes them conform to society” (Ellul, *Propaganda*, 64). Integration propaganda thus includes not just the usual state-sponsored suspects—political broadcasting, censorship, atrocity stories, and the manipulation of news—but also more diffusely constellated organizations and institutions, such as advertising, public relations, and popular films, whose interactions effectively reinforce official political propaganda without necessarily setting out to do so. Ellul is clearly open to the charge that insofar as nearly everything counts as propaganda, he empties the category of meaning. But it is equally clear that it makes sense to use “propaganda” as a covering term to articulate the notion that in highly rationalized societies, diverse forms of modern communication function together to ensure the reproduction of the system.²⁰

In many ways Ellul’s theory overlaps with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s earlier account of “the culture industry” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). Both theories focus on mechanisms of integration and control grounded in principles of rationality that ultimately subvert themselves. For Horkheimer and Adorno, “the tireless self-destruction of enlightenment,” or its regression into myth, is rooted in rationality’s fear that its power of critique will unground the existing order.²¹ Ellul’s investigation of propaganda grows out of his critique of instrumental rationality in his more frequently cited *The Technological Society* (1954). For Ellul, technique is at the heart of modern society (not technology; the English title misleadingly translates the original French, *La technique*).²² By “technique” Ellul means any standardized ensemble of means used to attain a given end, and he understands propaganda as a necessary corollary of a society dominated by technique. Recalling Max Weber’s theory of rationalization, Ellul argues that while technique began with the machine, the progressive extension of technique into all domains of existence produces a civilization committed only to efficiency as an end in itself. Propaganda is necessary in such a world, for “propaganda is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world” (Ellul, *Propaganda*, xvii). Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Ellul understands modern propaganda as a species of mythopoesis that papers over contradictions opened up by the homologous forces of rationalization, technique, and enlightenment.

But in comparison with Horkheimer and Adorno’s culture industry, Ellul’s model of relations among ideology, cultural production, and modernity offers a sharper analytic tool. First, Ellul’s theory is more dynamic and less monolithic. The culture industry articulates a top-down

model in which power is uniformly diffused throughout culture and inexorably subordinates the individual to the social totality through the agency of media controlled by capital. Thus all preexisting forms of entertainment and art are “taken over from above”; the resulting entertainment “prescribes each reaction”; content is transformed into style; and the stylistic transformation of “all branches of intellectual production” dictates “obedience to the social hierarchy.”²³ For Ellul, in contrast, individuals become consumers not because advertising and modern media (epitomized by cinema and radio) manufacture desire but because the desires and needs of the individual help generate the mechanisms that lead to their integration. Individuals collaborate in their subjection, in other words, because processes of rationalization, more broadly construed than in Horkheimer and Adorno, create needs that only propaganda can fulfill. Thus if both Ellul and the Frankfurt school critics offer grim visions of domination, the former’s approach preserves the possibility of agency by positing of a zone of interaction between individuals and apparatuses of integration. Modernism performs its cultural work, I argue in succeeding chapters, within this liminal space, a kind of psychosocial contact zone defined at one extreme by subjectivity construed as a sanctuary for being, and at the other by propaganda as an encompassing array of manipulative discourses. Second, whereas in Horkheimer and Adorno the difference between culture and propaganda disappears through the agency of media controlled by the culture industry—power, that is, alchemically transforms all cultural productions into propaganda—Ellul recognizes that cultural desires precede and motivate the invention of new technologies, such as new media, and that new technologies then reshape those cultural desires. In short, Ellul’s model is more genuinely dialectical than Horkheimer and Adorno’s “dialectic of enlightenment.” Thus where the concept of the culture industry asserts a media determinism in which specific media necessarily produce particular effects (e.g., “to posit the human word as absolute . . . is the immanent tendency of radio”),²⁴ Ellul sees the growing dominance of mass media as contributing to a more fundamental dynamic, in which the explosion of information requires the development of propaganda. This difference requires further explanation, for it goes to the heart of how Ellul’s theory brings into focus the ways in which modernism and propaganda, as incipient languages of the new information age, are related yet ultimately divergent mechanisms for processing information within modernity’s new regimes of rationalization.

In *Propaganda* Ellul repeats an argument he made more forcefully in an earlier essay, “Information and Propaganda” (1957): by the mid-twentieth century it has become virtually impossible to distinguish between information and propaganda. Ellul’s critics often misread him to

mean that the two are theoretically indistinguishable, but his point, in the words of Stanley Cunningham, is that modern propaganda is

characterized by a very close alliance with or incorporation of some central, highly prized epistemic values: information and knowledge; truth and facts; certainty and objectivity. It is further enhanced whenever these epistemic values are embedded within such culturally esteemed practices as debate, discussion, and scientific research; or when it is associated with such para-epistemic dispositions as thoughtfulness and reflection, and with the social values of openness, cooperation, courtesy, and civility—all of which add up to give a total impression of fair play and reasonableness in persuasive discourse.²⁵

Within this information-propaganda matrix, those most confident of their ability to tell the difference—intellectuals and professionals—are the most likely to be mistaken. Thus where Horkheimer and Adorno conjure the threat of elite capitalists gathered behind the curtain to orchestrate mass deception, Ellul describes the more alarming scenario in which the hidden persuaders (to cite Vance Packard’s popular version of the Frankfurt school’s conspiratorial vision)²⁶ are as blinded by information as those they would manipulate.²⁷

Much of the resistance to Ellul’s theory derives from his counterintuitive claim that “intellectuals are most easily reached by propaganda, particularly if it employs ambiguity” (*Propaganda*, 113). Horkheimer and Adorno implicitly exempt readers able to follow their complex dialectical critique (not to mention the writers capable of overcoming the reification of language that their analysis insists is universal) from the exhausted capitulation routinely suffered by their less nimble compatriots, for whom the culture industry is the only game in town. But for Ellul, information overrides intellect: “the more informed public or private opinion is, the more susceptible it is to propaganda,” because more informed is not the same as better informed: “information not only provides the basis for propaganda but gives propaganda the means to operate; for information actually generates the problems that propaganda exploits and for which it pretends to offer solutions” (*ibid.*, 113–14). If the intellectual reader resists this blow to academic self-regard, Ellul is no easier on everyone else: “The majority prefers expressing stupidities to not expressing any opinion: this gives them the feeling of participation” (*ibid.*, 140). So much for talk radio in the United States. Addressing the elite and the masses together, Ellul continues:

Developments [in the modern world] are not merely beyond man’s intellectual scope; they are also beyond him in volume and intensity; he simply cannot grasp the world’s economic and political problems. Faced with such matters, he feels his weakness, his inconsistency, his lack of effectiveness. He realizes

that he depends on decisions over which he has no control, and that realization drives him to despair. Man cannot stay in this situation too long. He needs an ideological veil to cover the harsh reality, some consolation, a *raison d'être*, a sense of values. And only propaganda offers him a remedy for a basically intolerable situation. (Ellul, *Propaganda*, 140)

Thus a claim I advanced in the preface can be refined here: propaganda finds a use value for negative affect by channeling what might be called informatic alienation into socially “productive” forms, such as myths, stereotypes, and xenophobia.

Admittedly, Ellul’s account exaggerates the effectiveness of propaganda—like Horkheimer and Adorno, he has no interest in empirical studies—as well as the degree to which propaganda usurps the role of all competing belief systems. The strong affect driving Ellul’s argument, particularly noticeable in “Propaganda and Information,” betrays an historical source when Ellul, discussing the role of memory in the conversion of information into knowledge, observes that “quite recently . . . we watched our intellectuals seriously assert the exact opposite of what they had said a few months before—not even alluding to their former stand and demonstrating that there is frequent loss of memory.”²⁸ The historical referent goes unnamed, but Ellul’s acid irony is motivated by the 1956 Soviet Party Congress in which Nikita Krushchev, finally acknowledging Stalin’s crimes and denouncing his despotism, in effect admitted that official Soviet history had been composed of propaganda unburdened by any fidelity to fact.²⁹ Writing as a quasi-Marxist just as the word “disinformation” was coined to name the blurry semantic space in which distinctions between information and propaganda were once discerned, Ellul no doubt felt betrayed into theorizing his own gullibility. But the depth of Ellul’s animus may also derive from the fact that he was a theologian as well as a cultural critic: sometimes he implies that humankind has fallen from a state of mythic premodernity—a state of psychic and social wholeness—into the modern hell of propaganda. Ellul himself thus writes as a modernist: his sustained analysis of the snares of modern existence amounts to a descent into the underworld, where he unearths, as Joyce does in *Nighttown*, the interlocking network of desires and social determinants that makes it hard for modern citizens to declare that they will not serve.

At this juncture, the interface between propaganda and information and between information and modernism becomes apparent. One might say that if the alienated, frustrated, and confused protagonists of modern British narrative are symptoms of modernity, propaganda is the solution. From the eddies and repetitions within “the prolonged present” of Gertrude Stein’s characteristic narrative voice to the present-tense

monologues of Woolf's characters in *The Waves* (1931), modernism's innocent eye or knowing ignorance, so intent on disavowing knowledge in favor of being, may be understood as a mechanism for coping with flows of information that exceed human comprehension. If Woolf's waves conjure the ruling power of Britannia, a covert power everywhere present but nowhere seen,³⁰ the italicized interchapters through which the waves roll insist equally on the natural fact of tides, seasons, and the rotation of the earth, offering a counterpoint to the turbulent ideological moment of the novel's composition and reception. According to this logic, lyric immediacy and modernist mythologies, like imagistic concentration and encyclopedic capaciousness, are the systole and diastole of an information ecology that demands either arbitrary exclusion ("We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing," says a missionary in *A Passage to India*) or impossible comprehension (the "Akasic records of all that ever anywhere wherever was" invoked by Stephen in *Ulysses*).³¹

If propaganda has always existed, reliable information has always been hard to come by in wartime; hence the proverbial fog. But the acuteness of the problems posed by the information-propaganda matrix is a distinctly twentieth-century phenomenon. The saying "to lie like a bulletin" dates from the Napoleonic Wars, and the well-known tripartite typology of deception—lies, damned lies, and statistics—dates from the late nineteenth century.³² But with World War I, when newly invented propaganda techniques first harnessed the considerable power of the advertising industry to the political aims of the nation-state, the most telling saying emerged: the first casualty of war is truth.³³ Truth has died many deaths over the twentieth century, but the role played by the British propaganda campaign in World War I is fundamental to understanding the new media ecology faced by modernist writers and its effects on attitudes toward truth, factuality, and rhetoric. For when Woolf and Orwell struggle to articulate a space for the aesthetic in the culture wars of the thirties, they are attempting to find their bearings in a media environment whose rate of change, already an overwhelming fact of existence prior to 1914, had been accelerated by war.

PROPAGATING FICTIONS: WELLINGTON HOUSE, MODERNISM, AND THE INVENTION OF MODERN PROPAGANDA

Although historical accounts of modernism have devoted a lot of attention to World War I, the innovative British propaganda campaign rarely enters the calculus. The plan was unique among its European counterparts in that it emphasized facts over overt persuasion, disguised the

official origins of its propaganda, and placed literature at the heart of its efforts—at least at the beginning.

On September 2, 1914, just under a month after the outbreak of war, C.F.G. Masterman, the former Liberal MP charged by Prime Minister Herbert Asquith with initiating the British propaganda campaign, tapped into the tremendous cultural prestige of British letters by secretly inviting to his office in Wellington House twenty-five of England's most influential writers. The invitees included William Archer, J. M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, Robert Bridges, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Anthony Hope Hawkins, Thomas Hardy, George Trevelyan, H. G. Wells, and Israel Zangwill. Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Quiller Couch could not attend but sent messages offering their services.³⁴ With the exception of Hardy, all those in attendance chose to help, and many others, including Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad, joined the campaign later. It is not at all surprising that so many writers supported the war: though the Liberal Party traditionally had been far less inclined to wage war than the Conservatives, early support for the fight against Germany tended to cut across party affiliation. Positioning themselves as concerned citizens, the authors recruited into service published commissioned books under their own names through well-known commercial and university presses that were secretly subsidized by the government. The plan was so effectively secretive that most members of Parliament remained unaware of its operations for two years, and the public did not learn of the writers' participation until the early 1930s.³⁵ Although Masterman's publishing enterprise has been narrated in traditional literary histories, its full significance has not been fully understood or explored, particularly with respect to British modernism.

It is hard to overestimate the cultural influence wielded by Masterman's gathering of writers. "The novelists, poets, short story writers, critics, and dramatists at Masterman's meeting," as Gary Messinger observes, "were all part of an Edwardian literary establishment that had no competition from radio or television and whose representatives enjoyed tremendous prestige throughout the world among both elite and mass audiences": "Not only through their writings, but also through the earnings they amassed, the access they were given to the social networks of the politically and economically powerful, and the letter-writing correspondence they maintained with numerous loyal readers, these men were as influential a group of writers as the world has ever produced."³⁶ As influential as these men were, however, literature's role shrunk over the course of the war, for Masterman and his successors soon realized that film and other mass media were beginning to overshadow the cultural influence of literary intellectuals. The evolving British strategy thus charts the emergence of what in retrospect looks like a modern media

environment. More than a microcosm, however, the campaign also accelerated the pace of change. Propaganda's influence on the truth value of facts or, to put it another way, on the tension between the seeming immediacy of facts and the subtle ways in which facts are already and always mediated, registers across a wide range of modernist texts. The following historical narrative is therefore intended to lay the ground for subsequent discussions of the way modernists struggle to position themselves in relation to a media ecology whose transformation of factuality into rhetoric was contributing to the formation of what Walter Lippmann called a "pseudo-environment" of mediated images.³⁷

The most benign view of British propaganda is that it was designed primarily to disseminate factual accounts to counter rumors, gossip, incomplete stories, and fabrications already in circulation. To the extent that German propagandists, confident of a quick victory, sometimes resorted early in the war to lies or misrepresentations concerning enemy losses, landmarks destroyed, or territory captured, counterpropaganda could respond effectively simply by means of factual enumeration. As Lord Robert Cecil observed in a confidential memo, "in war-time it is the facts that count, not words. All we can do to help by propaganda is to let foreigners know what is actually happening."³⁸ Masterman too was committed to facts, and, judging from available documents, it seems that many British officials sincerely believed that factual enlightenment and persuasion amounted to much the same thing. Ivor Nicholson, who was in charge of pictorial propaganda, claimed after the war that the British never circulated "a deliberate untruth" and that "infinite pains were taken to sift information."³⁹ Facts would speak for themselves, and the world would recognize the truth of Allied accounts and the virtue of Allied aims.

The British factual emphasis developed in response to the pressures exerted by Germany's already well-established campaign. When war broke out on August 4, 1914, Germany had been using official propaganda bureaus, openly identified as such, to ply the world with its version of political tensions in Europe for decades. By the fall of 1914, many European neutrals resented the endless stream of German pamphlets. Masterman therefore decided to rule out direct appeals to neutral countries: "Strict secrecy has been observed as to any connection of the Government with the work," he reported: "every recipient of material distributed gratuitously should receive it from an unofficial source" and the material itself would not "bear any sign of having been produced under the auspices of the Government."⁴⁰ Officially named the Propaganda Bureau, Masterman's project soon came to be known by the building in which it was housed, Wellington House, a cover name Masterman made quasi-official in the title of subsequent parliamentary reports in order to

camouflage his operation's status as the state's central organ of propaganda. By the end of the war, it was generally agreed that British propaganda completely dominated the field, and most historians today believe that the British campaign played some role in persuading the United States to enter the war, contributed materially to shortening the war by undermining German morale, and was a significant influence on the punitive nature of the Treaty of Versailles.⁴¹

When Masterman assembled his writers, the first order of business was to organize an "Authors' Declaration" in support of the war in response to a letter recently published by German academics; the declaration appeared in *The Times* on September 18. But his long-term plans were more important. Knowing that the United States was particularly hostile to overt appeals from its former colonial overlord, Masterman had Gilbert Parker consult the American *Who's Who* and compile a list of prominent people who would receive the books with a note from Gilbert or the author, as if from one private individual to another. The same tactic was used with other neutral countries. Commercial publishing houses cooperating included Hodder and Stoughton and T. Fisher Unwin; Oxford University Press also helped out by publishing several volumes, most notably *Why We Are at War* (1914) by the Oxford Historians. Arnold Toynbee wrote several books for Wellington House, as did Lewis Namier, Hugh Walpole, and Arthur Conan Doyle; Mrs. Humphrey Ward, Hilaire Belloc, Gilbert Murray, and G. M. Trevelyan contributed at least one each. Extending its reach beyond English writers, Wellington House also solicited and translated works by foreign authors, including *Who Wanted War* (1915), co-authored by Émile Durkheim, and *The Trail of the Barbarians* (1917), written by Pierre Loti and translated by Ford Madox Ford.

Samuel Hynes has called the exclusiveness of Masterman's initial gathering a "crucial mistake" and suggests that the meeting was in part responsible for one of the dominant myths of World War I, "the concept of the Old Men, as the makers of the war and enemies of the young."⁴² Looking back, Hardy, who was seventy-four in 1914, also intuited a generational divide: "the yellow September sun shone in from the dusty street with a tragic cast upon them as they sat round the large blue table, full of misgivings, yet unforeseeing in all their completeness the tremendous events that were to follow."⁴³ It is certainly true that the gathering did not include the rising generation of writers who were beginning to shape British modernism. Bloomsbury writers such as Lytton Strachey and E. M. Forster were not invited, nor were loose cannons such as D. H. Lawrence or pacifists such as Bertrand Russell. (On the contrary, Russell was dismissed from Trinity College in 1916 and later imprisoned for six months for his antiwar activities.)⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf was not yet on the

map as a novelist, but no women were involved until the original twenty-five writers were joined later by twenty-five more, including Jane Ellen Harrison, May Sinclair, Flora Anne Steel, and Mrs. Humphrey Ward. Yet if Masterman's strategy was a mistake, it was so only to the extent that by rallying support for the war on idealistic grounds he ultimately contributed to the disillusionment of the postwar years. Beyond the fact that the British campaign worked exceptionally well, the meeting and subsequent campaign were clandestine (apart from the Authors' Declaration) and therefore could not have contributed directly to the generational agon that poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen helped to shape well before the existence of Masterman's campaign was revealed.

More important is the fact that the gathering marked the last moment in which literature would ever hold such cultural prestige in England. When Masterman wrote his influential critique of Edwardian culture and society, *The Condition of England*, in 1909, some of his primary "documentary" sources were literary: H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1908) carried as much authority as William Booth's protosociological study *In Darkest England* (1890). In the long wake of World War I, however, the documentary role of fiction would be taken over by film and the rising disciplines of ethnography and sociology. By putting novelists to work as propagandists, Masterman not only helped to blur "the dividing-line between Journalism and Literature," a topic started in E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) as "a conversational hare" at a Schlegel sisters' luncheon,⁴⁵ he contributed to the novel's absorption into the capacious and ill-defined category of journalistic fictionality. Woolf registers the pressure of journalism in her essay "Modern Fiction" when she criticizes Edwardian novelists such as Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy for writing too much like newspapermen. Compared to "the luminous halo" of existence caught in the web of modernist textuality, fiction attentive to the way Bond Street tailors sew buttons, she implies, reads like copy torn from the society pages.⁴⁶

Within days of his literary gathering, Masterman acknowledged the power of popular journalism by scheduling a meeting with influential editors and journalists. At Masterman's urging, representatives from, among others, the *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily News*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Standard*, *Daily Mail*, *British Weekly*, *Times*, *Westminster Gazette*, and *Spectator* agreed to work with the government to coordinate the release of official news in exchange for assurances that censorship would be minimal.⁴⁷ Later in the war, Lloyd George, having replaced Asquith, recognized that he could coopt the press even more effectively by appointing prominent publishers to key administrative positions. Thus Lord Northcliffe, founder and publisher of the *Daily Mail*

and the *Daily Mirror*, ran the Committee for Propaganda in Enemy Countries out of Crewe House, and Lord Beaverbrook, who held controlling interest of the *Daily Express*, ended up running the MoI; Northcliffe got some help from one of Woolf's targets, Wells, and Beaverbrook was aided by Woolf's favorite target, Bennett, whom he hired in 1918.⁴⁸

From the start, then, literature's prominent role in the campaign was shadowed by the mass appeal of journalism, and it was not long before competing information flows from other media began to crowd out literature. When the campaign began, England was uniquely positioned to control the global flow of information—by the turn of century, British firms owned three-quarters of the world's 200,000 miles of underwater cables⁴⁹—but Britain's material advantage would have counted for little if Masterman had not overcome his elitist inclination to appeal to the masses only indirectly through an older generation of opinion-shapers.⁵⁰ As Masterman laid aside his anxious mistrust of the crowd and began to distribute not just books and pamphlets but also films, picture postcards, illustrated magazines, and photographs, Wellington House eventually became only one branch—the literature division—of a dynamic, increasingly complex organization.

But the need to win over neutral opinion abroad and to recruit people into the new citizen army never produced a fully unified bureaucratic structure. Government propaganda was both supported and contested by private organizations on the home front, and as internal rivalries among various government propaganda agencies grew, several attempts were made to centralize control through increasingly comprehensive bureaucratic structures. In February 1917 Wellington House was absorbed into the new Department of Information (DoI), briefly run by the novelist John Buchan, and in March 1918 the DoI became the MoI.⁵¹ But even these reforms failed to produce a fully coordinated government monopoly. The DoI and later the MoI were supplemented by the Press Bureau of the Foreign Office, the Home Office Neutral Press Committee, the War Aims Committee, and a subdivision of Military Intelligence (M.I.7[b]). The Admiralty, which solicited an essay from Conrad, was also producing its own propaganda, as was the Intelligence Department of the War Office. Citizens' groups, moreover, were very active.⁵² The Central Council for National Patriotic Organizations aimed to whip up martial spirits, and the Union of Democratic Control, which opposed British war policy and included prominent figures such as Norman Angell, J. A. Hobson, Bertrand Russell, and Lowes Dickinson, held public meetings and published numerous propaganda pamphlets of their own. George Bernard Shaw's *Common Sense about the War*, which equated British and German war aims on economic grounds, made such a splash that Ford was specifically charged with responding to it. Wellington House

and its later incarnations thus had to fight to maintain a monopoly over British propaganda.

If intragovernmental infighting and home-front competition prevented the formation of a highly integrated culture industry, a shared commitment to plying the British perspective through as many media channels as possible nevertheless created the most effective propaganda machine the world had ever seen. The MoI developed a Photographic Section that controlled the taking, reproduction, and distribution of war photographs at home and abroad.⁵³ Picture postcards had been enjoying a boom since the late 1890s (a phenomenon to which I will return in connection with Virginia Woolf in chapter 2), and in his *Third Report on the Work Conducted for the Government at Wellington House*, Masterman reported that “100,000 postcards prepared by us, containing greetings from the British soldier to the Russian soldier, were sent to the Russian armies at the time of the Russian Easter. We also printed 20,000 cards for Italy, showing General Cadorna and Lord Kitchner in medallions surrounded by flags of the Allies.”⁵⁴ Maps and diagrams were also among Wellington House’s publications; in November 1917, W. M. Dixon, a Glasgow professor who took over American propaganda from Gilbert Parker, proudly reported that when President Wilson “referred to a map which threw a flood of light upon the Balkan situation,” the “map was one of our publications.”⁵⁵

Hindsight, however, reveals that the most important news in Masterman’s *Third Report* concerns film. In early 1916 Wellington House was still in charge of cinematic propaganda, and Masterman highlights the spectacular success of a full-length feature entitled *Britain Prepared*.⁵⁶ Masterman had good reason to be proud. At the start of the war, the British, like the French and the Germans, were using hot air balloons to drop propaganda leaflets in enemy territory, a practice first developed a century earlier in the Napoleonic Wars. By war’s end, not only had the British graduated to hydrogen balloons, but film propaganda was being shown in cinema houses and through Cinemotor, a mobile film unit whose large trucks gave “improvised open-air cinema shows” in rural areas and near the front.⁵⁷ Cinema trade groups approached the War Office early in 1915 to offer their services, and though Masterman was quick to grasp film’s potential, the War Office Cinematograph Committee was not formed until October 1915, when a trade group, echoing Masterman, finally convinced the War Office that the political value of war films outweighed any possible costs.⁵⁸

Strategic concerns, class prejudice, and multiform anxiety about the newness of the medium were the root causes of the military’s reluctance to embrace film. In the wake of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), military leaders felt that Japan’s strict censorship had helped their cause and

were determined to follow a similar policy. Originally raised in response to the press, these concerns carried over to the new medium: “the services were completely convinced that every sort of secret would escape,” and fears were not entirely misplaced: it later turned out that “one or two enemy agents were caught disguised as dealers in film.”⁵⁹ Cinema houses, moreover, were viewed with great suspicion by the government. Cinema was known as the poor man’s theater; most seats cost less than four pence, far less than competing forms of entertainment, and working-class attendance soared. During the war even more people attended, and by July 1916 “the public was . . . spending as much on cinema as on all other plays, shows, concerts, and organized sporting events put together.”⁶⁰ With a working-class public sphere emerging across England, local governments took steps to regulate cinemas by adding provisions to the 1909 Cinematograph Act, the first act of Parliament specifically concerned with the cinema, and Parliament stepped in again in 1916 with new entertainment taxes. Anxieties about what might be going on under the cover of darkness elicited further provisions to protect children from pedophiles. But in a contradiction characteristic of class myopia, anxieties about the cultural agency of film did not stop government elites from dismissing the medium as a trivial diversion for the working class. Some field officers even objected to their being filmed on the grounds that it was beneath them.

Despite these obstacles, *Britain Prepared* became Wellington House’s first film and established the dominant approach to the great majority of British propaganda films for the duration of the war.⁶¹ A three-hour silent film with few titles, *Britain Prepared* shows scenes of the British navy, munitions work, and the army in training. Extremely well received by audiences, the film adopted a purely factual approach by giving people starved for authentic war footage a sense of what the country was doing to win. With the dominance of sound films in the thirties and forties, propaganda films became increasingly ideological by using voice-over narration to frame the images spectators viewed. But *Britain Prepared* and other British World War I films are remarkably free of that style of persuasion, nor do they in any way anticipate the manipulative editing that Soviet film invented in the twenties. Instead, the stream of visual “facts” is presented from a British point of view—literally, of course, but also in the sense that the films evince “a respect, a sympathy even, for the men and women whose experience of war was recorded on film.”⁶²

Eventually, as the British campaign evolved beyond Wellington House, it was recognized that film had to become a major component of the war effort. A few fiction films were made, but, consonant with Masterman’s founding emphasis on facts, most films, such as *The Battle of the Somme*,

which gave the public its first taste of battle footage, adopted a documentary approach before the term even existed.⁶³ As film historians often note, John Grierson's documentary film movement in the twenties and thirties was made possible by government propaganda films, which eventually included official newsreels, films about life on the home front, the British Royal family, and neutral and allied countries. By January 1918 Edward Carson, undersecretary of state in the Home Office and newly entrusted with general supervision of propaganda activities under the MoI, could state what had become obvious: "no more potent medium of Propaganda than the Cinematograph existed."⁶⁴ By World War II film was deeply entrenched in government propaganda bureaus throughout Europe and America.

In addition to heightening the cultural prominence of new media, Wellington House and its successors contributed to the epistemological decline of the fact. Never the stable units of self-evident truth seized on by British empiricism, facts became even less trustworthy in the media ecology of the early twentieth century. Facts were of course under assault from multiple directions. The rise of positivism and modern science in the nineteenth century, always shadowed by its dialectical counterpart, idealism, inevitably elicited responses that challenged the notion that facts were the only possible objects of knowledge. If "the experimental method" of Zola's naturalism paradoxically attempted to reclaim truth from science in the name of science "by bringing together [in fiction] the greatest number of human data arranged in their logical order," the French symbolists, carrying romanticism forward into the twentieth century, tried to reverse the polarity of real and unreal by exalting ineffable mysteries over "the accidents of daily life."⁶⁵ And despite Freud's insistent claims for the empirical truth of psychoanalysis, in his case studies facts became little more than surface clues to the deeper realities of the psyche. Jim's anguished lament while on trial in *Lord Jim* indexes the historical moment: "Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything!"⁶⁶

With an influence felt in multiple cultural domains, British propaganda's commitment to empirically verifiable information contributed enormously to the increasingly equivocal status of facts. To a significant degree the British were true to their ideals, but their propaganda techniques indicate that they also knew that information flows best when channels are properly greased, that factual accounts must be tailored to suit different audiences around the world, and that the power of facts to make an impression varies according to the media through which they are disseminated. Indeed, the single most effective piece of propaganda disseminated during World War I, Lord Bryce's *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, published in May 1915, gave Germany

ample grounds for its clever glossing of the Allies' information services as "All-lies." Though based on dubious research, the Bryce Report bore all the signs of detached objectivity: depositions, extensive appendices, and photographs of German soldiers' diary pages. Whereas Belgian committee reports refer to "the chivalrous and heroic resistance of the Belgian nation" against Germany's "devastating and murderous hordes," the language of the Bryce Report remains scrupulously legalistic and matter-of-fact.⁶⁷ In 1922 a Belgian commission could not substantiate any of the gruesome reports of children's hands having been lopped off or of citizens having been buried alive. But for the duration of the war, Wellington House made mutilated Belgian children as real as actual German brutalities by translating the Bryce Report into thirty languages and circulating it throughout the world.⁶⁸ In hindsight, the report shows how factuality was becoming detached from empirical grounding and transformed into a form of rhetoric. At the time, it firmly established one of the dominant myths of World War I: English civilization was fighting a war against German barbarism.

Initiating forms of deceit whose progeny remain with us today, the British manipulation of facts throws into relief the epistemological peculiarity of what Mary Poovey has termed the "modern fact." Poovey offers an historical account of how "facts" came to be conceived as both prior to systematic knowledge—as raw untheorized data—and inextricable from the theories they support. Tracing the emergence of this duality back to the seventeenth century, Poovey argues that the ambiguity of facts as both preinterpretive and wholly derived from theory is fundamental to modern epistemology.⁶⁹ In this context modernism and twentieth-century propaganda look like late chapters—or paired interchapters—in the history of the modern fact. Propaganda exploits the internal bifurcation of modern facts by amplifying their rhetorical appeal even while insisting on their value-free neutrality. The supposed independence of facts, their imperviousness to the assimilative power of systematic knowledge or suasion, made it easier for British officials to declare their fidelity to the veridical while subtly integrating facts into patterns designed to manipulate public opinion.⁷⁰ Although facts claim to speak for themselves—or rather, the purveyors of facts *claim* that facts speak for themselves—their framing and selection often amount to a species of ventriloquism in which the subjectivity of the editor qua propagandist speaks from behind a screen of enumerated facts. Modernism also troubles notions of objectivity, but not so much by spinning facts into spurious coherence as by pressuring one extreme into another. On one hand, some strands of modernism dwell so insistently on the image (Pound's "intellectual and emotional complex") or sensory data (Woolf's cascade of atoms falling on the brain) that the objective percept may seem to dissolve within the

activity of perceiving. On the other hand, the modernist investigation of subjective perception can produce a stream of seemingly arbitrary data, the bric-a-brac of everyday life or, in Wyndham Lewis's more colorful critique of *Ulysses*, "a monument like a record diarrhoea."⁷¹

Georg Lukács's well-known critique of modernism turns on just this issue, which he analyzes as the rise of subjectivism and the consequent loss of an objective perspective on material reality. Lukács argues that modernist fiction loses its critical perspective by failing to invest naturalist details with a sense of typicality grounded in apprehension of the social whole. Without a socially derived hierarchy of values guiding the selection and disposition of realistic detail, modernism succumbs to an arbitrariness that de-composes objective reality into the stasis of allegorical abstraction and solipsism. In essence producing a Marxist version of Lewis's critique of Joyce's surrender to temporal flux and the undifferentiated flow of meaningless detail, Lukács understands Joyce's modernism as simultaneously a fall into naturalism's empty objectivity and an escape into subjectivity through the negation of history.

But where Lukács sees modernism's assimilation of realistic detail into abstract structures of significance as a retreat from social engagement, I want to argue that the metaphoric structures subtending modernist fragmentation provide an aesthetic alternative to the stifling social integration urged by propaganda, an alternative that need not be considered a surrender to subjectivism. For Lukács, modernism's preference for metaphoric linkage over metonymic typicality amounts to a retreat from objective to subjective totalities. Yet if modernism, as Lukács notes, often seems obsessed with the phenomenological intensity of sheer factuality at the expense of objective laws governing historical experience, one need not simply reject his Marxist faith in the existence of such laws in order to acknowledge the social dimension of the modernist aspiration to discover principles of order occluded by a surfeit of naturalistic detail. To some extent, Lukács simply refuses to acknowledge the kind of ordering undertaken by many modernists; he sees the fragments, not the patterns. Yet we are also dealing here with incompatible epistemologies: even when acknowledged, modernism's metaphoric structures will be dismissed as escapist projections if significant structures cannot be made but only revealed. But far from being a kind of solipsistic projection, the construction of coherence is a fundamentally social response to the early century's fracturing of factuality. Propaganda, I have argued, drives a wedge between the objective and subjective poles of what Poovey calls the "modern fact." Inasmuch as the illusory autonomy of the modernist fragment corresponds to the supposed neutrality of the modern fact, modernism participates in the same dynamic. Both the fragment and the fact seem to stand on their own as indices of the real and yet both are

constituted within larger systems of meaning that invest them with significance. *Ulysses* offers a telling example of the historical embeddedness of the play between fragmentation and wholeness in modernism.

As Leopold Bloom wanders the streets in the “Lestrygonians” episode, the term “throwaway” first appears as a nonce word to describe a flier—an ad for an American evangelist—placed in Bloom’s hand by a young man from the YMCA. The word seems as disposable as the thing it designates. But after Bloom crunches up the flier and tosses it into the Liffey, “throwaway” begins to accrue ever more complex meanings within a symbolic structure that links the flier with, among other things, Bloom, a thoroughbred named Throwaway in the Gold Cup race, adultery, Odysseus’s ship, racial difference, empire, advertising, and Elijah. Increasingly available in retrospect, such chains of connection may be experienced at first as random fragments. Joyce, however, feared he might have oversystematized *Ulysses*, and in this instance the playful expansion of signification out from “throwaway” provides multiple perspectives that all converge on the fundamental story of Bloom, the Jewish outsider and disposable husband who, like the dark horse Throwaway, ends up winning the race. To call this web of connections, as Lukács would, a form of abstraction that destroys “the complex tissue of man’s relations with his environment” is to overlook how the activity of navigating Joyce’s connections between the pattern and the detail mirrors the social challenges Bloom faces as he makes his way through the competing ideological appeals woven into the texture of Dublin’s everyday life.⁷² The flier he throws away, after all, is attempting to convert him to Christianity.

Particularly prominent in Joyce, tension between the relative autonomy of the realistic detail and the integrative power of modernist form is felt throughout modernism. It also produces the sense of adjacency that Woolf and Conrad find so threatening: however different in intention, integration is a shared aim of modernist form and propaganda. As I will discuss in the next chapter, *The Secret Agent* is located precisely at the rift between the isolation of brute facts and the revelation of connectedness: amid the “nameless fragments” of Stevie’s shattered body, Chief Inspector Heat finds a name tag that ultimately reorganizes Conrad’s text around tropes of innocence, incorporation, and death. Itself chronologically disjunct, a narrative that makes fragmentation its main subject draws itself together through the agency of metaphor in order to comment on the fate of the easily manipulated within urban modernity.

For Conrad, the lived experience of fragmentation and the hunger for coherence could be narrated only as an uneasy mix of dark comedy and tragedy. Analytic commentaries traced similar fault lines. The early century saw not only increasing attention to the fragmenting of perception

under modernity, as in Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), but also new attention to the totalizing fictions generated by societies eager to hold themselves together. Walter Lippmann was the first major thinker to grasp the connection between integration propaganda and the felt unreality, or fictiveness, of modern life. In 1922 Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, one of the founding books of modern media studies, posited the emergence of a "pseudo-environment" built up by the propagation of stereotypical images and the interactions among them in the mass media.⁷³ As with Bernays, Lippmann's analysis was catalyzed by working as a propagandist. In June 1918 the Military Intelligence Branch (MIB) of the U.S. Army approached Lippmann to help offset the crude propaganda being produced by the CPI. Like Masterman, Lippmann believed in factual propaganda and aimed for "a frank campaign of education addressed to the German and Austrian troops, explaining as simply and persuasively as possible the unselfish character of the war, the generosity of our aims, and the great hope of mankind which we are trying to realize."⁷⁴ Despite such idealism, or perhaps because of it, Lippmann became deeply disillusioned by the ease with which facts could be distorted and used to manipulate public understanding. Out of this disillusionment came *Public Opinion*, a profound critique of democracy that anticipates Ellul's fears that average citizens were losing the capacity to understand their world.

The book's enduring contribution to media theory is the notion that human behavior under modernity is increasingly based not on "direct and certain knowledge" but on "pictures in our heads." Lippmann links the increasingly mediated nature of existence with the circulation of stereotypes disseminated by film and photography and then re-evoked by newspapers. The resulting pseudo-environment is then manipulated by propagandists. "What is propaganda," he writes, "if not the effort to alter the picture to which men respond, to substitute one social pattern for another?"⁷⁵ Lippmann thus provides a historically specific antecedent of what Jean Baudrillard has called the "simulacrum," but where Baudrillard is largely content to point out the strangeness of the copy without an original, Lippmann laments that the eclipse of a less mediated relation to contemporaneity is undermining the foundations of democracy.⁷⁶

The recession of the real within a pseudo-environment is of course overdetermined.⁷⁷ By the late nineteenth century, a nostalgia for the real-as-the-immediate was already manifest in diverse ways,⁷⁸ and in the early twentieth century the hunger for immediacy became yet more urgent in stream-of-consciousness techniques and imagism. According to what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin call the "logic of remediation," desire for the immediate will inevitably result in hypermediation, and modern narrative provides a telling example.⁷⁹ Counterpointing the imagist emphasis

on presentation, modern narrative's scenic immediacy is often nested within elaborate narrative architectonics that are designed to reconstruct the meaning of events whose meanings were once thought to be immanent. In consequence, a screen of language seems to rise between the reader and narrative events. The flow of Clarissa Dalloway's thoughts, sometimes crisply focused, may dissolve, like Septimus Smith's, into words that resist transparency, or Lawrence's passionate bodies, often vividly rendered through gesture and dialogue, may disappear behind the "pulsing, frictional to-and-fro" of Lawrentian style.⁸⁰ The event itself may come to seem (as of course in narratological terms it is) an effect of its telling. The pseudo-environment's derealizing effect also contributed to the modernist investment in authenticity. Artificial authenticity in service of "true facts" formed the backbone of British propaganda, and the turn of the century's increasingly urgent fantasy of unmediated connection to the real understood as the elemental or the factual marks one pole in a dialectic between perceptions of the real and the unreal that was significantly heightened by Wellington House in World War I.

Lippmann recognized that the surge of propaganda, operating through multiple media channels, exacerbated the derealization of the event and accelerated the emergence of a pseudo-environment by filling heads with pictures. Brought together as historical context and analytic lens, the legacy of the British propaganda campaign and the theories of Lippmann and Ellul offer a new perspective on British narrative in the first half of the twentieth century. To anticipate the literary yield of this approach, I will close this introductory chapter with a close reading of *Heart of Darkness* in relation to Conrad's propaganda essay for the Admiralty, "The Unlighted Coast."

MODERNISM AND THE MEDIA OF PROPAGANDA: *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND "THE UNLIGHTED COAST"

Conrad addressed the threatening adjacency of propaganda long before the Great War was glimpsed on the horizon. Indeed, *Heart of Darkness*, published in the opening moments of the twentieth century, anticipates the complex entangling of modernism, new media, and propaganda that is the subject of this book. Sixteen years later he wrote a propaganda essay for the Admiralty, "The Unlighted Coast," that rethinks *Heart of Darkness* within the new information ecology of global war. Read through the retrospective lens of the propaganda essay, *Heart of Darkness* suggests that the symbiosis of information and propaganda analyzed by Ellul was already emerging at the turn of the century, and that Lippmann's concept of the pseudo-environment gave a name to existing media effects that propaganda exacerbated.

Heart of Darkness was first serialized in *Blackwood's* (1899–1900) just as J. A. Hobson was commenting in *The Psychology of Jingoism* on the “spectatorial passion” for war exploited by the popular press.⁸¹ Always interested in the historical truth of his fictions, Conrad already sensed that the mass distribution of conflict as entertainment raised questions about the relationship between his own writing and propaganda. *Heart of Darkness* gets at both sides of the equation: the eroding distinction between truth and lies in Marlow’s ambivalent loyalty to Kurtz, for whom Marlow lies in order to preserve a different order of truth, and the emergence of the professional propagandist in Kurtz, a man whose seductive eloquence, as one character remarks, would make him a terrific candidate to lead *any* political party. All readings of *Heart of Darkness* must make sense of the pivotal relation between Marlow and Kurtz, and seeing this relation in light of Ellul’s information-propaganda matrix helps illuminate the underpinnings of Marlow’s ambivalent discipleship.

In part Marlow sees Kurtz as a symbol of the capacity for belief he himself desires. The death of his helmsman, killed by a spear, is pivotal. The helmsman had carried out the most valuable service in Conrad’s world: like the aptly-named Singleton in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* he had steered. With his Palinurus gone, Marlow’s mind turns instantly to Kurtz, a figure who might provide the guidance formerly supplied by the helmsman. But what Kurtz supplies is the consoling coherence that is the special province of propaganda. The helmsman’s death makes Marlow realize that he had “never imagined [Kurtz] as doing, you know, but as discoursing,” and his famous description of Kurtz’s “gift of expression”—“the pulsating stream of light or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness”—speaks directly to today’s truism that one person’s information is another’s propaganda.⁸² It makes sense, then, that in a compressed moment of calculation and instinctive reaction, Marlow later turns away from the Russian adventurer’s account of the Africans’ ceremonial deference to Kurtz to find comfort in the heads on stakes with which Kurtz has ringed his compound: “pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief,” he explains (*Heart of Darkness*, 58). A staple of propaganda, atrocity stories have always counted on the appeal of uncomplicated savagery. If a loss of moral compass is implied by the helmsman’s death, in Kurtz Marlow seeks clarity at the expense of moral value.

Propaganda mediates other relations as well. Kurtz’s Intended, like Marlow’s aunt, remains serenely impervious to the painful contradictions Marlow experiences in the Congo because the “rot let loose in print and talk just about that time” (*ibid.*, 15–16) inoculates her against thinking too hard about the actual fate of emissaries of light sent into the darkness. Like British journalists who preemptively censored themselves

during the war, Marlow helps keep the Intended safely cocooned in propaganda by suppressing information: he lies about Kurtz's last words in order to give her the romantic ending life withheld, and he tears off the savage postscript to Kurtz's report on the suppression of savage customs—"Exterminate the brutes!"—in order to prevent the degradation of Kurtz's original intentions from seeing the light of day. In many ways, of course, Marlow is Conrad's agent for debunking the myths that Kurtz's Intended and Marlow's aunt drink in. Thus if Marlow indulges in primitivist stereotypes by seeing Africans who paddle up in canoes as emblems of the receding real—"they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast" (*ibid.*, 17)—he also undercuts such stereotypes when he acknowledges that the cannibals on board his steamer show more "restraint" than the armed white men alongside them (*ibid.*, 43).

Such subversions notwithstanding, Marlow is far from immune to popular myths. His celebrated denunciation of "the conquest of the earth" as "the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" is undermined not only by the equivocal language of idolatry in which it culminates—that is, Marlow's praise for a belief "you can set up and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to"—but also by the peroration on the virtue of British "efficiency" that introduces it (*ibid.*, 10). Marlow's "devotion to efficiency" betrays no ethical coordinates. A highly political term at this time and a touchstone for British politics for decades to come, efficiency is also a key concept for Ellul, who argues that technological society fetishizes efficient means at the expense of considered ends.⁸³ One wonders how much of Marlow's horror at the Company Station derives from humanitarian outrage over the treatment of enslaved African workers and how much from disgust at "a wanton smash-up" in which workers became "inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest" (*ibid.*, 20). Holding in suspension the values implicit in Marlow's diction and a critique of those values, Conrad's complex ironies register to the degree to which the propagandistic "rot let loose in print" at this time—the very stuff of Lippmann's pseudo-environment—was not easily shrugged off, even by a skeptical humanist like Marlow.

Thus if *Heart of Darkness*, in Lionel Trilling's influential words, is "the paradigmatic literary expression of the modern concern with authenticity,"⁸⁴ it is equally expressive of the modern concern with propaganda. For Marlow's anxiously incomplete disavowal of Kurtz suggests that the desire for authenticity emerges as a dialectical response to the perceived inauthenticity of propaganda. On one hand, Marlow is disgusted by the conspiratorial brickmaker at the Central Station, whom he sees as a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" (*ibid.*, 29); clearly he would

prefer a real one. On the other hand, he finds the African canoers “a great comfort to look at,” not only owing to their “vitality” but because they made him feel he “belonged still to a world of straightforward facts” (ibid., 17). The conjunction of primitivism and the factual is crucial here. For if Kurtz becomes a symbol of authenticity, he does so owing to the contrast Marlow imagines between Kurtz’s voice—elemental, primitive, true—and idealistic journalistic claptrap that, like the mental universe Marlow attributes to leisured women, is “too beautiful altogether” to survive the counterpressure of facts (ibid., 16). Kurtz is going to be the one real thing in the pseudo-environment Marlow navigates on his way upriver. In the end, however, Marlow does not quite commit himself to a world of vital bodies and dependable facts but to a complexly confused idea about Kurtz in which the distinction between propaganda and authenticity is both crucial—affectively and ideologically—and unstable.

Marlow’s dilemma mirrors Conrad’s. For a writer who desired, in the famous words of the preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* “by the power of the written word, to *make* you hear, to *make* you feel . . . to *make* you see,” propaganda must have seemed enviably plugged into the popular imagination.⁸⁵ Acutely aware that his fiction often left him suspended between elite and popular audiences, Conrad persuaded himself that *The Secret Agent*, a grimly ironic melodrama that turns on the gruesome death of an innocent young man, could win him a broader audience. In *Heart of Darkness* his complicated relation to the persuasive power of propaganda, sharply focused in Marlow’s loyalty to Kurtz, first comes into view as a writerly matter in Marlow’s ambivalent response to the Company’s chief accountant, who is at once a hollow man and a kind of “miracle.” “Bent over his high desk,” the accountant is a writer devoted to facts, and Marlow occasionally seeks shelter in his office from “the chaos” of the station (ibid., 21). Soothed by the “apple-pie order” of the accountant’s books, Marlow ends up situated smack in the middle of Poovey’s modern fact. The accountant’s precise numerical entries, along with his immaculate collars, cuffs, and hair, constitute part of what Marlow considers his achievement of character: “in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s backbone” (ibid., 21). But the accountant’s bookkeeping cannot be divorced from the violence of the colonial system he facilitates: “When one has got to make correct entries,” he tells Marlow, “one comes to hate those savages—hate them to the death” (ibid., 22). Marlow’s fascination registers the incongruity between the accountant’s writing and “the grove of death” in which inefficient workers fade away, but the intense appeal of the accountant’s devotion to order blinds Marlow to the incoherence of his own assertion that the exoskeleton of the accountant’s starched clothes

amounts to “backbone.” Marlow’s blindness does not entirely negate the latent critique of the accountant implied by Conrad’s irony. It would be nice, Conrad seems to be musing, if facts could remain independent of the systems of meaning that generate them, if they could be free from ideological taint or spin, but as he remarks in another context, “a book is a deed, [and] the writing of it is an enterprise, as much as the conquest of a colony.”⁸⁶

The accountant’s ruthless dedication to information for its own sake holds out the promise of pure fact as a bulwark against the false abstraction of imperial rhetoric, just as Kurtz’s single-minded commitment to “some sort of belief,” however vague, seems to Marlow a welcome alternative to the cynical hypocrisy of the Company (ibid., 69). And yet the accountant’s murderous myopia suggests that the valorization of efficiency poses as much of a threat to society as Kurtz’s electrifying rhetoric, for the bracketing of values by efficiency creates the hollow men that charismatic leaders such as Kurtz exploit. The Russian adventurer is “filled” with the glory of Kurtz’s eloquence to such an extent that Marlow considers him “the most dangerous thing” (ibid., 55) he encounters on the trip—before promising to honor the Russian’s request to cover up anything that might injure Kurtz’s reputation in Europe. Marlow’s telling of the story to the men on the *Nellie* breaks that promise, but not before he tears off Kurtz’s scrawled postscript to become, for a time, a public relations agent *avant la lettre*.

In some fundamental sense much of modernism can be read as an attempt to clear a space within the pseudo-environment for more authentic modes of communication. Insofar as Marlow’s narration on board the *Nellie* is an attempt to rescue authenticity from lies in which he has had a part, *Heart of Darkness* holds a special place in this history. But in a world heading toward a flood of propaganda in 1914, the desire “to make you see” is always in danger of being coopted by forces beyond one’s control, just as in the Congo Marlow, despite his qualms, anxieties, and resentment, is always working, moment by moment, for the same trading company that pays the Africans in worthless coils of copper wire. If Kurtz’s death constitutes Conrad’s disavowal of propaganda’s powers of persuasion, his lingering appeal, mirroring the appeal of the accountant, testifies to the ambivalence of Conrad’s engagement with the eroding distinction between information and propaganda that characterizes the early twentieth century.⁸⁷

Conrad was suddenly returned to the problem in the fall of 1916 when the Admiralty decided that the Mercantile Navy needed publicity. On November 6 Conrad sailed out for ten days on the *Ready*, a brigantine disguised as a merchant vessel. A month later he wrote “The Unlighted Coast,” an essay that recounts being off the coast of England

during the black-out. The essay also suggests that the first person to rethink *Heart of Darkness* in light of the subsequent history of propaganda was Conrad himself. Reminiscent of the novella's scene of the *Nellie* anchored in the dying light on the Thames, the situation evidently was enough to return Conrad to the story in which he represented England as "one of the dark places of the earth" (*ibid.*, 9). Shared generic conventions reinforce numerous verbal and thematic links between the essay and *Heart of Darkness*. Both are instances of late imperial romance in which the historical conditions that motivate Conrad's romance are equally responsible for his modernism.⁸⁸ In "The Unlighted Coast" Conrad's modernism emerges from a modernization of romance that is forged under the pressure of trying to figure out what it might mean to write propaganda from within the blank darkness he encounters at sea. Deprived of obvious coordinates—the heroism of one's own side, say, versus the ignominy of the enemy—Conrad is left with the truth of his impressions. For Ford, reconciling the truth of the impression with propaganda was not a problem; but for Conrad, focusing on impressions in "The Unlighted Coast" ultimately means turning toward the medium of his message—toward the place of the written word in wartime—and toward competing media that were transforming the status of his own. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad worries over his ability, in Marlow's words, "to convey the life-sensation" proper to his story (*ibid.*, 30). War deepens the problem in "The Unlighted Coast": Conrad's fear that language may fail, that it may be "but talk round the war," becomes so acute that his meditation on the possible supersession of the word interferes with his ability to write propaganda.⁸⁹

Conrad's only World War I story, "The Tale," finished a few weeks before he began his propaganda activities for the Admiralty, anticipates the kind of self-reflexive intermedial turn taken by his propaganda essay. Framed by an awkward conversation between a naval commander home on leave and his wife or lover, the story recounts how the commander comes across a neutral ship he suspects of resupplying German submarines. He has no proof, however, and most of the story details his intensive scrutiny of the neutral ship's master, who claims to have been lost in the thick fog for days. The commander weighs every word of the interview and every nuance of facial expression, straining his interpretive abilities to decide whether the master is lying. Though his subordinate cautions against rash judgment, the commander finally decides to test the master's claim that he is lost by demanding that he clear out of the area on a heading that will ground his ship on "a deadly ledge of rock."⁹⁰ After the ship steams off to its destruction, the commander confesses that he does not know whether he has doled out "stern retribution" or committed murder ("The Tale," 80). More like a disillusioned

postwar story than a story written during wartime, “The Tale” insists on the impossibility of resolving the questions it poses: “I shall never know,” the commander admits. Readers cannot know either: our attention to the ambiguous text replays the commander’s scrutiny of the master’s face, and we are left simply with a tale told in a darkened room about an experience shrouded in fog and darkness. By calling the story “The Tale” rather than, say, “The Fog of War,” a phrase dating from the Napoleonic Wars, Conrad not only avoids the obvious cliché but throws into relief the medium of storytelling, as if the very topic of war could only drive him back to the fundamental resources of his art.⁹¹

Much the same happens in “The Unlighted Coast,” but what works as fiction does not necessarily work as propaganda. Deeply skeptical by nature, Conrad was not a natural propagandist. Disinclined to credit overblown language touting British heroism, he was also largely immune to the anti-German propaganda sweeping the nation, and “treated the shrill, simplistic exhortations of the press with contempt.”⁹² Although always eager to pledge allegiance to his adopted country, Conrad was more invested in Englishness as part of his authorial identity than he was in British citizenship. Conrad certainly wanted England to win the war, but his deepest concern always lay with the Polish question: would the war result in the reestablishment of an independent Polish state?⁹³ Still, he planned to write more than one essay for the Admiralty, perhaps because his son Borys, who later fought at the Somme, was stationed near the front, perhaps because he thought his participation might bolster his influence on Polish matters. “The Unlighted Coast” ended those plans. But more important than Conrad’s failure is how he fails. For Conrad’s failure as a propagandist is his success as a modernist.

To be sure, Conrad’s task for the Admiralty was made all the more difficult by the uneventfulness of the trip. From on board Conrad telegraphed to his agent J. B. Pinker that he had high hopes of “bagging Fritz,” but according to an independent account, the *Ready* (traveling under a nom de guerre supplied by Conrad, the *Freya*) encountered only three submarines, the first two turning out to be British, and the third disappearing with destroyers in pursuit before the *Ready* could get involved.⁹⁴ Lacking an obvious story of uncommon valor on the part of the British or the even more popular alternative of a German atrocity, Conrad dwells on two things: his impressions of the darkness while cruising the coastline at night, and his interview with a young seaman who had had a relatively inconclusive close encounter with a zeppelin. The German airship had emerged in classic Conradian fashion from a dense fog, was shot at twice, and departed to points unknown, perhaps to Norway, where newspapers reported sometime afterwards a damaged zeppelin had alighted. Conrad seems most struck by the encounter as a

rare interruption of what he takes to be the crushing monotony of night patrol at sea: for the most part, he is sure, nothing happens. While the essay expresses admiration for the clear-sighted planning and efficiency of the patrol, it was unlikely to produce recruits or trigger a surge of patriotism and consequently was not published until after Conrad's death. The Admiralty even seems to have lost its copy.

But just as Marlow is ultimately more interesting than Kurtz, so too the essay's frame is more interesting than the "Zeppelin-strafer" ("The Unlighted Coast," 52). Conrad revisits two favorite tropes, darkness and silence, in a self-consciously revisionary way. The first sentence reveals what most engaged his imagination—"I came ashore bringing with me strongest of all, and most persistent, the impression of a great darkness"—and he immediately distinguishes this darkness from the "brooding gloom" over London in *Heart of Darkness* by assuring the reader that he does not mean darkness in "a symbolic or spiritual sense" (ibid., 48). This darkness is rather the literal fact of England under black-out. And yet Conrad does not remain in the realm of fact for long; the multiple temporalities of *Heart of Darkness*, in which Marlow spins the historical fantasy of a Roman commander of a trireme and "a decent young citizen in a toga" facing the darkness that was England (*Heart of Darkness*, 10), return in the very sentence that insists on darkness as a "fact." What also returns is a foundational trope of imperial romance. For it is a darkness "such as wrapped up early mariners' landfalls on their voyages of exploration"; "surely neither Caesar's galleys nor the ships of the Danish rovers had ever found on their approach this land so absolutely and scrupulously lightless as this" ("The Unlighted Coast," 48, 49). With this gesture the premodern is uneasily superimposed over the modern: the zeppelin will emerge from the fog as a phantasm of modernity within an older darkness understood as the epitome of romance. This darkness, blacking out the familiar landmarks and geography of the English coast, recreates the "blank spaces" on the map that make adventure possible (*Heart of Darkness*, 11).

What makes Conrad's imperial romance *late* imperial romance is his acute awareness that with colonialism and modern travel completely mapping the world, "the glamour's off" (ibid., 11). Reinvented for nineteenth-century fiction by Sir Walter Scott, modern romance represents modernity's uncanny vision of the worlds it has superseded.⁹⁵ By the late nineteenth century, however, it seemed virtually impossible for romance writers to appropriate unexplored locales for the staging of imperial adventure at the lawless boundaries of civilization. In his late essay "Travel," Conrad laments that the profusion of new travel books is "more devastating to the world's freshness of impression than a swarm of locusts in a field of young corn."⁹⁶ He goes on to praise the books of

the “real travellers” of former times, regretting that “the time for such books of travel is past on this earth girt about with cables, with an atmosphere made restless by the waves of ether, lighted by that sun of the twentieth century under which there is nothing new left now, and but very little of what may still be called obscure” (“Travel,” 88). To recover traces of what might have existed prior to the global reach of new media and colonialism, late imperial romance had to effect an “imaginary un-mapping” of the world in order to escape from the grid of the rational and the known.⁹⁷ Hence Conan Doyle’s dinosaurs on an undiscovered plateau in South America in *The Lost World* (1911), one of many early-century novels that allude directly to Conrad’s blank spot on the map, and Conrad’s darkness, in which a submarine might slide silently beneath a Roman galley, or Marlow might witness a spiritual drama of loss and redemption in the dark continent, or Nostromo and Martin Decoud might drift away in *Nostromo* from the “material interests” of Sulaco into the existential void of the utterly black Golfo Placido.

Yet if such blackness evokes premodernity, it also paradoxically discloses the inescapably modern. While the “placid sea gleaming faintly” in “The Unlighted Coast” recalls the atavistic space of *Nostromo*’s Golfo Placido, the silence within that darkness is also modernized. No longer conveying “the usual meaning . . . to a human mind,” “that of being cut off from communication with its kind,” this silence is not empty but full. For two messages arrive on board, one a report about a submarine sighting, the other about floating mines, both picked up by wireless. The unlighted coast, “emitting no sound waves, no waves of light, was talking to its watchers at sea; filling the silence with words” (“The Unlighted Coast,” 49).⁹⁸ Conrad, who helps decode the messages, is fascinated by “the talk that flows on unheard” (*ibid.*, 50).⁹⁹ In contrast to the usual empty banter of the “war talk we hear on the lips of men,” “the grouped-letters war talk” is “full of sense, of meaning, and single-minded purpose; inquiries, information, orders, reports.” It is, in short, a perfectly transparent language: “words in direct relation to things and facts.”

The darkness and silence of “The Unlighted Coast,” operating at once as a form of negation and plenitude, throw into relief the link between Conrad’s modernism and his foregrounding of competing media. Fredric Jameson locates Conrad’s modernism in his “will to style,” which at once expresses and compensates for the rationalization and fragmentation of life under modernity. Arguing that the senses begin to split apart and become autonomous under late capitalism, and that the hallucinatory quality of Conrad’s impressionistic style conjures a utopian realm of sensuality beyond rationalization even as it embodies rationalization, Jameson observes that “the realm of nonperception” Nostromo and Decoud experience in the blackness of the Golfo Placido is “a heightened

form of perception in its own right, a realm of heightened yet blank intensity."¹⁰⁰ Jameson tells half the story here. What's missing in his otherwise incisive account is media's role in producing the historical conditions that his analysis presupposes.

Because Jameson draws his examples of perception as an end in itself almost exclusively from Conrad's representations of exotic spaces, his account cannot register Conrad's growing awareness of the pressure of competing media on his fiction. Conrad clearly understood new media as a defining feature of modernity. By the same logic, he typically linked romance with the negation of such media. Locating rationalization in the communication networks of the city and a compensatory immediacy of sensation at the colonial periphery, Conrad remains true to the conventions of imperial romance by erasing the network of cables and "waves of ether" that were rapidly shrinking the world. Accordingly, in the remote Malaysia of "Karain" and the never-never land of *Lord Jim's* Patusan, which lies "three hundred miles beyond the end of telegraph cables and mail-boat lines" (*Lord Jim*, 282), the senses are typically reintegrated through synaesthesia and the sensory phantasmagoria that Jameson sees as fundamental to Conrad's impressionist style.¹⁰¹ In the metropolitan world of *The Secret Agent*, however, sensory data operate not as a restorative balm but as discrete analytic units. Thus if oral accounts of Jim's desertion of the *Patna* in *Lord Jim* chase him around the South Pacific like bad debts in pursuit of a gambler, the flow of information in *The Secret Agent* often functions independently of human agents. Following news of Stevie's death, for instance, Verloc's words of self-justifying consolation are described as "waves of air of the proper length, propagated in accordance with correct mathematical formulas" that lap against Winnie's "head of stone."¹⁰² Initially overhearing scraps of conversation between Verloc and Chief Inspector Heat and then confirming the death by looking in the newspaper, Winnie receives the news in a way that maps the passage from *Lord Jim's* oral world into an impersonal system that facilitates the flow of information even as it makes reciprocal communication impossible.

How Conrad's sensitivity to the changing media ecology shapes *The Secret Agent* is part of the story I will tell in the next chapter. Here I want to focus on how the influence of new media affects Conrad's efforts as a propagandist. Under the pressure of historical change, "The Unlighted Coast" retrospectively illuminates Conrad's latent engagement with new media in *Heart of Darkness*. Explicitly linked to the wireless, "war talk" that is not propagated by "the lips of men" in Conrad's essay also recalls the primary narrator's description of Marlow's story, told in pitch darkness, as a "narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips" (*Heart of Darkness*, 30). Ivan Kreilkamp has linked these words to

the phonograph, arguing that Conrad's treatment of voice places *Heart of Darkness* within the same problematic of disembodiment and fragmentation raised by the phonograph's recording and reproduction of the human voice.¹⁰³ These two technologies—the phonograph dating from 1877, the wireless invented twenty years later but not licensed to the public in Britain for another twenty—mark two moments within the broader evolution of the media ecology that had begun to change the status of the word during the later nineteenth century. It was during this period, Friedrich Kittler has argued, that “cinema, phonography, and typewriting separated optical, acoustic, and written data flows,” all of which were formerly recorded and stored by the word; with these new technologies mimetically reproducing the real-time experience of sights and sounds, writing loses its “surrogate sensualities” and is increasingly understood as a closed symbolic system composed of twenty-six standardized letters.¹⁰⁴

In this context, Conrad's response to the wireless in “The Unlighted Coast” reads like a meditation on the aesthetic consequences of technological change. His characterization of coded wireless messages as “grouped-letters war talk,” in other words, evoking not only the transparent language of fact but also the alphabetic opacities of Mallarmé, resonates with literary accounts that locate modernism at the confluence of naturalism and symbolism even as it acknowledges the formative role of new media that such accounts (and Jameson's “will to style”) typically overlook.¹⁰⁵ Attention to media, moreover, brings into focus the distinctive quality of Conradian romance in the propaganda essay. For in contrast to *Nostromo*, darkness in “The Unlighted Coast” not only performs the usual function of erasure; it also operates as a kind of ether for the new medium of the radio—the unheard messages propagating through darkness simultaneously create in literature the romance they were erasing in historical experience by producing a new space of mystery. That mystery, moreover, has a suggestively literary quality, for when Conrad exalts the clarity of the wireless messages—“words in direct relation to things”—he simultaneously recodes his own language by indulging in the essay's only literary allusions. The usual war blather from “the lips of men” obscures “the one and only question: To be or not to be—the great alternative of an appeal to arms. The other, grouped-letters war talk, almost without sound and altogether without fury, is full of sense, of meaning, and single-minded purpose” (“The Unlighted Coast,” 50). Trite as they are, the allusions to Shakespeare reassert the power of literary language by thickening Conrad's account of the ideal transparency of the wireless messages. A strategic military resource in World War I, the radio would become a major medium of propaganda by the next world war. For Conrad, however, the new tech-

nology catalyzes a sense of wonder that ends up transforming his propaganda into a self-reflexive account of the media through which propaganda might be conducted. Within the modernist matrix of the essay, propagandistic intent is not so much negated as arrested; in the words of the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* propaganda is held up for what it is in "the light of a sincere mood" (147).

Becoming a matter for self-conscious reflection in "The Unlighted Coast," the cultural agon between modernism and propaganda that emerges in *Heart of Darkness* would find multiple, provisional resolutions in the coming decades. In a way that illuminates our own predicament in front of a darkened television screen, awaiting new streaks of tracer fire over the next target in the war on terrorism, Conrad's darkness, simultaneously suppressing and producing information, evokes the space of contestation in which the frontiers of modernism and propaganda, and propaganda and information, are always being negotiated. The next chapter maps this territory intermedially by remaining with Conrad, now in relation to Alfred Hitchcock's film adaptation of *The Secret Agent* (1907) as *Sabotage* (1936), and in relation to the problem of audience—how does one reach and master the audience?—that drew Hitchcock to Conrad in the first place.