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The Political Iconology of Right-Wing Culture

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edited by
Jacopo Galimberti, Margherita Picciché,
Ivan Pintor Iranzo and Giulia Zanon

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The Political Iconology of Right-Wing Culture

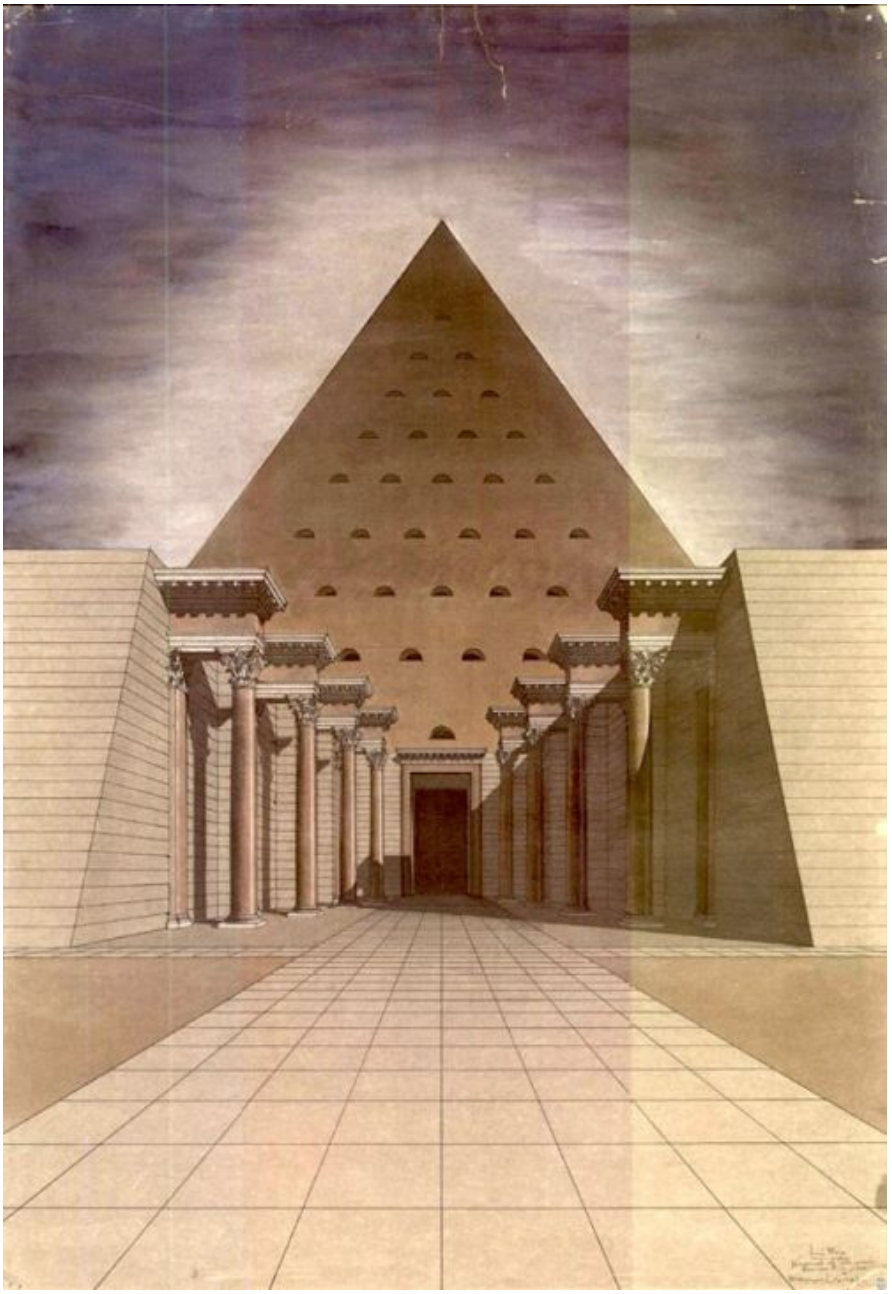
Editorial of Engramma 233

Jacopo Galimberti, Margherita Picciché, Ivan Pintor Iranzo and Giulia Zanon

"Dos personas se encuentran en un momento de caos. Son un escultor y un arquitecto. [Después] se agrega un militar. Sienten la necesidad de combatir de un modo espiritual por un orden" ["Two people meet at a moment of chaos. They are a sculptor and an architect. [Later] a military officer joins them. They feel the need to fight, in a spiritual way, for order"]. In December 1936, as Madrid burned under the siege of Franco's troops and the bombing by the German Junkers 52, the architect Luis Moya, together with the sculptor Manuel Laviada and the Viscount of Uzqueta, designed a monumental funerary complex to be built at the heart of the city: a citadel, a triumphal arch, and a crypt intended to house the tomb of a "Unique Hero"—the sepulcher of victorious power. Moya gave the project the name *Sueño arquitectónico para una exaltación nacional*. It was 1937, and Francoism was beginning to articulate its aesthetic ideal, embracing evocative forms structured around the conjunction of death, sacrifice, and antiquity as foundational to the legitimation of power. Moya's pyramid was never built, yet the mystical impulse that informed it endured in the Valle de los Caídos, in the fasces adorning public façades, and in the stone eagles crowning rationalist buildings. These visual elements constitute the aesthetic fabric of Far Right culture that traverse the centuries, periodically resurfacing at the threshold of what Aby Warburg termed the "selective will of time".

This issue of Engramma confronts this aesthetic-political nexus through the framework of political iconology. The volume reconstructs a line of inquiry that appears in embryonic form in Warburg's work and was subsequently systematised by Martin Warnke and the Hamburg School, while maintaining a sustained focus on the political imagery of the Far Right, from historical fascism to its contemporary rearticulations.

In so doing, the issue emphasises the intellectual legacy of Martin Warnke, who cultivated a longstanding relationship with Engramma and the Seminario Mnemosyne beginning in 2004 (see Engramma 34, *Giornata di studi sull'Atlante. Diario del 19 marzo 2004*). His work has been honored by the journal through a commemorative issue (Engramma 171) as well as through the republication of significant essays, including those dedicated to the Warburg Library (see Engramma 198, *Die Bibliothek Warburg und ihr Forschungsprogramm*) and to Warburg as a scholar of cultural politics (see Engramma 171, *Aby Warburg als Wissenschaftspolitiker*).



The genesis of the volume was also shaped through two moments of scholarly exchange: the "International Seminar on Political Iconography", held at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona on April 24, 2025, and the conference "Myths of Nation, Economy and the Iconology of the Far Right", which took place on December 8, 2025, at the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg.

*

"What does right-wing culture mean?". In the summer of 1979, the Italian weekly "L'Espresso" posed this question to the Germanist Furio Jesi. His answer was unequivocal:

> The culture [of the Right is] a culture in which the past is a kind of homogenized mash that can be shaped and maintained in whatever form proves most useful. A culture in which a religion of death—or of exemplary dead—prevails. A culture that declares the existence of incontestable values, designated by words with an initial capital: above all Tradition and Culture, but also Justice, Freedom, Revolution. A culture built, in short, on authority, on mythological certainty about the norms of knowledge, teaching, commanding, and obeying (Furio Jesi, "L'Espresso" 25, June 24, 1979).

Jesi further contended that much of the broader cultural heritage—including that of those who did not identify with the political right—was in fact a residue of right-wing culture, within that logic of reappropriation that led Franco to claim ownership of the thousands of Republican corpses used to fill the Valle de los Caídos. Nearly fifty years after that inquiry, and only a few years after the death of its author, whose intellectual legacy was long neglected but is today attracting renewed scholarly attention, this issue of Engramma takes up, in its own way, the challenge Jesi had posed with uncomfortable clarity concerning the nature of right-wing imagery.

The analytical framework developed throughout this issue draws on political iconology as a Warburgian *Nachleben*, an inquiry into the afterlife of images across their historical reactivations, while locating its disciplinary articulation in the tradition of the Hamburg School and, most specifically, in the research program defined by Martin Warnke. That program's reception has, however, been an uneven one, shaped by misreadings and political discontinuities. It was not until 1970, at the Twelfth German Congress of Art Historians in Cologne, that a younger generation of art historians from the Ulmer Verein undertook an initial recuperation of Warburg, in the context of a broader revolt against the established canons of the discipline. A provocative session chaired by Warnke, titled *Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung*, offered a critical assessment of the tendency within art history to subordinate the individual artworks to overarching ideological or collective frameworks.

It was nonetheless from this crucible of ideas and conflicts that two of the most consequential figures for both Warburg studies and Political Iconology would emerge: Warnke,

appointed professor at the University of Marburg that same year, and his student Horst Bredekamp. Over the following decade, art historians returned to Warburg with renewed intensity, a process that culminated in definitive institutional recognition at the 1990 International Conference on Aby Warburg. That same year, Warnke was awarded the Leibniz Prize, which enabled him to establish the "Forschungsstelle Politische Ikonographie" at the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg. This initiative was designed both to reestablish a physical connection with the sites of Warburg's original research and to develop his legacy in its most explicitly political dimension. It was within this context that *Politische Ikonographie* took shape as a formal disciplinary field, producing foundational research instruments such as the Image Index to Political Iconography and, later, the *Handbuch der Politischen Ikonographie*, edited by Warnke together with Uwe Fleckner and Hendrik Ziegler—works that mark a turning point in the systematic study of the field.

By way of methodological introduction, the issue presents the first translation into Italian, English and Spanish of Martin Warnke's 1993 text *Politische Ikonographie*. The text—one of the (unfortunately) few sustained contributions Warnke devoted specifically to the subject—examines the concepts of *Schlagbild* and the public sphere, both of which are necessarily central to any rigorous analysis of political imagery. This is followed by *Notes on the Concept of Schlagbild*, by Margherita Picciché, reconstructing the genealogy of political iconography in twentieth-century German art history, with particular attention to the theoretical and methodological legacy of the Hamburg School, of which Martin Warnke was one of the leading scholars.

The issue is then divided into three sections: *Myths and (Un)truths*, *Crowded Masses*, *Far Right Bodies*.

Myths and (Un)truths

The first section traces the ideological roots of myth in the visual politics of the contemporary Right, drawing on intellectual history and image theory. In *Not True, but Right. Falsity and Inaccuracy as Political Visual Strategy*, Emanuele Arielli addresses a problem that runs through the entire section: the strategic function of falsity in right-wing visual political communication. By introducing the concepts of "emblematic evidence" and "synthetic indexicality", Arielli shows how manipulated, decontextualized, or AI-generated images do not fail for lack of veracity but function precisely as pseudo-proofs confirming pre-established ideological narratives. In *Mito, simbolo, antichità. Bozza per uno studio sulla personalità nella storia a partire dagli scritti di Julius Evola*, Irene Galuppo reconstructs the figure of Julius Evola—"a figure with whom no one has yet properly settled accounts", in Furio Jesi's own words—showing how his thought operates as an iconographic reservoir for the global Far Right, from Steve Bannon to Alessandro Giuli. In *Le anime nere. Il mito dell'eroe e le radici di un'egemonia*, Nicolas Martino shifts the focus to an apparently distant terrain—the Japanese *anime* that reached Italian screens in the late 1970s—arguing that the myth of the solitary anti-modern hero embodied by

Captain Harlock shares the same Romantic matrix as bourgeois individualism, and that the anti-liberal Right and economic liberalism grow from the same cultural substrate. In *La blanquitud de Apolo. La supervivencia de la Antigüedad clásica en la cultura visual de la Alt-Right*, Luis Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez examines how specific models of classical statuary—above all the *Apollo del Belvedere*—have been mobilized from the eighteenth century onward as ideological instruments for theorizing racial categories of masculine beauty and bodily perfection, tracing their appropriation as visual and ideological supports for the legitimation of Alt-right racial doctrine. In *The Aesthetics of Technofascism. From Apocalypse to Milk and Mar-a-Lago-Makeovers*, Kathrin Rottmann and Friederike Sigler extend this logic to the aesthetics of contemporary American technofascism: from incarnations of apocalyptic masculinity to the trad wife as a hyper-digitized performance of a völkisch nature that never existed. Thomas Helbig closes the section with *A Magical Aid to Experience. Warburg's Use of Film as an Object of Political Iconology*, tracing an arc from Warburg's analysis of the LUCE documentary on the 1929 Lateran Conciliation to the contemporary mechanisms of AI-slop and social media, and showing how Warburg had intuited in the cinematic apparatus a "magical aid to experience" capable—through critical analysis—of subverting the very propagandistic intentions it served to convey.

Crowded Masses

The second section shifts attention from the individual image to the collective body—the masses that structure the visual politics of the right. In *Downloading Martyrs. Turkey's Commemoration Campaign for the Failed Coup Attempt of July 15, 2016*, Elif Akyüz documents how the Turkish government transformed the failed coup of July 2016 into an inexhaustible iconographic reservoir, reversing its political sign to affirm and consolidate preexisting power. In *A Neoliberal Caspar David Friedrich. The AfD's Ethnoscape*, Jacopo Galimberti analyzes AfD communication through a close reading of an Alice Weidel campaign video, showing how the German Romantic landscape—*Waldeinsamkeit*, the forest as locus of *völkisch* identity—is reactivated as the illegitimate and incoherent inheritance of a national bourgeoisie incapable of producing its own aesthetics and compelled to appropriate those of others. In *False Flags? Semiotic Operations and Assemblages of (Neo) Fascist Propaganda and Protest*, Tom Holert examines the semiotic operations of flags in the contemporary Far Right, showing how the legal prohibition of the swastika has generated a substitute creativity that navigates the boundaries of the unconstitutional with a tactical agility that regulations struggle to keep pace with. In *The Visual Politics of 'Danishness' and the Mainstreaming of Xenophobia in Danish Party Politics*, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen reconstructs the mainstreaming of xenophobia in Danish party politics—rooted in Islamophobia and sustained by images expressing a 'Danishness' that is fundamentally agrarian and *kitsch*.

Far Right Bodies

The third section approaches the question from the perspective of the body as a surface of ideological inscription. In *Surface Derangement. Preliminary Notes for an Inquiry into*

Trumpian Imagery Luka Arsenjuk and Mauro Resmini analyze Trumpism as a politically disarticulated spectacle. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Furio Jesi, and Gérard Wajcman, they argue that Trumpian "iconorrhea"—the deluge of AI- and social-media-generated images to which we are constantly exposed—is not the aestheticization of a recognizable politics but rather a seriality stripped of myth: a "continuous crisis" that replaces the dialectical temporality of historical fascism with the logic of capitalist discontinuity. In *Far Right Virilities in Digital Spaces. Analysing The Masculine Aesthetics of Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro*, Erica Capecchi analyzes the digital masculinity of Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro as a deliberate aesthetic construction—specifically, the figure of the *Capitano* as a dispositif that fuses the image of the man of the people with that of the virile authoritarian leader. In *Right-Wing Communication Guerilla. Nationalist Détournements of Feminist Protest Performances*, Kathrin Fahlenbrach examines the femonationalist détournement of feminist protest forms by the German group Lukreta, showing how the tactics of communication guerrilla are appropriated and semantically reversed—transforming the vocabulary of emancipation into a vehicle for xenophobic and racist messages normalized by the aesthetics of digital platforms. In *Soldiers of Lights. Food, Self-optimization, and the Contemporary Far Right,* Clio Nicastro extends the analysis to the terrain of food and wellness, showing through the documentary *Soldiers of Light* (2025) how practices of diet, fasting, and bodily self-optimization become a symbolic system of belonging and exclusion.

The issue closes with Nicole Coffineau's *Hillbilly Split*. A critical viewing of *Hillbilly Elegy* (Netflix, 2020) which reads the film on the life of J.D. Vance as a narrative apparatus and argues that its lack of psychological and social depth is precisely the condition of its political efficacy—its cinematic failures helping to account for its broader political utility.

Abstract

Engramma 233 examines how the contemporary Far Right, lacking a genuinely new political imaginary, consistently reactivates a repertoire of visual survivals. The issue presents the first translation into Italian, English, and Spanish of Martin Warnke's *Politische Ikonographie* (1993), with some *Notes on the Concept of* Schlagbild by Margherita Picciché, examining the concepts of *Schlagbild* and the public sphere. The issue is organized into three sections: Myths and (Un)truths, Crowded Masses, Far Right Bodies. *Myths and (Un)truths* traces the ideological roots of myth in the visual politics of the contemporary right, through contributions by Emanuele Arielli (Not True, but Right), on the strategic function of falsity in right-wing visual communication; Irene Galuppo (*Mito, simbolo, antichità*), on Julius Evola as iconographic reservoir for the global Far Right; Nicolas Martino (*Le anime nere*), on the shared Romantic matrix of anti-liberal right and economic liberalism; Luis Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez (*La blanquitud de Apolo*), on classical statuary as ideological support for Alt-right racial doctrine; Kathrin Rottmann and Friederike Sigler (*The Aesthetics of Technofascism*), on contemporary American technofascism from apocalyptic masculinity to the trad wife; Thomas Helbig (*A Magical Aid to Experience*), on Warburg's analysis of LUCE video on *La conciliazione* and its relevance to AI-generated media. *Crowded Masses* shifts attention to the collective body, through contributions by Elif Akyüz (*Downloading Martyrs*), on Turkey's iconographic exploitation of the failed 2016 coup;

Jacopo Galimberti (*A Neoliberal Caspar David Friedrich*), on the AfD's reactivation of German Romantic landscape imagery; Tom Holert (*False Flags?*), on the semiotic creativity generated by the legal prohibition of the swastika; Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen (*The Visual Politics of 'Danishness'*), on the mainstreaming of xenophobia in Danish party politics. *Far Right Bodies* approaches the body as a surface of ideological inscription, through contributions by Luka Arsenjuk and Mauro Resmini (*Surface Derangement*), on Trumpian 'iconorrhea' as a seriality stripped of myth; Erica Capecchi (Far Right Virilities in Digital Spaces), on the digital masculinity of Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro; Kathrin Fahlenbrach (*Right-Wing Communication Guerilla*), on the femonationalist *détournement* of feminist protest forms; Clio Nicastro (*Soldiers of Lights*), on diet and bodily self-optimization as a symbolic system of Far Right belonging. The issue closes with Nicole Coffineau's *Hillbilly Split*, reading the series *Hillbilly Elegy* (Netflix, 2020) as a narrative apparatus whose cinematic failures are the very condition of its political efficacy.

keywords | Political Iconology; Martin Warnke; Donald Trump; Caspar David Friedrich; AfD; J.D. Vance; Julius Evola; Peter Thiel; Jair Bolsonaro; Dansk Folkeparti; Captain Harlock.

This issue of Engramma is by invitation: the review of the essays has been entrusted to the editorial board and the international advisory board of the journal.

Politische Ikonologie (1993)

Martin Warnke, edited by Margherita Picciché





1 | Giulio Romano, *The Crowd worshipping the statue of an emperor, preparatory drawing for a stucco relief*. Paris, Musée du Louvre.
2 | Khevenhüller showing the portrait and a letter from Maria Theresa to his troops, engraving for a pamphlet. Amsterdam, 1742.
3 | Pamphlet featuring an image of Khevenhüller showing the portrait of Maria Theresa to his troops, copper engraving. Amsterdam, 1742.

Political Iconology

Martin Warnke, translated by Margherita Picciché

We publish here, for the first time in digital edition and English translation, Martin Warnke's text on Political Iconology, originally published in the volume *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst. Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie*, edited by Andreas Beyer (1992, 23-28), and subsequently republished as the introduction to the *Bildindex zur politischen Ikonographie*, a limited-circulation volume presenting a synthesis of the activities of the Hamburg-based Forschungsstelle Politische Ikonographie (1993, 5-12).

*

"Among common people, things penetrate more effectively through the eyes than through the ears, for the people internalize better what they see than what they hear". This obser-

vation was conveyed to King Henry VIII in 1533 by a politically experienced advisor, when the question arose of making the break with the Roman Catholic Church plausible to the people. The King, the advisor recommended, should organize a great procession in which the Pope would be mocked, and in which images would be used to illustrate the reasons for his course of action. The royal advisor's view—that speech, the discursive argument, achieves less and makes less impression upon common people than visual presentation; that visual impressions engrave themselves more deeply upon the mind than verbal messages—corresponded with centuries of ecclesiastical experience. The Bishop of Vitry summarized an old ecclesiastical maxim in the thirteenth century, saying, "To the laity, everything must be made sensory and visually apparent". Whether one holds this view to be correct or not, most political authorities have acted accordingly.

Giulio Romano, as the organizer of all the visual acts of state for the Gonzaga court in Mantua, wished to draw attention to this efficacy of images when, above the fireplace in his magnificent residence, he had hung a scene depicting a crowd kneeling before the statue of an emperor with every sign of devotion and veneration [Fig. 1]. In 1719, a specialist in the science of ceremony, Johann Christian Lünig, declared:

> Most people, and above all the rabble, are of such a constitution that sensory perception has more power than wit and reason; therefore they are moved more by things that tickle the senses and catch the eye than by the most compelling and lucid motives. Were one to present the common people a hundred and then a hundred times over, with the most exquisite words and arguments, that they ought to obey their sovereign because it conforms to divine command and sound reason, but this sovereign conducted himself in dress and in all other respects as plainly as an ordinary citizen, one would achieve little. But if one instead were to present that same common people with a magnificently attired prince, surrounded by many courtiers, honored by various foreign princes and embassies, and covered by a substantial guard—then the people would begin to marvel at his highness. This wonder would produce esteem and reverence, from which submission and obedience follow.

In the very midst of the Age of Enlightenment, it was pointed out that "sensory perception and imagination have more power than wit and reason", that distinguished attire, a brilliant retinue, a substantial guard, magnificent ceremonies and festivities—in short, a compelling visual staging—arouse wonder and astonishment from which reverence and obedience grow. Were a ruler to appear in the plain clothes of a citizen, he could present the most reasonable arguments "a hundred and then a hundred times over", and still he would not have the slightest chance of finding attention and obedience. "And for this reason", Lünig concludes, "even the most pious kings among the people of God have not refrained from ceremonies and splendid celebrations to lend their courts prestige".

If political rulers have acted even halfway in accordance with these insights, then a large part of their political activity in the past did not leave its mark in written acts, not in treaties, proclamations, decrees, and newssheets, not in books, compendia, theories of state, and pamphlets—but rather in ceremonies, in spectacles, commemorative coins, fes-

tivities, theaters, processions, parades, buildings, gardens, images, monuments, medals, transparent paintings, ballets, waterworks, and fireworks: that is, in the domain of Political Iconography.

In 1742, a pamphlet was circulated from Holland reporting and commenting upon an actual scene from Austria [Fig. 2]. The Empress Maria Theresa observed upon her accession to the throne, in her own words, that "domestic and foreign credit had been shaken, there was little unity among the ministers, and the mood of the people was ungovernable and difficult". The Elector of Bavaria, moreover, had occupied the whole of Upper Austria. In this threatening situation, the Empress wrote to her Field Marshal, Count Khevenhüller, who was setting in motion the reconquest and defense, a letter personally delivered to him by her husband, the future Emperor Franz Stephan. Enclosed with the letter was a portrait of the Empress and her son, to which she directly alludes: "Before your eyes you have a young Queen who has been abandoned by the whole world. What do you think of her fate? What do you think of the fate of this child? Look your sovereign in the eyes". The image on the pamphlet shows how the Field Marshal reacts. He steps before the tent with his officers, the Empress's letter in his left hand, the portraits in his right, displaying everything to the troops streaming out of the tents. The text on the pamphlet reports how the soldiers showered the images with kisses, brandished their swords, praised the Empress, and renewed their oath of loyalty to her. Sending the portrait evidently struck the chivalric hearts of the military. They understood that their mistress, in her distress, had ventured a final plea by sending not only imploring words, but also her living likeness.

The examples cited make it clearly apparent that the political production of images in the modern era had a public that had to be taken into account—whether broadly designated as "the people", or defined more narrowly as military men, estates, urban notables, guilds, distinguished guests and envoys, courtly clientele, courtly cliques, high prelates, or humanists and jurists of literary influence. A not inconsiderable stock of images from the image-politics of rulers is addressed back by these recipients to the rulers themselves—as when the occasion arose, at festivals, divine services, processions, entries, homages, or audiences, to communicate wishes and hopes, demands and opinions to those in authority through images.

Particular problems and tasks arise for iconographic research from the significance that images could acquire in the political sphere. In the conventional iconographic interpretive procedure, the political messages of artistic works are regarded as expressions of the will of a single, authoritative source of power. This might be a pious donor, a wealthy merchant, a power-hungry condottiere, a mighty king, or a municipal council. These patrons are presented as omnipotent instances who dictate their intentions and views to artists. A political iconography that credits images with active roles in the political sphere takes into account, however, that in the case of images too, a sender wishing to communicate something to a recipient must know and accommodate the recipient's linguistic capaci-

ties and possibilities, mental dispositions, needs and expectations, norms and values—if the message is to have any chance of taking effect. This most elementary precondition of human communication means, with regard to the official production of images, that while such production is initiated "from above", from the patron, it need not therefore be wholly occupied and determined by the patron. It means that the image directed "downward" must also contain the wishes, expectations, and needs of those "below". It means that these must at least have a share in the reality of the image, even if only in that they have found entry into the images through the mediating artist.

This is touched upon by the letter that an official addressed to the Duke of Nevers in 1577 in a remarkable formulation: "There is nothing that touches the hearts of simple people more than the portraits of their princes and lords…They pass them from hand to hand down to their descendants… They honor them and bless them—unless the portraits do not resemble their subjects at all, or are the work of a poor hand, in which case they turn away and despise them". Here, attachment to the portraits of one's superiors is made contingent upon qualities that lie solely in the hands of an artist; reverence is rendered only under certain conditions.

For this reason, the research goal of political iconography is not necessarily to issue a catalogue of mere sovereign self-stagings and fantasies of power, as has generally been the case in previous analyses of official image-politics. When Cellini was working on his *Perseus*—which still adorns the Piazza della Signoria in Florence today—he was visited by the Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici, who came to inspect the work. According to Cellini's autobiography, the prince, who was not otherwise credited with great consideration for his subjects, said on this occasion, "Although this work seems to us very beautiful, it must also please the people; therefore, my Benvenuto, before you apply the finishing touches, I should wish, as a favor to me, that you open this front door onto my piazza, so that we may see what the people say of it".

It is evidently not sufficient, then, that a work destined for a public square should please the ruler alone; the "people" too—those addressed—must be able to recognize themselves in it, to find in it an echo of their own conceptions, if it is to achieve its effect. A great part of the fictional charge carried by images of the past is cast in a new light when they are seen as products of negotiation between the operative and vital interests of patron and of those addressed. When, time and again, city councilors celebrate their own governance as Solomonic, as ideal Good Government; when kings transfigure their military campaigns as battles of Saint George, Saint Michael, or Hercules; when princes are figured today as a rock in a storm, tomorrow as the sun, then as good shepherds, as able helmsmen; when a potentate is presented as a new Augustus, Alexander, or Caesar, as David, Jupiter, or James—this does not mean that the rulers in question felt themselves to correspond to these figures, or that their subjects duly regarded them as such. The fact alone that such costumings of rulers were preferably offered on triumphal arches at en-

tries into cities—that is, that these arches were often erected by the citizens themselves, above all by the guilds, at the ruler's arrival—must raise the suspicion that the fictional apparatus (*Fiktionsapparat*) nwas perhaps not naively deployed, but prescriptively: the princes were expected to conduct themselves in accordance with that fictive spectrum of roles (*fiktiven Rollenspektrum*), in which expectations and norms of conduct were expressed.

In Friedrich Schiller's words: "Truth lives on in the illusion [of the arts], and from the copy the archetype (*Urbild*) shall be restored". In the profane, immanently conceived apparatus of fiction that was put forward over the centuries, something like a political space of values and desires takes shape. One can see that this fictive catalogue (*fiktiver Wertekatalog*) of values, in the wake of the French Revolution, entered into constitutions and party programs—becoming, that is, tangible, or available for selection. With this, it became subject to obsolescence as a subject matter for art.

The new visual mass media, which, in modern democracies, take over the tasks of the craft-based production of images, work with numerous motifs, formulas, and techniques with which the older arts had already been successfully employed. From a rigorous standpoint of Enlightenment, one might regret that political opinion-formation is still shaped less through discursive arguments than through visual stagings or optical stimuli—a situation that has led to the description of the present system as a 'telecracy'. Yet one may be closer to the needs of human beings if one investigates why they prove more receptive to arguments that make their case through the senses than to rationally elaborated propositions.

* * *

The concept of political iconography does not derive directly from the foundational redefinition of iconographic methods as developed by Aby Warburg and his circle. Warburg himself had, during the First World War, engaged in activities that temporarily transformed his library into a kind of archive of current political propaganda. He collected newspaper clippings, propaganda materials, and writings, which he intended to incorporate into a wholly reorganized library. His essay *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther*, which he had already presented to the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences in 1917, is, in a certain sense, a founding document of political iconography—not only because it was the first time that the pamphlet, and with it then burgeoning visual propaganda, was taken seriously as an object of art historical inquiry, but also because in this essay an immediate political problem—the mobilizing efficacy of agitation—was directly translated into a historical research program.

Even if political themes receded somewhat into the background during the phase of the institutional expansion of the Cultural Studies Library in the 1920s, they remained latently embedded there. They came to the fore again after the forced relocation of the library to

London in 1933. Fritz Saxl published, in 1938, his study on the Capitol as a symbol of imperial pretensions up to and including Mussolini, and right at the beginning of the war he published a study from 1932 on the battle paintings of Aniello Falcone, now under the new title *The Battle Scene without a Hero*, in the third volume of the "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes" (1939). Edgar Wind reviewed a catalogue of political satires in the British Museum, analyzed the political forms of the allegorical portrait, reviewed in the "Burlington Magazine" in 1936 the *Studies on the Gorgo* that had been presented to Kaiser Wilhelm II, and, in the following year, edited Friedrich Gundolf's *Beginnings of German Historiography* (*Anfänge deutscher Geschichtschreibung).*

One can thus recognize the programmatic unfolding of Political Iconography today as prepared not only by Warburg himself, but also within subsequent research interests of the Warburg Institute.

Iconografia politica

Martin Warnke, traduzione di Margherita Picciché

Pubblichiamo qui, per la prima volta in edizione digitale e in traduzione italiana, il testo di Martin Warnke dedicato all'Iconologia politica, apparso inizialmente nel volume *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst. Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie*, a cura di Andreas Beyer, e successivamente riproposto come introduzione al *Bildindex zur politischen Ikonographie*, volume a tiratura limitata che raccoglieva una sintesi delle attività della Forschungsstelle Politische Ikonographie di Amburgo (Warnke 1992, 23-28; Warnke 1993, 5-12).

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"Tra la gente comune, le cose penetrano più efficacemente attraverso gli occhi che attraverso le orecchie, poiché il popolo assimila meglio ciò che vede di ciò che sente". Questa osservazione fu avanzata da un uomo esperto di politica, consigliere del re inglese Enrico VIII, nel 1533, quando si trattava di rendere l'apostasia dalla Chiesa cattolica romana accettabile al popolo. Il consigliere suggerì al re di organizzare una grande processione in cui il papa fosse messo alla berlina e in cui il re illustrasse con immagini le ragioni della sua azione. La convinzione del consigliere reale – secondo cui il discorso, l'argomentazione discorsiva, è meno efficace e fa minore impressione sulla gente comune rispetto alla presentazione visiva, che le immagini agiscono sulla mente con più forza delle parole –corrispondeva a secoli di esperienza ecclesiastica. Nel XIII secolo, il vescovo di Vitry aveva riassunto un'antica massima ecclesiastica: "Al profano bisogna mostrare tutto in forma tangibile e concreta, dinanzi agli occhi". Che si condivida o meno questa opinione, la maggior parte delle autorità politiche vi ha aderito.

Giulio Romano, in qualità di organizzatore delle scenografie per le cerimonie di Stato alla corte Gonzaga a Mantova, volle rimarcare l'efficace potere delle immagini decorando il camino della sua magnifica dimora con una scena in cui una folla si inginocchia dinnanzi alla statua di un imperatore con ogni segno di devozione e venerazione [Fig. 1]. Nel 1719, Johann Christian Lünig, esperto di cerimoniali, osservava:

> La maggior parte delle persone, e soprattutto il popolino, è di natura tale che la percezione sensoriale ha su di loro più presa dell'ingegno e dell'intelletto; di conseguenza, sono più mossi da ciò che solletica i sensi e cattura l'occhio che da argomentazioni più stringenti e chiare. Se si spiegasse cento volte alla gente comune, con le parole e le ragioni più sofisticate, che deve obbedire al proprio sovrano – perché così vogliono il volere divino e il buon senso – ma questo re si comportasse nel vestire e tutto il resto come un semplice popolano, si otterrebbe ben poco. Se invece si presenta alla gente comune un principe splendidamente vestito, circondato da molti cortigiani, omaggiato da principi e dignitari stranieri e scortato da una guardia di tutto rispetto, il popolo comincerà ad ammirarne la maestà, e questo stupore genererà rispetto e soggezione, dai quali derivano sottomissione e obbedienza.

Nel pieno dell'Illuminismo si ribadisce così che "la percezione sensoriale e l'immaginazione sono più potenti dell'ingegno e dell'intelletto", e che abiti eleganti, un seguito sfarzoso, una guardia prestante, cerimonie e celebrazioni grandiose – vale a dire una scenografia visiva d'effetto – suscitano meraviglia e stupore, da cui nascono soggezione e obbedienza. Se un sovrano si presentasse in abiti semplici da cittadino, potrebbe ripetere "cento e cento volte" le ragioni più sensate, eppure non avrebbe la minima possibilità essere ascoltato e obbedito. "E per questo motivo", conclude Lünig, "i re più pii del popolo di Dio non si sono astenuti dal dare lustro alle loro corti con cerimonie solenni e celebrazioni magnifiche".

Se i governanti hanno agito anche solo in parte secondo queste intuizioni, allora gran parte della loro attività politica nel passato non si è espressa in documenti scritti – non in trattati, proclami, decreti e gazzette, non in libri, compendi, dottrine di Stato o opuscoli – bensì in cerimonie, spettacoli, monete celebrative, feste, rappresentazioni teatrali, parate, cortei, edifici, giardini, dipinti, monumenti, medaglie, stendardi, balletti, giochi d'acqua e fuochi d'artificio: vale a dire nell'ambito dell'iconografia politica.

Nel 1742 dall'Olanda fu diffuso un *pamphlet* che riportava e commentava una scena reale svoltasi in Austria [Fig. 2]. Al momento della sua ascesa al potere, l'imperatrice Maria Teresa constatò, secondo le sue stesse parole, che "il credito, interno ed esterno, era scosso, vi era poca unità tra i ministri e l'umore popolare era ribelle e incontrollabile". Inoltre, l'Elettore di Baviera aveva occupato l'intera Alta Austria. In questa situazione minacciosa, l'imperatrice scrisse una lettera al suo feldmaresciallo conte Khevenhüller, che aveva avviato le operazioni di riconquista e difesa; lettera che il marito, il futuro imperatore Franz Stephan, consegnò personalmente al comandante. La missiva era accompagnata da un ritratto dell'imperatrice e di suo figlio, cui ella faceva immediatamente riferimento: "Avete davanti agli occhi una giovane regina abbandonata dal mondo intero: come pensate al suo destino? Come pensate al destino di questo bambino? Guardate gli occhi della vostra principessa…". L'immagine del *pamphlet* mostra la reazione del feldmaresciallo: si presenta davanti alla tenda con i suoi ufficiali, la lettera dell'imperatrice nella mano destra e i ritratti nella sinistra, mostrando tutto ai soldati che escono dalle tende. Il testo dell'opuscolo riporta come i soldati abbiano ricoperto i ritratti di baci, brandito le spade, acclamato l'imperatrice e rinnovato il giuramento di fedeltà a lei. L'invio del ritratto aveva evidentemente fatto breccia nell'animo cavalleresco dei militari. Essi compresero che la loro imperatrice, nella sua angoscia, aveva osato compiere un gesto estremo inviando non solo parole di supplica ma anche la propria effigie.

Gli esempi citati dimostrano chiaramente che la produzione di immagini politiche nell'età moderna doveva fare i compiti con un pubblico ben preciso: sia che ci si riferisse genericamente al popolo, sia che ci si limitasse ai militari, ai proprietari terrieri, ai dignitari urbani, alle corporazioni, agli ospiti illustri e agli ambasciatori, oppure alla clientela di corte, ai cortigiani, agli alti prelati, agli umanisti e ai giuristi dotati di autorità letteraria.

Una parte non trascurabile dell'iconografia prodotta dai destinatari della politica del potere per immagini è stata a sua volta rivolta ai governanti stessi: accadeva, ad esempio, quando feste, funzioni religiose, processioni, cortei, omaggi o udienze offrivano l'occasione di comunicare alle autorità – con l'aiuto delle immagini – desideri e speranze, richieste e giudizi.

L'importanza che le immagini hanno assunto nella vita politica ha posto alla ricerca iconografica problemi e compiti specifici. Secondo il consueto metodo dell'interpretazione iconografica, i messaggi politici delle opere d'arte sono le espressioni della volontà di un'unica fonte autorevole di potere: un pio benefattore, un ricco mercante, un condottiero assetato di potere, un potente re o un consiglio comunale. I committenti sono rappresentati come autorità onnipotenti che impartiscono e dettano le proprie intenzioni e la propria visione agli artisti. Tuttavia, un'iconografia politica che affida alle immagini un ruolo attivo nello spazio politico deve tenere conto del fatto che un committente il quale desideri comunicare qualcosa a un destinario deve anche conoscere e fare proprie le capacità e le possibilità linguistiche, le disposizioni mentali, i bisogni e le aspettative, le norme e i valori quel destinario se vuole che il suo messaggio risulti efficace. Questo presupposto elementare della comunicazione interpersonale implica, per la produzione di immagini da parte del potere, che essa – pur essendo promossa 'dall'alto', dal committente – non sia per questo già interamente occupata e determinata da quest'ultimo; che l'immagine diretta 'verso il basso' debba contenere anche i desideri, le aspettative, i bisogni del 'basso'; che questi debbano almeno trovare espressione nella sostanza dell'immagine, fosse anche solo nel senso che, attraverso l'artista che la plasma, hanno avuto accesso a essa.

A ciò si allude, con un curioso giro di parole, nella lettera indirizzata da un funzionario al duca di Nevers nel 1577: "Non c'è nulla che tocchi il cuore della gente comune più dei ritratti dei loro principi e signori… li di mano in mano ai loro discendenti… li onorano e li benedicono, a meno che le effigi non siano per nulla somiglianti, o siano opera di mano mediocre: in quel caso se ne allontanano e li disprezzano". La deferenza verso i ritratti delle autorità viene così fatta dipendere da qualità che sono esclusivamente nelle mani dell'artista; l'omaggio è così tributato solo a determinate condizioni.

Per questo motivo, l'obiettivo dell'iconografia politica non deve necessariamente ridursi a un catalogo di autorappresentazioni e fantasie di potere da parte dei governanti, come di solito accade nelle analisi della politica dell'immagine dei governanti. Quando Cellini stava lavorando al suo *Perseo* – che ancora oggi adorna Piazza della Signoria a Firenze – il Granduca Cosimo de' Medici gli fece visita per esaminare il lavoro. Secondo quanto raccontato dallo stesso Cellini nella sua biografia, il principe, che di norma pare non nutrisse grande considerazione per i suoi sudditi, disse in quell'occasione: "Sebbene quest'opera ci sembri molto bella, deve piacere anche al popolo. Perciò, mio Benvenuto, prima che tu la rifinisca, vorrei che tu aprissi questa porta d'ingresso della mia casa, a mio vantaggio, per vedere cosa ne dice il popolo".

Non basta, dunque, che un'opera destinata alla piazza piaccia a chi la governa: anche il 'popolo', il destinatario, deve riconoscerla e trovarvi un'eco delle proprie idee, se si vuole che essa risulti efficace. Gran parte della carica simbolica delle immagini del passato appare sotto una luce nuova quando si considera tali immagini come prodotti dell'equilibrio tra gli interessi del committente e quelli dei destinatari. Quando i membri del consiglio cittadino celebrano ripetutamente il proprio governo come salomonico, come ideale di buon governo; quando i re glorificano le loro campagne militari come battaglie di San Giorgio, San Michele o Ercole; quando i principi sono raffigurati ora come scogli nella tempesta, ora come il sole, ora come buoni pastori, ora come abili timonieri; quando un potentato è presentato come il nuovo Augusto, Alessandro o Cesare, come Davide, Giove o Giacobbe: tutto questo non significa che i governanti in questione si sarebbero sentiti tali né che i loro sudditi li avrebbero giudicati di conseguenza. Il solo fatto che simili travestimenti dei sovrani venissero proposti di preferenza sugli archi di trionfo durante gli ingressi nelle città, e che questi archi fossero così spesso eretti dai cittadini (soprattutto dalle corporazioni) in occasione dell'arrivo del sovrano, deve alimentare il sospetto che quell'apparato fittizio non fosse presentato in modo ingenuo, bensì secondo una prescrizione: i principi dovevano comportarsi conformemente a quel fittizio spettro di ruoli, nel quale si esprimevano aspettative e norme di condotta.

In Friederich Schiller si legge: "La verità sopravvive nell'illusione, e dall'immagine derivata sarà restituita l'immagine originaria". Nell'apparato finzionale laico, di concezione integralmente immanente, ripropostosi nel corso dei secoli, viene a configurarsi uno spazio politico fatto di valori e aspirazioni. Si può vedere come questo fittizio catalogo di valori sia confluito, con (e dopo) la Rivoluzione francese, nelle costituzioni e nei programmi dei partiti, ossia sia stato tradotto in norma e suscettibile di scelta politica. In tal modo, esso aveva perduto la propria ragion d'essere come oggetto dell'arte.

I nuovi mass media visivi, che nelle democrazie moderne hanno preso il posto della produzione artigianale di immagini, operano con molti degli stessi motivi, delle stesse formule e delle stesse tecniche che avevano già assicurato il successo delle arti tradizionali. Da una prospettiva illuminista rigorosa, ci si può rammaricare del fatto che la formazione dell'opinione politica avvenga meno attraverso argomenti discorsivi che mediante messe in scena e stimoli visivi, tanto che si è parlato dell'attuale sistema come di una 'telecrazia'. Forse, però, si coglie meglio la natura umana se si esamina senza pregiudizi per quale ragione le persone siano più ricettive ad argomentazioni che si rivolgono ai sensi che a frasi puramente razionali.

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Il concetto di Iconografia politica non discende direttamente dalla fondamentale riforma del metodo iconografico sviluppata da Aby Warburg e dal Warburgkreis. Durante la Prima guerra mondiale, lo stesso Warburg condusse attività che trasformarono temporaneamente la sua biblioteca in una sorta di archivio della propaganda politica contemporanea.

Raccolse ritagli di giornale, materiale e scritti di propaganda, che intendeva integrare in una biblioteca concepita come un organismo unitario. Il suo saggio su *Divinazione antica pagana in testi e immagini dell'età di Lutero*, che aveva già presentato nel 1917 all'Accademia delle Scienze di Heidelberg, è in un certo senso uno scritto fondativo dell'iconografia politica: non solo perché per la prima volta la stampa volante – e con essa la propaganda per immagini, allora in rapida proliferazione – veniva presa sul serio dalla storia dell'arte, ma anche perché in quel saggio un problema politico attuale, ossia la forza di mobilitazione dell'agitazione, veniva tradotto direttamente in un programma di ricerca storica.

Se nella fase di consolidamento istituzionale della Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek, negli anni Venti, i temi politici passarono piuttosto in secondo piano, rimasero tuttavia presenti in forma latente. Avrebbero ripreso tutta la loro urgenza dopo il trasferimento forzato della biblioteca a Londra nel 1933. Fritz Saxl pubblicò nel 1938 il suo studio sul Campidoglio come simbolo delle aspirazioni imperiali fino a Mussolini; e allo scoppio stesso della guerra, nel terzo fascicolo del "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes" (1939), pubblicò un suo studio del 1932 sui dipinti di battaglia di Aniello Falcone, ora con il nuovo titolo di *La scena di battaglia senza eroe*. Edgar Wind, a sua volta, recensì un catalogo di satire politiche del British Museum; analizzò le forme politiche del 'ritratto allegorico'; nel 1936 recensì nel "Burlington Magazine" gli *Studi sulla Gorgone* a firma dell'imperatore Guglielmo II; e l'anno successivo curò l'edizione degli *Inizi della storiografia tedesca* di Friedrich Gundolf (*Anfänge deutscher Geschichtschreibung)*.

In tutto ciò, è possibile ravvisare le premesse di una sistematica elaborazione dell'iconografia politica che trova radici non solo nell'opera di Warburg, ma anche nei successivi interessi di ricerca del Warburg Institute.

Iconología política

Martin Warnke, traducido por Ivan Pintor Iranzo

Publicamos aquí, por primera vez en edición digital y traducción al español, el texto de Martin Warnke dedicado a la Iconología política, publicado originalmente en el volumen *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst. Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie*, editado por Andreas Beyer (1992, 23-28), y posteriormente reeditado como introducción al *Bildindex zur politischen Ikonographie*, volumen de circulación limitada que presentaba una síntesis de las actividades de la *Forschungsstelle Politische Ikonographie* de Hamburgo (1993, 5-12).

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"Entre el pueblo llano, las cosas penetran con mayor eficacia a través de los ojos que a través de los oídos, pues el pueblo asimila mejor aquello que ve que aquello que oye". Esta observación fue realizada en el año 1533 por un hombre con experiencia política, un consejero, al rey inglés Enrique VIII, cuando trataba de hacer plausible ante el pueblo la apostasía con respecto a la Iglesia católica romana. El consejero, además, recomendaba al rey organizar una gran procesión en la que el Papa fuese ridiculizado y en la que el monarca ilustrase mediante imágenes las razones de su proceder. La concepción del consejero real –según la cual el discurso, la argumentación discursiva, es menos eficaz y causa menor impresión entre el pueblo llano que la presentación visual; según la cual las impresiones visuales se graban más profundamente en la sensibilidad que los mensajes verbales– respondía a siglos de experiencia eclesiástica. Ya en el siglo XIII, el obispo de Vitry había resumido una antigua máxima de la Iglesia al afirmar: "A los profanos hay que mostrarles todo de manera sensible y visible". Se comparta o no esta opinión, la mayor parte de las autoridades políticas se han atenido a ella.

Giulio Romano, en tanto que artífice de la puesta en escena visual del poder de los Gonzaga en Mantua, quiso subrayar la eficacia del poder de las imágenes decorando la chimenea de su suntuosa casa con una escena en la que una multitud, con todos los signos de entrega y veneración, se arrodilla ante la estatua de un emperador. En 1719, un especialista en ciencia ceremonial, Johann Christian Lünig, declaró:

> La mayoría de los hombres, y especialmente la plebe, son de tal naturaleza que en ellos la percepción sensible tiene más fuerza que el ingenio y el entendimiento; por eso son conmovidos más por aquellas cosas que halagan los sentidos y saltan a la vista que por los motivos más concluyentes y claros. Si se presentara al pueblo común centenares de veces con las palabras y las razones mejor escogidas, que debería obedecer -porque así lo exige el mandato divino y el buen juicio-, pero ese rey se condujese en su vestimenta y en todo lo demás con la misma sencillez que un ciudadano cualquiera, se lograría muy poco. En cambio, si se presenta a ese mismo pueblo un príncipe magníficamente vestido, rodeado de numerosos cortesanos, honrado por príncipes extranjeros y embajadores y protegido por

> una guardia imponente, entonces el pueblo comenzará a maravillarse de su grandeza, y ese asombro causará respeto y reverencia, de los cuales surgen la sumisión y la obediencia.

En pleno siglo de la Ilustración se subraya así que la "percepción sensible y la imaginación son más poderosas que el ingenio y el entendimiento", que el atuendo noble, un séquito espléndido, una guardia imponente, ceremonias fastuosas y fiestas –es decir, una escenificación visual impactante– suscitan admiración y asombro, de los cuales nacen la reverencia y la obediencia. Si un gobernante apareciera con la sencillez de un plebeyo, podría exponer "centenares de veces" los argumentos más razonables y, aun así, no tendría la menor posibilidad de obtener atención y obediencia. "Y por esta razón –concluye Lünig– los reyes, incluso los más piadosos, no han dejado de dar prestigio a su corte mediante ceremonias organizadas y celebraciones espléndidas".

Si los gobernantes políticos han actuado siquiera a medias conforme a estas ideas, entonces el peso principal de su acción política en el pasado no se ha depositado en documentos escritos, en tratados, proclamas, decretos y "gacetas", ni en libros, compendios, doctrinas de Estado o panfletos, sino en ceremonias, espectáculos, monedas conmemorativas, festividades, teatros, desfiles, procesiones, edificios, jardines, imágenes, monumentos, medallas, pancartas, ballets, juegos de agua y fuegos artificiales: es decir, en el campo de la iconografía política.

En 1742 se difundió desde Holanda un folleto que relataba y comentaba una escena real ocurrida en Austria. La emperatriz María Teresa de Austria declaró al inicio de su reinado que "el crédito interior y exterior estaba socavado, que había poca unidad entre los ministros y que el estado de ánimo del pueblo era indisciplinado y difícil". El elector de Baviera, además, había ocupado toda la Alta Austria. En esta situación amenazante, la emperatriz escribió a su mariscal de campo, el conde Khevenhüller, que encabezaba la reconquista y la defensa. La carta fue entregada personalmente por su esposo, el futuro emperador Franz Stephan. Junto a la carta se adjuntaba un retrato de la emperatriz y de su hijo, al que ella misma aludía en el texto: "Tienes ante tus ojos a una joven reina abandonada por todo el mundo… ¿qué piensas de su destino? ¿Qué piensas del destino de este niño? Mira a tu soberana a los ojos…". La imagen de la hoja volante muestra cómo reaccionó el mariscal: sale de su tienda con sus oficiales, sosteniendo en la mano izquierda la carta de la emperatriz y en la derecha los retratos, que muestra a la tropa que acude desde las tiendas. El texto de ese mismo folleto relata cómo los soldados colmaron las imágenes de besos, blandieron sus espadas, alabaron a la Emperatriz y renovaron su juramento de fidelidad. Evidentemente, el envío del retrato conmovió el corazón caballeresco de los militares: comprendieron que su soberana, en su aflicción, había arriesgado un último recurso, enviando no solo palabras suplicantes, sino también su propia imagen.

En los ejemplos citados se hace evidente que la producción de imágenes políticas en la Edad Moderna tenía un público con el que era necesario contar: ya se designara de manera general como "pueblo" o se tratara de militares, dignatarios urbanos, embajadores,

gremios, altos mandatarios, clientela y círculos cortesanos, prelados de alto rango o incluso de humanistas y juristas influyentes. Una parte nada desdeñable del acervo de imágenes está constituida por producciones dirigidas por los propios gobernados hacia los gobernantes: por ejemplo, cuando en fiestas, servicios religiosos, procesiones, desfiles triunfales, homenajes o audiencias se ofrecía la ocasión de comunicar a la autoridad, mediante imágenes, deseos, esperanzas, demandas u opiniones.

La importancia que las imágenes han adquirido en la vida política plantea problemas y tareas particulares para la investigación iconográfica. En el procedimiento iconográfico habitual, los mensajes políticos de las obras artísticas se interpretan como expresiones de la voluntad de una única fuente de poder dominante: el comitente. Este puede ser un piadoso mecenas, un comerciante adinerado, un condotiero ambicioso, un poderoso rey o un consejo municipal. Los comitentes son presentados como autoridades todopoderosas que inculcan y dictan a los artistas sus intenciones y puntos de vista. Sin embargo, una iconografía política que atribuye a las imágenes un papel activo en el espacio político debe tener en cuenta que, también en el caso de las imágenes, un emisor que desee comunicar algo a un receptor debe conocer y asumir las capacidades y posibilidades lingüísticas, las disposiciones mentales, las necesidades y expectativas, las normas y los valores de ese receptor si quiere que su mensaje tenga posibilidades de surtir efecto. Este requisito fundamental de toda comunicación interpersonal implica, para la producción de imágenes de poder, que aunque esta sea impulsada "desde arriba" por el comitente, no queda por ello completamente determinada por él; que en la imagen dirigida "hacia abajo" deben estar presentes también los deseos, expectativas y necesidades de "abajo"; que estos deben tener al menos una participación en la realidad de la imagen, aunque solo sea porque han encontrado su camino hacia las imágenes a través del artista que las creó.

A esto alude de manera reveladora una carta que un funcionario dirigió en 1577 al duque de Nevers: "Nada conmueve más los corazones del pueblo llano que los retratos de sus príncipes y señores… los hacen circular de mano en mano entre sus descendientes… los honran y los bendicen, a menos que los retratos no se parezcan en nada o estén mal ejecutados; entonces se apartan de ellos y los desprecian". Aquí, la veneración hacia los retratos de los poderosos se hace depender de cualidades que están exclusivamente en manos del artista; la reverencia solo se manifiesta bajo determinadas condiciones.

Por ello, el objetivo de la investigación en iconografía política no tiene por qué desembocar necesariamente en un catálogo de meras autoescenificaciones del poder o fantasías de dominación, como ha ocurrido en la mayoría de los análisis tradicionales de las imágenes del poder. Cuando Cellini trabajaba en su estatua de Perseo –que aún hoy adorna la Piazza della Signoria en Florencia–, fue visitado por el gran duque Cosimo I de Médici para inspeccionar la obra. Según relata el propio Cellini en su autobiografía, el príncipe, al que por lo demás no se le atribuía gran consideración hacia sus súbditos, dijo en esa

ocasión: "Aunque esta obra nos parece muy bella, también debe agradar al pueblo; por eso, querido Benvenuto, antes de dar el toque final, quisiera que, por complacerme, abrieras esta puerta frontal hacia la plaza para ver qué dice el pueblo al respecto".

Resulta evidente que no basta con que una obra destinada al espacio público agrade al gobernante: también debe permitir que el "pueblo", el destinatario, se reconozca en ella, encuentre en ella un eco de sus propias ideas, si ha de ser eficaz. Una gran parte de la carga ficticia de las imágenes del pasado adquiere una nueva perspectiva cuando se las considera como productos de un compromiso entre los intereses del mecenas y del público al que va dirigida.

Cuando, una y otra vez, los consejos municipales elogian su gobierno como un gobierno salomónico, como un buen gobierno ideal; cuando los reyes glorifican sus campañas militares como batallas de San Jorge, San Miguel o Hércules; cuando los príncipes aparecen ora como rocas en la tempestad, ora como el sol, ora como buenos pastores, ora como hábiles timoneles; cuando un potentado es presentado como el nuevo Augusto, Alejandro o César, como David, Júpiter o Santiago, ello no significa que esos gobernantes se hayan sentido realmente así ni que los súbditos los hayan valorado obedientemente en esos términos. El mero hecho de que tales disfraces de los gobernantes se ofrecieran preferentemente en arcos triunfales durante las entradas en las ciudades –es decir, en construcciones erigidas por los propios ciudadanos, en particular por los gremios, con ocasión de la llegada del soberano– debe suscitar la sospecha de que ese aparato ficticio [*Fiktionsapparat*] no era ingenuo, sino de carácter postulativo: se proponía a los príncipes un repertorio de roles ficticios [*fiktiven Rollenspektrum*] en el que se expresaban expectativas y normas de conducta a las que debían ajustarse.

En Friedrich Schiller encontramos la formulación: "La verdad vive en la ilusión [de las artes], y a partir de la copia se restablece el modelo [*Urbild*]". En ese aparato de ficción concebido de manera casi profana, repetido durante siglos, se configura algo así como un sistema de valores políticos o aspiraciones. No es casual que ese catálogo ficticio de valores [*fiktiver Wertekatalog*], con y después de la Revolución francesa, haya pasado a integrarse en las constituciones y en los programas de los partidos, es decir, que se haya vuelto tangible y elegible, perdiendo así su función como objeto propio del arte.

Los nuevos medios de masas visuales, que en las democracias modernas asumen las funciones de la producción artesanal de imágenes, elaboran numerosos motivos, fórmulas y técnicas que ya habían sido desarrollados con éxito por las artes tradicionales. Desde una perspectiva de Ilustración rigurosa, podría lamentarse que la formación de la opinión política siga produciéndose menos mediante argumentos discursivos que a través de escenificaciones visuales o estímulos ópticos, de modo que el sistema actual ha sido calificado como una 'telecracia'. Pero quizá se esté más cerca de las necesidades humanas si se investiga por qué las personas se muestran más receptivas a argumenta-

ciones que se presentan de forma sensible y visible que a proposiciones racionalmente elaboradas.

* * *

El concepto de iconografía política no se deriva de manera directa de la redefinición fundamental de los métodos iconográficos desarrollada por Aby Warburg y su círculo. El propio Warburg, durante la Primera Guerra Mundial, llevó a cabo actividades que convirtieron temporalmente su biblioteca en una especie de archivo de propaganda política contemporánea. Reunió recortes de prensa, materiales propagandísticos y escritos que pretendía integrar en una reorganización completa de la biblioteca. Su ensayo sobre la *Profecía pagana en palabras e imágenes en la época de Lutero*, presentado en 1917 ante la Academia de Ciencias de Heidelberg, puede considerarse en cierto modo un texto fundacional de la iconografía política. No solo porque en él se toma por primera vez en serio, desde la historia del arte, la hoja volante –y con ella la propaganda visual emergente–, sino también porque un problema político actual, la fuerza movilizadora de la agitación, se traduce directamente en un programa de investigación histórica.

Aunque en la fase de institucionalización de la Biblioteca de Ciencias de la Cultura en los años veinte los temas políticos pasaron más bien a segundo plano, permanecieron latentes en su seno. Tras el traslado forzoso de la biblioteca a Londres en 1933, volvieron a cobrar actualidad. Así, Fritz Saxl publicó en 1938 su estudio sobre el Capitolio como símbolo de aspiraciones imperiales, extendiéndolo hasta Benito Mussolini; y al inicio de la guerra editó en 1939, en el *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, un estudio anterior sobre las pinturas de batallas de Aniello Falcone bajo el nuevo título *Pintura de batallas sin héroes*. Edgar Wind, por su parte, reseñó un catálogo de sátiras políticas del British Museum; analizó las formas políticas del "retrato alegórico" y también reseñó, en el *Burlington Magazine*, en 1936, los estudios sobre la Gorgona presentados por el káiser Guillermo II. Al año siguiente, editó *Los comienzos de la historiografía alemana* [*Anfänge deutscher Geschichtsschreibung*], de Friedrich Gundolf.

De este modo, puede considerarse que una elaboración programática de la iconografía política estaba ya preparada no solo en la obra de Warburg, sino también en las líneas de investigación posteriores del Instituto Warburg.

Politische Ikonologie

Martin Warnke

"Bei dem einfachen Volk dringen die Dinge wirksamer über die Augen als über die Ohren ein, denn das Volk verinnerlicht besser das, was es sieht, als das, was es hört". Diese Feststellung hat ein politisch erfahrener Mann, ein Ratgeber, dem englischen König Heinrich VIII. im Jahre 1533 mitgeteilt, als es darum ging, dem Volk den Abfall von der römisch-katholischen Kirche plausibel zu machen. Der König, so empfiehlt der Ratgeber weiter, möge einen großen Umzug veranstalten, auf dem der Papst verspottet werden solle, und auf dem der König mit Bildern die Gründe für sein Vorgehen veranschaulichen solle. Die Auffassung des königlichen Ratgebers, daß die Rede, das diskursive Argument, beim einfachen Volke weniger ausrichtet und weniger Eindruck macht als die visuelle Darbietung; daß Augeneindrücke sich dem Gemütshaushalt stärker einprägen als Wortnachrichten, entsprach einer jahrhundertelangen kirchlichen Erfahrung. Der Bischof von Vitry hatte im 13. Jahrhundert eine alte kirchliche Maxime zusammengefaßt als er sagte: "Den Laien muß man alles sinnlich und anschaulich vor Augen führen". Ob man diese Meinung für richtig hält oder nicht: die meisten politischen Instanzen haben sich daran gehalten.

Giulio Romano hat als Organisator aller visuellen Staatsakte der Gonzaga-Dynastie in Mantua auf diese Wirkkraft der Bilder hinweisen wollen, als er über dem Kamin in seinem Prachthaus eine Szene zeigte, in der eine Volksmenge mit allen Zeichen der Hingabe und Verehrung vor der Statue eines Imperators niederkniet [Abb. 1]. Im Jahre 1719 hat ein Spezialist der Zeremonialwissenschaft, Johann Christian Lünig, erklärt:

> Die meisten Menschen, vornehmlich aber der Pöbel, sind von solcher Beschaffenheit, daß bei ihnen die sinnliche Empfindung mehr als Witz und Verstand vermögen; deshalb werden sie durch solche Dinge, welche die Sinne kitzeln und in die Augen fallen, mehr als durch die bündigsten und deutlichsten Motiven commovieret. Wenn man dem gemeinen Volk hundert und aber hundert mal mit auserlesensten Worten und Gründen vorstellte, daß es seinem Regenten deswegen gehorchen sollte, weil es dem göttlichen Befehl und der gesunden Vernunft gemäß wäre, dieser König sich aber in Kleidung und sonst in allem so schlicht wie ein gemeiner Bürger aufführte, so würde man wenig ausrichten. Allein man stelle demselben gemeinen Volk einen Fürsten vor, der prächtig gekleidet, mit vielen Hofleuten umgeben, von verschiedenen auswärtigen Prinzen und Gesandtenschaften verehrt, und von einer ansehnlichen Garde bedeckt ist, so wird das Volk anfangen, sich über dessen Hoheit zu verwundern, diese Verwunderung aber bringet Hochachtung und Ehrfurcht zuwege, von welchen Untertänigkeit und Gehorsam herkommen.

Mitten im Zeitalter der Aufklärung wird darauf hingewiesen, daß die "sinnliche Empfindung und Einbildung mehr als Witz und Verstand vermögen", daß vornehme Kleidung,

glanzvolle Begleitschaft, eine ansehnliche Garde, prächtige Zeremonien und Feiern, also eine eindrucksvolle visuelle Inszenierung, Verwunderung und Erstaunen wecken, aus denen Ehrfurcht und Gehorsam erwachsen. Wenn ein Herrscher in schlichten Kleidern eines Bürgers daherkäme, könnte er "hundert und aber hundert mal" die vernünftigsten Gründe vortragen, und doch würde er nicht die geringste Chance haben, Aufmerksamkeit und Gehorsam zu finden. "Und aus diesem Grunde", so schließt Lünig, "haben sich die frömmsten Könige unter dem Volk Gottes nicht enthalten, ihren Hofhaltungen durch angeordnete Ceremonien und prächtige Feiern Ansehen zu geben".

Wenn die politischen Machthaber nur halbwegs nach diesen Einsichten auch gehandelt haben, dann hat sich ein Hauptgewicht ihres politischen Wirkens in der Vergangenheit nicht in schriftlichen Akten, nicht in Verträgen, Abkündigungen, Dekreten und Zeytungen, nicht in Büchern, Kompendien, Staatslehren und Pamphleten niedergeschlagen, sondern in Zeremonien, in Schaustellungen, Schaumünzen, Festivitäten, Theatern, Aufzügen, Paraden, Gebäuden, Gärten, Bildern, Denkmälern, Medaillen, Transparenten, Balletten, Wasserspielen und Feuerwerken, also im Gegenstandsfeld der Politischen Ikonographie.

Im Jahre 1742 wurde von Holland aus ein Flugblatt in Umlauf gebracht, das eine wirkliche Szene aus Österreich vermeldete und kommentierte [Abb. 2]. Die Kaiserin Maria Theresia sah bei ihrem Regierungsantritt nach ihren eigenen Worten, "daß der in- und ausländische Kredit erschüttert war, es wenig Einigkeit unter den Ministern gab und die Stimmung im Volk ungezügelt und schwierig war". Der Kurfürst von Bayern hatte zudem ganz Oberösterreich besetzt. In dieser bedrohlichen Lage schrieb die Kaiserin an ihren Feldmarschall Graf Khevenhüller, der die Rückeroberung und Verteidigung in die Wege leitete, einen Brief, den ihr Gemahl, der spätere Kaiser Franz Stephan, dem Feldherren persönlich überbrachte. Dem Brief war ein Bildnis der Kaiserin und ihres Sohnes beigegeben, auf das sie gleich anspielt: "Du hast vor Deinen Augen eine junge Königin, die von der ganzen Welt in Stich gelassen ist: Wie denkst Du über ihr Schicksal? Wie denkst Du über das Schicksal dieses Kindes? Blicke Deiner Fürstin in die Augen…" Das Bild auf dem Flugblatt zeigt, wie der Feldmarschall reagiert. Er tritt mit seinen Offizieren vor das Zelt, den Brief der Kaiserin in der Linken, die Bildnisse in der Rechten, zeigt alles der aus den Zelten strömenden Mannschaft. Der Text auf dem Flugblatt berichtet, wie die Soldaten die Bilder mit Küssen überschüttet, die Schwerter geschwungen, die Kaiserin gepriesen und den Treueeid auf sie erneuert hätten. Offensichtlich traf die Übersendung des Bildnisses das Ritterherz der Militärs: Sie hatten begriffen, daß ihre Herrin in ihrer Not einen letzten Einsatz gewagt hatte, indem sie nicht nur flehentliche Worte, sondern auch ihr leibhaftiges Bildnis übersandt hatte.

In den angeführten Beispielen kommt deutlich zum Ausdruck, daß die politische Bildproduktion der Neuzeit eine Öffentlichkeit hatte, mit der gerechnet werden mußte, ob sie nun pauschal als Volk bezeichnet war, oder ob sie auf Militärs, auf Stände, städtische Honoratioren, Zünfte, hohe Gäste und Gesandte, oder aber auf höfische Klientel, auf höfische

Cliquen, hohe Prälaten oder schreibmächtige Humanisten und Juristen eingegrenzt war. Ein nicht geringer Bildbestand ist von diesen Adressaten herrscherlicher Bildpolitik an die Herrschenden selbst zurückadressiert, etwa wenn bei Festen, Gottesdiensten, Prozessionen, Einzügen, Huldigungen oder Audienzen sich Gelegenheit ergab, der Obrigkeit mithilfe von Bildern Wünsche und Hoffnungen, Forderungen und Meinungen mitzuteilen.

Aus dem Stellenwert, den Bilder im politischen Leben gewinnen konnten, ergeben sich für die ikonographische Forschung besondere Probleme und Aufgaben. In dem üblichen ikonographischen Deutungsverfahren sind die politischen Botschaften künstlerischer Produkte Willensleistungen einer einzigen maßgeblichen Machtquelle. Diese kann ein frommer Stifter, ein wohlhabender Kaufmann, ein machthungriger Condottiere, ein mächtiger König oder ein städtischer Rat sein. Diese Besteller werden als allmächtige Instanzen vorgestellt, die den Künstlern ihre Absichten und Ansichten eingeben und diktieren. Eine politische Ikonographie, welche den Bildern eine aktive Rolle im politischen Raum zutraut, berücksichtigt jedoch, daß auch bei Bildern ein Sender, der einem Empfänger etwas mitteilen will, die sprachlichen Fähigkeiten und Möglichkeiten, die mentalen Dispositionen, die Bedürfnisse und Erwartungen, Normen und Wertvorstellungen dieser Empfänger kennen und aufnehmen muß, wenn seine Botschaft die Chance einer Wirkung haben soll. Diese einfachste Voraussetzung zwischenmenschlicher Mitteilung bedeutet für die herrschaftliche Bildproduktion, daß diese von "oben", vom Besteller zwar veranlaßt, deshalb aber von diesem noch nicht besetzt und determiniert sein muß; daß in dem nach "unten" gerichteten Bild auch die Wünsche, Erwartungen, Bedürfnisse von "unten" enthalten sein müssen; daß diese zumindest einen Anteil an der Bildwirklichkeit haben müssen, und sei es nur, daß sie über den formenden Künstler Eingang in die Bilder gefunden haben.

Darauf spielt der Brief, den ein Beamter im Jahre 1577 an den Herzog von Nevers gerichtet hat, in einer merkwürdigen Wendung an: “Es gibt nichts, was die Herzen der einfachen Menschen mehr berührt als die Bildnisse ihrer Fürsten und Herren,… sie lassen sie von Hand zu Hand gehen an ihre Nachfahren… sie ehren sie und segnen sie, es sei denn die Bildnisse sind gar nicht ähnlich oder sie sind von einer schlechten Hand gemacht, dann wenden sie sich ab und verachten sie”. Hier wird die Zuwendung an die Porträts der Oberen abhängig gemacht von Qualitäten, die allein in der Hand eines Künstlers liegen; Ehrerbietung wird nur unter bestimmten Bedingungen geleistet.

Deshalb muß das Forschungsziel einer Politischen Ikonographie nicht notwendig in einen Katalog bloßer herrscherlicher Selbstinszenierungen und Machtphantasien münden, wie es in den bisherigen Analysen obrigkeitlicher Bildpolitik zumeist der Fall ist. Als Cellini an seiner Perseusfigur arbeitete, die heute noch die Piazza della Signoria in Florenz schmückt, besuchte ihn der Großherzog Cosimo de’Medici, um das Werk zu besichtigen. Nach Cellinis eigenen Angaben in seiner Autobiographie sagte der Fürst, dem ansonsten keine große Rücksicht auf die Untertanen nachgesagt wird, bei dieser Gelegenheit: “Ob

uns gleich dieses Werk sehr schön vorkommt, so muß es doch auch dem Volke gefallen; deswegen, mein Benvenuto, ehe du die letzte Hand anlegst, wünschte ich, daß du mir zuliebe diese vordere Tür nach meinem Platz hin öffnetest, um zu sehen, was das Volk dazu sagt".

Offensichtlich genügt es also nicht, daß ein zur Aufstellung auf dem Platz bestimmtes Werk dem Herrscher allein gefalle; es muß darin auch das 'Volk', der Angesprochene sich wiedererkennen, darin einen Anklang eigener Vorstellungen finden, wenn es wirksam werden soll. Ein großer Teil fiktiver Aufladung vergangener Bilder rückt in eine neue Perspektive, wenn man sie als Ausgleichserzeugnisse zwischen den Wirkungs- und Lebensinteressen von Auftraggeber und den Adressaten angesiedelt sieht. Wenn immer wieder Ratsherren ihr Regiment als ein salomonisches, als ein ideales Gutes Regiment preisen; wenn Könige ihre Kriegszüge als Georgs-, Michaels- oder Herkuleskämpfe verklären; wenn Fürsten heute als Felsen im Sturm, morgen als Sonne, sodann als gute Hirten, als seetüchtige Steuermänner; wenn ein Potentat als neuer Augustus, Alexander oder Caesar, als David, Jupiter oder Jacobus vorgestellt wird, dann heißt das nicht, die betreffenden Herrscher hätten sich entsprechend gefühlt und die Untertanen hätten sie gehorsamst entsprechend eingeschätzt. Allein die Tatsache, daß solche Verkleidungen der Herrscher mit Vorliebe auf Triumphbögen bei Einzügen in Städte angeboten wurden, daß also diese Bögen oft von den Bürgern, vor allem den Zünften bei der Ankunft des Herrschers errichtet wurden, muß den Verdacht nähren, daß vielleicht jener Fiktionsapparat nicht naiv, sondern postulativ vorgetragen wurde: die Fürstlichkeiten sollten sich gemäß jenem fiktiven Rollenspektrum, in dem sich ja Erwartungen und Handlungsnormen ausdrückten, verhalten.

Bei Friedrich Schiller heißt es: "Die Wahrheit lebt in der Täuschung [der Künste] fort, und aus dem Nachbilde wird das Urbild wiederhergestellt werden". In dem profanen, ganz innerweltlich konzipierten Fiktionsapparat, der über Jahrhunderte immer wieder vorgetragen wurde, stellt sich so etwas wie ein politischer Werte- oder Wunschraum her. Man kann es so sehen, daß dieser fiktive Wertekatalog mit und nach der französischen Revolution in die Verfassungen und in die Programme der Parteien einging, also greifbar oder wählbar gemacht worden ist. Damit war er als Gegenstand der Kunst hinfällig geworden.

Die neuen visuellen Massenmedien, welche die Aufgaben der handwerklichen Bildproduktion in den modernen Demokratien übernehmen, arbeiten mit zahlreichen Motiven, Rezepten und Techniken, mit denen schon die alten Künste erfolgreich gewesen waren. Im Sinne einer rigorosen Aufklärung mag man bedauern, daß die politische Meinungsbildung noch immer weniger mithilfe diskursiver Argumente als mithilfe visueller Inszenierungen oder optischer Reizwerte ausgebildet wird, so daß von dem gegenwärtigen System als einer 'Telekratie' gesprochen wurde. Vielleicht aber ist man den Bedürfnissen der Menschen näher, wenn man untersucht, warum sie sich sinnlich vor Augen führenden Argumentationen zugänglicher zeigen als rational ausgeklügelten Sätzen.

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Der Begriff einer politischen Ikonographie ergibt sich nicht unmittelbar aus der grundlegenden Neubestimmung ikonographischer Methoden, wie sie Aby Warburg und sein Kreis entwickelt haben.Warburg selbst hatte während des Ersten Weltkrieges Aktivitäten entfaltet, die seine Bibliothek auf Zeit zu einer Art Archiv aktueller politischer Propaganda gemacht haben. Er sammelte Zeitungsausschnitte, Propagandamaterial und -schriften, die er einer zur Gänze umgeordneten Bibliothek eingliedern wollte. Sein Aufsatz über H*eidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten*, den er schon 1917 der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften vorgetragen hatte, ist in gewisser Weise eine Gründungsschrift politischer Ikonographie, nicht nur, weil hier erstmals die Flugschrift, und damit die gerade auswuchernde Bildpropaganda kunsthistorisch ernst genommen wurde, sondern auch, weil sich in diesem Aufsatz ein aktuelles politisches Problem: die mobilisierende Wirkkraft der Agitation, unmittelbar in ein historisches Forschungsprogramm umgesetzt hatte.

Wenn auch in der Phase des institutionellen Ausbaus der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek in den 20er Jahren politische Themen eher in den Hintergrund traten, so blieben sie doch dort eingelagert. Sie sind dann nach der erzwungenen Übersiedlung der Bibliothek nach London im Jahre 1933 wieder akut geworden. Fritz Saxl veröffentlicht 1938 seine Studie über das Kapitol als Symbol imperialer Ansprüche bis hin zu Mussolini, und gleich zu Beginn des Krieges publiziert er im dritten Band des "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes" 1939 eine ältere Studie von 1932 über die Schlachtenbilder Aniello Falcones jetzt unter dem neuen Titel einer *Schlachtenmalerei ohne Helden*. Edgar Wind rezensiert nun einen Katalog der Politischen Satiren im British Museum, analysiert die politischen Formen des allegorischen Porträts, rezensiert auch im "Burlington Magazine" 1936 die *Studien zur Gorgo,* die Kaiser Wilhelm II. vorgelegt hatte, und ediert im Jahr darauf Friedrich Gundolfs *Anfänge deutscher Geschichtsschreibung*.

So kann man eine programmatische Entfaltung der politischen Ikonographie heute nicht nur in Warburg selbst, sondern auch in den späteren Forschungsinteressen des Warburg Institute vorbereitet sehen.

Abstract

This article presents, for the first time in digital edition and English, Italian and Spanish translation, Martin Warnke's essay on Political iconology. Originally published in the volume *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst. Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie*, edited by Andreas Beyer, the text was later republished as the introduction to the *Bildindex zur politischen Ikonographie.* Through examples ranging from early modern political ritual to modern mass media, Warnke reflects on the operative power of images within the public sphere and on the historical relationship between visual representation, political authority, and collective perception.

keywords | Political Iconology; Bildwissenschaft; Public Images; German Art History.

Notes on the Concept of Schlagbild

From Aby Warburg to Martin Warnke

Margherita Picciché

A Genealogy

Horst Bredekamp has observed, with deliberate provocation, that art historical studies might be reduced to nothing more than variants of political iconography (Bredekamp 2022, 26). Polemically overstated as this claim may be, it contains a kernel of truth that is difficult to evade: the image is never a neutral object, being necessarily defined by social, economic, and above all political connotations that manifest themselves in its production, its reception, and in the uses to which later generations put it.

Political iconography is grounded in the status of the image. In its broadest sense, it encompasses all visual forms that, directly or indirectly, give shape to political content: from design to painting, from sculpture to architecture, through to the mass media (Bredekamp 2022, 26). Its concern is with the qualitative dimension of how objects are presented – whether explicitly or latently – and with the manipulation and control of perception and action. It is in this sense that Martin Warnke spoke of *sichtbare Politik* (Warnke 1994, 170) – politics made visible: in every era, ruling classes have attributed such high value to the efficacy of images as to invest enormous resources in the visual construction of power. The principle holds in reverse as well: political dynamics from below have equally relied on the strategic deployment of images, above all through idealised representations of rulers and situations that paradoxically proved a symbolic trap for those who commissioned them. A ruler must conform to his own glorified image; the voices of artists are in turn constrained, held within the interpretive frame they themselves helped to construct, thus sustaining the enduring entanglement of representation and power.

This tradition of scholarship has its natural home in Germany, both for its analyses of the historical phenomenon of the image and for its methodological elaborations. The field draws on scholars working across different approaches to art history and image theory – among them Martin Warnke, Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, Otto Karl Werckmeister, and David Craven – who converge, albeit from distinct vantage points, on the question of what political iconography as a discipline might mean and do. In 1970, Cologne hosted the Twelfth International Congress of Art History at a moment of extraordinary political complexity, when across Europe sustained attempts were being made to transform the historical, economic, political, and social order. The art historical world was no exception: it was fighting its own battle against the persistence of academic elites formed

under the National Socialist dictatorship within the newly constituted democracy (Werckmeister 2006, 213). In this context, a particular form of Marxist intellectual presence was embodied in the GDR, just as the Soviet Union had underpinned the founding of the Federal Republic through the Western Alliance – all of it a consequence of the Second World War's settlement. The GDR era was characterised by its claim to represent a "people's democracy," defining itself as a primary socialist state. Any cultural opposition from the Left within the Federal Republic that sought to radicalise democracy was therefore compelled to distance itself sharply from the official Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the GDR. In this climate of political antagonism, young West German scholars interested in a Marxist art history turned instead to the *Schriften zur Kunst* of Marx and Engels (Marx, Engels [1844-1895] 1973), texts that predated and stood apart from the canonical orthodoxies of communist doctrine. As the Marxist art historian Otto Werckmeister underscores, the aim of these young scholars was not so much the political empowerment of the working class, or even the formation of a socialist state, as it was a potentially revolutionary cultural critique of capitalist society (Werckmeister 2006, 213). To compensate for the absence of genuinely usable references, West German Marxist art historians turned to the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt—whose work is gathered under the well-known designation of the Frankfurt School, a current of neo-Marxist sociological and philosophical thought built in large part around figures such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. This research centre, located at the heart of the Federal Republic, had become a dominant influence on public and academic culture, standing in sharp contrast to the prevailing conservative politics that surrounded it. In this climate, the adjective "critical," applied now even to art history, became a marker of firm opposition, aligned against the conventional and bourgeois understanding of the discipline. This designation, which carried a philosophical and political charge, derived directly from the Frankfurt School's critique of society and ideology, and found its programme in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Critical Theory* (Adorno, Horkheimer [1947] 2002).

From these premises, a younger generation of art historians mounted an insurgency against the canons of their discipline, making their demands loudly heard against the entire senior faculty (Diers 1997, 63). Scholars of art history associated with the neo-Marxist movement were active within the Ulmer Verein (the Ulm Association), a dissident offshoot of the German Association of Art Historians, the profession's representative body. Founded in 1968 to articulate the critical intellectual interests of the moment, the UV became the most important West German platform for neo-Marxist art history. It was precisely the UV's members who, at the 1970 Cologne congress, took matters into their own hands: they organised a provocatory session entitled *The Work of Art between Science and World View* (*Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung*, Warnke 1970), chaired by Martin Warnke, which offered a careful and polemical accounting of the persistence of the Nazi past within the discipline (Werckmeister 2006, 214).

The session challenged the discipline's dominant assumptions head-on, levelling sharp criticism at both the interpretive frameworks and the methodological tools that art historical research had inherited – and at the ideological content embedded within them. As Diers notes, the spectre haunting the discussions of those days was unmistakably Walter Benjamin, whose legacy was returning to prominence precisely in those years through the work of the Frankfurt School scholars. Questions of the reproducibility of the work of art and other then-novel theoretical concerns occupied the full attention of the audience, drawing the tensions of the moment into sharp focus (Diers 1997, 64). In the same year, the congress proceedings were published under the same title— – *The Work of Art between Science and World View*—and the volume came, in time, to function as something of a foundational text for proponents of a radical art history.

The state of Warburg's reception at that moment can be summarised precisely: his name appeared only in a footnote. And yet, from the crucible of ideas and conflicts that was the Cologne Congress, two figures emerged who would prove among the most consequential both for the future of Warburg studies and for political iconography: Martin Warnke, appointed professor at the University of Marburg in 1970, and one of his younger students, Horst Bredekamp. Werckmeister dwells on the militant tenor that characterised the early work of both Warnke and Bredekamp, attuned as it was to the initial impulse toward sharp rupture with tradition that animated art historians of that generation. Warnke's *Bau und Überbau* (*Structure and Superstructure*, Warnke [1976] 1979) and Bredekamp's *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte* (*Art as a Medium of Social Conflicts*, Bredekamp 1975) are identified by Werckmeister as two of the most significant works of Marxist art history published in that decade. Both offer sustained analyses of medieval art as a vehicle for class relations. In *Bau und Überbau*, Warnke begins from a sociological analysis of the written source corpus on medieval buildings. He establishes that cooperation between distinct segments of medieval society was a necessary condition for raising ecclesiastical architecture to supra-regional standards of achievement – standards that lay beyond the reach of any single patron. He demonstrates how kings and bishops, monks and burghers, nobles and commoners were compelled to resolve their social antagonisms and pool their rights and resources in the service of an architecture designed to transfigure the coherence of Christian communities across and beyond class divisions. In *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte*, by contrast, Bredekamp addresses the prolonged and frequently lethal controversies over the legitimacy of religious images, from the earliest centuries of Christianity through the various forms of iconoclasm. Behind these disputes he identifies class struggles between secular rulers and ecclesiastical institutions for political control and economic exploitation of their respective subject populations. He shows how both parties deployed images of Christ and the saints as instruments of power in their contest for the religious allegiance of a population susceptible to the fascination exerted by images. More radical in his positions than Warnke, Bredekamp thereby

reasserts, in Werckmeister's reading, Marx's foundational critique of religion as an instrument of power in the hands of the ruling class.

Where Werckmeister writes with admiration of these experiments in radical and critical art history, David Craven dismisses the scholarship of those years with considerable severity (Craven 2008, 303). In a 2014 article entitled *The New German Art History: From Ideological Critique and the Warburg Renaissance to the Bildwissenschaft of the Three Bs* – which sought, building on Diers's 1995 study (Diers 1995, 59-63), to take fresh stock of the state of visual studies in Germany – Craven turns to the text *Die Villa als Herrschaftsarchitektur*. Published also in 1970, by two former students of Theodor W. Adorno, the essay offered an "implacably" critical reading of the Palladian villa, construing it as a negative utopia. This reading provoked strong controversy on account of its "non-dialectical iconoclasm", which cast the Palladian villa as historically regressive (Craven 2014, 132). Craven dismisses the study as a "bold youthful exercise in iconoclasm", conceding only a "populist critique" of the villa that, in his view, bore no relation to sophisticated Marxist analysis—which he understands, by contrast, as a mode of productive tension, one that would construe the villa as simultaneously progressive and regressive, an advance and a retreat at once, so as to make visible unresolved historical contradictions.

The approach taken in *Die Villa als Herrschaftsarchitektur* is minimised by Craven as a methodological dead end, as are the early experiments of Warnke and Bredekamp more broadly. It is precisely in the subsequent evolution of their work, however, that Craven locates the arrival of a less combative "post-iconoclast critical scholarship", one that moderated the initial ideological-critical approach (Craven 2014, 134). Craven argues that these and other young art historians recalibrated their challenge to the discipline's received assumptions through a more sophisticated critical reassessment of the major German-language art historians of the first half of the twentieth century, reading them more carefully through Walter Benjamin and the categories of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt scholars thus served as a mediating bridge between the first, more combative and radical phase of Marxist art history and a second phase which, while remaining critical, began slowly to shift its centre of gravity. It is at this juncture that Craven locates the beginnings of what he calls "Iconographical critique", in which what changed was the emphasis placed on the specific historical contextualisation of works of art, now framed within a "social history of art" (Craven 2014, 139).

Werckmeister too observes this shift, though he attributes it to historical circumstances rather than to intellectual influences alone. Between 1978 and 1982, Marxist scholars across European and American democracies found that their anti-capitalist positions were increasingly at odds with the democratic majorities that had returned new conservative governments to power. In this renewed political climate, the project of Marxist revisionism – including in art history – lost much of its ideological resonance in the public

sphere, as it could no longer make a compelling case for democratic support. Critical art history was, in effect, supplanted by social art history. It was at the turn of the 1980s, in this second phase of iconographical critique and social art history, that scholars who had once positioned themselves within the Marxist tradition began to reread their predecessors, recovering figures such as Aby Warburg. Whereas a few years earlier they had scarcely engaged with him at all – relegating him to a single footnote in an entire volume on the politics of the image – they now returned to his work through an anthropological lens and in the spirit of disciplinary renewal (Craven 2014, 139-140).

The shift from a radical, Marxist art history towards a social art history—somewhat more measured as a consequence of the historical upheavals that had brought different models of society into being – carries genuine explanatory force. It would be the 1990s that definitively consecrated Warburg as a pivotal figure in German art history, with an international congress held in his honour in Hamburg in 1990. From that point on, both Warnke and Bredekamp continued to invoke the Warburgian tradition, making it a touchstone for the institutional projects they subsequently pursued in Hamburg and Berlin: Warnke's for the Warburg-Haus, centred on *Politische Ikonographie*, and Bredekamp's for the Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik (HZK).

In 1990, Warnke was awarded the Leibniz Prize, which enabled him to establish a dedicated research group in political iconography – the Forschungsstelle Politische Ikonographie at the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg – in a conscious effort to restore, also in physical terms, the sites of Warburgian scholarship. These were the years in which he devoted himself to elaborating the concept and, from 1996 onwards, to compiling a visual index of political iconography that encompassed all forms of political imprint – from gesture to electoral posters, from postcards to royal portraits – and which came to acquire a certain prominence (Bredekamp 2022, 31-34). Six overlapping and relatively brief texts are the fruit of this period of study. In 1992, an article entitled *Wie die Obrigkeit mit Bildern Politik machte* appeared in the Hamburg university periodical uni hh. Forschung, a journal with limited distribution (Warnke 1992a). Around the same time, a new formulation of the definition of political iconography appeared in the essay collection edited by Andreas Beyer, *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst. Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie* (Warnke 1992b) – the only contribution on the subject addressed to a broader readership. The same material appears in the introduction to the *Bildindex zur politischen Ikonographie*, issued in a limited print run in 1993 (Warnke 1993). The particular attention the Bildindex received in sociology and political science was further sustained by two related publications from the same period: *Visualisierungen der Macht im 16. Jahrhundert*, which appeared in an essay collection on the representation of the state (Warnke 1991); and, also from 1992, *Politische Landschaft* (Warnke 1992c), whose brief epilogue can be situated within the series of definitions of *Politische Ikonologie*. Following Bredekamp's analysis, a later essay from 1994, contained in a volume on contemporary politics and likewise aimed at contextualising the research fields of political iconography, also belongs to this series (Warnke

1994). After the publication of these six texts – born of the enthusiasm surrounding the recovery of the Warburg-Haus, the elaboration of the *Bildindex*, and the establishment of a research group on *Politische Ikonographie*—a cycle came to an end of sorts. Only after a pause of nearly a decade did a further article by Warnke appear, in 2003, in the art history journal "Kunsthistorische Arbeitsblätter", concerned primarily with mapping the fields of *Politische Ikonologie* (Warnke 2003). Finally, the *Handbuch der Politischen Ikonographie* (Warnke, Fleckner, Ziegler 2011), edited together with Uwe Fleckner and Hendrik Ziegler, marked a significant milestone in 2011 – the only handbook on the subject currently available.

Schlagbild

The declared aim of political iconography is to examine the strategies of images, as stated in the introduction to the *Handbuch der Politischen Ikonographie* (Warnke, Fleckner, Ziegler 2011). This entails sustained attention to the contents of images, their functions, their circulation, and their capacity to act upon the social body. It is precisely within this horizon that Warburg's concept of *Schlagbild* belongs – one of the most generative and, at the same time, most neglected theoretical contributions in his entire body of thought.

The term *Schlagbild* ("pictorial slogans" as translated in English) – which Warburg used to designate the concept of the public image (*öffentliches Bild*) (Diers 1997, 12) – appears for the first time in the 1920 text *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther* (Warburg [1920] 1999, 622), a study that proved foundational for the subsequent fortunes of political iconography. One can say that it was on this occasion that Warburg found himself, for the first time, directly confronting the concept of the public image – a theme he would continue to develop across other works and which would constitute the incandescent core of the research in political iconography that followed, including and especially its most radical expressions: the concept was subsequently taken up and systematised by scholars such as Martin Warnke, Horst Bredekamp, and Friedrich Schwartz (Diers 1997, 30).

As is often the case in studying Warburg's work, one must pay closer attention to the second meaning than to the more immediately apparent one. Warburg presented the results of his historical research under the heading of "Luther" and delivered it at both public and private conferences; yet it was impossible not to discern, reading between the lines, an implicit appeal to contemporary events. The figure of Luther plays a role in this context that reaches well beyond the academic: Luther's hold on the imagination was not Warburg's alone, but resonated so powerfully that the German reformer had been elevated to a historical icon of the German nation in the period immediately preceding the First World War.

In the Lutherian laboratory, Warburg carried out a first formalisation of the experience of war, retrospectively identifying a peculiar mechanism that the conflict had brought back

to the surface: the transformation of symbolic materials into instruments of political and religious orientation. An essay dedicated to the reformer was presented on 25 April 1919 at the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and, shortly afterwards, published in 1920 as *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten* (Warburg [1920] 1999). An earlier version had already been delivered in September 1917, at an informal gathering at the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW) and subsequently presented to the public of the "Verein für Hamburgische Geschichte" in November of the same year – in the highly politicised context of celebrations marking the four hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, during the most catastrophic years of the First World War. The occasion presented an opportunity, against a backdrop of hunger and widespread disillusionment on the front and on the home front alike, to stage a bellicose celebration capable of rallying spirits, grounded in the hegemonic narrative that connected Luther to Bismarck as an interpretive key to the birth of modern Germany – the very narrative that wartime theology sought to legitimate (Newman 2009, 144).

For the first time, Warburg not only engaged with the non-obvious political implications of Renaissance imagery but turned his attention to the direct political use of images, seeking to understand genealogically the symbolic mechanisms active in the present (Rampley 2010, 321). Examining the pamphlets and broadsheets of the Reformation period, the Hamburg scholar explored the astrological, religious, and political world of images and ideas, and more broadly the intellectually and politically tendentious literature of the early modern period. The long 1920 essay thus concentrated on the use of woodcuts, and in particular of astrological images, during the Reformation, studying the mobilisation of the visual element by the Catholic Church and the followers of Luther for propagandistic purposes. Warburg's interest in these materials was undoubtedly shaped by the urgencies of his own present, and analogies with the media of his age surface repeatedly in his language: popular prints are described as a new "medium of propaganda for reaching the less educated", artists and writers as engaged in a "press campaign" conducted through images (*Bilderpressefeldzug*), with the bearing of "astro-political journalists" (*astropolitische Journalisten*) (Warburg [1920] 1999, 618, 622, 601). Word and image together allow us to observe the unfolding of a present steeped in a sacredness rooted in the symbolic structures of the early modern period.

To grasp the full import of Warburg's concept of *Schlagbild*, it is necessary to place it alongside its verbal counterpart, the *Schlagwort*. As Michael Diers writes, the Schlagwort is an expression endowed simultaneously with "pregnant form" (*prägnante Form*) and "heightened emotional value" (*gesteigerter Gefühlswert*): a slogan, configured as a formula capable of condensing an era or a tendency into a single charged term – at times polemical – that circulates on everyone's lips and takes a position, explicit or implied, for or against a cause or an institution (Diers 1997, 7-8). Diers further suggests, convincingly, that the combativeness resonating as an association in both concepts derives from their historical context: from the use of cutting and thrusting weapons – a register with-

in which *Schlagwort* has carried its meaning in synonymous use with *Stichwort* since the eighteenth century. It is also possible that Warburg's coinage *Schlagbild* contains a reference to the expression *Schlagzeile* – the striking front-page headline: a hypothesis that, if substantiated, would draw the concept even more tightly into the orbit of a political iconography understood as a systematic study of the word-images or slogan-images of power (Diers 1997, 7-8). To the *Schlagbild*, Warburg attributes a function analogous to that of the *Schlagwort*, but transposed to the visual plane. It is a representation that is ubiquitous and entirely oriented toward effect—whether a satirical or an advertising image – that acts upon the viewer with the same violent immediacy as a slogan. Its defining characteristic lies in its capacity to penetrate collective consciousness rapidly, to convey a political position through the immediate force of visible form.

It was precisely from the concept of *Schlagbild* that Martin Warnke drove the renewal of interest in Warburg's work from 1991 onwards. The political implications of the Warburgian term returned to the centre of discussion within the Forschungsstelle Politische Ikonographie at the Institute of Art History of the University of Hamburg. Initially conceived as an archive of visual documentation – today grown to half a million reproductions – in which the Institute's slide collection was partly reorganised according to social, cultural, and political themes, the project gave impetus to the publication of numerous texts on political iconography (Rampley 2012, 119-120).

Warnke addresses the theme of the *Schlagbild* in the essay *Schlagbilder und Bilderfahrzeuge*, contained in the volume *Die Menschenrechte des Auges: Über Aby Warburg* of 1980 (Warnke 1980, 75ff.), where he reconstructs the centrality of the political image in Warburg's thought. Here Warnke emphasises, on the one hand, that the biographical dimension must not be overlooked in studying the intensity of Warburg's political engagement and, on the other, that the heart of Warburgian research was, with something close to obsession, the problem of media – hence the interest in tapestries and stamps as image-carriers (*Bilderfahrzeuge*).

Politische Ikonographie

Another emblematic site of Warnke's reflection on the *Schlagbild*, in its primary sense of public image (*öffentliches Bild*) (Diers 1997, 12), is the essay *Politische Ikonographie*, published in Italian, English and Spanish translation in this issue. As Bredekamp notes, this contribution – which turns on an episode from the mid-eighteenth century – is among the texts most frequently cited by Warnke, and constitutes a practical illustration of the concept of the public sphere in relation to the circulation of political images, demonstrating with considerable effectiveness their role as mediators between the private and the public (Bredekamp 2022, 34).

The episode concerns the dissemination, in the Holland of 1742, of a broadsheet that reproduced and commented upon a scene that had actually taken place in Austria. At the time, the Empress Maria Theresa found herself in a precarious position: loyalty to her

was wavering, the realm divided between internal conflicts and external threats, and the Elector of Bavaria had occupied Upper Austria. To strengthen the allegiance of her soldiers, the Empress sent a letter to Field Marshal Khevenhüller, her military commander, accompanying it with a portrait of herself and her son. In the letter, she wrote with evident feeling: "Before you are a young queen abandoned by the whole world: how do you consider her fate? How do you consider the fate of this child? Look into the eyes of your princess…". The Dutch broadsheet depicted the effect of this gesture and, in particular, the Field Marshal's response: Khevenhüller, having read the letter in his tent, goes outside, recalls his soldiers and officers, gathers them around him, and shows them the Empress's letter in one hand and the portrait in the other. Through its accompanying text, the broadsheet further relates how the soldiers covered the portrait with kisses, drew their swords, praised the Empress, and renewed their oath of loyalty to her—for, manifestly, the sending of the portrait had struck the soldiers with great force, recalling them to their duty. The simple act of dispatching an image had thus produced an extraordinary emotional and political impact, transforming a private appeal into a public act of mobilisation and the legitimation of power.

The Italian comparatist Lea Ritter Santini, in her course on Political Iconology held in 1999 at the Fondazione San Carlo in Modena, develops sustained references to the Politische Ikonographie of Warnke and the Hamburg group—contained in contributions published (to this day) almost exclusively in German. In her lectures, Ritter Santini evokes the Khevenhüller anecdote, underlining the decisive importance of the count's stepping out of his tent to share the image with his soldiers rather than contemplating it in private. It is in this movement that the passage from the private to the public sphere is accomplished: an image deployed for political ends neither remains confined to its origins nor exhausts itself in the context of its production; on the contrary, it erupts into collective space, acquiring social resonance and taking on the full character of the *öffentliches Bild* (Diers 1997, 28).

As emerges from Matthew Rampley's examination of German Bildwissenschaft (Rampley 2012, 119-134), it is within this lineage that the art historian Michael Diers published, in 1997, a small volume of essays entitled *Schlagbilder. Zur politischen Ikonographie der Gegenwart* (Diers 1997). Working self-consciously with images drawn from different media – news photographs, stamps, paintings, caricatures, posters – Diers set out to examine the role of the contemporary image in the formation and dissemination of political discourse. The decision to traverse media boundaries reflects the conviction that the *Schlagbild* belongs to no specific support, but is defined rather by its function – the capacity to strike and to orient, mobilising the will of the viewer – irrespective of the channel through which it circulates. Diers's primary concern was to illuminate the analogies between images and slogans as metonymic representations of political ideas and events, with particular attention to their high emotional charge.

In the preface to the volume, the author reconstructs the theoretical genealogy of the concept, recovering the analogy between *Schlagbild* as the visual equivalent of the *Schlagwort*: a ubiquitous representation, "entirely oriented toward effect, incisive" (Diers 1997, 7), whatever the category of public image it may inhabit. Its historical reach is illuminated through Frances Yates's reference to the *Ad Herennium* – the anonymous first-century BC rhetorical manual in which the so-called imagines agentes make their appearance: active images, charged with mnemonic force, constructed to strike and to lodge themselves in the memory. In these, Diers identifies a prefiguration of the modern *Schlagbilder* (Diers 1997, 8). What changes across the centuries is, of course, the medium of transmission: from woodcut to photograph, from poster to video screen, each era has given the same function new expression through its own instruments of reproduction and dissemination. This intertwining of functional invariance and material transformation is precisely what makes the *Schlagbild* a historically productive concept. Like Warburg—who accused his colleagues of suffering from the bias of "border-police mentality" (*grenzpolizeiliche Befangenheit*) (Warburg [1912] 1922, 191) – Diers insists on a redefinition of art history's field of competence: public images belong "strictly to the domain of reference and competence of an art history conceived as a history of images" (Diers 1997, 11), that is, of a discipline that refuses to confine itself to a specialisation concerned only with "high art". Public images that "form and propagate political images of representation and appearance in the public sphere" (Diers 1997, 12) are characterised by wide dissemination and are effectively predisposed for immediate consumption: their analysis cannot dispense with consideration of the medium that carries them—today more digital than ever.

The history of the concept of *Schlagbild* makes visible how political iconography, in its most radical formulation, was born of the urgent need to equip art history with tools capable of measuring the political efficacy of images and their capacity to act upon the public sphere (Schwartz 2019). From the social history of art to the present, for all the transformation of historical and social conditions, it is precisely this urgency that keeps the contribution of Warburg – and ultimately of Warnke and the German school – alive. It is for these reasons that one must underscore how the question of the public sphere, which runs through the entire reflection on political iconography, today presents itself in a radically altered configuration. No longer reducible to the twentieth-century model of a shared and visible space, it manifests today as a sphere that expands, multiplies, and becomes ubiquitous while simultaneously and not paradoxically – growing more intimate, penetrating screens and individual representations with the same logic by which it once occupied public squares. Fragmented into algorithmic bubbles, personalised down to the individual level, it nevertheless retains intact its function as the field in which political images produce real effects upon bodies and upon consciousnesses. Even in this extreme configuration, the *Schlagbild* and the practice of political iconography do not lose their analytical pertinence: on the contrary, in the age of technofascism (Coeckelbergh 2026),

the critical act of understanding the logic of the construction and circulation of political images—directed at those who produce and disseminate those visual formulas—proves all the more essential. It is in this sense, then, that the image science inaugurated by Warburg and developed by the Hamburg school continues to address us.

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Abstract

This note reconstructs the genealogy of political iconography in twentieth-century German art history, focusing on the theoretical and methodological legacy of Aby Warburg, Martin Warnke, and the Hamburg school. Beginning with the neo-Marxist debates that reshaped West German art history after 1968, the essay traces the emergence of political iconography as a critical discipline concerned with the public and operative dimension of images. Particular attention is devoted to Warburg's concept of *Schlagbild*, understood as a politically charged public image capable of acting upon collective consciousness through emotional and symbolic immediacy. Through the writings of Warnke, Bredekamp, and Michael Diers, the article examines the transformation of Warburgian image theory into a broader reflection on media, propaganda, and the visual construction of power.

keywords | Political Iconology; Martin Warnke; Horst Bredekamp; Michael Diers; Aby Warburg; *Schlagbilder*.

Myths and (Un)truths

Not True, but Right

Falsity and Inaccuracy as Political Visual Strategy

Emanuele Arielli



1 | AI-generated image of Donald Trump amid supporters during the 2024 campaign.

Introduction

In recent years, public discourse has filled with labels such as *fake news*, *post-truth*, and *alternative facts*. These terms signal not only the circulation of false content, but a deeper transformation in the epistemic ecology of political communication. Within this framework, many communicative practices aim less to establish what is true than to render the very criteria of verification ineffective, irrelevant, or suspect (Keyes 2004; McIntyre 2018). Moreover, the political competition shifts communication from the terrain of evidence to that of belonging, where the validity of a claim depends on its identity-based and affective function. These are controversies about images as well: pictures are digitally enhanced or modified, misattributed, or outright artificially generated.

In this setting we are witnessing an epistemic corrosion: a growing difficulty in maintaining an ordered public discourse in which the circulation of information is regulated by

shared criteria of empirical validity and by stable relations of trust with sources. The problem is not only that clearly false items circulate. It is that we increasingly live in borderline conditions in which the same sign, text, or image can be pragmatically used in more than one way, and its status is left intentionally, or tacitly, undecided. The same content can oscillate between truth-apt reporting and fiction; between seriousness and parody; between mere "illustration" and evidential demonstration. In parallel, trust in sources is eroded in two complementary ways: by openly contesting the authority of institutions built around verification (journalism, courts, historical scholarship, science), and by blurring the distinction between accountable sources and ideologically driven outlets. Digital circulation and the rapid development of generative AI add a further pressure: they make the origin and causal production of images harder to assess (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017; Chesney, Citron 2019a).

A striking symptom of this condition that builds the premise of this paper is the ambivalent fact that images that are clearly misattributed, manipulated or explicitly recognized as artificial can still be processed as evidence-like by part of their recipient base. One way to explain this is to look at the recipient side of image reception and interpretation. In fact, in politically polarized contexts, images insert themselves into an epistemic environment that can be described as *tribalized*: a setting in which informational items are primarily evaluated as tokens of affiliation and instruments of orientation. Within such an environment, images tend to be, on one side, rapidly *typified* as instances of familiar narratives ("This is what they are like", "This is what is happening") or transformed to iconic imagery: for example, Donald Trump raising his fist after the assassination attempt in 2024 did not remain a singular record of a specific moment. It was rapidly iconized, becoming a visual type for a broader narrative, like defiance, resilience, "leadership under attack", national redemption, etc. On the other side, generic or even non-pertinent images become fungible as quasi-evidence: the same image of a road full of walking immigrants illustrates but also visually demonstrates every instance of a refugee crisis. What matters is less the image's strict probative link to a specific event than its capacity to function as an index-like support for a position. The observer here does not need to believe that the depicted scene is literally true; it is often sufficient that they *accept* it as a premise within a narrative, and that they are *committed* to publicly affirm it as a valid piece of information. The difference between believing, accepting, and being committed to some "truth" will shortly be clarified in the context of this paper.

In the specific and contemporary case of AI-generated imagery, several features intensify this blurring between ideologically-laden use and evidentiary value. First, AI images produce a strong effect of realism: even when viewers can recognize artifacts or suspect synthesis, the output reproduces the perceptual grammar of camera media closely enough to activate a default 'witnessing' stance. A reflective judgment ("this is AI-generated") does not necessarily cancel the perceptual effect produced by camera-like simulated photorealism. In other words, skepticism can coexist with a residual "witnessing mode"

in which the image is stored and circulated as if it were a view onto a scene. Even when viewers explicitly say "it's fake", the visualization can still function as evidence of plausibility, and plausibility can slide into prevalence ("this sort of thing is everywhere"), supporting generalized accusations and threat narratives. Moreover, a well-known cognitive pattern is that content is retained more robustly than source. When an image is encoded in a witnessing mode, the likelihood that it will later be recalled as "something seen" increases.

Moreover, generative systems tend to draw on general stereotypes and culturally typical templates, since they are trained on large-scale visual archives and optimized for legibility: therefore, their outputs often look immediately familiar and thus readily classifiable within existing political typologies. This stereotypicality is frequently amplified through mechanisms of essentialization: generative images do not merely depict individuals and situations, but push them toward salient, condensed, and emotionally legible cues. Moreover, AI imagery often presents itself as impersonal. The weakening of specific authorial reference in AI-generated content can increase its apparent neutrality and reduce interpretive resistance. In practice, the loss of a concrete author can paradoxically strengthen the image's claim to be "just showing" a state of affairs, and thus intensify its communicative force as a particular kind of assertion.

The argument developed in the following sections builds on these observations. First, I briefly show that the epistemic and evidentiary value of images, especially photographic images, has long been contested and has repeatedly generated pragmatic tensions. Second, I characterize polarized epistemic environments as contexts in which belief is often displaced by acceptance and public commitment, producing what I have elsewhere called "staged belief" (Arielli 2024). Third, I analyze misattributed and recycled photographs as instances of "emblematic evidence" (Arielli 2019), meaning images that function simultaneously as illustrative emblems and as evidence-shaped proof, drawing on the documented tendency of photographs to inflate perceived truth even when they are non-probative (Newman *et al.* 2012). Fourth, I introduce the concept of "synthetic indexicality" to explain how AI-generated images intensify this mechanism by preserving indexical feeling while being clearly fabricated. Finally, I connect synthetic indexicality to debates on platform realism (Meyer 2025a and Meyer 2025b) to clarify why generative imagery is particularly compatible with political communication organized around threat and polarization.

Varieties of photographic deception

Images, like other sign systems, can be used in several ways. They can be deployed to support a thesis, to illustrate an idea, to elicit an affective or aesthetic response, to consolidate a myth, or to establish a fact. In many cases, the image's function is not epistemic at all. It may be social, expressive, ritual, or identity-marking. The relevant question is therefore primarily pragmatic rather than ontological. What an image is taken to

be doing depends on shared conventions between those who produce and circulate it and those who receive it. One of these shared assumptions is that photography and video have been widely understood as indexical media. Following the traditional Peircean framing (Peirce 1931-1958), they are thought to bear a physical, causal connection to a particular situation that occurs at a time and a place. This has been repeatedly rearticulated in twentieth-century theories of photography. Roland Barthes famously treated the photograph as a privileged case of indexical reference, stressing its "having-been-there" character and the way it compels the viewer to confront the pastness of the depicted event (Barthes [1980] 1981). A related, but more explicitly epistemological claim is Kendall Walton's thesis of photographic transparency: in standard viewing conditions, photographs function less like pictures we merely interpret and more like perceptual access to their subjects, as if we were literally seeing through the image to the world (Walton 1984). Together, these accounts help explain why camera images are routinely seen as trace-like and as a direct source of evidence.

However, the idea that indexical images automatically function as factual proof without remainder has always rested on unstable ground (Doane 2007; Gunning 2004; Mitchell 1992). From its inception, photographic evidentiary authority has depended on contextual and institutional support that stabilizes provenance, sequencing, framing, and interpretation (Mnookin 1998; Tagg 1988). The history of photography is also a history of contested proof. It is not simply that photographs can be falsified. It is that their epistemic value is not self-contained, but it is socially negotiated and constantly contestable. This is why the contemporary panic about synthetic media, or so-called "deepfakes", while justified in many respects, should not be framed as the arrival of deception into an otherwise transparent visual regime.

In fact, at least four recurrent varieties of "photographic deception" are worth distinguishing (see also Allbeson, Allan 2019):

1) The first is "direct manipulation" of the image itself. Retouching, compositing, erasing, darkroom alteration, and now digital editing can create the appearance of an indexical trace that is not anchored in the depicted event. This is the clearest case of fabrication, because it simulates the trace-character of photography.

2) The second variety is "staging" of the depicted scene. A scene may be arranged, posed, or performed for the camera, while still being photographed through genuine optical registration. Here the deception lies not in the causal process of image formation but in the event that the camera registers.

3) The third variety is "misattribution" and recontextualization (Arielli 2019). A photograph can be authentic in itself and yet false in use, because it is presented as evidence for another event, another location or another time. The deception operates at the level of framing and captioning.

4) The fourth variety is interpretive distortion produced by ambiguity. Even when provenance is clear and no manipulation is involved, an image can be read in incompatible ways, and these readings can be strategically amplified. The same image becomes a battleground of inference. Photographs and videos rarely carry their meaning alone, they are fragments or traces, whose interpretation depends on background assumptions, testimony, presence of additional evidence. A still photograph

or a short clip can invite sharply opposed interpretations once it is detached from reliable contextual information and from a shared account of what led to what. For example, the disputes around the killings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents in January 2026 show how competing camps can treat the same visual material as either evidence of defensive restraint or of reckless, excessive force, with official statements and public readings of the footage pulling in different directions. The epistemic vulnerability here is the product of images' underdetermination.

The possibility of deception has often been used as an argument for denying the epistemic relevance of photographic evidence. A famous example is Richard Nixon's reaction to the photograph known as *Napalm Girl*. According to audiotapes recordings, Nixon raised the possibility that the photograph had been staged or otherwise manipulated. The episode is instructive because it shows how quickly a camera image can be repositioned as suspect, even when it later becomes an iconic reference point. The line from "photographs can be faked" to "this photograph might be fake" can be drawn with minimal evidential work, especially when the stakes are political (Westrick 2019).

Precisely because photographic indexicality does not, by itself, settle questions of provenance, sequencing, or meaning, photographs acquire evidentiary force only within an external scaffolding of authentication and corroboration: trusted sources, aligned timelines, testimonial networks, and additional traces that stabilize what the image is of and how it came to circulate as "proof". From the legal perspective, courts make this dependence explicit by treating many photographs as demonstrative aids that merely illustrate witness accounts, and by granting them substantive probative status only when reliability is independently anchored through authentication procedures and additional evidence (Graham 2010). Seen from this angle, AI-generated photorealistic imagery is not a rupture in the history of visual deception. It is a qualitative and quantitative escalation of a long-standing condition. What changes is the scale, speed, and accessibility with which "proof-shaped" images can be produced and circulated. The most consequential feature of contemporary deepfakes is therefore not simply that they enable manipulated imagery and simulated indexicality, as we will clarify later, but that they make such manipulation cheap and routine, and in doing so reinforce what Chesney and Citron call the "liar's dividend": once synthetic media becomes a familiar possibility, it becomes easier to cast doubt on authentic images as well, fostering a generalized atmosphere in which visual evidence can be rejected on demand (Chesney, Citron 2019b).

Given these distinctions, there are at least three familiar ways in which a photographic image can be identified as fake. First, it may fail to look photographic in a strict sense, as happened with early generative AI-images or with imperfect photorealistic paintings, or present clear evidence of retouching. Second, the depicted scene may be judged implausible, for example a public figure in an implausible situation (e.g. the Pope posing and dressed like a rapper). Third, even when neither formal oddities nor implausibility in the content are present, an image can be classified as fake on the basis of background information, such as reliable reports of manipulation, knowledge that it was produced by an

AI, or evidence that it was staged or decontextualized. Each of these aspects could be ambiguous and object of debate: many AI images look photographic while still carrying small cues that trigger suspicion. Some scenes might be improbable but not impossible (like a picture of Trump amid African-American supporters [Fig. 1]). And provenance information can itself be contested, especially in environments where trust is fragmented, such as in ideologically polarized contexts.

Epistemic stances and polarization

The general assumption about visual disinformation presupposes a deceptiveness model: a false image works when it is mistaken for an authentic photograph of the described event. But this is, at best, only one part of the mechanism. In polarized environments, images often remain pragmatically effective even when their status is contested, when they are publicly debunked, or when their artificial character is plain. In these circumstances, the epistemic uptake of images shifts away from true belief, understood as an inner conviction depending on reasons, and toward public stances that are more relevant in cases of ideological alignment: belief gives way to acceptance and commitment (Arielli 2024).

Belief is typically understood as a relatively involuntary disposition: one finds oneself convinced that p is true, and this conviction is in principle answerable to evidence. It is not something one can simply decide to adopt at will without falling into a form of doxastic voluntarism (that is, "deciding to believe" something: Williams 1973). Acceptance, by contrast, is a practical act: treating *p* as true for the purposes of reasoning, action, or coordination in a given context, even without (or despite) full conviction. To give an example, in legal contexts, a defense attorney may accept a client's innocence as the premise of argument, while privately suspending belief or even harboring doubts. As Cohen argues, acceptance is not merely a weaker belief; it is a different attitude with a different function (Cohen 1992). Acceptance is particularly relevant in contexts where public communication is ideologically driven, since it is a stance we can take up and sustain in practice. In polarized political settings, it is not enough that a claim be accepted as a premise. What matters is that it is backed by a publicly recognizable posture of steadfastness: this is the case of being openly committed. Commitment is stronger than mere acceptance because it involves occupying, and being seen to occupy, the role of a believer. A committed speaker does not merely ask others to accept *p* for some limited purpose. They present *p* as something they stand behind, and they signal that they will not easily retreat from it. In this sense, commitment includes not only acceptance of *p*, but also the willingness to sustain a second-order stance: the acceptance of believing that p, or at least of being answerable as if one believed it. This is what we might call a form of staged or performed belief (Arielli 2024).

Polarized contexts are structurally conducive to the displacement of belief through one-sided acceptance and commitment because they corrode shared criteria for what counts as a good reason, a credible source, or an adequate refutation. What David Roberts popu-

larized as "tribal epistemology" is precisely the condition in which standards of evidence become subordinated to group allegiance: information is evaluated primarily by whether it supports the tribe's narrative (Roberts 2017). Similarly, Regina Rini calls this "partisan epistemology": a systematic tendency to overweight testimony from perceived allies and underweight testimony from perceived opponents, generating predictable asymmetries in what different groups treat as credible (Rini 2017). On the empirical side, cultural-cognition research has documented "identity-protective cognition", a pattern in which people selectively credit or dismiss evidence in ways that protect their standing within an identity-defining group. The common denominator is that the function of public communication shifts: it is less a mechanism for updating beliefs in light of new evidence, and more a mechanism for expressing alignment, policing boundaries, and maintaining a shared moral and explanatory frame.

In the case of visual communication, when an image circulates in a polarized environment, the question is often not whether it produces belief in a narrow epistemic sense, but whether it can be accepted and mobilized within a worldview. Acceptance here functions as a practical authorization: "Take this as showing what is going on", "Treat this as confirming what we already know". Commitment then enters at the level of public alignment. Sharing an image, endorsing it, or using it as a prompt for indignation is a performative act that signals an already established membership and reinforces a collective frame: there is no search for knowledge or truth, but on the contrary a search for evidence that reinforces an already existing truth. What is taken as true is the result of a collectively supported posture of acceptance and commitment within a shared form of life. In such conditions, visual material can generate belief-like effects without being truly believed, and this is the terrain on which misattributed photographs and AI-generated images as well become rhetorically powerful.

Emblematic evidence

In polarized epistemic environments, images are frequently received through an essentialist lens: singular occurrences are treated as manifestations of pre-existing truths, not as contingent events. The photograph, in this setting, confirms what is already taken to be the case. On this view, documentary accuracy is secondary. Even misattributed images, and sometimes outright manipulations, can still be treated as "evidence" because they are taken to disclose a general truth, rather than to document a particular occurrence. Moreover, there is robust experimental literature showing that photos inflate subjective truth (so-called "truthiness") even when the images provide no evidence for the claim. According to this study, including nonprobative photographs, images that are related to a topic but provide no actual proof, significantly increased the likelihood that participants would believe a claim was true (Newman *et al.* 2012).

A notable example was the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) communication during the 2017 German election campaign. The party circulated a social media ad featuring a close-

up of a woman being harassed by men described as "Arabic-looking". The image was overlaid with the provocative caption "Do you remember…? New Year's Eve!" and the hashtag "#govote", directly referencing the 2015/2016 mass harassment of women by men with immigrant backgrounds at the Cologne central station. However, the sources reveal that the advertisement was a significant decontextualization and manipulation of reality. The photograph was actually taken in 2011 during the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt, depicting the harassment of an American journalist. The ad was also the product of visual manipulation: to further distance the image from its original source, the face of the harassed woman was replaced with the portrait of a model. When accused of spreading "fake news", an AfD spokesperson defended the ad by claiming the specific origin was irrelevant. He argued that the picture should be taken for its symbolic and illustrative value as a "hassled-woman-picture", stating that what mattered most was "getting the right message over".

This example illustrates the shift from a specific indexical document (a photo of a unique event in Cairo) to an iconic archetype that still retains the value of an indexical with evidentiary value (since it represents a real occurrence). For the target audience, the image stopped being a record of a specific 2011 event and instead became evidentiary confirmation of a perceived general phenomenon: "Arabic looking men against defenseless white women". By ignoring the misattribution, the image was used to treat the events in Cairo and Cologne as essentially two occurrences of the same phenomenon, allowing a non-pertinent visualization to function as pseudo-evidence for the party's ideological narrative. In other words, in essentialist worldviews, they were both contingent manifestations of the same general phenomena and therefore one could be used as a way to showcase the other.

I propose to call this hybrid use "emblematic evidence" (or "illustrative proof": Arielli 2019), an ambiguous status where images oscillate between their emblematic function (showing "what this kind of thing looks like") and an evidentiary function (serving as if they were traces of "what happened here and now"). Photographic images are indexical traces that may later be generalized into symbols, or icons. One example we already mentioned is the image of Trump raising his fist after the assassination attempt. It did not remain a singular record of a specific moment, but rapidly iconized and then typified, becoming a visual type and a reusable schema for a broader narrative: defiance, resilience, "leadership under attack", national redemption, etc. Emblematic evidence reverses this direction. In such cases, a generic or merely illustrative image, including manipulated or misattributed ones such as photographs from the Tahrir Square protests, is made to trigger a stereotype that proves the specific event at issue, for example the assaults in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, since it highlights how the event is a manifestation of a universal phenomenon. In this way, an emblem is converted into quasi-evidence: it does not add information but dictates, in advance, how the event is to be read. What is at stake

here is the slide from exemplification to quasi-proof: the representation becomes a cue about unrelated facts because the type is granted priority over the individual case.

This structure exemplifies an essentializing, archetypal hermeneutics: singular occurrences are treated primarily as instances of a prior type, while contingency and context recede. In philosophical terms, it aligns with a broadly Platonic model of intelligibility, where particulars matter insofar as they instantiate a general form. Mircea Eliade's account of 'mythic' or archetypal temporality offers a close analogue: events acquire meaning and perceived reality to the extent that they are read as repetitions of exemplary models, whereas what is merely singular is treated as secondary and inessential (Eliade [1949] 1954). Something similar holds in contemporary polarization, except that the archetypes are political: "The violent foreigner", "The corrupt elite", "The deviant minority", "The dangerous protester", and so forth. Once an archetype is installed, it becomes plausible to treat any vivid visualization of it as a form of disclosure. The image is taken to make present what is always already there. A comparison with science clarifies both the attraction and the distortion involved. In experimental science, a single test can indeed function as evidence that generalizes beyond the specific trial, because the evidential logic presupposes the universality of natural laws and relies on controlled procedures that make results replicable and publicly checkable. Political emblematic evidence borrows just the form of this logic while substituting with "universals" concerning the essence of groups and social phenomena. The crucial point is that emblematic evidence is not reducible to lying or to simple error. The indexical bond to a specific time and place becomes secondary, and sometimes strategically dispensable, because what matters is the iconic confirmation of a worldview.

Synthetic Indexicality and AI images

The crucial question concerning generative AI is not whether AI images could be indistinguishable from photography. Often the capacity to distinguish fake from real photography depends on competence, attention, and viewing conditions. The same output can be judged real by one viewer and synthetic by another, and even a single viewer may shift judgment depending on how carefully they inspect the image. Moreover, as we argued in the previous sections, a forged image can be welcomed or rejected less on epistemic grounds than on ideological reasons, and a viewer's prior commitments often determine whether doubt is activated (as in Richard Nixon's suspicion that the *Napalm Girl* photo could have been fabricated).

Having said that, AI-generated images are effective in politically-laden communication for at least three reasons:

1) They often achieve striking visuals that preserve an appearance of photographic indexicality, and thus give an evidential feel, even when viewers recognize their artificiality;

2) AI-images appear to arise from systems whose output is presented as impersonal and quasi-neutral, since they stem from the huge archives of real photographic documents;

3) they present a hyper-real aesthetic (sometimes bordering on caricatural exaggeration) which is able to perceptually and cognitively convey specific imageries without the imperfection of real scenes, in other words, they are similar to "supernormal stimuli" where aesthetic amplification is impactful in the arena of provoking and redefining viewer's imagination.



2 | AI-generated image from a site on Alberta's independence movement.

Concerning the first point ("evidential feel"), indexicality is not exclusively a feature of a photograph's transparency, but it is also a stylistic feature: photorealism is the feel of indexicality, even in its absence. The impression of indexicality becomes a stylistic register based on a photographic grammar we are used to, a repertoire of perceptual cues and cultural conventions that invites a default stance of witnessing (certain lighting, depth of field, documentary framing, surveillance aesthetics, phone-video formats) and the feeling that something "happened there at that moment". AI systems can reproduce that grammar well enough to activate the witnessing stance even when the observer is also aware of their artificiality. In general terms, this aesthetic can be described as a simulation or staging of indexicality. Even if a trained eye recognizes its artificiality, or we know from background information that the image was generated by AI, we still do not look at it as a drawing or a human-made graphic work, but instead as a window onto a specific scene (see for instance the image taken from a right-wing propaganda site on Alberta's independent movement [Fig. 2]). The image appears indexical or transparent (in Walton's sense), even though we do not believe in its transparency.



3 | Photographic-looking AI-generated image that represents a dangerous foreigner presence in the UK.

In other words, AI media reproduce the experience of indexicality without the fact of indexicality by parasitically inhabiting the aura of photography. Audiences that are aware of the artificiality of those images, still engage with them under a mode of "as-if" realism. They behave as if the depicted scenario were real for the purposes of argument, mobilization, and identity reinforcement. In the treatment of ideological assumptions (e.g., a "Great Replacement", the "Deep state conspiracy") they often refer to literal and tangible realities that simply lack a perfect photographic record. In this context, synthetic images become the "best available evidence" for a believed-but-unseen truth, filling the evidentiary gap with proof that bears affective efficacy [Fig. 3].

Modern diffusion models are trained on billions of photographs. By doing so, they learn the statistical distribution of pixels that constitute the photographic look. This gives them a formal credibility that feels evidentiary, even when the viewer is consciously aware of the image's artificiality. Moreover, the viewer's perceptual system, conditioned by a century of use of video and photographic images as undoubtedly indexical, spontaneously reads these formal cues as signs of witness. Finally, simulated photorealism supports a double stance that is extremely useful in polarized environments: audiences can treat the image as evidence-like for orientation ("This shows what is going on") while denying full responsibility when challenged ("It's just AI", "Just an illustration", "Just a meme"), more so if the image is clearly the product of generative AI. This produces belief-like effects without accountability.

Concerning the second aspect ("apparent impersonality"), it is useful to recall André Bazin's argument concerning photography's "objective" nature. In his essay *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* (Bazin [1945] 1967), he claimed the photograph is an imprint of reality, like a death mask or a fingerprint. A photograph's authority stems from the bracketing of human subjectivity. The camera is an automatic witness. AI imagery creates a similar rhetoric of authorless generation. The user provides a prompt, but the image is generated by the model. Outputs are easily framed as what the system neutrally produced, with agency distributed across prompts, datasets, and automated procedures. This diffusion of authorship can make ideological content appear less intentional and therefore less contestable, while simultaneously making accountability harder to assign. AI images' specific visual details are not chosen by a human artist in the way a painter chooses each brushstroke. This creates a sense of objectivity, as if the image came out of the machine's understanding of the world's visual data. This apparent neutrality of the medium makes the documentary posture politically usable, since the image can function as evidence-like support for claims even when it is openly synthetic.

Concerning the third aspect ("hyper-real aesthetics"), AI-generated imagery usually exhibits a form of augmented and heightened realism. AI-images, even the most photorealistic ones, are not neutral or matter-of-fact, but are algorithmically enhanced and made more striking than ordinary photos, engineered to grab attention: colors are saturated; surfaces are almost too flawless; human figures are rendered according to conventions that match, with emblematic precision, the "types" they are meant to represent (the hypermasculine worker; the rugged farmer, the idyllic family, the "threatening" immigrant, the innocent child, and so on). Their poses are staged according to a dramaturgy that exceeds the prosaic banality of an ordinary photographic snapshot. A growing literature investigates the replication and amplification of representational bias by text-to-image models. Text-to-image models can amplify harmful representations even when not explicitly asked for, producing outputs that magnify violence and sexualization even when the input is relatively benign (Hao *et al.* 2024). More generally, analyses of toxicity and bias in variants of Stable Diffusion (the most widely used model in AI-image

generation) indicate that problematic content and biased associations are not exceptional instances but rather typical behaviors that can be induced under typical prompting conditions (Schneider, Hagendorff 2025).

In this regard, media scholar Roland Meyer identifies two key properties of such AI images: first, they function as "cliché amplifiers", statistically extracting and intensifying stereotypes from their training data (Meyer 2025a). In practice, generative models recombine familiar visual tropes and icons into an idealized average of conventional representations, reinforcing what is already popular or recognizable. Second, they embody a populist aesthetic or "platform realism", meaning the visuals are fine-tuned to fulfill immediate, visceral expectations of viewers (Meyer 2025b). Through user feedback loops (likes, shares, click-throughs), the models optimize outputs that feel emotionally real and ideologically reassuring to a target demographic. Indeed, the prevailing aesthetic is calibrated to the tastes of those most active online (predominantly young, white, male Western audiences) whose biases and engagements effectively shape the model's sense of "what is real". This creates a feedback cycle: images that confirm biases or elicit strong emotional reactions gain more engagement, and those signals of engagement in turn guide the generative model's future outputs. The result is a self-reinforcing loop of credibility, whereby what looks real (in the sense of confirming what the target audience already considers real) is increasingly determined by what aligns with platform metrics and ingrained cultural clichés. In effect, AI imagery leverages in the visual domain what ethologist Niko Tinbergen famously termed "supernormal stimulus", namely exaggerated cues that provoke outsized instinctive responses (Tinbergen 1951, see also Arielli 2022). Supernormal stimuli could be artificially engineered amplifications of ordinary cues, calibrated to seize attention (see Barrett 2010). Think of unnaturally hypersexualized bodies in fashion magazines, or of commodities advertised through photographs that look better than the real object. Attention capture is the first step: the hyperreal image tends to displace, in the observer's imagination, the object it purportedly represents, in line with the simulacral logic Jean Baudrillard notoriously analyzed. The perfected, intensified, more seductive representation becomes a stand-in for the real and is apprehended as reality in its own right. The manufactured image, by hijacking the subject's perceptual and cognitive mechanisms, becomes evidence of how things are not despite its enhanced artificiality, but precisely because of it.

Conclusion

The rise of AI-generated and manipulated imagery could mark a further step in a broader process of epistemic corrosion, in which the evidentiary authority historically associated with photography is increasingly superseded by a tribalized logic of communication. In this environment, the observer's stance often shifts from genuine belief toward strategic acceptance or performative commitment, treating images as emblematic evidence that confirms pre-existing ideological narratives rather than documenting specific, singular events. By leveraging synthetic indexicality and providing supernormal stimuli, generative

AI intensifies this process, producing hyper-legible visualizations that route attention toward visceral, affective registers rather than reflective scrutiny. This facilitates a transition from a search for empirical truth to a struggle over imaginaries, where the informational fog and the "liar's dividend" undermine shared procedures for authenticating reality.

In addition to the three points mentioned earlier (indexicality effect, appearance of impersonality, simulacra that amplify clichés), one should add the quantitative superiority of AI image production: images can be generated rapidly, at scale, and in some cases through automated pipelines that circulate content across digital media. In this sense, AI-generated imagery functions as a tool to establish, through sheer preponderance, the specific imagery that takes hold in viewers' heads. Testimonial imagery is numerically overwhelmed in this respect by the overproduction of synthetic images. The struggle, then, concerns the capacity to dictate modes of imagination and perceptual expectation regarding social and political facts. It is not primarily a matter of bearing witness to reality, but of shaping how reality is to be seen and thought, constructing what becomes possible, plausible, and even inevitable to think. This can be described as a politics of anticipatory imagery: Donatella Della Ratta (Della Ratta 2025) captures this point when she examines how generative AI can operate as a tool of "speculative violence" by visually normalizing and prefiguring radical political agendas. This is especially effective for agendas that depend on pre-emptive fear and exceptional measures (border militarization, mass surveillance, collective punishment): the images condition publics to accept controversial policies by making them appear both plausible and unavoidable. By rendering the previously unthinkable in a polished, aesthetic format, these fabrications can bypass familiar interpretive filters and lodge themselves within collective repertoires of expectation. Therefore, the use of AI images does not merely aim to replace or mimic the tradition of indexical documentation that testifies to "how things are." It functions as a versatile instrument of ideological communication oriented toward determining "how we should see things", fusing factual perception with ideologically loaded imaginaries.

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Abstract

Emanuele Arielli's paper examines how falsified, AI-generated, or misattributed images function not as failures of reference but as tools of symbolic consolidation. In contemporary far-right and nationalist propaganda, stock photos, memes, and recycled or synthetic imagery are used to construct visual archetypes that embed themselves in collective imagination beyond factual accuracy. Rather than treating such images merely as deceptive or epistemically flawed, the article introduces the concept of emblematic evidence: images that, despite being false or decontextualized, are perceived as legitimate referents for ideological narratives. They give visual form to beliefs already assumed to be true – less images pointing to truth than truths seeking images. In this sense, they ritualize belief, turning images into markers of ideological belonging rather than referential proof. This reversal reflects a broader epistemic shift from verification to affective identification. By detaching images from their indexical referents, they circulate more freely as mythic condensations of polarized worldviews. Crucially, their falsity is often performatively displayed: epistemic inaccuracy becomes not a flaw but a feature, reinforcing political identity by signaling distance from mainstream regimes of truth.

keywords | Emblematic evidence, Image manipulation, Misattribution, Epistemic accuracy.

Mito, simbolo, antichità

Bozza per uno studio sulla personalità nella storia a partire dagli scritti di Julius Evola

Irene Galuppo



1 | Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler mostra a Mussolini le rovine della Lagebarcke dopo l'attentato del 20 luglio 1944. Da sinistra a destra: Benito Mussolini, Walter Warlimont (?), Julius Evola, Karl Dönitz, Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, Karl-Jesko von Puttkamer, Hermann Fegelein, Bruno Loerzer. Scansione digitale da negativo di rigenerazionevola.it.

Introduzione

Julius Evola, il cui nome di battesimo è Giulio Cesare Evola, è di recente tornato nel dibattito pubblico italiano, a seguito dell'intervento del Ministro della Cultura Alessandro Giuli, in occasione dell'inaugurazione della Buchermesse di Francoforte. Il discorso del ministro per molti è stato interpretato come un insignificante giro di parole. Per altri, al contrario,

è stato un adattamento, in un contesto istituzionale, di alcune formulazioni del filosofo Evola, prima tra tutte la questione del 'pensiero solare'. Sebbene il ministro abbia smentito immediatamente il riferimento al pensiero evoliano, riconducendo la citazione ad Albert Camus, è difficile non riscontrare la presenza di Giuli tra i ringraziamenti della maggior parte delle ristampe delle opere di Evola per Edizioni Mediterranee e la partecipazione al convegno "Il mistero imperiale del Graal", organizzato a Palazzo Valentini a Roma il 10 aprile 2003, con l'intervento *L'idea del Graal nel novecento europeo*. *Percorsi esoterici tra letteratura, politica e religione,* in cui l'attuale ministro ha attinto a piene mani da uno studio di Julius Evola sullo stesso tema (sull'influenza evoliana del ministro Alessandro Giuli si veda Casarotti 2024).

Sarebbe riduttivo, però, limitare il ritorno di Evola nel panorama politico italiano solo 'grazie' all'intervento di Alessandro Giuli. Infatti, negli ultimi tempi, il nome del barone (Fritz Bauer, suo traduttore, nella versione tedesca di Imperialismo pagano scrive: "Il barone Julius Evola è nato a Roma da una famiglia patrizia di origine nordico-normanna (Evola-Hevelar)" tuttavia non si hanno informazioni certe sulla reale discendenza 'patrizia': vedi Bruno 2024) accompagna le più recenti letture sul ritorno al Tradizionalismo (Teitelbaum 2020; Sedgwick [2023] 2025; Renzi 2025) che si affiancano, cronologicamente, a rinnovate attenzioni per la vita del filosofo romano (Scarabelli 2024; Scarabelli, Scianca 2024) e a nuove edizioni critiche (*Fuoco segreto*; *Oltre l'idealismo*; *L'italiano*) e le ristampe delle opere principali dello stesso: *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo*; *Gli uomini e le rovine*).

Nel 2022 il MART di Rovereto gli ha dedicato perfino una mostra antologica di 50 opere intitolata "Julius Evola. Lo spirituale nell'arte", su proposta di Vittorio Sgarbi e curata da Beatrice Avanzi e Giorgio Calcara.

Il mitologo italiano Furio Jesi nel suo brillante studio, condotto a più riprese, sulla cultura di destra – un lavoro di raccolta iconografica e di letteratura sotto la dicitura *Materiali dello studio sulla cultura di destra*, il quale apparve per la prima volta con due lunghi saggi sulle pagine della rivista "Comunità", per poi essere, di lì a poco, ricomposto e pubblicato per Garzanti nel 1979 con il titolo *Cultura di destra* – tra i numerosi temi che affronta per inquadrare l'humus culturale e l'immaginario dell'estrema destra del Novecento, ha dedicato alcune pagine alla figura, enigmatica e controversa, di Julius Evola:

> Julius Evola è un personaggio con cui ancora nessuno ha fatto bene i suoi conti. Non basta, infatti, dichiararlo un razzista così sporco che ripugna toccarlo con le dita (il che è vero) e così insulso che non vale la pena di dedicargli alcuna attenzione (il che non è vero). Questa è la posizione assunta nei suoi confronti da vari studiosi che in tal modo si sono privati dell'occasione di esaminare un materiale significativo" (Jesi [1979] 2011, 140).

E continua dicendo:

> Ma nello stesso tempo non si può ammettere che abbiano fatto veramente i conti con Evola quegli altri studiosi che sono rimasti in qualche modo rispettosi della sua aureola culturale: esaminarlo come una personalità culturale significativa non deve affatto voler attribuirgli meriti e statura culturali rilevanti (Jesi [1979] 2011, 140).

Lo stesso Jesi riconosce che, sebbene Evola non fosse il 'vate' del fascismo storico, lo è stato – e lo è – per il neofascismo (Jesi [1979] 2011, 152): Evola "è il nostro Marcuse, ma più bravo", ebbe a dire Giorgio Almirante – fondatore dell'MSI, partito in cui si è formata l'attuale classe dirigente di Fratelli d'Italia di Giorgia Meloni (Galli 1974, 20; sul giudizio di Julius Evola su Herbert Marcuse si veda: *Il mito Marcuse*). Inoltre, l'attualità del barone è quanto mai vera se si considerano non solo le necessità dei giovani italiani di estrema destra di tornare a un approccio più tradizionalista, ovvero un'attitudine che sia in qualche modo legata all'antico, quanto più se si guarda al contesto internazionale in cui Evola sovente, negli ultimi decenni, torna nel dibattito politico dell'ultradestra.

Quando nel 2015 il neonazista svedese Daniel Friberg adotta l'espressione "strangolare la tigre", dal celebre volume evoliano degli anni Sessanta *Cavalcare la tigre* (Jones 2022), oppure se si considera l'esternazione dell'attenzione che Steve Bannon – uno dei principali attivisti della campagna elettorale di Donald Trump, oggi vicinissimo alla Casa Bianca – nutre per Evola (Teitelbaum 2020; Jones 2022), e ancora, se si guarda attentamente nel sito web del partito Jobbik e di Alba Dorata (Jones 2022), ci rendiamo conto quantomeno della diffusione geografica che ha avuto il pensiero di Julius Evola tra le fila dell'ultradestra globale emergente. Allora, non possiamo non 'fare i conti' con il barone anche se solo volessimo limitarci allo studio della superficie delle immagini e dei simboli della destra attuale.

Va chiarito, però, che Julius Evola è una figura molto complessa, oltre che enigmatica, anche nel suo stile letterario, il che facilmente si presta a rimaneggiamenti e a un citazionismo spicciolo per una cultura, quella di destra, che Jesi ha definito "caratterizzata (in buona o in cattiva fede) dal vuoto" (Jesi [1979] 2011, 7). Anche il rapporto tra Evola e il fascismo fu tutt'altro che lineare: sia per ciò che concerne i suoi non sempre floridi legami con Mussolini, sia per l'uso che ne viene fatto a posteriori nella lettura del presente – in cui egli torna spesso come passaggio inevitabile nelle biografie degli esponenti dell'attuale destra italiana (Renzi 2024) o come 'papa' del Tradizionalismo, insieme a René Guénon, senza alcuna contestualizzazione della cultura europea di fine Ottocento e inizio Novecento.

Che si abbia dimestichezza con gli scritti di Evola o che lo si usi in maniera strumentale ed evocativa, resta il fatto che egli è stato tradotto in tantissime lingue nel corso degli ultimi decenni del Novecento – a esclusione delle lingue 'orientali', paradossalmente i territori a cui lui stesso guardava nei suoi studi – a indicare un grosso apprezzamento delle sue idee nei circuiti europei, russi e latino-americani (Ghio 2017; De Turris 2023).

Senza mezzi termini o scuse di sorta, è innegabile che Evola era più che un fascista e, per questo, non era visto di buon occhio perfino dal regime di Mussolini. Ciò nonostante, il filosofo era entusiasta di un ritorno all'ordine in Italia, di cui non condivideva però il criterio razziale come paradigma meramente biologico e, piuttosto che Mussolini, riteneva Vittorio Emanuele III la vera 'personalità' che potesse condurre l'Italia a una rivoluzione conservatrice. Egli era, per certi versi, più vicino al nazismo e all'antisemitismo tedeschi che a quelli italiani. Ma anche in Germania non ha avuto soggiorni floridi.

Il barone era geograficamente e 'spiritualmente' affine al mondo tedesco. In un articolo del 1938 dal titolo *Spiritualità ariano-romana*: *Giano*, pubblicato sul giornale "Il regime fascista", Evola dirà di voler integrare l'intesa politica esistente fra Italia e Germania con un'intesa spirituale basata su ciò che fra i due popoli: "C'è in comune in fatto di tradizione e di visione generale del mondo [...] cioè come si considera il mondo dell'origine con uno sguardo diverso da quello razionalistico e ignorantemente accademico dello scientismo" (*Spiritualità ariano-romana*, 97). La civiltà dell'origine a cui si riferisce è quella indo-germanica, di cui sia quella romana sia quella nordico-germanica sono due diramazioni particolarmente affini (*Gli uomini e le rovine*, 209-227).

I rapporti di Julius Evola con la Germania e i suoi soggiorni nel Terzo Reich non furono episodi occasionali, bensì tappe di un preciso progetto di 'diplomazia culturale' che si estese per oltre un decennio – questo afflato a costruire un'Internazionale Nera, su base europea, è qualcosa su cui vale la pena soffermarsi (*Gli uomini e le rovine*, 239-254; Sedgwick [2023] 2025). Dalla metà degli anni Trenta, il filosofo romano intensificò la sua presenza tra Berlino e Monaco con l'ambizioso obiettivo di influenzare l'ideologia nazionalsocialista, tentando di orientarla verso una visione più 'aristocratica' e spirituale, distante dalla teoria della razza biologica propugnata dalle gerarchie del partito di Hitler (De Felice [1962] 1972, 385-386). Il momento di massima attività pubblica si registrò nel giugno del 1938, quando Evola tenne a Berlino un ciclo di conferenze su temi esoterici e politici, tra cui "La dottrina aria della guerra santa" e "Il Graal come mistero nordico". Nonostante il successo di pubblico in alcuni ambienti conservatori, questa esposizione attirò l'attenzione negativa dei vertici delle SS. Ciò è testimoniato dai documenti d'archivio, in particolare dalla relazione Weisgerber dell'agosto 1938, oggi conservata presso il Bundesarchiv. L'"Istituto di ricerca razziale" delle SS redasse un rapporto segreto indirizzato a Heinrich Himmler. In questo documento, Evola veniva definito un "reazionario romano" e si sconsigliava vivamente di fornirgli ulteriore supporto ufficiale, giudicando le sue teorie sulla supremazia dello spirito incompatibili con la purezza razziale biologica del nazismo.

Nonostante la diffidenza dei servizi di sicurezza, Evola continuò a viaggiare in Germania. Tornò per alcune conferenze nel febbraio 1941 e nuovamente nell'aprile 1942 ad Amburgo e a Berlino, per promuovere la sua teoria del 'razzismo dello spirito', un tentativo

intellettuale di nobilitare l'alleanza dell'Asse su basi tradizionali, mitiche e simboliche comuni.

La natura della sua permanenza in Germania cambiò drasticamente dopo l'armistizio dell'8 settembre 1943. Trovandosi già in territorio tedesco, Evola fu tra i primissimi italiani a essere trasportato al quartier generale di Hitler a Rastenburg, nella Prussia Orientale. La sua presenza nella Tana del Lupo in quei giorni caotici, durante i quali si formava il nucleo della futura Repubblica Sociale Italiana, è confermata da Gianfranco de Turris e Andrea Scarabelli, nonché da prove aneddotiche come la famosa scatola di sigari firmata dai presenti, tra cui il figlio di Mussolini [Fig.1].

L'ultima fase del suo soggiorno tedesco si svolse a Vienna, città allora annessa al Reich. Tra il 1944 e l'inizio del 1945, Evola si stabilì nella capitale austriaca con l'incarico di esaminare gli archivi massonici ed esoterici requisiti dai nazisti in tutta Europa. Fu proprio qui che la sua esperienza tedesca si concluse tragicamente: durante un pesante bombardamento nel gennaio 1945, mentre camminava per strada, sfidando il pericolo anziché rifugiarsi nei bunker – spirito eroico tipico del pensiero evoliano che egli ha tradotto anche in pratica di vita – fu investito dallo spostamento d'aria di un ordigno. La lesione al midollo spinale riportata in quell'occasione gli causò la paralisi degli arti inferiori, segnando la fine dei suoi viaggi e il rientro in Italia.

Ma cosa possiamo ipotizzare che Evola cercasse in quegli archivi? Tra il 1926 e il 1945, epoca in cui si condensa la maggior parte delle sue opere, il filosofo pubblica quattordici articoli, oggi raccolti nel libro *Simboli della tradizione occidentale*, edito esclusivamente in Italia nel 1988 e ristampato nel 2023. Anche la ristampa, in questo senso, è un sintomo dei tempi e dell'attenzione che oggi si hanno nei confronti del pensiero evoliano. Il libro affronta i temi dell'origine, della fortuna e della sfortuna dei simboli della tradizione occidentale. Infatti, Evola ha in mente la costruzione di uno studio sul programma iconografico della tradizione conservatrice per "esaminare e penetrare nel loro più profondo e puro significato l'ascia, il lupo, il cigno, l'aquila, la croce radiata" attraverso "un metodo comparativo applicato al ciclo complessivo delle civiltà e dei miti ari", per integrare, confermare o "lumeggiare ulteriormente" (*L'ascia*, 51). Per tradizione occidentale Evola intende la tradizione imperiale romana. Una tradizione imperiale che però non affonda le sue radici nell'antica Roma, bensì nella mitologia simbolica di tutti quei "grandi popoli" che, nella loro storia, hanno manifestato, attraverso il simbolo e il mito, un valore spirituale "superiore", di cui la storia è il palcoscenico.

Tuttavia, la maggior parte delle sue riflessioni sui legami tra le culture è scarna di fonti, ed egli stesso ne chiarisce i motivi. Nel cercare di capire il legame tra le popolazioni indoeuropee dell'origine e l'Impero romano, più che trovarci davanti a dati certi, il filosofo postula delle congetture: per Evola bisogna accogliere un metodo di indagine della storia che è radicalmente diverso da quello della storiografia scientifica. La storia che noi studiamo è, secondo lui, una storia incompleta. Nella prefazione a *I due imperatori*, Claudio Mutti sot-

tolinea come per Evola la storia del Medioevo sia tutta da riscrivere. Non è possibile avere "un'autentica comprensione della civiltà medioevale finché ci si atterrà a quel tipo di osservazione esteriore che caratterizza la mentalità razionalistica, positivista e laica, e ci si rifiuterà di porgere orecchio al linguaggio dei simboli e dei miti" (*I due imperatori*, 10). Fare attenzione ad altri aspetti poco evidenziati nella storia ufficiale non è però l'operazione che gli stessi anni stanno portando avanti all'École des Annales. Infatti, l'intenzione di Evola non è quella di costruire una microstoria nella storia, bensì la sua volontà è di ricostruire la storia universale a partire da elementi spirituali e simbolici finora considerati semplice superstizione (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 30). La ricostruzione filologica dell'origine, del significato e dello sviluppo di questi elementi non deve necessariamente essere dimostrata, anzi, per Evola meglio di no (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 31), e questo non può che farci dubitare della validità dell'intera produzione evoliana, almeno di quella riguardante l'origine dei simboli e dei miti. Per di più, essendo il mito qualcosa di difficilmente conoscibile per definizione, fondare una riscrittura della storia a partire dal "retaggio dei padri che abbiamo nel sangue: idee senza parole" (Jesi [1979] 2011, 24) è un'operazione che inevitabilmente è di difficile verificabilità e che apre ad ampissime interpretazioni. "Produrre la storia dal vuoto intangibile del mito" (Jesi [1979] 2011, 14) significa maneggiare un'immensa quantità di immagini, gesti, storie e simboli che, d'altro canto, non sono che meri feticci, svuotati della loro puntualità scientifica. Secondo Furio Jesi, Evola fu un "rimasticatore" che, a differenza di Guénon, a cui è spesso associato, non è utilizzabile nemmeno per fini scientifici, sia per la mancanza di originalità che per l'assenza di fonti storiografiche solide (Jesi [1979] 2011, 149-150).

Sorvolare sull'aspetto delle fonti è uno scoglio solo apparentemente insormontabile. È di certo ineludibile conoscere le fonti se ci si vuole addentrare nelle vicende mitiche e prenderne parola. Se invece il dibattito sulla veridicità del mito non è il campo in cui ci si vuole imbattere, ecco che Evola può assumere una validità scientifica, o quantomeno può essere uno strumento utile per interpretare alcuni fenomeni; nel nostro caso, la funzione della personalità nella storia secondo il pensiero evoliano e la sopravvivenza di questo indirizzo di pensiero anche nella contemporaneità.

L'operazione stessa di riscrittura della storia, omettendone le fonti, non è neutra, per quanto si possa dir voluta e giustificata da un preciso intento. Rimaneggiare il racconto storico serve a riscattare i protagonisti della storia stessa che, per svariate vicende, o non hanno avuto fortuna, o sono stati letti negativamente, oppure – e soprattutto – sono stati interpretati esclusivamente nella loro dimensione terrena, umana. Ed è proprio quest'ultima la lacuna più grande che Evola attribuisce ai biografi e agli storici a lui contemporanei. La scelta del filosofo di reinquadrare la funzione di alcune personalità quali Cesare, Massimiliano I e Federico Barbarossa, per valorizzarne, all'opposto, il carattere e il ruolo supra-storico, cioè l'agire politico guidato dal volere degli dèi, mira a conferire alle citate figure una sorta di missione civilizzatrice, ovvero una missione 'superiore' che ha l'obiettivo di porre rimedio al decadimento dello spirito in un dato tempo.

Certo, se oggi si pensa al ruolo che la destra italiana ritaglia per sé, è possibile sentir risuonare l'eco di questa orchestrazione: la missione civilizzatrice – del ritorno alle 'antiche virtù' – nei confronti di una società degradata dal consumismo e, per i più identitari, dalla presunta vittoria delle idee marxiste. La crociata contro l'intelligenza artificiale e l'automazione, a favore del ritorno al gesto, al lavoro manuale e artigianale, ci racconta di un'attuale ultradestra che, più che essere vicina al Futurismo – per quante mostre si possano organizzare alla Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea – è piuttosto compatibile con una visione negativa della modernità.

La rivolta contro il mondo moderno – come il titolo del celebre libro di Julius Evola scritto tra il 1931 e il 1932 – è la strada del riscatto e del risveglio che sa interiorizzare il "muto insegnamento del simbolo" (*Simboli della tradizione occidentale*, 9; il simbolo come "portatore muto" di significati torna in *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 108), cioè che sa cogliere quei punti e momenti in cui l'elemento fisico e metafisico si fondono, in cui l'esteriore aderisce all'interiore. Quello che ne risulta è la realizzazione integrale dell'umanità occidentale, cioè la vita assoluta (*Meditazioni delle vette*, 120).

Secondo Evola, per superare la crisi che porta con sé il mondo moderno è necessaria una maggiore comprensione del mondo antico e di quelle civiltà che tuttora conservano tratti irriducibili alle forme della civiltà moderna. Alla base di questa scelta di campo c'è il presupposto che la fantasia (in cui rientrano, per il filosofo, la sfera del sacro, del mito e del sogno) non sia produttrice di forme irreali, ma che, anzi, la fantasia e il simbolo siano traduzioni soggettive di qualcosa di oggettivo (*Fantasia e conoscenza*, 15-16). Analizzare i simboli, le tradizioni e i miti delle grandi civiltà antiche, secondo Evola, ci permette di scegliere quegli elementi del proprio passato, inteso come passato dell'umanità globale, che si accordano davvero allo spirito che permea una nazione in un dato periodo, individuando gli ideali che essa sceglie per la formazione del proprio avvenire (*Federico Barbarossa*, 11). Questa nuova lettura della storia ci permette, dice Evola, di comprendere altre esperienze che completano ed integrano sia la storia in sé sia l'azione della 'personalità' nel tempo.

Leggere i brevi ma intensi articoli di Julius Evola pubblicati sul quotidiano cremonese "Il regime fascista" e sul mensile "Vita Nova" ci racconta molto più di un semplice sforzo iconologico dell'autore per comprendere l'uso dell'ascia, dell'aquila, del fascio ecc. Ci permette di inquadrare, attraverso la proposta di analisi della simbologia, il ruolo della personalità nell'immaginario evoliano e nella cultura di destra, attiva ancor oggi nei punti di crisi del presente.

Mito, simbolo e antichità

Nell'articolo *Simboli eroici della tradizione romana* – pubblicato su "Vita Nova" nell'agosto 1929 – Julius Evola ci invita, attraverso la lente del 'culto', ad approfondire la mentalità dell'Impero romano. Evola chiarisce bene la sua metodologia. Egli prende le distanze dal:

> Metodo comparativo di certi ricercatori moderni. […] Ciò che noi chiamiamo 'metodo tradizionale' è, in genere, caratterizzato da un doppio principio: ontologicamente e oggettivamente, dal principio della corrispondenza, il quale assicura una correlazione funzionale essenziale tra elementi analoghi, presentandoli come semplici forme omologhe di apparire di un significato centrale unitario (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 32).

Con un metodo apparentemente comparativo, l'autore chiarisce che sia l'Antico Oriente che l'Occidente, in alcuni periodi, conoscevano solo due grandi vie: l'azione e la contemplazione, e che, attraverso di esse, "L'uomo va al di là dell'uomo" (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 22). Per Evola le nostre tradizioni antiche, specie quella romana, sono ricche di questo dualismo. I Ludi o i giochi, sia nei Greci che nei Romani, avevano un carattere sacro. Ad esempio, ci dice che in origine il presidente dei giochi del Circo Massimo era il sacerdote di Cerere (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 24). I giochi erano talmente legati ai templi che gli imperatori cristiani dovettero permettere di conservarli, poiché la loro scomparsa avrebbe comportato la fine dei giochi (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 24). I giochi, inoltre, erano la connessione tra due presunti opposti e cita Bachofen – lo studioso di riferimento per Evola nel suo studio sul simbolo: la vicenda atletico-sportiva era un'evocazione magica, in cui magico e sacro si compenetravano, infatti, il vincitore delle gare appariva rivestito di un carattere divino, cioè era inteso come momentanea incarnazione del sacro – la magia (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 25-27). A seguire, l'acclamazione al gladiatore vittorioso divenne la formula in uso presso la liturgia cristiana e vi cita Tertulliano: "All'eternità dall'eternità", dei secoli nei secoli (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 27). Ma non solo i giochi assumevano entrambi gli aspetti, azione e contemplazione, sacro e magico, ma avevano anche un valore evocativo, capace di riaccendere quel contatto con lo spirituale. Ci dice che questa è la ragione per cui, frequentemente, si riscontrano figure di vincitori olimpici nell'arte funeraria pagana. Nel sarcofago di Haghia Triada, nel bassorilievo del carro etrusco di Monteleone (Achille), nelle stele di Bologna ricorrono le immagini della morte trionfale: vittorie che coprono le porte dell'Ade e sostengono il medaglione del defunto. Nelle immagini sepolcrali, Eracle, Teseo, i Dioscuri e Achille sono iniziati orfici (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 29). Questo excursus evocativo di immagini ed eventi (gli stessi esempi vengono integrati e arricchiti in *Ludi e Victoria*, 173-186), da parte dell'autore, gli permette di farci notare che Roma si curava ben poco di qualsiasi forma religiosa in quanto tale, ma piuttosto riteneva che attraverso l'azione, intesa anche come contemplazione, si realizzasse lo spirito: "Lo spirito si realizza nella forma di coloro che combattono e non di coloro che pregano. […] Nella Vittoria, lo spirito si realizza fino al 'limite solare', costituito dall'Impero" (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 30). Per questo, continua, la forma più luminosa, cioè la più grande e la più intima, era la guerra. L'espressione marinettiana della guerra, come "sola igiene del mondo" (Marinetti 1909) – pronunciata vent'anni prima dal poeta e nota al filosofo – è identificata da Evola con la guerra come opportunità di ritorno a una vita dello spirito.

Tornando ai simboli, citando nuovamente Bachofen, Evola afferma che la vittoria era anche dea della morte, ovvero dea delle battaglie e 'doppio' dell'uomo (sul dualismo della morte si veda *Le due vie dell'oltretomba*, 93-99). Per dimostrare tale natura, il barone si avvale della presenza di tale dualismo anche nelle culture extraeuropee, in particolare nella tradizione indù. Il dualismo, tra atto e fatto, tra azione e contemplazione, era accompagnato anche da manifestazioni che Evola definisce "forme inferiori" (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 32), ovvero la danza frenetica e il ritmo delle menadi, e ci dice che esse erano un modo per sciogliere il limite e metterlo a nudo: attraverso l'azione si mette a nudo lo stadio più profondo dello spirito. Lo stesso avviene anche nelle tradizioni nordiche: le Valchirie, dee tempestose delle battaglie, conducevano, simbolicamente, le anime dei guerrieri al Valhalla (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 33).

A chiusura dell'articolo *Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, il filosofo conclude dicendo che "la vittoria è la visibilità di una morte trionfale e di una mistica epifania, cioè del risolversi della forza abissale evocata (le Furie, le Erinni, ecc.) nella piena attualità dello spirito" (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 33) e, proprio per questo, nell'imperatore e nel Duce, acclamati sui campi di battaglia, si aveva il senso del brusco manifestarsi di una forza d'ordine superiore. Questo modo di approcciare il simbolo è dunque qualcosa di più che una semplice superstizione o un mito, come li intenderebbe la storia positivista: per Evola, ciò dimostra che il simbolo è la traccia di una tradizione che conobbe eroicamente, cioè occidentalmente, lo spirito (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 34). Il filosofo si chiede se al suo tempo si potesse ancora parlare di una tale tradizione eroica e risponde affermativamente. Nella frenesia dello sport e del fare moderno si potranno forse ridestare forze primordiali: i Numi degli antichi (*Simboli eroici della tradizione romana*, 35). È chiaro che ci sta dicendo che gli uomini-eroi, proprio tra 'rovine' del mondo globalizzato e meccanico, torneranno ad affermarsi nella storia – al suo tempo il riferimento andava a Hitler e a Mussolini. Per lo storico Gianfranco De Turris, curatore della maggior parte delle riedizioni delle opere di Evola:

> L'impressione del già letto: vale a dire il rendersi conto che Julius Evola ha scritto cose […] scritte contemporaneamente da altri sotto diverse latitudini, senza alcun contatto fra loro […] significa semplicemente che vi sono stati, nelle culture occidentali, spiriti così aperti e sensibili ai pericoli della Modernità, da aver avute le stesse, identiche ispirazioni e suggestioni. […] Queste indubbie somiglianze e questi paralleli fra uomini che non si conobbero, non si lessero, che vissero però nello stesso tempo, indicano come la percezione di certi pericoli fosse comune per chi aveva la cultura (ancorché assai diversa gli uni dagli altri), la sensibilità umana e la preveggenza di denunciarli, andando controcorrente (Nota del curatore in *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo*, 11-12).

Evola e Warburg non si sono mai conosciuti, tantomeno si sono letti. Warburg, brillantemente e fuori da ogni intento politico, aveva compreso cosa c'era dietro la figura di Mussolini che giudicava negativamente, ma che osservava con attenzione cercandone le tracce nel passato mitico: la Messa di Bolsena, i Patti Lateranensi, l'atleta olimpico che

solleva la medaglia, il francobollo delle Barbados, l'oroscopo dello stesso Mussolini (Klenner 2007; Querini 2015; Esposito 2020; Piccichè 2023). Tutti questi elementi che Warburg accosta per comprendere meglio l'avvento del fascismo in Italia, inconsapevolmente, vanno nella stessa direzione dell'operazione evoliana di costruire una storia e un'origine dei simboli della tradizione occidentale, anche se per Warburg è un modo per comprendere ciò che stava accadendo in Italia, mentre per Evola è una necessaria strada da intraprendere per conferire al fascismo una dimensione supra-storica e spirituale. In entrambi i casi, l'antico non è visto come semplice contenitore di valori astratti da cui attingere, bensì come un atteggiamento che implica la sfera emotiva e personale: un modo – più o meno cosciente – di ricongiungersi a una dimensione supra-storica nel frattempo in cui la storia si dispiega davanti a noi.

In una recensione del 1940 del libro di Erhard Breitner *Massimiliano I: Der Traum der Weltmonarchie*, tradotta in italiano nel 1977 nei "Quaderni del Veltro", Julius Evola coglie l'occasione per illustrarci ancora una volta la funzione del mito per la cultura di destra: "Il valore del mito non si misura in ciò che esso può contenere di storia, ma viceversa, la storia che più importa si individua sulla base di ciò che essa può incarnare di mito, vale a dire sulla base di ciò che in essa ha valore simbolico, apparendo così quasi un'incarnazione di significati trascendenti" (*Massimiliano I*, 29). Evola rinviene questo approccio anche nella vita di Massimiliano I, il quale "portò abusivamente il titolo di imperatore romano dal momento che questo titolo se lo assegnò da sé, indipendentemente dall'incoronazione a Roma, che circostanze avverse non resero possibile" (*Massimiliano I*, 34). Autoproclamarsi imperatore non è per lui un gesto casuale, bensì la dimostrazione che la personalità del sovrano era "più vicina a quei valori che, per essere al di sopra del tempo, non sono di ieri o di oggi, ma hanno una perenne attualità" (*Massimiliano I*, 35). Per Evola, essere portatori di valori metafisici, cioè oltre la storia e senza alcuna geografia, è ciò che distingue le civiltà tradizionali da quella moderna. Tale concezione, appresa direttamente dal Guénon, si fonda sull'assunto che le civiltà tradizionali hanno punti di riferimento metafisici, vale a dire che sono "caratterizzate dal riconoscimento di un ordine superiore a tutto ciò che è umano e temporale" (*Oriente e occidente*, 48). All'inverso, la modernità è quel fenomeno che genera individui e comunità che "non vedono niente al di là delle realtà temporali e contingenti" (*Oriente e occidente*, 48).

Evocando l'anima del simbolo e non limitandosi al solo corpo, si può condurre lo spirito oltre ciò che è condizionato e contingente (*Il Fascio*, 47). Uno dei simboli portatori di questa trasformazione è *Il Fascio*, "Simbolo di resurrezione trionfale e compimento solare […] speranza di coloro che ancora 'credono' e che resistono di contro alle grandi ombre di decadenza spirituale che incombono sull'Occidente moderno" (*Il Fascio*, 47-48). Ancora una volta, traslando le parole di Evola, potremmo dire che "vedere in tutto ciò del semplice caso ci sembra troppo facile, a nostro avviso è molto più saggio presentire qui tracce più o meno coscienti di un unico tema, di un unico significato, di un'unica tradizione storica o

super storica che sia affiorata qua e là attraverso vie sotterranee, tanto sul piano del mito quanto su quello della realtà" (*Il Fascio*, 42).

Le personalità dai caratteri 'cesarei'

La religione di Cesare è il titolo del sesto volume della collana "I Quaderni del Veltro" edita da Edizioni Ar. Questa pubblicazione ripropone due testi sullo stesso tema: *Sul 'regnum' e sulla spiritualità di Cesare*, scritto da Evola nel 1934 per la rivista "La Vita Italiana", e *Cesare*, di Franz Altheim, pubblicato nel 1956 sulla rivista "Monarchia" (Evola mostra il suo apprezzamento per le tesi di Franz Altheim anche in *Oriente e Occidente*, 105; nello specifico per l'interpretazione del *sol invictus* presente nel suo *Il dio invitto)*. L'accostamento è dovuto ad una certa sintonia tra i due autori, essendo entrambi parte di "quell'esigua schiera di studiosi del mondo antico, i quali hanno tentato di rimuovere le stratificazioni mentali di derivazione cristiana, positivistica e razionalistica, per cercare di intendere l'universo tradizionale dall'interno, sulla base dei suoi miti e dei suoi simboli" (*La religione di Cesare*, 6-7).

L'assunto analitico da cui i due autori prendono le mosse è chiarito nella nota introduttiva di Claudio Mutti: la crisi della modernità occidentale comporterà un radicale cambio di paradigma che sarà frutto e terreno in cui si imporranno nuove personalità dai caratteri 'cesarei'. Il riferimento è alla preannunciata vittoria del cesarismo descritta da Oswald Spengler in conclusione del libro *Il tramonto dell'Occidente* (Spengler [1918-1922] 1957) – peraltro tradotto in Italia dallo stesso Evola negli anni Cinquanta. In questo senso, è interessante ricordare che il predecessore di Alessandro Giuli al Ministero della Cultura è stato Gennaro Sangiuliano che in più occasioni ha definito Spengler il filosofo da lui più amato e *Il tramonto dell'Occidente* il suo testo preferito). Il tramonto è la naturale fase terminale di un ciclo storico dominato dall'oro e dall'esprimersi del sistema democratico (*La religione di Cesare*, 5). Lo stesso Spengler, evidenzia Mutti, sarà autore di *Anni della decisione* (Spengler [1933] 2010) in cui ugualmente si presagisce l'arrivo di grandi personalità col compito di riportare al centro "il primato del principio politico contro le prevaricazioni dell'economia: […] la spada trionferà sul denaro, la volontà da signore piegherà di nuovo la volontà da predatore" (*La religione di Cesare*, 5-6). Seppur Spengler sia il punto di partenza sia di Evola che di Altheim, l'elemento su cui non c'è sintonia tra i due è, a detta del curatore del volume, la semplicità con cui l'autore de *Il tramonto dell'Occidente* accosta il nome di Cesare a quello di 'signore', siccome quest'ultimo sembra avere i connotati di un capo cinico e privo di scrupoli maggiormente simile al principe rinascimentale anziché alla vera 'natura' della figura del Cesare storico (*La religione di Cesare*, 6).

Infatti, l'operazione analitica che vuole proporre Evola in *Sul 'regnum'* è quella di inquadrare meglio il ruolo del sacro (ovvero il ruolo svolto dalla Fortuna) nella vita politica di Giulio Cesare, peraltro colui di cui porta il nome – il che ci dice anche di una sorta di assunzione della personalità cesarea. Evola ci introduce al tema criticando l'espressione "culto della personalità". A parere del filosofo, questo modo di celebrare e intendere

la personalità nella storia non può essere considerato esaustivo perché si concentra semplicemente sull'aspetto umano delle grandi figure del mondo antico, anche se la conseguente formula "le personalità fanno la storia" conserva la volontà di smarcarsi da quel "determinismo di carattere inferiore" (*La religione di Cesare*, 10) che vincola gli individui alla gretta materialità degli avvenimenti. Ugualmente, però, l'accezione data alla parola 'culto' nega l'aspetto dirimente del manifestarsi delle personalità nella storia, ovvero il gesto nasconde il sostantivo: "Gli elementi in un piano d'ordine superiore, in uno sviluppo che – come quello di ogni grandezza – non si lascia spiegare con fattori semplicemente umani" (*La religione di Cesare*, 10). I fattori (non umani) che la storia positivista indica come elementi collaterali per comprendere una personalità in una data epoca, in realtà, assurgono "a valore di testimonianza certa per significati di un ordine superiore, essi soli atti a introdurci nel lato interno, e quindi più essenziale, di una data realtà" (*La religione di Cesare*, 11). Cesare, infatti, per Evola non è semplicemente un grande personaggio storico – storicizzato in un certo modo – ma è soprattutto un individuo supra-storico. Per dimostrare questa tesi, il barone si avvale del discorso che Cesare adolescente tenne in occasione delle esequie della moglie di Caio Mario. Egli pronunciò: "Nella mia stirpe vi è la maestà dei re, che eccellono per potenza fra gli uomini, e la sacralità degli dèi, che hanno la potenza dei re nelle loro mani" (*La religione di Cesare*, 12). Queste parole, secondo Evola, sono la riprova della consapevolezza di Cesare del suo carattere discendente da un principio antico, ovvero universale, cioè "ritrovabile, in una forma o nell'altra, in un ciclo tipico che riprende in sé le più grandi civiltà gerarchico-spirituali del mondo preantico" (*La religione di Cesare*, 13). Dal discorso di Cesare si evince l'aspetto temporale dell'istituzione, ma, al pari tempo, il fatto che "essa sia sostenuta e resa trascendente da una forza o influenza dall'alto": in sostanza, l'idea del *sacrum imperium*, del *Regnum* (*La religione di Cesare*, 13). Tale forza in Cesare non si è data fin da subito; all'inizio si è rivelata come un tratto di eloquenza del "giovane patrizio", poi come "potenza oggettiva di destino attraverso l'umanità e l'azione militare" (*La religione di Cesare*, 14), infine si è fatta coscienza di se stessa. Ma la presa di coscienza di Cesare "non è la realizzazione della volontà di divinità esterne o redentori alla sirio-semitica, bensì di una mistica misteriosa forza di fortuna e di vittoria – *Felicitas Caesaris*, *fortuna Caesaris* – che gli si rendeva via via evidente come anima occulta o sotterranea, scaturigine di tutto ciò che, attraverso di lui, andava creandosi nel mondo visibile. Un legame con la sua stirpe, ma anche una personalità che è agita, ma nella quale alla fine esso si trasfigura e si incentra" (*La religione di Cesare*, 15).

L'elemento spirituale è legato alla Fortuna romana come elemento cosmico e impersonale tant'è "che nell'ultimo periodo della sua vita può venire il dubbio che l'abbia talmente trasfusa in sé è talmente confusa con le sue sorti tanto da ritenersi anche lui, come molti lo ritenevano, 'divino'. […] Dappertutto, sia in rapporto a Fortuna che di fronte alla religione di Stato, è sempre allo straordinario, al più-che-umano, che Cesare tendeva", dirà più avanti Franz Altheim (*La religione di Cesare*, 28). Queste questioni, che sembrano degli el-

ementi psicologici e caratteriali "presso agli storici e ai 'ricercatori' moderni" (*La religione di Cesare*, 17) in realtà sono il principio stesso del *regnum* che vuole dar forma a una nuova civiltà universale attraverso il rimando costante a quei simboli da cui emerge la potenza imperiale romana.

Nell'articolo summenzionato, Evola coglie nuovamente l'occasione per mostrare una certa indifferenza nei confronti degli àuguri e dei sacrifici. Un'indifferenza che, a detta sua, mutua dai Romani e che riscontra nell'atteggiamento dello stesso Cesare, il quale preferisce affermare la sua personalità in termini di azione oggettiva e vittoriosa anziché mediante un fatalismo di carattere esteriore e sacerdotale. È come se in lui si imponesse "un fatalismo di carattere superiore e immanente, adombrato dalla forza delle origini" (*La religione di Cesare*, 17-18).

Atteggiamento da eroe dorico, lo definisce Evola, ove per dorico si intende la chiarezza e l'essenzialità. Cesare è il tipo del vincitore olimpico (la 'purezza olimpica' è la caratteristica del culto solare che si tramuta in carattere dell'*imperium*. Si vedano *Oriente e Occidente*, e *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*), che riconobbe in Eracle il suo ideale eroico: un ideale che si pone al di là del mistico sacerdotale in senso stretto, ma che, a modo suo, raggiunge uno specifico piano, una certa trascendenza, in cui "l'estremo limite dell'essere 'personalità' fa tutto uno con l'esser più che personalità" (*La religione di Cesare*, 18). L'eternità imperiale di Cesare più che essere un'idea storica, cioè ricavata dal contingente e dal perituro, è metafisica, cioè "dotata di perenne vita e della dignità del 'sempre ed ovunque' di fronte a un significato fondamentale della civiltà quale virile e spiritualità" (*La religione di Cesare*, 19).

Dati questi presupposti, saper comprendere con "nuovi occhi e nuove orecchie" (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 26) il muto insegnamento del simbolo e la centralità del manifestarsi di valori antichi e metafisici nell'agire di alcune personalità serve a comprendere meglio le "deviazioni moderne" e, di conseguenza, a scegliere percorsi differenti per realizzare lo spirito della civiltà universale. "Bisogna risalire integralmente oltre il mondo moderno" (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 28) perché solo questa sembra essere la via per risalire agli antichi valori, offuscati dalla storia. Tale operazione genealogica, a sua volta, non si adatta di certo al tempo cronologico lineare e questo assicura un riemergere, in futuro, di una sensibilità mitologica. Evola si avvale in altra sede, per esplicare il concetto, della citazione di Sallustio: "Ciò non fu una volta, ma è sempre" (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 29). Il carattere sovratemporale di ieri può riemergere con forza domani, ma per farlo necessita che il "mondo inferiore" sia mosso da un "mondo superiore" (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 77), attraverso l'agire eroico di personalità vivificatrici della mistica forza del rito (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 82-83). Per muoversi – e vincere – nelle rovine del mondo moderno, "cavalcandone la tigre", occorrono personalità in grado di accogliere il *numen* piuttosto che il *deus*: non un semplice Dio a cui essere sottomessi,

bensì una forza nuda capace di produrre effetti, di agire e di manifestarsi (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 87).

Nelle pagine di *Gli uomini e le rovine* e di *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, questo processo di ritorno del metafisico non può che essere anche una critica al totalitarismo. Evola polemizza contro l'assolutismo e il nazionalismo dei suoi tempi: una centralizzazione politica materiale, priva di un legame con il trascendentale, non è che uno scacco, una mossa politica che prepara il terreno all'ascesa del *demos* (alla democrazia) e, dunque, alla profanazione del trono (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 121). Nel totalitarismo del suo tempo, il barone vede solo una barbara volontà di potenza, di tipo militaristico o economico, a cui si è continuato a dare il nome di impero: tirannie senza spirito (*Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 121). Questi assolutismi si sono preoccupati solo della sfera materiale e non di quella spirituale e questo significherà per loro un'assoluta capitolazione. L'esempio che Evola adotta in *Gli uomini e le rovine* è quello della proprietà privata: come si può chiedere il rispetto della proprietà privata se manca una legittimazione superiore del possesso da parte di alcuni e della privazione da parte di altri? Se gli uomini che possiedono privilegi, ricchezza e proprietà non dimostrano di avere qualcosa di sensibilmente superiore agli altri, non può che esserci una richiesta di giustizia sociale (*Gli uomini e le rovine*, 63). Per di più, il riconoscimento di una superiorità morale non si può obbligare, e ciò non perché l'autore abbia un giudizio di valore negativo nei confronti degli obblighi, ma perché l'orizzonte della costruzione di uno Stato organico – la proposta politica di Evola – non può prevedere il livellamento e l'uguaglianza tra gli individui. In ultima istanza, l'obbedienza, più che adesione, si limiterebbe a essere semplice conformismo. Il totalitarismo, senza spiritualità, non sarebbe che una scuola di servilismo, vale a dire un'estensione peggiorativa del collettivismo (*Gli uomini e le rovine*, 70). Evola per converso ha in mente una concezione organica del potere cioè una gestione della politica che "presuppone qualcosa di trascendente, di 'dall'alto' come base dell'autorità e del comando; senza di ciò verrebbero automaticamente a mancare le connessioni immateriali, sostanziali delle parti col centro, l'ordine interno delle singole libertà, l'immanenza di una legge generale che guida e sorregge senza costringere, infine, la disposizione superindividuale del particolare, senza la quale ogni decentralizzazione e articolazione finirebbe col costruire un pericolo per l'unità del tutto" (*Gli uomini e le rovine*, 71). L'organicità delle grandi civiltà tradizionali fu esattamente questo:

> Una idea centrale, un simbolo di sovranità con un corrispondente, positivo principio di autorità ne costituì la base e la forza animatrice, e quasi per spontanea gravitazione uomini e corpi sociali si trovarono in sinergia; pur conservando una loro autonomia essi svolsero attività convergenti in un'unica direzione fondamentale; gli stessi contrasti, le stesse antitesi avevano una loro parte nell'economia del tutto, perché esse non presentavano il carattere di affezioni disorganizzatrici, esse non mettevano in questione la sovraordinata unità dell'organismo come tale, ma agivano piuttosto come un fattore dinamico e ravvivatore (*Gli uomini e le rovine*, 66).









2 | Copertina della ristampa del 2023 di Julius Evola, *Simboli della Tradizione Occidentale*, Edizioni Arktos, Carmagnola (TO).
3 | Charles Thomson, William Barton, *Observe of Great Seal of the United States*, emblema ufficiale, flat design, 1782.
4 | Tre monete 'Impero' del Regno d'Italia: cent. 50, lire 1, lire 2, acmonital, 1940-1941. Fila superiore in rovescio, fila inferiore in dritto.
5 | Rovescio moneta 20 lire 'Elmetto', argento 600/1000, 1928.
6 | Logo ufficiale dell'ECR Group (Gruppo dei Conservatori e Riformisti Europei), 2020.

Conclusioni

In questo momento storico, in cui cresce la sensazione, tra individui e comunità, di essere abbandonati a se stessi, il modo di agire la personalità proposto da Evola, da parte dei leader politici, fa gola. Il progressivo restringimento degli spazi democratici si accompagna a un'evidente crescita di parti politiche e figure che non solo si prefiggono un ritorno all'ordine, ma lo fanno a partire dalla costruzione di un contorno sovrastorico, eroico e simbolico che fa apparire la loro ascesa come 'metafisica', cioè al di là del tempo ed esclusivamente frutto della volontà e della determinazione dei singoli nel bisogno di ristabilire qualcosa di latente nell'uomo. Chi scrive ritiene che Trump, Giorgia Meloni, Milei e Orbán, per evocare i casi più espliciti, non siano altro che prodotti di una data fase storica, semplici fattori tra particolari contingenze economiche e culturali. Resta tuttavia la percezione che queste personalità abbraccino l'idea dell'eroe evoliano: il Cesare fortunato dell'azione, della riflessione, della guerra. L'eroe imperiale che si avvale dei simboli dell'aquila – stemma del presidente degli Stati Uniti –, del leone – simbolo dei Partiti Conservatori Europei (ECR)–, dell'ascia e del fascio: elementi ulteriori per legittimare la propria azione politica.

Si sa, ogni leader ha un Olimpo di eroi da imitare, a cui pensa mentre indossa la giacca prima di approvare l'ennesimo decreto razzista o firmare un aumento delle spese militari. Non sappiamo se questi 'eroi' abbiano il volto di Cesare o quello di Hitler, e di conseguenza se prediligano un simbolo piuttosto che un altro, ma il profilo a cui tendono è inconsapevolmente evoliano. Spesso sentiamo dire che Trump o Meloni sono dei pazzi, ma è troppo semplice additare qualcuno come pazzo (come se il mondo non fosse che una concatenazione di eventi, scelte, manifestazioni e congiunture); ben più difficile è ammettere che davanti a noi si sta mostrando qualcosa che supera la sfera del politico strettamente inteso nel suo aspetto economico, qualcosa che interagisce con la sfera più intima dei cittadini e, nel caso dei leader, con una tradizione storica che non si limita – e spesso non lo fa affatto – alla mera evocazione del fascismo.

Soffermarsi sul senso che un autore come Evola – letto, citato e tradotto dalle destre mondiali – attribuisce alla funzione della personalità nella storia (a partire da i simboli con cui essa sceglie di connettersi) ha il valore di far parlare insieme immagini, manifestazioni visive e segni dell'estrema destra contemporanea, dandoci la possibilità non solo di avere degli elementi su cui ragionare genealogicamente – qual è l'origine del fascio, della svastica o della fiamma tricolore – ma facendo interagire i programmi politici con i programmi iconologici. Avere una maggiore comprensione e, se possibile, fare lo sforzo di invertirne la rotta, anche sul piano dell'immaginario simbolico.

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English abstract

This contribution aims to demonstrate that Julius Evola's studies on symbols and their function served a purpose for the thinker that was deeper than mere curiosity about the origins of symbols or a fascination with ancient peoples'mythologies. By retracing key concepts from his writings, we will highlight Evola's attempt to use this research to define the function of personality in history: its

nature, role, and power. What are the characteristics of a leader? What is their attitude, and what image should they project? What is their relationship with history? By bringing together the answers to these questions in Julius Evola's texts, we aim to contribute to tracing further trajectories of interpretation on the authoritarian drift of governments and personalities in our historical present.

keywords | Julius Evola, Alt-right, Political programme, Iconology, Myth.

Le anime nere

Il mito dell'eroe e le radici di un'egemonia

Nicolas Martino



Leiji Matsumoto, *Capitan Harlock*, 1979.

In questo intervento proveremo a dimostrare come alcune icone dell'immaginario dell'estrema destra italiana, soprattutto quelle nate dagli *anime* giapponesi e dalla letteratura fantastica, affondino le loro radici nel mito dell'individualismo moderno che produce, allo stesso tempo, la figura dell'imprenditore capace di creare letteralmente il capitalismo attraverso l'ascesi intra-mondana, secondo la nota tesi di Max Weber, e la figura dell'eroe anti-moderno che resiste alla corruzione del mondo e combatte per difendere i valori di una società organica fondata sulla potenza simbolica della tradizione. Insomma, la cultura liberale e quella anti-liberale e tradizionalista, paradossalmente, nascono nello

stesso momento e condividono lo stesso humus culturale e gli stessi miti tipicamente moderni, inventati dalla cultura romantica del XIX secolo. Nelle prossime righe proveremo a verificare la tenuta di questa ipotesi, ricostruendo brevemente la rivoluzione visiva determinata dall'arrivo degli *anime* giapponesi in Italia alla fine degli anni Settanta e il dibattito che ne seguì, per poi provare a delimitare i confini mobili dei miti dell'individualismo moderno.

Il 7 gennaio del 1979 Silverio Corvisieri, all'epoca deputato di Democrazia Proletaria e componente della commissione parlamentare di vigilanza Rai, pubblicava un articolo su "La Repubblica" in cui registrava, con un certo allarme, il successo di un nuovo fenomeno: gli *anime*, ovvero i cartoni animati, provenienti dal Giappone e sbarcati sulla televisione italiana alla fine degli anni Settanta. L'anno prima, in singolare coincidenza con i giorni del rapimento Moro, sul secondo canale della Rai era andato in onda il primo episodio di *Ufo Robot* e proprio sulla creatura di Gō Nagai insisteva l'articolo che ravvisava come questo programma che tanto successo stava riscontrando presso il pubblico dei giovanissimi celebrasse:

> L'orgia della violenza annientatrice, il culto della delega al grande combattente, la religione delle macchine elettroniche, il rifiuto viscerale del diverso. […] Goldrake [insisteva] deve sempre affrontare qualche nemico spaziale estremamente malvagio, che vuole invadere o distruggere la Terra e l'umana civiltà orrendamente tecnologizzata. È a lui che gli uomini si affidano come si faceva un tempo in Giappone coi valorosi samurai (Corvisieri 1979).

Che tipo di effetti potrà avere questo immaginario sui bambini? Che tipo di valori avrebbero finito per interiorizzare più o meno inconsapevolmente? Queste erano le domande che si poneva l'autore all'interno di un dibattito che in quegli anni avrebbe coinvolto anche testate di movimento come "Lotta Continua", associazioni di genitori, intellettuali e pedagogisti, tra cui Gianni Rodari.

Soprattutto Rodari dalle colonne di "Rinascita", il prestigioso organo politico-culturale del Partito Comunista, difendeva il fenomeno inserendolo dentro un'analisi profetica del passaggio d'epoca che, da un lato, vedeva tramontare l'egemonia della parola scritta a favore di mezzi di comunicazione nuovi come la televisione, e dall'altro conosceva la proliferazione di una nuova forma di "letteratura orale" in cui una "nonna collettiva" (la televisione) raccontava favole nuove come quelle di Goldrake, un Ercole moderno che "ogni volta ha una grande impresa da affrontare, la affronta e la supera" (Rodari 1980). Nessuna demonizzazione, dunque, ma un tentativo di comprendere il fenomeno. Sulla questione della violenza, del resto, Nicoletta Artom, all'epoca funzionaria Rai e responsabile della programmazione per i ragazzi, aveva ragione quando rispondeva a Corvisieri ricordando che altri cartoni animati e altri eroi "come Topolino, Tom e Jerry, Silvestro, il terribile Bunny (il coniglio) o Tweety (il canarino)" sono altrettanto se non più violenti di *Goldrake* (Artom 1979).

Il problema non era dunque la violenza, e neppure la discriminazione del diverso, visto che Actarus, il pilota del robot, era anche lui un alieno venuto da un altro pianeta a difendere la Terra da un'invasione, ma da alieno contro altri alieni. A ben vedere, Actarus era uno straniero, un migrante arrivato a bordo di una nave stellare, che difendeva il nostro mondo dall'invasione imperialista di una potenza straniera, quella delle truppe del malvagio Re Vega, autonominatosi signore dell'Universo. Uno straniero che non difendeva un territorio – né tanto meno un'identità – particolari, ma combatteva contro l'imperialismo di una potenza soverchiante per costruire l'impero galattico della libertà, dell'uguaglianza e della fratellanza. Insomma, si potrebbe leggere questo personaggio come un difensore del cosmopolitismo illuminista, fuori da ogni retorica identitaria che rifiuta e annienta il diverso.

Se si ripercorre la storia degli *anime* giapponesi (Raffaelli 2024) ci si accorge anche abbastanza facilmente di quanto sia diversificato l'immaginario al quale rimandano e come non si possa semplificare una storia complessa che procede in entrambe le direzioni: dal Giappone all'Europa e viceversa. In questi *anime* è contenuta la particolare tradizione culturale nipponica e anche il trauma della seconda guerra mondiale (le atomiche di Hiroshima e Nagasaki), ma allo stesso tempo attraverso gli *anime* il Giappone rielabora la storia e la tradizione europea restituendola attraverso il punto di vista del Sol Levante. In questo senso basterebbe ricordare *Lady Oscar* di Ryoko Ikeda che raccontava la Rivoluzione francese in chiave femminista, e *Galaxy Express 999* di Leiji Matsumoto che raccontava, allo stesso tempo, il conflitto di classe e il sogno della vita eterna.

Sbagliava quindi chi, all'epoca, si affrettava a condannare i 'cartoni animati giapponesi', nella loro complessità, come violenti e strutturalmente fascisti. Ma in fin dei conti c'era anche qualcosa di vero nelle osservazioni di Corvisieri, visto che un anno dopo la messa in onda di *Goldrake* avrebbe fatto il suo debutto, sempre su Rai 2, un altro eroe disegnato da Leiji Matsumoto, *Capitan Harlock*, quasi subito diventato un punto di riferimento per i giovani della destra settantasettina e poi per quella degli anni Novanta di Meridiano Zero e, ancora dopo, per quella del XXI secolo di CasaPound. Non è un caso che nel 1981 sul quindicinale "Linea" fondato e diretto da Pino Rauti, all'interno della rubrica "Le ali della fantasy" curata da Gianfranco de Turris, uscisse un articolo intitolato *Da Mazinga a Harlock* e firmato con lo pseudonimo Giovanni Drogo (il protagonista del romanzo *Il deserto dei Tartari* di Dino Buzzati), dove si poteva leggere che:

> In Capitan Harlock, il pirata dello spazio che difende la Terra contro le Mazoniane, donne-pianta crudelissime, c'è da un lato l'esaltazione della vita libera e avventurosa, coraggiosa e audace, dall'altro la condanna dei politici vigliacchi, imbelli e traditori, attaccati alla poltrona, alla vita burocratica, tranquilla e pantofolaia, preoccupati della carriera, senza ideali eroici, avversari dell'avventura materiale e spirituale. Harlock, che raccoglie sotto la sua bandiera tutti gli insoddisfatti e li porta a combattere il nemico del genere umano, è, se vogliamo, un perfetto "fascista" nell'ideologia e nei comportamenti (Drogo 1981; Tarantino 2024).

Se non è vero che Ufo Robot lo si poteva definire fascista, essendo piuttosto figlio di quel cosmopolitismo rivoluzionario già ricordato, è invece vero che nel pirata dal mantello nero viveva quella forza del passato che, a partire dai controrivoluzionari francesi avrebbe affascinato tutta la cultura di destra, passando dalla Rivoluzione conservatrice del XX secolo fino ad arrivare al neoconservatorismo contemporaneo. Cosa c'era di vero, allora, nelle parole di Corvisieri e degli altri? L'insistenza su parole come "combattente" e "samurai" coglieva il punto centrale della questione che rimanda al mito dell'eroe e alla sua persistenza nella cultura moderna soprattutto a partire dal Romanticismo. È per questo che Capitan Harlock diventa un simbolo per l'estrema destra italiana a cavallo tra la fine degli anni Settanta e i primi anni Ottanta, rimanendolo ancora oggi: perché incarna il mito dell'eroe che salva il mondo dal male, un mito profondamente radicato nella cultura europea e coltivato soprattutto dal Romanticismo nel XIX secolo. Come ha mostrato Furio Jesi nei suoi studi sul mito politico, simboli e figure dell'immaginario possono essere riattivati in contesti storici diversi funzionando come una vera e propria "macchina mitologica", capace di produrre identificazioni simboliche anche quando il loro significato originario è stato in parte dimenticato (Jesi [1979] 2025).

Se il Giappone ha i samurai, il cui mito è stato raccontato nel 2003 dal film *L'ultimo Samurai* di Edward Zwick, l'Europa ha l'eroe come figura centrale della propria mitologia, dall'Ercole all'Edipo, dal Don Chisciotte al Faust, da Don Giovanni a Robinson Crusoe. Quello che qui vogliamo sostenere è che nel cortocircuito che si produce attraverso l'immaginario giapponese tradotto in italiano per un pubblico di giovanissimi, il samurai prende il posto dell'eroe che già il Romanticismo aveva celebrato come figura centrale delle narrazioni popolari e quindi "dello spirito", come avrebbe detto Johann Gottfried Herder, di un popolo. Molto di più di Actarus che guida Goldrake o di altri *anime*, proprio il pirata nero finisce per incarnare alla perfezione il prototipo di una figura già presente nel nostro immaginario da molti secoli e reinventata nell'Ottocento con risultati ambivalenti. Se pensiamo agli eroi tipicamente moderni, ovvero a quelli della letteratura già citati, come il Faust e il Chisciotte, ci si accorge che questi sono caratterizzati quasi sempre dall'essere dei super-individui che vivono la loro avventura in una condizione di eccezionale isolamento. Lo stesso si può dire per il romanzo d'avventura pubblicato nel 1719 da Daniel Defoe e dedicato alle peripezie del naufrago Robinson Crusoe. Anzi, proprio quest'ultimo diventa il simbolo vero e proprio di quell'individualismo moderno che prima Marx e poi Weber indicano come struttura stessa della logica liberale e capitalista. Più che in Defoe è nelle riscritture e nelle riduzioni (le cosiddette 'robinsonate') del romanzo che ha conosciuto un crescente successo popolare, che ritroviamo l'idea di un uomo che riesce con le sue sole forze a ricostruire un mondo. Qui l'eroe di Defoe sembra quasi una anticipazione del credo neoliberista degli anni Ottanta riassunto nella famosa frase di Margaret Thatcher: "Non esiste la società, esistono solo gli individui".

E gli altri miti moderni? In questo senso risulta particolarmente interessante ripercorrere l'analisi del critico letterario Ian Watt che smonta e rimonta il mito dell'individualismo

moderno dimostrando come i grandi romanzi come il *Chisciotte* e il *Faust*, o anche il *Don Giovanni*, non fossero originariamente, quando ne erano state scritte le prime versioni tra il XVI e il XVII secolo, storie che celebravano il mito dell'eroe ma che, al contrario, testimoniavano contraddittoriamente la resistenza di una cultura comunitaria e pre-moderna all'emersione dell'individualismo umanistico rinascimentale. Nati in un clima controriformista (Watt 1998), questi personaggi finivano tutti per fare una brutta fine perché esprimevano una *hybris* che tradiva la dimensione collettiva fatta di regole condivise. Insomma, in tutte queste versioni del Cinquecento e del Seicento emergeva la lotta tra l'*homo faber ipsius fortunae* e la società comunitaria più antica e non ancora del tutto moderna. Sarà solo durante il Romanticismo, nel XIX secolo, che queste storie verranno letteralmente riscritte e rilette in chiave tipicamente moderna, mettendo al centro la figura dell'eroe individuale che titanicamente emerge dall'anonimato della dimensione collettiva per sottomettere il mondo e gli altri ai suoi progetti. Lo stesso vale per il romanzo di Defoe che, come notava intelligentemente Marx nei *Grundrisse*, diventa un simbolo per gli economisti classici solo nelle versioni rielaborate, ovvero le robinsonate. Nel dettaglio il critico inglese sottolinea come:

> Per effetto del Rinascimento e della Riforma, il primato dell'individuo sul collettivo sia diventato caratteristica precipua di tutta la società occidentale moderna. Possiamo citare quattro famosi esempi ideologici del XVII e del XVIII secolo che hanno grandemente aiutato la causa individualista. Descartes basò il suo pensiero sull'idea della cui realtà poteva essere sicuro senza alcun dubbio, e la sua soluzione fu "Cogito ergo sum", "Io penso" dunque, non "noi"; non dice "Cogitamus ergo sumus". In seguito anche John Locke costruisce sull'individuo il proprio pensiero psicologico, politico ed epistemologico, ponendo così le basi della maggior parte del pensiero illuminista (Watt 1998, 207).

Ma sarà soprattutto il Romanticismo a mitizzare e portare a compimento simbolico l'individualismo moderno, facendo dell'eroe il centro del nostro immaginario. Anche la tragedia greca, aggiungiamo, viene riletta in questa chiave. A uno sguardo più attento, in effetti, risulta abbastanza evidente come i personaggi della tragedia non incarnassero il trionfo dell'eroe, ma al contrario un destino tragico che nasceva dal conflitto tra la dimensione collettiva – tipica dell'età arcaica e pre-classica – e il principio di individuazione che provava a farsi strada tra le onde tumultuose del canto corale. Qui è interessante notare come uno studioso di teoria dei media come Derrick De Kerckhove abbia dedicato alcuni studi proprio alla tragedia che, strutturalmente e artisticamente, starebbe a rappresentare la transizione tra una cultura orale (l'antico) e quella alfabetica (il moderno). I personaggi di Eschilo, sostiene De Kerckhove, parlano una lingua o sono parlati dalla lingua, rappresentando spesso e alternativamente, la tensione tra queste due diverse forme culturali che troverebbero, fino a un certo punto, un qualche equilibrio più o meno stabile nella forma della tragedia classica:

> Eschilo indica che non si tratta soltanto di un processo mentale, che tutto il corpo di Cassandra, come quello dei dervisci rotanti, è posseduto, immerso a forza nell'ambiente sensoriale,

> e non le appartiene più. Per dirla nel modo più semplice: il linguaggio possiede Cassandra, mentre Clitennestra possiede il linguaggio (De Kerckhove [1999] 2008, 118).

Se il debito di questa lettura nei confronti della celebre analisi di Friedrich Nietzsche è piuttosto evidente, è altrettanto vero che qui è particolarmente importante la sottolineatura di come sia stata l'invenzione della scrittura alfabetica a rendere possibile l'interiorizzazione del sapere e quindi la formazione di un foro interiore che inizia a definire la struttura di una psiche individuale a discapito di quella collettiva:

> Tutti questi effetti combinati della scrittura e del teatro accelerano la trasformazione di una psiche collettiva in psiche individuale, non solo per coloro che sanno leggere, ma anche per coloro che essi servono e per coloro che li servono. È in questo modo che si costituisce, attraverso l'esempio esterno dell'attore sulla scena, e la formazione interna di una scena mentale, la psicologia della persona autonoma (De Kerckhove [1999] 2008, 86).

Se tutto questo è vero, è altrettanto vero che per secoli le due dimensioni continueranno a convivere e spesso la dimensione pre-individuale rivendicherà i suoi diritti come sostiene Watt. Le tesi di De Kerckhove, d'altra parte, aiutano a comprendere meglio la profondità storica del processo che il Romanticismo porterà a piena visibilità simbolica. Sarà solo con il Romanticismo, quindi relativamente tardi, che l'individualismo che inizia a emergere nella tragedia greca verrà celebrato come la vittoria di uno spirito libero che si auto-afferma sul mondo e sugli altri, diventando allo stesso tempo il simbolo dell'imprenditore capitalista e quello del ribelle. Un ribelle anarchico, come in Max Stirner, o tradizionalista e controrivoluzionario. Allo stesso modo sarà sempre il Romanticismo a rivalutare, in una chiave anti-illuminista, il ruolo della fantasia e della magia, ed è da qui che la destra italiana degli anni Settanta attingerà il suo interesse per la letteratura fantasy e costruirà il mito, tutto italiano, dell'alternativa alla cultura marxista attraverso i romanzi di J.R.R. Tolkien e di Michael Ende. A proposito di Ende, in particolare *La storia infinita*, pubblicato nel 1979 e diventato anche un film di Wolfgang Petersen nel 1984, diventerà un simbolo per tutta la generazione nata nella seconda metà degli anni Settanta e cresciuta nel decennio successivo. In breve: l'eroe, in questo caso, è un giovane che si chiama Atreyu (non a caso, nome della festa giovanile della destra italiana) che difende il regno di Fantàsia e combatte contro l'avanzata del nulla. Anche qui siamo davanti a un esempio tipico di eroe romantico del XIX secolo che poi ritroviamo negli *anime* giapponesi arrivati nella televisione italiana più o meno negli stessi anni in cui Ende pubblica il suo romanzo.

Dunque, tornando al mito di Capitan Harlock – un po' stirneriano e un po' evoliano allo stesso tempo – forse ci rendiamo conto più chiaramente di come l'icona della destra radicale degli anni Settanta e Ottanta sia allo stesso tempo il simbolo del rampantismo neoliberista che segue alla destrutturazione del welfare a livello internazionale. Gli anni Ottanta sono effettivamente quelli del trionfo dell'individuo thatcheriano e del suo protagonismo narcisista contro quell'esperienza collettiva che erano stati i movimenti del '68 e del '77. Quindi possiamo dire che gli anni Ottanta sono quelli di Harlock perché nel capitano dal mantello nero sembrano convivere, contemporaneamente, gli spiriti,

apparentemente contrapposti, di Gordon Gekko, l'eroe di *Wall Street*, il film di Oliver Stone del 1987, e quelli della tecnoribellione dell'estrema destra degli anni Ottanta e Novanta. Paradossalmente chi riconosce in Capitan Harlock una ribellione ai valori borghesi, riconosce lì anche quelli borghesi della libera impresa e del successo negli affari. L'*homo economicus* (quello raccontato da Weber nell'*Etica protestante e lo spirito del capitalismo*) e l'*homo spiritualis* (quello che possiamo riscontrare nell'anti-modernismo di Julius Evola), sono lo stesso individuo eroico che dalla letteratura per l'infanzia del XIX secolo agli *anime* giapponesi ha popolato l'immaginario di intere generazioni. In Capitan Harlock ritroviamo lo stesso spirito del Don Chisciotte così come quello di Robinson Crusoe: tutti impegnati a lottare, da soli, o al massimo con qualche aiutante (che si chiami Sancho Panza, Venerdì oppure Kei Yuki), contro il male. Ciò che rende questi eroi, pur così diversi, tante varianti dello stesso modello è la loro solitudine costitutiva: sono figure che agiscono da sole e da sole affrontano e salvano il mondo. Ed è questa caratteristica tipicamente romantica a fare da *trait d'union* fra tutti questi personaggi nati in epoche diverse e a latitudini molto distanti. È questo individualismo, insieme proprietario e libertario, a costituire l'asse di un mondo in cui la dimensione collettiva resta solo uno sfondo da governare o un ostacolo da sottomettere.

Ecco perché chi si è riconosciuto in Capitan Harlock, facendone un'icona, si è, allo stesso tempo, riconosciuto nei valori del neoliberismo degli anni Ottanta, che faceva di Wall Street la nuova chiesa con i broker come sacerdoti, e in quelli della ribellione al mondo moderno nato dalla rivoluzione del 1789. Perché il capitano dell'astronave Arcadia è una versione nippo-dark degli eroi dell'individualismo moderno come Robinson, che sono contemporaneamente degli anarchici ribelli e degli operosi imprenditori. Qui, forse, sta la spiegazione della lunga egemonia culturale e politica che le destre hanno esercitato in Europa e negli Stati Uniti dagli anni Ottanta fino a oggi. E qui, probabilmente, sta anche la spiegazione di quel tradimento che le destre radicali, una volta arrivate al potere, avrebbero esercitato nei confronti dei loro valori originari abbracciando completamente il credo neoliberista. Non di tradimento si è trattato, ma di svelamento della loro natura più profonda. Non c'è una vera contraddizione tra governi neosovranisti e neoautoritari e le loro politiche economiche ultraliberiste. C'è, al contrario, un'identità profonda che coincide, a livello iconografico, con la doppia natura dell'eroe moderno inventato dalla cultura romantica: un giano bifronte. Insomma, la destra radicale con il suo immaginario non è l'opposto del liberalismo moderno, ma è il suo doppio mitico-individualista.

E in effetti, se gli anni Ottanta sono stati quelli dell'edonismo reaganiano, e questi primi decenni del XXI secolo sono quelli dell'egemonia neoconservatrice a livello internazionale, gli anni Novanta sono stati un laboratorio sperimentale dove le istanze degli anni Settanta hanno provato a reinventarsi in vista del passaggio di secolo (Mattioli 2025). Ma cosa sono stati gli anni Sessanta e Settanta se non un incredibile laboratorio politico-culturale in cui si è immaginata e costruita una potente alternativa all'individualismo borghese? Dalla distruzione della famiglia patriarcale nel '68 all'avanguardia di

massa del ’77, il decennio dei movimenti può essere ripensato come una grande risposta collettiva alla cultura costruita dal Romanticismo del XIX secolo, una forma di vita che ha colonizzato le nostre anime dipingendole di nero. La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa degli anni Sessanta e Settanta ci insegna che l’alternativa radicale non consiste mai nell’azione di eroi che, affondando le radici nei miti dell’individualismo moderno, vendicano i torti subiti dagli sconfitti della storia, ma nel far emergere chiaramente, anche a livello di immaginario, quella dimensione collettiva in cui consiste la verità della produzione e della vita in società.

In questo senso le critiche all’immaginario degli *anime* giapponesi che abbiamo ricordato all’inizio acquistano un senso più chiaro e molto meno bigotto e retrò di quello che poteva sembrare all’epoca. Non si trattava di rifiutare un processo di modernizzazione che passava anche attraverso il passaggio di testimone alla televisione che diventava la nuova baby sitter, e neanche di opporsi a un qualche processo di colonizzazione che arrivava dal Sol Levante per difendere, invece, qualche altra mal compresa tradizione. Si trattava, piuttosto, di pensare a un’alternativa collettiva e gioiosa al mito dell’eroe borghese e quindi di sconfiggere l’individualismo del capitano dal mantello nero e dal cuore bianco (come diceva il testo della sigla italiana). Si trattava di uscire da quel mondo ormai in rovina per costruirne uno che fosse davvero nuovo e diverso. È ragionevole pensare, allora, che quella sconfitta sul piano dell’immaginario abbia preparato, almeno in parte, il terreno per l’egemonia che oggi l’autoritarismo liberista esercita su scala internazionale nelle sue forme neosovraniste e ultraconservatrici.

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Abstract

In this brief essay, Martino demonstrates how certain icons of the Italian far-right imagination – articularly those drawn from Japanese *anime* and fantasy literature – have their roots in the myth of modern individualism, which simultaneously gives rise to the figure of the entrepreneur capable of literally creating capitalism through inner-worldly asceticism, and the figure of the anti-modern hero who resists the corruption of the world and fights to defend the values of an organic society founded on traditional values. In short, liberal culture and anti-liberal, traditionalist culture, paradoxically, arise at the same time and share the same cultural soil and the same typically modern myths, invented by 19th-century Romantic culture. In this sense, the figure of Captain Harlock becomes particularly significant because he embodies the structural ambivalence of the modern imagination founded on the myth of individualism.

keywords | Japanese *anime*; Imaginary; Radical right; Captain Harlock; Individualism; Myth; Hero.

La blanquitud de Apolo

La supervivencia de la Antigüedad clásica en la cultura visual de la Alt-Right

Luis Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez



1 | Propaganda de Identity Europa, 2017.

Una guerra de imágenes

En los años 2016 y 2017, en diversos campus universitarios estadounidenses se distribuyeron una serie de pósteres, flyers y propaganda visual protagonizada por famosas esculturas de la historia del arte [Fig. 1]. Entre ellas, se puede distinguir el David de Miguel Ángel, el Apolo de Belvedere, el Hércules del Metropolitan Museum de Nueva York, el Julio César de Nicolas Coustou del siglo XVII o una indefinida figura de un ángel con una expresión de tristeza. Las imágenes estaban acompañadas de frases o eslóganes como "Let's become great again", "Serve your people", "Protect our heritage" o "Our future belongs to us". Bajo estos lemas se podía leer un nombre, Identity Europa, una organización de extrema derecha, neo-nazi, neo-fascista y supremacista blanca fundada en el año 2016 por el exmarine Nathan Damigo. El grupo fue una de las principales organizaciones que contribuyeron al crecimiento del supremacismo blanco en los Estados Unidos en la segunda década del siglo XXI durante sus cuatro años de existencia. Fue una de las organizaciones más activas en los campus, responsable de casi la mitad de los incidentes reportados en el país relacionados con la distribución de propaganda de la Alt-Right y del Movimiento Identitario, dos de los principales grupos de la derecha radical en los Estados Unidos. En marzo de 2019 el grupo fue renombrado como American Identity Movement y su existencia duró hasta el año 2020 en que fue disuelto. Hoy en día

no es una organización activa, pero llegó a contar con cerca de 700 miembros afiliados (Davis 2017, Beckett 2017).

La ideología supremacista de Identity Europa no estaba encaminada tanto a denigrar a personas de color como a cultivar un sentido de conciencia racial blanca entre los jóvenes, principalmente hombres, que los llevara a construir una comunidad. Es por ello que sus actividades en los campus universitarios se orientaban a conectar con un potencial público masculino con los que conformar la nueva imagen del nacionalismo blanco en los Estados Unidos del siglo XXI. Para este propósito, la elección de la estatuaria clásica para sus carteles y su propaganda visual fue una herramienta fundamental, ya que servía para representar y dar visibilidad a su ideología. No se trataba de una estrategia puramente visual y estética, sino que apelar a la estatuaría clásica es un modo de aludir a la identidad blanca, la *whiteness* (blanquitud en adelante), en los Estados Unidos (Mirzoeff 2023, 10-12).

En este uso de la estatuaría clásica se adivinan una serie de capas en las que hay encerrados matices, sentidos y significados que cuentan con una larga historia. Por un lado, las imágenes que conforman la propaganda de Identity Europa son un conjunto heterogéneo de ejemplos extraídos de la historia del arte occidental. No se trata de una selección coherente de la tradición clásica, pues bajo este apelativo tan sólo se podría englobar al Apolo de Belvedere y el Hércules del Metropolitan Museum. Las otras esculturas, a saber, el David de Miguel Ángel o el Julio César de Coustou, mantienen algunos lazos con la tradición clásica, pero son de épocas posteriores. El David y Julio César, del Renacimiento y el barroco respectivamente, entroncan con la cultura clásica de diferentes maneras. En el caso del primero, por el movimiento cultural al que pertenece y por la clara inspiración formal en el contrapposto clásico. Sin embargo, no deja de ser una escultura que representa un tipo iconográfico bíblico. En el caso del segundo, la elección de Julio César se justifica por el referente clásico del personaje pero es una estatua de 1696 destinada a los jardines del palacio de Versalles. Por último, la escultura del ángel triste es la menos clásica de todas pues es una obra del siglo XIX que se encuentra en el cementerio de la ciudad de Saarlouis (Alemania). Su inclusión responde a que es una estatua que parece clásica por el material, el mármol, y por el pathos de su rostro.

Este último ejemplo da un sentido homogéneo al programa visual de la propaganda de Identity Europa pues es un conjunto de imágenes reunidas porque parecen extraídas de la tradición clásica al ser todas de mármol. Son un claro ejemplo de lo que se conoce como "white classical body", un concepto que ha servido para sostener y defender la identidad blanca a partir del material con el que están hechas las esculturas clásicas (Dhindsa 2024). El paradigma del mármol blanco ha sido esgrimido para que los grupos supremacistas defiendan su concepto de blanquitud. La asociación entre mármol blanco y belleza ideal que se produjo en el siglo XVIII con el desarrollo de la estética, sirvió de base intelectual para que el supremacismo blanco emplease la estatuaria clásica

monocroma como una infraestructura material con la que sostener su ideología (Mirzoeff 2023, 10-12; Martínez 2020). Las teorías estéticas que han privilegiado el mármol blanco han servido para validar la opresión étnica y racial por medio de discursos sobre el gusto, el arte y el color en los que se puede entrever una tendencia hacia la cromofobia que es simétrica al supremacismo blanco y la segregación racial (Calvo-Quirós 2013, 93-104).

No sólo el mármol blanco es el material con el que argumentar una ideología racista, sino que la propia estatua evoca una cultura material que ampara el racismo sistemático. Se pone de manifiesto una idea constante en la historia del mundo eurooccidental: que la Grecia clásica es la cuna y la matriz de los valores occidentales y que lo clásico se usa para legitimar la hegemonía de occidente sobre el resto del mundo (Settis [2004] 2006, 20-23). En el contexto del giro derechizador que se está dando en algunos países, entre ellos Estados Unidos, la Antigüedad clásica es un recurso o modelo de legitimación política y cultural que se ha activado en un marco político, mediático y cultural muy específico (Machuca Prieto 2021, 74-77).

A todo esto hay que añadir que el movimiento identitario y el supremacismo estadounidenses han defendido con violencia la presencia de estatuas en el espacio público. La propaganda visual de Identity Europa, con alusiones a la estatuaria clásica, se sitúa en un contexto más complejo en el que las imágenes actúan como agentes con capacidad de tener efectos en el mundo real. Este contexto es el de una guerra de imágenes (Mitchell 2011, 1-3), un concepto que señala el papel de las imágenes en los conflictos políticos del mundo contemporáneo. Esta guerra de imágenes se entiende en clave metafórica pero también real. Metafórica porque la propaganda y la estatuaria buscan movilizar a los espectadores con la finalidad que se unan a la comunidad supremacista soñada por Damigo. La imagen, así, cumple su función propagandística y persuasiva a la perfección. Sin embargo, esta guerra de imágenes tiene un componente real ya que Identity Europa fue una de las organizaciones que participó de manera activa en los violentos disturbios que tuvieron lugar en Charlottesville (Virginia) en agosto de 2017.

En los días 11 y 12 de agosto de 2017, en la ciudad de Charlottesville se reunieron diversas asociaciones y grupos de extrema derecha estadounidenses en una manifestación llamada "Unite the right" cuyo propósito era oponerse a la retirada de una imagen, la escultura del general confederado Robert E. Lee (Blout, Burkart 2023, 1624-1652). Estos acontecimientos se enmarcan en el contexto del movimiento #blacklivesmatter que promueve la retirada de monumentos confederados y supremacistas del espacio público (Mirzoeff 2017, 6-22) y, de modo más general, la eliminación o resignificación de cualquier monumento vinculado con ideas racistas, supremacistas, fascistas e intolerantes (Montanari 2024).

Es aquí donde la guerra de imágenes cobra todo su sentido. Por un lado, por la violencia que se desató durante esos dos días y, por otro, por la iconofilia demostrada por los

manifestantes de extrema derecha. El supremacismo blanco entiende la estatua (si es clásica todavía más) como el paradigma de la blanquitud y del supremacismo (Mirzoeff 2023, 59). A su vez, esas esculturas en el espacio público son la infraestructura material que ampara lo que se conoce como *replacement theory* ("teoría del gran reemplazo"), un precepto compartido por el supremacismo que entiende que la raza blanca y su cultura están amenazadas y van a ser desplazadas. Durante los disturbios acontecidos en Charlottesville, los grupos de extrema derecha repitieron consignas como "You will not replace us", en clara alusión a la teoría del gran reemplazo (Blout, Burkart 2023, 1625-1626). La iconofilia de la extrema derecha es contrastada con la iconoclasia de los grupos antifascistas que plantean la retirada de la estatua pues es un símbolo de opresión (Heller, 2018. 35-38). Estos grupos respondieron a la propaganda de Identity Europa en los campus por medio de carteles de imágenes de estatuas clásicas destruidas o vandalizadas con el slogan "This is an antifa zone".

El Apolo Belvedere y la fisionomía del supremacismo blanco: de Winckelmann al cesarismo MAGA

Volviendo a los pósteres, uno de ellos es especialmente significativo, aquel que representa al Apolo de Belvedere, una escultura que desde el siglo XVIII ha servido para defender, no sólo ideales de belleza, sino también ideales fisionómicos, raciales y humanos que han sustentado la supremacía del hombre blanco europeo sobre el resto de la humanidad. Parte de la ideología del supremacismo blanco no se puede entender sin el papel de la estética y las valoraciones que recibió la estatua del Apolo de Belvedere, la famosa copia romana en mármol del siglo II d.C. que desde el siglo XVI formó parte de las colecciones papales y que se muestra en el Cortile ottagonale del Belvedere vaticano diseñado por Bramante (Haskell, Penny [1981] 1990, 26-28 y 115-122).

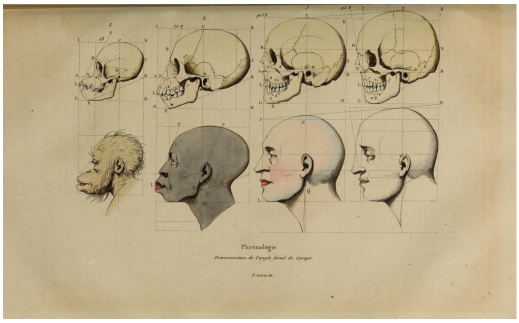
La estética, entendida como la disciplina destinada al estudio de la belleza, se aplicó también al estudio de la belleza humana pues los juicios estéticos podían servir para categorizar personas y para diferenciar entre la civilización y el salvaje. La revitalización del concepto griego *kalokagathia*, según el cual la belleza exterior se corresponde con una belleza interior, sirvió para apuntalar la correspondencia entre estética y fisionomía. Así, Los juicios estéticos se aplicaron al estudio de los seres humanos con el propósito de leer en los rasgos exteriores, las características morales internas (Bindman 2002, 23-78).

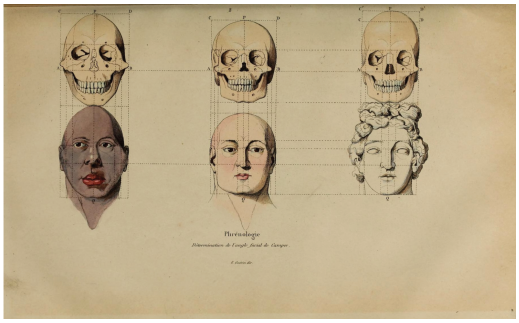
La asociación entre escultura clásica y belleza ideal comienza con Johann Joachim Winckelmann, quien pensaba que el único camino que el ser humano tenía "para ser grandes, más aún, para ser, si es posible, inimitables, es la imitación de los antiguos" (Winckelmann [1755] 2008, 78). De esta forma, el ideal de belleza que alcanzaron los griegos de la época de Pericles era la meta a la que podían aspirar los artistas de mediados del siglo XVIII. Las conclusiones de Winckelmann se basaron en sus observaciones de la estatuaria clásica que podía contemplar y estudiar en Roma. Entre todas, se consideraba el Apolo de Belvedere la perfección, siendo alabada por Winckelmann como el

ejemplo que condensaba la belleza suprema. Con su descripción del Apolo de Belvedere, Winckelmann definía un canon estético europeo basado en la fetichización de la belleza masculina blanca que había encontrado en la estatuaria clásica. La explicación de esta perfección se debía, según Winckelmann, al sistema político de los griegos y a la llamada teoría del clima, que consideraba que las diferencias entre seres humanos, lo que en el siglo XVIII se definía como la variedad humana (y el siglo XIX mencionará como razas) se explicaba porque estaban distribuidos en distintas zonas del mundo en función del clima. En esta teoría, que se remonta a Hipócrates y que fue recuperada en la Ilustración por Du Bos y Montesquieu, el clima de Grecia favorece el desarrollo de la perfección física masculina (Bindman 2002, 59-66).

En realidad, Winckelmann se centró en un aspecto muy concreto de la fisionomía del Apolo de Belvedere: el llamado perfil griego, un tipo de rostro que se caracterizaba por una línea recta que unía la frente con la nariz. Según el autor, este perfil era indicativo de personas que podían actuar racionalmente porque las pasiones del cuerpo eran controladas por la mente. Aquellos que tenían este autocontrol de sus pasiones internas eran capaces de gobernarse en una sociedad libre (Hodne 2020, 6-35). Este perfil se podía encontrar en diversas estatuas clásicas, pero donde se representa de un modo perfecto es, según Winckelmann, en el Apolo de Belvedere: "en la forma del rostro, el llamado perfil griego es la cualidad más sobresaliente de una belleza superior. Este perfil es una línea casi recta o suavemente descendente que, en cabezas juveniles y especialmente femeninas, une la frente y la nariz. La naturaleza lo crea menos en los lugares con un clima riguroso que en los que lo tienen suave, pero donde se encuentra, puede hacer bella la forma del rostro, pues lo recto y lleno expresa grandeza, y las formas suavemente descendentes, delicadeza. Que este perfil es una de las causas de la belleza del rostro lo demuestra el caso contrario: cuanto más pronunciada es la curva de la nariz, más se aleja de la forma bella. Y cuando un rostro visto de lado muestra un perfil defectuoso, podemos ahorrarnos el trabajo de buscar en él algo bello" (Winckelmann [1764] 2024, 90).

Las reflexiones de Winckelmann sobre el arte antiguo se difundieron con rapidez en los ambientes artísticos, anticuarios e intelectuales de la Europa del momento y su fama y prestigio se acrecentó. La importancia de sus ideas sobre el arte clásico queda manifiesta por la presencia del Apolo de Belvedere en contextos que poco tienen que ver con la estética y la historia del arte. Comienza aquí la historia de la supervivencia de la imagen y de sus migraciones, desde la estética a la antropología y a las ideologías fascistas. Uno de los primeros ejemplos es el médico y anatomista Petrus Camper, contemporáneo de Winckelmann, que para estudiar la diversidad humana que poblaba el mundo se dedicó a medir cráneos en la morgue de Ámsterdam entre 1755 y 1761. La mayoría de sus disecciones eran con hombre blancos europeos, aunque pudo hacer alguna disección con cuerpos de africanos o de algún primate. Con este material, Camper se interesó por el ángulo facial, una medida que se obtiene de la intersección entre una línea vertical que





2 | Petrus Camper, Dibujos sobre el ángulo facial de perfil, 1838.
3 | Petrus Camper, Dibujos sobre el ángulo facial frontales con la inclusión del Apolo de Belvedere, 1838.

va desde la barbilla a la parte superior de la frente y una línea horizontal que va desde el lóbulo de la oreja hasta la punta de la nariz. Esta medida servía para diferenciar de manera objetiva entre los diversos grupos que conformaban la humanidad. Las observaciones de Camper determinaron que el ángulo facial del orangután media 58°, el del angoleño 70°, el del europeo 80° y que el de las estatuas romanas variaba entre 85° y 90°. La perfección se encontraba en las estatuas griegas, que daban una medida en el ángulo facial de 100°. Camper advierte que esta medida no se puede encontrar en el mundo real, sino que sólo se halla en la estatuaria griega (Hodne 2020, 29).

Camper estaba interesado en el ángulo facial porque podía ser una herramienta muy útil para los artistas. El propio Camper tenía formación artística ya que también se dedicó a la ilustración científica y algunas de sus conferencias sobre el ángulo facial se impartieron en la sede de la academia de dibujo de Ámsterdam. La publicación de sus investigaciones sobre antropometría tras su muerte incluyó las imágenes sobre el ángulo facial [Fig. 2]. En estas se disponen los cráneos y las cabezas vistas de perfil con una serie de líneas superpuestas que ayudan a visualizar los grados del ángulo facial. La disposición de las cabezas comienza con los simios y va avanzando de manera gradual hacia las otras razas hasta llegar a la cabeza del europeo. Otra de las ilustraciones representa los rostros de frente y es aquí donde Camper incluye al Apolo de Belvedere [Fig. 3]. Los distintos rostros también presentan una gradación de izquierda a derecha pues comienza con el mono y concluye con la cabeza de Apolo. Entre ambas se disponen el resto de las razas, como si el reino animal y el ámbito del arte fuesen los límites entre los que se sitúa la humanidad. Camper advierte que la disposición de las cabezas debe servir para que el observador aprecie las diferencias entre los cráneos humanos y los animales, no para mostrar una jerarquía entre especies y humanos en la que el europeo queda más cerca del ideal apolíneo y el africano cerca del mono. Camper, al introducir la cabeza del Apolo, estaba realizando el primer intento científico de asociar la tipología del europeo con el canon de las antiguas esculturas (Meijer 1999, 96-100, Bindman 2002, 203-205).



4 | Johan Caspar Lavater, Silueta del Apolo de Belvedere, 1775.
5 | Johan Caspar Lavater, Secuencia de etapas desde la rana hasta el perfil de Apolo, 1797.
6 | Joseph Julien Virey, Cráneo de Apolo junto a otras razas y animales, 1824.

Otro autor contemporáneo a Camper que se interesó por el llamado perfil griego fue Johan Caspar Lavater, conocido por sus estudios sobre la fisionomía humana. Esta disciplina buscaba estudiar los rasgos externos de una persona pues se creía que eran expresión de las características morales internas. Para Lavater, existía una correlación indudable entre belleza física y belleza interior, entre fealdad y vileza moral. Esta conexión se podía leer de manera admirable en el cráneo, por lo que Lavater centrará sus investigaciones en esta parte del cuerpo. En sus textos, Lavater menciona el Apolo de Belvedere, influido por Winckelmann, a quien cita en varias ocasiones. La cabeza del Apolo es un paradigma de belleza pero también de inteligencia y es alabada por Lavater por su equilibrio (Bindman 2002, 102-113).

Para precisar sus conclusiones fisionómicas, Lavater se apoyó en la moda de las siluetas, un tipo de retrato popular y barato de finales del siglo XVIII que consistía en la delineación del perfil de un rostro. Lavater defendía el uso de estas silueta o sombra porque:

> Physiognomy has no greater, more incontrovertible certainty of the truth of its object than that imparted by shade. If the shade, according to the general sense and decision of all men, can decide so much concerning character, how much more must the living body, the whole appearance, and action of the man! If the shade be oracular, the voice of truth, the Word of God, what must the living original be, illuminated by the spirit of God! (Lavater 1853, 189).

En la edición de 1755 de su *Physiognomische Fragmente*, incluyó una silueta o sombra del Apolo de Belvedere [Fig. 4] con la intención de demostrar que la belleza externa de la escultura se correspondía con su belleza interior (Lavater 1775, 130).

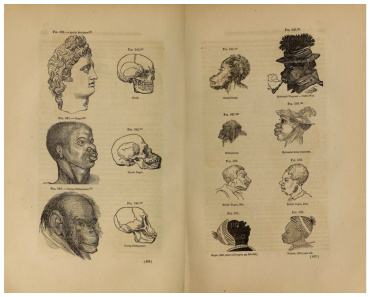
En la edición francesa de 1803 de la Fisionomía de Lavater se incluyó un curioso grabado titulado *Stufenfolge von dem Frosche bis zum Apollo-Profil* ("Gradación de la cabeza de una rana hasta la cabeza de Apolo") que de nuevo introduce el perfil del Apolo de

Belvedere en un discurso sobre la superioridad humana (Bindman 2011, 392-395; Bindman 2002, 209-213). En la imagen se muestra una suerte de transición o transformación de una rana hasta el Apolo de Belvedere en 24 imágenes [Fig. 5]. En la gradación se aprecia la transformación del ángulo facial, especialmente la frente, desde la casi horizontalidad del batracio a la perfección de los 100° de Apolo. La intención de Lavater era mostrar de manera muy clara la separación entre los animales y el ser humano por lo que la disposición secuencial buscaba cumplir este objetivo. La imagen es muy sugerente en términos de la teoría de la evolución pues visualmente sugiere una gradación casi cinemática desde las criaturas más inferiores hasta llegar al ser humano, aunque cronológicamente es algo anterior a la circulación de las primeras ideas sobre el transformismo de Lamarck.

Las observaciones de Winckelmann, Camper o Lavater fueron la base sobre la que el siglo XIX conformó las ideas raciales de la superioridad de la raza blanca. Aunque ninguno de ellos defendió esta posición (el propio Camper era antiesclavista y Winckelmann defendió la libertad democrática como garantía para alcanzar el gran arte), no emplearon la palabra raza en sus textos (la variedad humana era la expresión habitual), sus palabras e imágenes fueron asumidas por antropólogos y naturistas en el siglo XIX para defender la superioridad blanca. Winckelmann y Camper distinguían de manera muy clara entre el ideal de belleza que se podía encontrar en los griegos de la Antigüedad y la imperfección de sus contemporáneos europeos. Sin embargo, estos matices se diluyen y desaparecen en el siglo XIX pues se asumirá que el ideal griego representaba el tipo genérico del europeo civilizado (Bindman 2002, 221). Esto se aprecia de manera muy elocuente en publicaciones como *Histoire naturelle du genre humain*, del antropólogo Joseph Julien Virey (1775-1846) quien recurre a la estatuaria clásica para asociarla con los europeos y con su superioridad. Virey aporta diversos argumentos para demostrar la superioridad del europeo blanco: menciona el ángulo facial de Camper así como otros experimentos destinados a evidenciar la superior inteligencia. Una de las ilustraciones del libro actúa como argumento visual de estas ideas. En ella se recurre, de nuevo, al Apolo de Belvedere, aunque en este caso es el cráneo [Fig. 6]. En la imagen se compara su calavera con el cráneo de un georgiano, de un negro y de un simio. Al disponerse juntos se observa el mayor tamaño del cráneo del europeo (lo que equivale a más inteligencia) así como el avance hacia el prognatismo en los otros cráneos (Virey 1824, 58).

En la misma línea, los antropólogos Josiah Nott y George Gliddon recurrieron al Apolo de Belvedere para explicar las características que tienen los cráneos de las distintas razas del mundo (Hodne 2020, 7). En su libro, *Types of mankind*, se apoyan de manera recurrente en la historia del arte para el estudio de las razas orientales o asiáticas, con alusiones a los rostros representados en el arte egipcio y de Mesopotamia [Fig. 7]. Nott y Gliddon ofrecen una comparación visual entre el europeo, evidenciado por el Apolo de Belvedere, y el negro, el orangután, el chimpancé, los hotentotes y los nubios. La disposición de la cabeza de Apolo en la parte superior busca consolidar su posición privilegiada









7 | Josiah Nott, George Gliddon, Perfiles judíos de la antigua Mesopotamia, 1854.
8 | Josiah Nott, George Gliddon, Primacía racial del Apolo de Belvedere, 1854.
9 | Portada del primer número de "La difesa della razza", 1938.
10 | Portada con el Apolo de Belvedere de "La difesa della razza", 1939.

respecto al resto de razas (Nott, Gliddon 1854, 458-459). En otro de sus publicaciones, vuelven a mencionar el arte griego y romano de un modo muy singular, pues Nott y Gliddon los describen como: "The intellectual and physical masters of the world. In the Greek skull we behold the emblem of exalted reason" (Nott, Gliddon 1857, 309). Para evidenciar que la fisionomía griega es superior se recurre, de nuevo, al Apolo de Belvedere [Fig. 8] ya que sirve para obtener una idea exacta de "perfect Grecian countenance" (Nott, Gliddon 1857, 310).

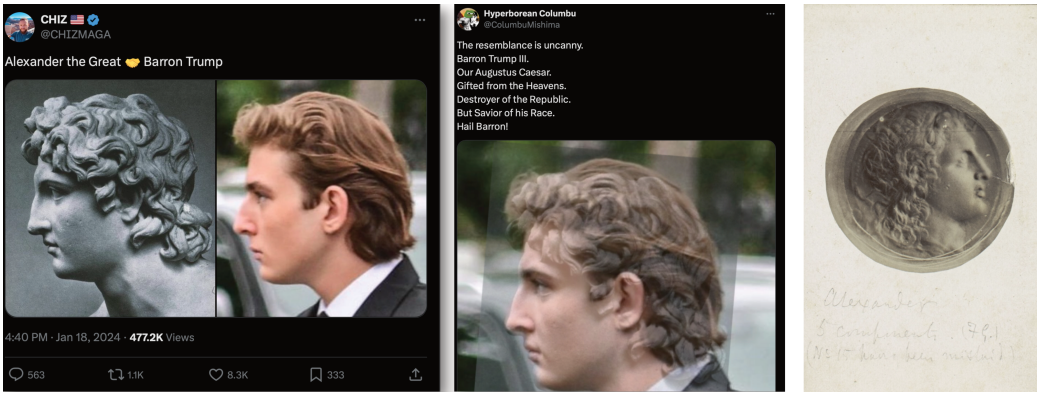
El Apolo de Belvedere volverá a ser rescatado para argumentar la superioridad racial europea en el contexto del fascismo italiano. "La difesa della razza" fue una publicación oficial del régimen fascista dirigida por Telesio Interlandi destinada a difundir el racismo cultural y científico con un claro perfil antisemita. La revista, que se publicó entre 1938 y 1943, se basó en el uso de fotomontajes como una estrategia visual para mostrar su ideología a los lectores (Righettoni 2022, 43-67). En esos fotomontajes se empleaba de manera recurrente el arte clásico, tanto arquitectura como escultura, para mostrar y defender la superioridad racial de los europeos y para vilipendiar a los no-europeos y a los judíos. El compromiso de la revista con el clasicismo quedó patente en el fotomontaje de la portada de su primer número que consistía en una cabeza clásica junto a la de un judío y un africano [Fig. 9]. La cabeza clásica es la del Doríforo de Policleto mientras que la del judío proviene de una terracota medieval y el africano está extraído de una fotografía. En el fotomontaje, la cabeza clásica está separada de las otras dos por una espada, metáfora visual de la violencia como estrategia válida para preservar la pureza racial y subrayar la pureza racial italiana (Aguirre 2015, 376). La revista se apoyaba en la historia del arte y en el clasicismo para legitimar el racismo científico del régimen. Esta postura explica la inclusión del Apolo de Belvedere en la portada de diciembre de 1939 [Fig. 10]. En el fotomontaje se separa la escultura de un grupo de africanos por una marcada diagonal que deja a estos en penumbra y oscuridad a la vez que resalta a Apolo con luminosidad, como una metáfora visual de la superioridad racial y estética que desde la Ilustración ha

empleado la escultura del Apolo para defender su ideología. Este ejemplo se sitúa en el marco más amplio de la masiva reutilización de lo clásico que promovieron los sistemas totalitarios de Italia y Alemania en los años 20 y 30 del siglo XX ya que veían en Grecia y Roma la presencia de unos valores perpetuos e inmutables (Settis [2004] 2006, 110, Chapoutot [2008] 2016, Roche, Demetriou 2017).

Todos estos ejemplos sobre la pervivencia del Apolo de Belvedere y sus migraciones desde la historia del arte y la estética a terrenos como la antropología, la medicina o el fascismo ponen de manifiesto el papel que la historia del arte como disciplina ha tenido en la conformación del racismo (Aguirre 2015, 380). El renovado interés por la fisionomía como disciplina en el siglo XVIII y XIX afianzó la creencia en que las características externas de los individuos podían denotar o transparentar su condición interna. Aliándose con la estética y la historia del arte, junto al prestigio del clasicismo y la tradición clásica, la fisionomía privilegió el rostro del Apolo del Belvedere como paradigma de la fisionomía de la raza.

El recurso a la fisionomía para señalar la superioridad de un individuo o grupo sigue vigente en el discurso de la Alt-Right estadounidense donde Barron Trump, el hijo más joven del presidente Donald Trump, ha sido visto por algunos internautas como un potencial emperador o césar por la fisionomía de su rostro (Page 2024). Este sueño hay que entenderlo en el contexto del cesarismo MAGA (Make America Great Again), una corriente que apuesta por la sustitución de la democracia en los Estados Unidos por una dictadura. El principal defensor de esta idea es Curtis Yarvin, un bloguero cuyas ideas han calado de manera muy profunda en algunos miembros importantes de la administración Trump que abogan por un desmantelamiento del estado en favor de un gobierno absoluto apoyado por las grandes empresas tecnológicas. Entre sus ideas se encuentra el despido masivo de funcionarios estatales, la desaparición de escuelas y universidades públicas, la abolición de la prensa y la revisión de los acuerdos internacionales ya que se trata de los elementos que obstaculizarían la implantación de esa dictadura soñada por la Alt-Right: "The idea that you're going to be a Caesar […] with someone else's Department of Reality in operation is just manifestly absurd", defendía Yarvin en un podcast (Kofman 2025).

El cesarismo MAGA ha visto que Barron Trump encarnaría mejor que nadie la figura de un César o un dictador por su fisionomía. Algunos internautas han buscado analogías entre su perfil y el de algunas estatuas clásicas de Alejandro Magno a modo de un meme de internet [Fig. 11]. A partir de una foto de Barron Trump en estricto perfil tomada durante el funeral de su abuela, los usuarios han comparado la nariz y el perfil con Alejandro Magno y, en algún caso, han superpuesto ambos rostros para destacar la semejanza entre ambos, como si la fisionomía de Barron Trump fuese suficiente para ser nombrado César o emperador. Esta superposición recuerda los retratos compuestos que el eugenista y antropólogo Francis Galton hacía de criminales o de tipos étnicos a finales del siglo XIX



11 | Comparativas entre los perfiles de Alejandro Magno y Barron Trump extraídas de redes sociales de simpatizantes de la alt-right, 2024.
12 | Francis Galton, Retrato compuesto de Alejandro Magno a partir de monedas, 1880-1890, London, Wellcome Collection.

con el objetivo de detectar unas características externas que indicasen una disposición innata al crimen, una enfermedad o un tipo racial (Sekula 1986, 18-20). Galton llegó a curiosear con conocer el verdadero perfil de personajes del mundo antiguo, como Alejandro Magno, superponiendo diversas monedas para obtener un retrato compuesto [Fig. 12].

El perfil griego que Winckelmann aplaudiese como una seña de la belleza ideal alcanzada por los griegos ha mostrado una fértil supervivencia desde la estética hasta la antropología del siglo XIX, el fascismo del siglo XX y los memes de internet en el siglo XXI, evidenciando una migración de las imágenes desde la historia del arte hacia discursos y espacios en los que muestra su fuerza evocadora.

La supervivencia del Apolo de Belvedere a través de los discursos estéticos, antropológicos, racistas y cesaristas revela una cuestión crucial: que todos ellos han visto a la estatua de mármol como un ser vivo. La escultura ha sido objeto de animación desde Winckelmann, que fue el primero en metamorfosear el mármol en carne en su descripción del Apolo: "Y me parece que la figura de mi contemplación, como la de Pigmalión, cobra vida y movimiento" (Winckelmann [1764] 2024, 180; Barolsky 2014). Los posteriores autores como Camper, Lavater, Virey, Nott, Gliddon o los fotomontajes fascistas siguieron dando vida a la estatua con más intensidad que Winckelmann ya que sus motivaciones estaban orientadas a denigrar a las otras razas con las que era comparado. En todos ellos se detecta la misma aspiración: que el Apolo fuese un ser humano de carne y hueso para apuntalar, con el prestigio de la tradición clásica, la supremacía del hombre blanco. En esta aspiración, la estatua se dota de un poder y de una agencia que la conectan con los problemas de los actos icónicos (Bredekamp [2010] 2017, 35-39). El Apolo de Belvedere ha actuado como un agente histórico con efectos en el mundo real



13 | Leni Riefensthal, *Olympia*, 1936.

pues las teorías elaboradas por antropólogos y racistas lo dispusieron junto a seres humanos reales. La estatua era un ser humano vivo que podía ser medido y comparado con otras razas y primates con el propósito de visualizar la superioridad del hombre blanco europeo. Estos modernos pigmaliones también creyeron que la estatua cobraba vida y se bajaba del pedestal. La diferencia con el Pigmalión de la mitología es que la valencia erótica que animaba la metamorfosis de Galatea se sustituye por el credo racista y colonial que insufla vida a la escultura a la vez que introduce en el mundo real un modelo de perfección y belleza inalcanzable para otros seres humanos.

El sueño supremacista y racista de una escultura clásica que cobra vida se cumplirá en el documental *Olympia* de Leni Riefensthal para los Juegos Olímpicos de Berlín de 1936. Los primeros minutos del documental están formados por diversos planos de los templos de la acrópolis de Atenas en los que la cámara recorre las columnas, los sillares y acaba con un plano general del Partenón. A continuación, el documental se centra en diversas esculturas clásicas, masculinas y femeninas, y llega a mostrar a algunas de ellas en estricto perfil para que el espectador pueda ver el ángulo facial. Se puede identificar a Alejandro Magno, Ares, Afrodita o Apolo. La cámara se centra en un caso muy concreto de la estatuaria clásica, el Discóbolo ya que sintetiza el tema del olimpismo y el deporte. La cámara la rodea y poco a poco se aleja para que el espectador la pueda ver completa y en su punto de vista óptimo, momento en que el montaje cinematográfico transforma la escultura de mármol en un cuerpo de carne y hueso, el de Erwin Huber, un célebre atleta alemán de decatlón [Fig. 13]. Leni Riefensthal consigue con este montaje conectar dos mundos y sugerir la continuidad cultural y racial entre la Grecia clásica y la Alemania nazi. Esta continuidad entre la estatuaria clásica y los nazis no es puramente metafóri-

ca, sino que sirvió para representar y defender la idea que los griegos antiguos tienen un origen nórdico. Las esculturas, de este modo, serían representaciones de tipos ideales germánicos cuyas características físicas y morales se podían encontrar indistintamente en el pasado y en el presente, así como en los cuerpos de los antiguos habitantes de la Hélade y en los de la Alemania nazi (Chapoutot [2008] 2016, 158-167). Esta conexión se consigue gracias al recurso del *tableaux vivant*, una categoría que refiere a la puesta en escena de obras plásticas con individuos (Bredekamp [2010] 2017, 77-81). En *Olympia*, el Discóbolo de mármol es transformado en una escultura viviente gracias al efecto de disolución entre planos que Leni Riefensthal emplea. Este recurso es la metáfora ideológica que conecta la raza aria con la Antigüedad clásica: la cámara cinematográfica insufla vida al mármol antiguo que se convierte en un atleta moderno (Wildmann 2017, 67-70).

El renacimiento del paganismo: el apoloismo, la Alt-Right y la manosfera

La figura del dios Apolo ha cobrado un renovado protagonismo en el movimiento de la Alt-Right estadounidense ya que no es sólo una antigua escultura que encapsula una serie de ideas supremacistas y racistas, sino que su culto ha sido restablecido por Mark Brahmin, un influyente líder religioso de la extrema derecha. Para Brahmin, el dios Apolo brilla de nuevo como un ejemplo racial y masculino para los jóvenes blancos. Su ideario está fuertemente inspirado en la visión que la Alemania nazi hizo del dios Apolo como la divinidad de la sabiduría, la luz y la masculinidad (Chapoutot [2008] 2016, 61). Ante la crisis del cristianismo, muchos miembros de la Alt-Right han buscado cobijo espiritual en un neopaganismo que ha adoptado distintas formas. Por un lado, algunos grupos se han orientado hacia una recuperación del paganismo nórdico y germánico mientras que otros han apostado por la figura de Apolo como una figura que aglutina las aspiraciones de la Alt-Right en Estados Unidos. El apoloismo responde, además, al declive de la raza aria en el mundo y aspira a crear grupos masculinos de élite con los que conquistar el mundo (Vandiver 2022, 135-181).

El apoloismo ha hecho del ciberespacio su principal lugar de acción. Brahmin ha creado una página web, The Apollonian Transmission, en la que se explica la recuperación del culto de Apolo y el valor que esta figura tiene para los hombres blancos del siglo XXI [Fig. 14]. Brahmin explica que el dios griego era conocido como el Hiperbóreo, el invasor del norte, lo que le convierte en un personaje de raza aria por lo que, ya en la Antigüedad, sería visto como un ideal racial con un culto de tipo eugenésico. Brahmin precisa que la existencia de Apolo hay que entenderla como una metáfora, no como la existencia de un dios corpóreo: "Wait are you saying you believe a God named Apollo actually exists? Not in the manner a Christian understands the existence of his God but in the manner all Gods exist or at least in any evident dimension, as metaphor. Here's where things become especially meaningful". Brahmin ha elaborado el concepto REM, que alude a las siglas en inglés de Racial Esoteric Moralization, que consiste en infundir a la historia y al mito un subtexto racial con la finalidad de crear un sentido identitario en un grupo determinado. Junto a la página web, la estrategia de Brahmin se apoya en otras plataformas del cibere-



14 | Mark Brahmin, Página web The Apollonian Transmission.

spacio para difundir su mensaje y ganar adeptos, como cuentas en YouTube o diversos podcasts vinculados con destacados blogueros y activistas de la extrema derecha. En todos ellos aparece de manera recurrente el rostro del Apolo de Belvedere, como en el perfil de Richard Spencer en la plataforma Substack, lo que evidencia que las migraciones de las imágenes se producen en la actualidad hacia geografías virtuales en las que sirven a los intereses políticos de los usuarios.

El culto a Apolo promovido por Brahmin está conectado con la crisis de la masculinidad moderna en el mundo eurooccidental, pues la Alt-Right aspira a rehabilitar la masculinidad del hombre blanco a través de la figura de Apolo (Vandiver 2022, 149). La crisis de la masculinidad ha dado lugar a la existencia de la manosfera, un fenómeno online (principalmente) que defiende una masculinidad tradicional que habría sido atacada por los avances feministas en igualdad. La manosfera es abiertamente misógina y antifeminista y a ella se dirigen los esfuerzos de la Alt-Right y del apoloismo (Vandiver 2022, 140-143).

Todo ello desemboca en dos cuestiones cruciales: por un lado, la crisis de la masculinidad del hombre blanco es la que abona el surgimiento de algunas doctrinas de la extrema derecha. Esa crisis busca en la Antigüedad clásica las respuestas a sus preguntas y los modelos a los que venerar. La manosfera mira a la Antigüedad clásica como si fuera un espejo en el que reconocerse pues los clásicos aportan un prestigio que sirve para validar y reforzar ideologías de extrema derecha, patriarcales y supremacistas (Zuckerberg 2018). Por otro lado, se detecta un aspecto transversal a todos los argumentos, personajes y hechos que se han estudiado: ante el encuentro con la otredad, el clasicismo ofrece el retorno a un lugar seguro. En el caso concreto que nos ocupa,

cuando el hombre blanco europeo se ha encontrado con el otro, ha buscado resaltar y subrayar su superioridad apelando a los clásicos y, de modo concreto, al Apolo de Belvedere como un modelo con el que identificarse. Camper y Lavater elaboraron sus teorías sobre el ángulo facial y la fisionomía en un momento en que la expansión europea ampliaba su dominio hacia zonas inexploradas del Pacífico. Las compañías comerciales holandesas fueron la condición de posibilidad para que la otredad racial llegase a Europa de un modo más intenso a como lo había hecho anteriormente. Poco a poco, desde el siglo XVII y XVIII, el hombre blanco europeo se enfrentó a una variedad humana que le empujó a interrogarse por sus diferencias corporales y por su lugar en un mundo cada vez más variado. En el siglo XIX, las discusiones sobre la variedad humana dejaron paso a las teorías raciales en las que la otredad fue de nuevo contestada, dominada y amaestrada con el recurso a los clásicos, lo que allanó el camino para que el fascismo y el nazismo se identificaran con griegos y romanos para mostrar su superioridad. En el siglo XXI, el movimiento identitario y la Alt-Right, se han enfrentado a la otredad racial, étnica y sexual, como si la historia se repitiese con los mismos protagonistas y con las mismas respuestas. La manosfera ha acogido a aquellos hombres que se han visto amenazados por los avances feministas y la extrema derecha estadounidense ha pergeñado la teoría del gran reemplazo ante el miedo a los inmigrantes. En todos estos casos se detectan dos constantes: el miedo al otro y el consecuente regreso al clasicismo en busca de respuestas.

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English abstract

Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez's contribution studies the ways in which specific models of classical statuary have been mobilized, from the eighteenth century onward, as intellectual instruments for theorizing the attributes that constitute masculine beauty and bodily perfection in different historical contexts. The study examines the foundational role played by Johann Joachim Winckelmann and his theorization of the aesthetic superiority of the Apollo Belvedere. Once transposed into scientific and anthropological discourse, these ideas contributed to the elevation of the white European male within emergent classificatory systems of human diversity. The article further analyzes the appropriation of the Apollo Belvedere and of classical sculptural paradigms by Italian Fascism and National Socialist Germany as visual and ideological supports for the articulation and legitimization of their racial doctrines. Finally, it investigates the continued resonance of these aesthetic and ideological constructs in the propaganda of the United States Alt-Right during the second decade of the twenty-first century, where a renewed interest in the cult of the god Apollo can also be identified.

keywords | Apollo, Whiteness, Alt-Right, Classical Tradition.

The Aesthetics of Technofascism

From Apocalypse to Milk and Mar-a-Lago-Makeovers

Kathrin Rottmann, Friederike Sigler



1 | Cybertruck in charred landscape, screenshot from the German website of tesla.com.

On 19 August 2025, American tech billionaire Peter Thiel delivered four lectures at a two-day workshop held at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. According to press reports, around twenty theologians attended, including Thiel's entourage, a personal assistant, and two religion scholars (Kilian 2025). Among them was Alan Fimister, a British theologian and an "influential advocate of neo-integralism", a movement that strives for a kind of Catholic theocracy to which the US Vice President, J.D. Vance, also has ties (Kilian 2025). The organiser of the Tyrolean lectures was Professor Emeritus Wolfgang Palaver, a theologian who met Thiel in the 1990s while conducting research at Stanford University's Centre for International Security and Arms Control. There, they encountered René Girard and discovered their shared fascination with the French literary scholar, cultural scientist and philosopher. Today, Girard is regarded as a "visionary of Silicon Valley and the anti-democratic right in the USA" (Bernard 2025),

and Palaver is researching his work at the University of Innsbruck (Palaver, 2008; Girard, Palaver 2010).

The subject of Thiel's Innsbruck lectures was his crude theory about the Antichrist, inspired by the work of Girard. The Austrian newspaper "Der Standard" (hlk 2025) summarised Thiel's claims, which he had previously set out in detail for a semi-public audience, in a way that is understandable even to those unfamiliar with the Bible:

> They can be summarised as meaning that 'the Antichrist' will exploit an impending Armageddon or, more generally, an impending catastrophe to seize power and establish a 'one-world government'. This one-world government will push for regulation and high taxes in the name of security—that is 'sacrificing' the 'freedom' of businesses—in order to avert catastrophe. However, allying oneself with the Antichrist is not the solution—instead, one must pursue an absolutely opposite, ultra-libertarian course.

According to Thiel, Antichrists can be identified as climate crisis activists, such as Greta Thunberg, who demand strategies to combat the crisis. They can also be supranational institutions, such as the United Nations, which was established in 1945 in response to fascism.

In light of Thiel's broader comments and actions—including his investments in eugenics research centered on white embryos, his involvement in Palantir (a company whose software, Palantir Gotham, has access to the data records of billions of people and influences criminalisation decision-making processes by providing services to the authorities), and his financing of J.D. Vance's election campaign—the term 'ultra-libertarian' seems insufficient, if not downright euphemistic, as a description of his political strategy. Instead, Thiel's entrepreneurial approach, combined with his Antichrist theory, results in the extremist practices of an orthodox fanatic who aims to abolish liberal democracies in favour of individual-centred power, while enforcing the hegemony of 'healthy', Western, white populations. And he is not alone in this. In their publication, which they define as a "political treatise" providing instructions for action, Alex Karp and Nicholas W. Zaminska (Karp, Zaminska 2025, XV) put forward arguments similar to those of Thiel. According to their book's title, "The engineering elite of Silicon Valley" must take responsibility "in the defence of the nation and the articulation of a national project" by "business leaders […] [determining] the relationship between the technology sector and the state" for The Technological Republic to come (Karp, Zaminska 2025, XIV-XV). For this reason, the political practices of Thiel and his 'tech bros', including his Palantir-partner Karp, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos as well as Mark Zuckerberg, have long been described as technofascist.

The term characterises the expansion of digital technologies and infrastructures for entrepreneurial, political and fascist purposes in capitalist industrialised countries that define themselves as democracies, such as the United States. Drawing on Janis A. Mimura's analysis of Japanese "reform bureaucrats"—prominent advocates of "technofascism" who sought to realise their vision of a "managerial state" and a "controlled

economy" in pre-war Japan—we define techno-fascism as a form of fascism in which political power is seized by the economically powerful in an illiberal manner, with democratic structures being employed solely for technocratic administration (Mimura 2017). While in 1930s Japan it was industrialised capital that held power, today it is the owners of new technologies such as AI or Palantir.

For Thiel, technological expansion can only succeed if political systems such as democracies adopt a purely technocratic approach, with the real political power residing with capital and its holders. Weakening democracies politically would also prevent Antichrists such as the climate movement or the UN from gaining or retaining power. Additionally, Karp, Thiel's Palantir partner, has repeatedly emphasised that both are committed to using technology to make the US military the most powerful in the world. A cursory analysis of US politics reveals that these examples for technofascist strategies are already being implemented, if only in part. This involves the violation of international law through illegal bombing and kidnapping in order to gain access to Venezuelan oil reserves. And it also involves the financial backing of the election of Vice President J.D. Vance, a former venture capital lawyer in Silicon Valley, by Thiel.

The concept of technofascism has been the subject of scientific study from various perspectives. These include the infrastructures of state power (Möllers 2025), Silicon Valley imperialism (McElroy 2024), authoritarianism (Coeckelbergh 2026) and the extent to which digital technologies and infrastructures such as AI, surveillance and social media (Zuboff 2019; Schaake 2024) are used today to control information, people and their emotions (Strick 2021; Fielitz, Marcks 2020). This practice has historical parallels in the utilisation of analogue administrative apparatus and mass media by historical fascism. However, an investigation of its aesthetic figurations, which do not necessarily resemble those of historical fascism, is still lacking. The present paper aims to provide an art-historical analysis of this specific phenomenon. It is based on two assumptions. According to Alberto Toscano's definition, we argue that "late fascism" manifests repeatedly in novel forms "as a dynamic that precedes its naming" and "like other political phenomena, [it] varies according to its socioeconomic context" (Toscano 2023, XI). Secondly, we assume that these pre- or proto-fascist dynamics are particularly evident in aesthetics because politics can be pursued here independently of concrete political theory and beyond the sphere of state political power. To demonstrate this, we will explore the aesthetics of technofascism. First, we will examine the military armour of the Cybertruck and its potential for combatting the apocalypse. Next, we will use female figures to analyse the politics of retro dreams and the naturalness of raw milk in twentyfirst-century industrial society, starting with the Mar-A-Lago face and the tradwife. Finally, on a fictional walk through Innsbruck, we will ask whether the aesthetics of technofascism encompass more than just 'doom trucks', fillers, and raw milk shots.



2 | Technofascist Fusion: Humvee, Cybertruck on Mars and Delorean Time Machine, collage by the authors.

Riding the Apocalypse. Electric Cars for Katechons

On Tesla's German company website, the Cybertruck—unveiled by company founder Elon Musk in 2019—is not presented as a means of transport that allows buyers to get from A to B quickly and easily. Nor is it presented as particularly sustainable, despite its electric drive. Instead, most of the images and videos show the pickup truck off-road, with no roads in sight [Fig. 1]. It is pictured in barren wastelands under threatening clouds, surrounded by black rubble, as if everything had burned down. It kicks up red, dusty earth as if driving across Mars. It races through the surf along the coast or crosses rivers, seemingly far from civilisation, as if there were no roads or other people left. However, the Cybertruck is not designed for experiencing nature, despite the website providing an image of a family camping, but rather for times of disaster. In fact, user experiences and practical tests have proven that it is not built for this purpose at all. Yet, the design of this high-powered steel wedge on wheels promises survival, as the car's immense size and load capacity give it the appearance of a vehicle from a 1970s vision of the future that predicts disaster. Its contours and materials suggest movement is a fight for survival, with its polished stainless steel and sharp edges as if cutting through the air and every obstacle. Its rough shape [Fig. 2] is reminiscent of a crude combination of a Humvee (the US military's off-road High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle), a stealth aircraft, the DeLorean time machine from *Back to the Future*, and the Lotus sports car driven by James Bond, but on a monumental scale: it is almost two metres high and weighs three tonnes.

"This thing radiates dystopia, war zone, combat vehicle", says Paul Snyder, a professor of transport design at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit (Anonymous, 2019). In addition to fast-charging stations and cinema-quality screens, it promises occupants protection from light ammunition in the form of a steel and bulletproof glass body, as well as a "bioweapon defence mode" that filters the air to hospital-grade quality.

Musk is not selling Cybertruck drivers protection from disaster with this moving steel wedge; rather, he is selling them technology for the apocalypse. "Sometimes you get these late-civilization vibes [that the] apocalypse could come along at any moment", he explains: "Here at Tesla, we have the best in apocalypse technology" (Lawrence 2025). In Christianity, the apocalypse signifies both the end of the world and its subsequent transformation. In contrast, "Doomsday preppers" (Lawrence 2025) spend their time preparing for 'the day after' (to use TV film's term), even if they can only afford a truck and not a luxury underground bunker (Rushkoff 2025, 25-38). Such preparation is hardly necessary, however, as everything will be better and newly created afterwards. The Cybertruck is therefore designed for a different version of the apocalypse. "Tesla's apocalypse machine" (Lawrence 2025) is destined for the end-time events that Thiel conjures up. Central to Thiel's "apocalyptic crypto-theology" and his conception of the apocalypse is his adoption of Carl Schmitt's interpretation of the "katechon" (Baab 2026).

According to Christian beliefs about the end times, the katechon delays the appearance of the Antichrist, without whom salvation cannot follow. For Christians, the figure of the *katechon* thus provides an explanation as to why the apocalypse, the creation of a new earth and a new heaven, the return of Christ, and the peaceful existence of all the redeemed have not yet come to pass after some 2000 years. The political theorist Carl Schmitt defines "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state" as "secularised theological concepts" (Schmitt [1922] 1985, 36) and has used the term *katechon* in his publications since the era of National Socialism (Grossheutschi 1996, 57). Initially, he defined it similarly, as a "retarder and delayer", identifying it with "'old' or at least anachronistic empires or states" (Grossheutschi 1996, 62-63). However, he later characterised the figure positively as a "historical force"—in the sense of an "honorary title" (Grossheutschi 1996, 90, 105). Thiel referred to this interpretation in autumn 2025 in San Francisco at the Commonwealth Club in his private lecture series, the dress rehearsal for which took place in Innsbruck, "The Antichrist: A Four-Part Lecture Series" (Bhuiyan, Kerr, Robins-Early, 2025). The series was organised and sponsored by ACTS 17 Collective (ACTS stands for "Acknowledging Christ Within Technology and Society"), a Christian network of tech investors whose aim is to minister "to elites" rather than the poor (Tiku, Dwoskin & De Vynck 2025). Thiel identifies both the *katechon* and the Antichrist threat of a "one-world state" (threatening only to the super-rich as there would no longer be any tax havens) as originating from the USA: "The *katechon* is tied in with empire and politics. If the antichrist is going to take over the world, you need something very powerful to stop



3 | Casspir, "the father of all MRAPs" (Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected), photograph from reddit.com "r/Military Porn".

it" (Bhuiyan, Kerr, Robins-Early 2025). Theologian Florian Baab (2026) analyses who Thiel specifically identifies with this term katechon in his "identitarian pseudo-theology":

> The *Katechon* represents the process of technological progress. Therefore, tech nerds are the ones holding back the impending apocalypse, the opponents of the Antichrist. This explains the sense of pathos surrounding the idea of delaying the Parousia [the Second Coming of Christ] at all costs, which is considered a core Christian task. This is where the dark intersection between this reactionary Silicon Valley ideology and the Trumpist movement lies. […] And who is this Antichrist? There is a broad consensus that it is 'woke ideologies' and transnational alliances such as the European Union and NATO. According to Thiel and others, these would ultimately bring about a bureaucratically overburdened, innovation-hostile, and politically paralysed world government.

Thiel envisages an apocalypse that replaces the Christian belief in a happy ending with a permanent state of threat. By doing so, he adopts a key strategy of the New Right: using invented grand narratives to create threats in order to present the implementation of right-wing and fascist policies as a form of salvation (Schilk 2024). Specifically, Thiel's techno-fascist argument aims to completely deregulate tech industries, allowing them to use AI, surveillance software, and 'the most powerful military in the world' to stop the supposed Antichrist.

By defining the unspecified catastrophe as an apocalypse, Musk—whom Thiel has explicitly praised in his lectures—has placed the Cybertruck within the framework of



4 | Technofascist Fusion: catwalk wasteland for Balenciaga's 2023 summer fashion collection, designed by Santiago Sierra, Kanye West on the runway in a military-style survival outfit and ICE agents during Donald Trump's second term in office. Collage by the authors.

technofascist theorizing and has provided Thiel's audience with a car for the end times that references the tech industry in its name. In addition, its technofascist aesthetic is linked to narratives of white supremacy and apartheid. The Cybertruck's sharp edges and straight surfaces are often described as minimalist, as if this meant reducing to the essentials. However, anthropologist Vivian Chenxue Lu and historian Nana Osei-Opare argue that the car's shape and dimensions resemble the Casspir [Fig. 3], a huge mine-protected wheeled armoured vehicle with a V-shaped hull for troop transport. Photographs of the Casspir are shared on the online discussion forum Reddit under the hashtag "Military Porn" but this military retro-dream is racist. The Casspir was designed, produced and deployed especially in the townships of South Africa, where Musk was born and raised, and where Thiel attended school. The armoured vehicle was used "to patrol and terrorise Black African communities" and has therefore been an "iconic global symbol of apartheid oppression" since the 1990s (Lu, Osei-Opare 2025). Due to its similarity in size and design to the Casspir, the Cybertruck "blurs the boundaries between the battlefield and the public street" (Lu, Osei-Opare 2025). Furthermore, it defines the street—or the charred landscape of rubble—as a racist battlefield, thereby exposing the politics underlying the design, production and use of the Cybertruck.

This military porn and doomsday aesthetic is already evident in many other areas. Examples include the perverse bunker architecture designed for the super-rich, which is

intended to ensure their survival underground in the event of an apocalypse. These bunkers feature luxury spas and other amenities and are guarded by ex-military personnel to prevent others from seeking shelter there. This aesthetic also resonates in the catwalk wasteland designed by artist Santiago Sierra for the presentation of Balenciaga's 2023 summer fashion collection. The parallels are unmistakable, especially when Kanye West—who has long trivialised fascism and the Holocaust through his fascist fantasies and Hitler songs—struts across the runway in his hip military-style survival outfit, as if he has just emerged from his bunker security shift. From today's perspective, this was frighteningly prescient. The outfits worn by ICE agents during Donald Trump's second term in office are virtually identical. With their bulletproof vests, black sunglasses and balaclavas or scarves wrapped around their faces, they resemble the models on the Balenciaga catwalk [Fig. 4]. However, the aesthetics of contemporary US-American fascism are not limited to haute couture looks. Gregory Bovino, the now-resigned head of Border Control, stands out from the DIY style of his agents. For photo shoots and public appearances, he wears a uniform-like, long-cut coat with extremely straight shoulders, a Sam Browne belt, gold buttons and badges, and with his undercut and martial appearance, he looks as if he came straight out of Nazi Germany of the 1930s and 1940s. However, this discrepancy does not show that "the new US totalitarianism has not yet found its own style" (Frank 2026), but rather that historical and contemporary elements come together here and, precisely in their mixture, reveal a great deal about the new face of fascism.

This aesthetic embodies specific gender politics. What is particularly striking about these apocalyptic aesthetic examples is that they are genuinely masculine. No matter how many Kim Kardashians drive the Cybertruck, it remains the car for the techno-fascist man of the future. While figures such as Mark Zuckerberg once exemplified the entrepreneurial spirit of the 'new men' who opposed patriarchy and advocated equality in the workplace and at home, today's techno-fascist 'broligarchs' are characterised by a "re-masculinisation" or "re-sovereignisation" of the strong man (Forster 2006). These authoritarian and toxic forms of masculinity have always been present in neoliberalism and Silicon Valley, as argued by Becca Lewis (2025). Their shift to the right and their alliance with the established political right has now resulted in a new masculinity based on authoritarian, supremacist ideas centred around the sale and consumption of fossil fuels. Their vehicle is the "complex of masculinity and cars", which appears to be an inevitable part of the art and cultural history of the Global North (Kunze 2022, 24). Political scientist Cara Daggett has highlighted that the US right wing, whom Donald Trump successfully appealed to in his first election campaign, has strong economic links to the fossil fuel industry. Trump promised to reinstate the 'good old days', when working in the fossil fuel industry provided prosperity and enabled the traditional male breadwinner model. These reactionary politics have given rise to a new form of petro-masculinity, manifested in the denial of climate change and the fetishisation of combustion engines within right-wing movements worldwide. Although it is powered by an electric motor and therefore seems

to represent less of a petroleum culture and petro-masculinity, and more of what Daggett calls eco-modernism, the Cybertruck fits into these new models of masculinity and its resovereignisation—due to its aesthetics. Daggett argues that the Cybertruck in particular surpasses the aesthetics inherent in SUV design, with its ground clearance (without off-road capability), elevated seating position, robust, voluminous body, pronounced fenders and striking front end—only better and more extreme: "The Cybertruck is hyped as not just a permissible replacement for the traditional pick-up truck, but as far superior in terms of hardness, toughness, and power" (Daggett 2022).

During its presentation in 2019, the vehicle was smashed with a hammer and shot at with bullets to demonstrate that the metal of the militarised Cybertruck is very hard. The Cybertruck thus literally becomes the car-version of Klaus Theweleit's *Körperpanzer* ("body armour"). Theweleit, a cultural scientist, analyses these psychoanalytically based notions of fascist masculinity, which are directed against anything associated with femininity. He uses the example of the soldierly man in the literature of the German Freikorps after the First World War and finds similar notions in National Socialism (Theweleit 1987). In today's technofascist condition, the Cybertruck embodies and extends a technofascist masculinity characterised by the same criteria, but which uses armouring, alongside psychotechnique, drills and violent technologies. The fact that it has an electric motor does not contradict petro-masculinity. As Daggett argues, Musk's handling of critical minerals and rare earths, which he needs for electric motor production, and of space is just as imperialistic and exploitative as the coal democracies' appropriation of raw materials. Ultimately, the Cybertruck is not about combatting the climate crisis through sustainable energy production; it is about completely exploiting the world (and space) through continuously evolving technologies. Therefore, it is also not contradictory for Trump supporters and 'Rolling Coal' to modify their diesel engines to emit high levels of exhaust fumes and form a cross-front with Cybertruck drivers. Instead, it is this supposed incompatibility and asynchrony that characterise the aesthetics of technofascism today.

Milking the *völkisch* Future: Retro-Dreams from the Scratch

Aesthetics of a seemingly contradictory nature are also evident in the images of women in technofascism. Consequently, right-wing women who endorse and perpetuate the contemporary fascist movement find themselves presented with a range of aesthetic options. In German-speaking countries, right-wing femininity has been represented in public in recent years primarily by "three positions that are equally permeated by feudal, bourgeois and colonial attitudes", as argued by art historian and artist Ruby Sircar, "The princess, vassal or damsel, and [the] representative of the people" (2021, 163-164). A prime example of this is Brittany Sellner, née Pettibone, an American white nationalist who presents herself on social media as an 'immaculate bride' but spreads racist conspiracy theories; the publicist Ellen Kositza, who appears in home stories about herself and her husband, the publisher and right-wing activist Götz Kubitschek, as a knight's wife on their shared estate; and Caroline Sommerfeld-Lethen, who uses intellectual work and

gardening projects to convey right-wing ideologies to the bourgeois middle class (Sircar 2021, 164-165, 167). In the United States, there are currently two other significant aesthetic trends that are defining gender relations in the context of technofascism. These are the 'Mar-a-Lago face' and the 'trad wife'.

The Mar-a-Lago look is intended to convey "emphasized femininity" (Mühl, Paul 2026) and to openly display that expensive surgical procedures have been performed, preferably in the beauty clinics near Trump's private residence, which have now specialised in this aesthetic. The procedures engender a similarity between faces that is independent of biological kinship. The aesthetic can be defined by the combination of static facial expressions, accentuated cheekbones, pronounced jawlines, the extensive use of fillers, a narrow nose, visibly taut skin, and penetrating eyes framed by raised eyebrows, set against wavy, motionless hair. In addition to numerous influencers, Melania Trump, Lara Trump and Kristi Noem are cited as prime examples of this look in research. The latter is the former Minister of Homeland Security and has a particular penchant for martial displays. For rough field appointments, she has adopted an ensemble that evokes a Lara Croft Mar-a-Lago look, characterised by a baseball cap adorned with Homeland Security print, a form-fitting white shirt, relaxed trousers in an army-inspired style, and lace-up boots. In this manner, she has herself been photographed in front of open prison cells in El Salvador and deported Venezuelan inmates, as if she had personally captured them. The latter are presented as if they were no more than animals, a category for which the minister is known to have no sympathy, since she cold-bloodedly shot her own dog when it no longer suited her.

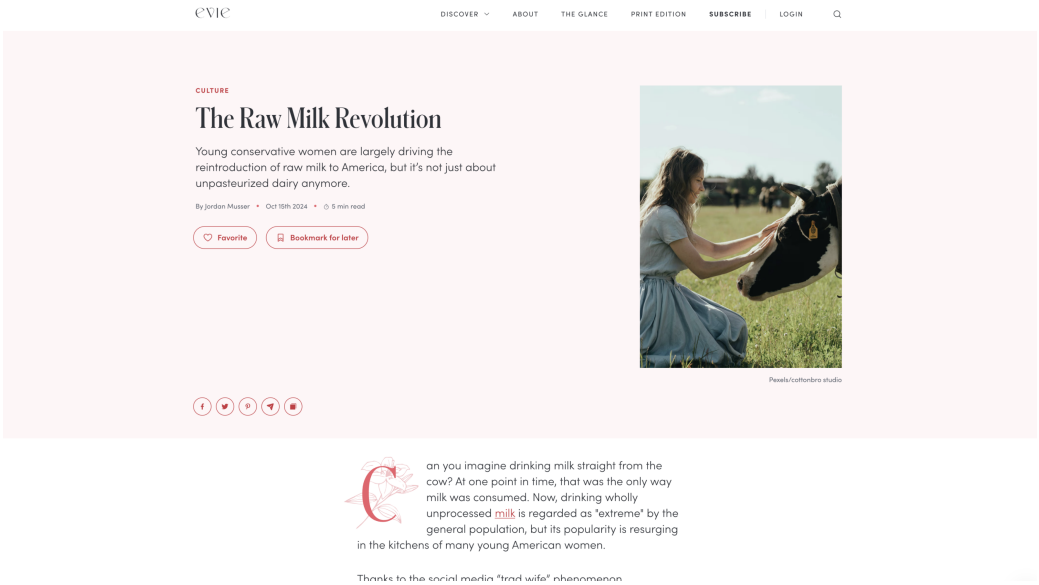
Therefore, the Mar-a-Lago face is, firstly, an aesthetic that marks belonging and submission. The facial transformation, essentially a transfer "from digital to physical filter" (Künne 2025), is, as argued by art historian Anne Higonnet, tantamount to a declaration of political loyalty: "a sign of physical submission to Donald Trump, a statement of fealty to him and the idea that the surface of a policy is the only thing that matters. […] In a way, these women are performing a key part of Donald Trump's whole political persona" (Oh 2025). This phenomenon is also evident among men, as it is associated with the capacity to wield political influence. Secondly, the Mar-a-Lago face represents a policy that views the actions of the US government impassively and without any form of empathy—indeed, it actively pursues, contributes to and trivialises this very policy. The use of Botox and fillers constitutes a pivotal element in the process of "saving face", that is to say, the suppression of facial expressions, affects, affection and moral principles, even in the face of extreme violence. Concurrently, women such as 28-year-old Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt, with her blonde curls and appeal to an iconography of innocence, convey a perfidious and cold-blooded trivialisation and normalisation of the fascist policies she justifies on a daily basis, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. For these reasons, the Mar-a-Lago face is the face of the technofascist Trump administration. It stoically confronts brutality, racism and daily violence as if empathy were indeed a "funda-

mental weakness of Western civilisation", as Elon Musk explained in a three-hour podcast with Joe Rogan, the voice of hypermasculinity, in 2025. For the technofascist aesthetic, this anti-empathy prosthesis deliberately equips the supposedly more emotional female politicians with facial armour.

It is evident that this visual association also manifests class and race, as its characteristics are perceived in the USA as the epitome of a Caucasian appearance (Alonso 2025). The Mar-a-Lago face is genuinely white and thus evokes both National Socialist 'racial thinking' and the ideology of white supremacy established in the United States. This aesthetic is not confined to faces; it also encompasses bodies that are notably slim, toned, sculpted and 'healthy'. Noem's complete mastery of this style for example is evident in figure-hugging clothing, especially dresses, that act as an extension of the Mar-a-Lago face and its white 'healthy' body and, because their aim is to emphasise the body's shapes, make the white healthy body as visible as possible. Incidentally, right-wing circles regard the Caucasian appearance as a product of white genetics. Now, technofascism embraces technological mastery to redefine it. This reinvention of the Caucasian look is based on the concept of artificial naturalness and does not hide the fact that it is technologically produced. Parallels with National Socialism become apparent; a movement that promoted a genocidal racial ideology based on a white, blonde aesthetic. As not all German National Socialists were born with blonde hair, they quickly resorted to using hair bleach to achieve the desired Nordic look (Spiekermann 2021). Similarly, white fascist racial ideology is conceptualised as a technological and 'produced' construct today.

This also applies to the figure of the Trad Wife, although her aesthetic is characterised less by surgery than by performance. The Trad Wife is a digital and political phenomenon. The movement, whose formation is measured in follower numbers and likes rather than in demonstration participants on the streets, has its genuine place in social media and, consequently, in the tools, instruments and platforms of technofascism. The term 'Trad Wife', which has been circulating since the 2010s and has been widely established as a hashtag on social media since the 2020s, is associated with images that largely show "highly curated versions of domestic life, showcasing elaborate home-cooked meals, vintage-inspired fashion, and idyllic family scenes" (Tamara 2025, 1386)—all of which is still defined in capitalist industrial societies as care work and thus as women's work.

While the gendered division of labour depicted in such images was defined as, and criticised for, being unequal and exploitative in feminist debates, particularly during the second wave of the women's movement, Trad Wives present the decision to engage in full-time care work as a form of emancipatory self-determination. What is strategically ignored here is that this decision is made under post-feminist conditions. In contrast to the 1950s, which US Trad Wives fantasise about as a better retro future in the same nostalgic manner as petromasculinity, most women from the middle class upwards can now decide whether or not to combine care work and wage work. Given that this is the result of the



5 | Jordan Musser, *The Raw Milk Revolution*, 15 October 2024, screenshot from "Evie" magazine.

second wave of the women's movement, which fought for these opportunities, scholars such as Angela McRobbie refer to it as post-feminism (McRobbie 2004). Consequently, Trad Wives are not subject to the same care work obligations as in the 1950s; rather, they elect to engage in such activities within a framework shaped by the accomplishments of the feminist movement. Their basis, therefore, is "the toxic use of feminist tools and […] the utilisation of hard-won freedoms" (Sircar 2021, 161).

In the post-feminist era, these spaces of hard-won freedom also include the possibility of explicitly performing care work for the internet, i.e. playing a role geared towards the camera and, more specifically, towards the public and the pursuit of financial gain. Trad Wives do not seek to depict authentic domestic labour; rather, they employ the medium of the internet to represent women's care work, thereby rendering the gender division of labour and the underlying gender relations more relatable. Consequently, the ideological tenets of the Trad Wives movement can be characterised as fundamentally anti-feminist (Leidig 2023, 96). But the movement cannot be reduced to a binding political programme, a theoretical framework or a shared aesthetic. In addition, the vast majority of Trad Wives do not publicly profess allegiance to any party or political movement. The theoretical vagueness of the movement, in conjunction with its ideological overlaps with the gender concepts of religious fundamentalism, political conservatism and the global New Right (Lewandowsky 2025), under the conditions of post-feminism and digitality, engenders compatibility with technofascism, which performs the "simultaneity of progress and regression" in its aesthetics (Amlinger, Nachtwey 2025, 33).

A central characteristic of the images shared and disseminated in the context of the Trad Wives movement is their supposed anachronism—not only with regard to long-outdated gender stereotypes. In October 2024, "Evie" magazine published an article on its website about raw milk, illustrated with a photo of a woman and a cow. The online magazine, which is published in print once a year but updated several times a day online, is a kind of "Cosmopolitan" for conservative, preferably white American women, according to its imagery. The photo accompanying the article on raw milk shows the cow and the woman facing each other in profile, bathed in bright sunshine, on a lush green pasture dotted with wildflowers and herbs. The woman is kneeling in the grass, her hair is loose and slightly wavy and tousled by the wind, yet glistening in the sun. Its lack of artificiality, conveyed not as unkempt, but as natural, contrasts with the stiff MAGA concrete waves. The woman also wears a simple, modest cotton dress in a light beige or blue tone that reaches below the knees, has modest sleeves like a T-shirt, and is tied at the waist with a simple fabric belt that gathers the wide flared skirt. The black and white cow standing opposite her is marked as a farm animal. It wears an ear tag and collar and lowers its head so far that the woman can place her hands on its forehead, as if the two—despite the exploitation of one by the other—were sharing an intimate moment bathed in golden light, overexposed because it is so beautiful against the backdrop of the website's delicate pink layout.

The woman in the raw milk article can only be understood as a female farmer, despite the fact that no farmer with such hair would go milking, the vast majority of "Evie" readers are likely not farmers, and industrial dairy farming today relies on different production conditions. This retro dream is part of the magazine's agenda, which frames its content with images of a fictional white present and future. The magazine uses images of white women to report on "lost feminine skills"—milk "from the scratch", as German-American Nara Smith sells her cooking videos. Other "Evie" articles provide insights into the life of the Trad Wife influencer from *Ballerina Farm and the New American Dream*, appeal to married couples with explicit tips on sex practices, spread falsehoods about porn consumption (*Watching Porn Is Literally Making You Gay*) and place information about Gen Z's new faith (*God Is Back*) alongside anti-abortion confessions such as: *I Used To Be Pro-Choice. Here's What Changed My Mind*. Furthermore, they attribute all honours and achievements to white men (*In Defence of White Men*), who have been unjustly criticised so much in recent years, as the founders of institutions, nations, culture, peace, security, prosperity, civilisation and technology. Articles like these show that new right-wing women and the figure of the Trad Wife not only propagate a new image of women, but also advocate a masculinity linked to this image of women, reviving the classic heteronormative breadwinner model, according to which the man rakes in the money so that the woman is a full-time care worker—looking after children and cows or reading recommendations for underwear and nail designs.

What is striking about articles such as the propaganda for raw milk and the glorification of reactionary gender models is a peculiar anachronism that is particularly evident when embedded in contemporary digital technologies. In his study of painting in German fascism, art historian Bertold Hinz identified such an anachronism as characteristic of National Socialist art, which, for example, depicted numerous farmers working the fields by hand with ploughs, despite the fact that this type of agricultural work was already obsolete at the time:

> The temporal discrepancy between painting and reality that characterizes all National Socialist art lies at the very heart of this painting. This dual temporal perspective tries to convince the observer that work and the conditions in which it is performed—the conditions under which the worker lives—are permanent and unchanging, that progress has no place in the social conditions of work, that no improvement in the means of production is possible, and that the worker can produce more only by working longer, not differently (Hinz 1979, 115).

The right-wing conservative women's magazine shows a similar discrepancy. It appears as an online medium with all the links and networks in social media, is therefore based on IT technologies and ties in with the digital internet phenomenon of the Trad Wife. At the same time, it uses images to present a pre-industrial, comprehensively idealised way of working for women in the household, in which care work is not visible as work, but as love in complete affirmation and acceptance of the role of the Trad Wife. In terms of content, the magazine thus continues a policy that conservative activist and publicist Phyllis Schlafly, who has been campaigning against the Equal Rights Amendment since the 1970s, has been promoting for decades: "Marriage and motherhood give a woman a new identity and the opportunity for all-round fulfilment as a woman" (Schlafly 2003, 196). "Evie" magazine is an exemplar of this policy, employing a glossy magazine aesthetic to disseminate its message beyond the confines of conventional political discourse.

In addition, the white dairy farmer featured in "Evie" magazine evokes a nationalistic retro dream: raw milk. For decades, raw milk was consumed only in hippie communes or far away from dairies. Now, however, it is part of the "Make America Healthy Again" (MAHA) programme. The current U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is pursuing MAHA alongside the rejection of vaccinations, the promotion of a supposed natural lifestyle, and the consumption of state-subsidised full-fat milk (@SecKennedy 2026). Notably, he also claims to drink raw milk, which of course has long been the product of large dairies as well. But MAHA is not actually about pasteurisation. For technofascists, milk is "white power milk" (Stănescu 2018). The retro dream that is supposed to come true with milk consumption is ethnonationalist and völkisch, in the sense that ideas of purity and naturalness are connected to blood and race. Since the late 2010s, white supremacists have claimed that the ability to digest milk in adulthood is proof of their genetic superiority, which they attribute to their Northern European origins (Freeman 2013, 1263). Milk consumption is the epitome of their "colonial dream of racial purity" because milk itself seems to contain whiteness as "iconic imagery" (Stă-

nescu 2018, 119). The reference to European ancestry, underpinned by milk consumption, corresponds to the fundamental redefinition of US national identity that J. D. Vance has been defining in his speeches since 2024 in terms of a *völkisch* understanding of the state based on ancestry, not birthright and belief in the rights enshrined in the US Constitution (Beck 2025). The technofascist future belongs to milk drinkers.

Beyond cars and milk: Technofascism and its hidden aesthetics

As the examples show, technofascist aesthetics are polyphonic. They produce new things like the Cybertruck, which operates simultaneously with 'old' (military) notions of masculinity and, as an electric car with its harsh aesthetics, has to outdo the petromasculine SUVs because it does not have a combustion engine, even though both are equally guilty of extractivist overexploitation of resources. The central importance of technology, a characteristic of historical fascism, should not be understood as a contradiction to references to older ideas of masculinity and the division of labour. The example of the Mar-a-Lago face and the Trad Wives perhaps shows even more clearly how retro fantasies and new technologies mix: the hyper-digitised Trad Wife as a pure social media phenomenon and the attempt to generate a white racial aesthetic with surgery, synthetic substances—and milk consumption. However, amidst these pronounced aesthetic choices lies an additional, yet often overlooked, consideration of which Thiel himself is the best example. So let's go back to Innsbruck, Austria, in August 2025.

Not much is known about the tech fascist's stay. If Thiel had opted to take a short stroll through the city during his visit to Tyrol, he would not necessarily have stood out from other people, because, like many other tech fascists, he does not have a particularly striking sense of style (Gaugele, Held 2021). He certainly differs from those who once considered themselves liberal, such as Alex Karp with his shaggy hair, mountaineering boots and yoga look, or Mark Zuckerberg, who recently mutated from nerd to wannabe martial artist with gold chains. In contrast to them, he represents the classic, conservative American look with chinos, an open suit shirt or polo shirt and an unobtrusive hairstyle, the kind of look that is also worn in Austria and comes across as sheer understatement in relation to his political agenda. He therefore does not represent a change in style, nor does he represent a new style, but rather a shift in the content and political significance of an existing aesthetic or, to put it another way, an aesthetic that takes on a correspondingly changed meaning under the changed conditions of the present.

In times of technofascism, conservative Stanford chic does not contrast with fascist politics. Instead, it is its infrastructures that are shifting to the right, thereby helping to shape the public image of technofascism while simultaneously trivialising it. Had Thiel taken a walk through Innsbruck, it is likely that he would not have been recognised, let alone identified as an extremist technofascist. One would not have categorised him as such based on his clothing, nor if he had philosophised about how the view of the Alps reminded him of his beloved *Lord of the Rings*, from which he borrowed the title for his surveil-

lance software Palantir and which has been relevant literary and political reference for the Italian right since the mid-1970s, for example. And one would not have guessed that his investments in embryo research as part of his postnatal stance, or in J.D. Vance, who is already translating this into politics, show clear parallels to Austrian's most famous fascist. In contrast to the assertions of the majority of theories of fascist aesthetics, such as those presented by Susan Sontag in her 1974 article "Fascinating Fascism", fascism does not exclusively manifest aesthetically in mass movements, neoclassicism or scenarios of subjugation.

Furthermore, it does not necessarily express itself in a newly invented aesthetic, as was the case with Italian Futurism. As the German version of fascism has demonstrated, instead, it seems to favour working with existing materials and concepts. For example, nineteenth century genre painting was revived in National Socialist art and integrated with set pieces that aligned with the prevailing political agenda. The examples selected, which are by no means exhaustive, demonstrate that the aesthetics of techno-fascism bear a striking resemblance to the agendas of historical references. These aesthetics are neither homogeneous nor hermetic; they are not designed and implemented in a centralised manner. Instead, they draw on existing, inconspicuous, or sometimes, outdated aesthetics, carrying them into a new technological age. These aesthetics are modified and thus given new meanings and roles through technologisation and the technofascist context. Rather than engendering an original aesthetic, technofascism combines and transforms existing aesthetics, transferring them into the technological era and altering their meanings and associations. Consequently, the technofascist aesthetic does not immediately capture the observer's attention. Instead, it has been in existence for a considerable amount of time, and, akin to its associated policies, it has been implemented with minimal scrutiny.

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Abstract

The contribution offers an art-historical analysis of the aesthetics of technofascism in the contemporary United States, arguing that the political practices of figures such as Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and their Silicon Valley allies constitute a novel form of fascism in which economic power seizes political control through illiberal means. Drawing on three interconnected case studies, the paper examines the militarised design of the Tesla Cybertruck as an embodiment of apocalyptic technofascist masculinity and white supremacist visual codes; the "Mar-a-Lago face" as a surgical and political aesthetic of racial whiteness, anti-empathy, and submission; and the Trad Wife phenomenon as a hyper-digitised performance of retro gender ideology and *völkisch* naturalism.

keywords | Peter Thiel; Elon Musk; Mar-a-Lago; Tesla; Evie Magazine; Trad Wife.

A Magical Aid to Experience

Warburg's Use of Film as an Object of Political Iconology

Thomas Helbig



1 | Mussolini with his lioness Italia, 1924.

Preliminary remarks

It is surely no coincidence that modern mass media imagery appears only on the first and last panels, with a few minor exceptions, of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Due to his unexpected death in 1929, however, this project remained unfinished. It therefore remains unknown whether Warburg, who called himself "Bildhistoriker, kein Kunsthistoriker" ("an image historian, rather than an art historian": Warburg's diary entry of 12 February 1917, quoted in Diers 1991, 230, fn. 142), would later have added more examples of modern media to his Atlas.

But we do know one thing for certain. Warburg claimed that one of the essential functions of the "Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg" (KBW) was to engage with technological and media discourses of its time from a visual, art-historical perspective. The



2 | Warburg's picture panel, presumably for the lecture on 16 July 1927, with a reproduction of Giotto's fresco, *St. Francis Preaching to the Birds* (c. 1296-1299, Assisi, San Francesco), and a photograph of Mussolini and the lioness (1927), to the right of which are two Persian stamps with lion-motif coats of arms (GS *Ausstellungen*, 137; GS *Atlas*, XVI).

inclusion of advertisements, photographs, and newspaper clippings with reports on modern disasters and atrocities, as well as technical innovations such as aviation and pictorial telegraphy, in the first and last panels of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* could be understood as an attempt to actualize this aim.

Warburg's demonstrated sensitivity to propaganda likewise supports this conjecture. He had documented and analyzed signs of anti-Semitism, racism, and fascism, including Italian fascism, at an early stage in his career. On 16 July 1927, Warburg gave a lecture on *Die Funktion der sozialen Mneme als Bewahrerin der antikisierenden Dynamo-Engramme der Gebärdensprache* (*The Function of Social Mneme as Preserver of the Antiquising Dynamo Engrams of Sign Language*), accompanied by a *Bilderreihe* ("series of images") on "Weltanschauung im Lichtbild" ("Worldview in Photography": GS *Ausstellungen*, 135-140). In this talk, he traced the symbols of Italian fascism under Benito Mussolini to a series of ancient motifs. Jost Philipp Klenner, in an article entitled *Mussolini und der Löwe* (Klenner 2007a), traces Warburg's argument linking Mussolini's preference for presenting himself with his lioness Italia with a long history of the iconography of power.





3 | Bertolt Brecht, *Kriegsfibel*, 1955: "Ich bin der Schlächterclown in dem Betrieb. Der eiserne Hermann, der beliebte Ringer. Und Reichsmarschall, der Polizist als Dieb: Wer mir die Hand gibt, zähle seine Finger [I am the butcher clown in the business. Iron Hermann, the popular wrestler. And Reich Marshal, the policeman as thief: whoever shakes my hand should count their fingers]" (Brecht 2008, 72).
4 | Donald Trump's post on Truth, 24 August 2024.

This symbolism is reiterated, for example in a similar photograph of Hermann Göring and a lion, which was used by Bertolt Brecht in his *Kriegsfibel* (1955), and extends as far as an AI-generated post by Donald Trump in the present day.

Warburg's relationship with cinema and film has been discussed by many. Peter J. Schwartz recently presented a critical review of the research literature, calling some widely held theses into question (Schwartz 2020). Although Warburg cannot be described as a true cineaste, a number of his connections with the new medium can nevertheless be identified. The question to be debated is to what extent film influenced Warburg's scholarly work. The inclusion of a film screening in the KBW's lecture program is a clear starting point to address this inquiry. On 17 March 1928, Czech ethnologist František Pospíšil gave a lecture entitled *Urantike Tänze im heutigen Baskenlande* (*Ancient dances in today's Basque Country*), which included the screening of films. A film projector was set up especially for this purpose in the KBW reading room. The lecture took half an hour, while the screening lasted an hour (GS *Briefe*, II, 529; see also Pospisil, Warburg [1926-1929] 2003; McEwan 2008). Warburg, a scholar who had devoted his life to the



5 | *La conciliazione fra l'Italia e il Vaticano*, 1929, LUCE; montage of selected scenes by the author (click to watch).

study of *bewegtes Beiwerk* ("moving accessories") such as clothing and hair in antiquity and the Renaissance, must have been thrilled that film provided a means of capturing "social expressive movements" in images. In his letter to Wolfgang Stammler on 2 April 1928, Warburg summarized the lecture as follows:

> Ich hege für Dr. Pospisil aufrichtige Bewunderung: Denn mag auch das Hackmesser der Zeit stellenweise schädlich dareinfahren, so muss die Kulturwissenschaftliche Forschung doch Ihre Freude daran haben, dass unter Einsatz äusserster Energie und überragender Intelligenz, soziale Ausdrucksbewegungen im Bilde gerettet werden, die zur Psychologie des europäischen Festwesens einzig wertvolle, und leider im Absterben begriffene Prozesse in der Erinnerung lebendig erhalten.
>
> [I have sincere admiration for Dr. Pospíšil. Although time's chopper may sporadically cause damage by its intrusion, still cultural studies must delight in the fact that socially expressive movements are being salvaged in images that preserve moribund processes of unique importance to the psychological understanding of European festivals] (GS *Briefe*, I, 704).

1929

A letter to his wife (and family) in Hamburg on 19 February 1929, however, refers to a later event in which Warburg came into contact with cinema:



6 | "The Pope blessed with both hands". *La conciliazione fra l'Italia e il Vaticano*, 1929, LUCE; sequence (click to watch).

> Gestern Abend waren wir im Kino, das nun in diesem Falle ein ganz unheimlich wunderbarer Mithelfer beim Erleben sogenannter grosser Augenblicke ist. Ich rate Euch dringend diesen Film […] anzusehen.
>
> [We were at the cinema yesterday evening, which was in this case a really uncannily wonderful help in experiencing so-called great moments. I urgently advise you to see this film] (GS *Briefe*, I, 740).

Warburg was in Rome at the time, where he had recently lectured at the Bibliotheca Hertziana. It was during this period that the Lateran Treaty was signed by Pope Pius XI, Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, and Benito Mussolini. In short, the treaty defined the Vatican State in its current form based upon the mutual recognition of spiritual and secular spheres. The Holy See and the Italian state assured each other of their respective sovereignty. Warburg included thirteen photographs of the Lateran Treaty being signed and its subsequent ratification on Panel 78 in his Atlas.

The inclusion of these photographs in an art-historical image atlas may seem puzzling to some. At this point, Warburg was not interested in the artistic value of photography, nor in its recognition as an autonomous art form. Instead, their status as documents of an important event was their relevant quality. In earlier periods, such images, repre-



7 | "Only the two flags representing spiritual and material power are visible". *La conciliazione fra l'Italia e il Vaticano*, 1929, LUCE; sequence (click to watch).

sentative of important current events, also existed, but were created by painters. As an image historian, Warburg was interested in the transformations of symbols of spiritual and secular power. In line with Horst Bredekamp's formulation, he understood that like political events, religious processions may be interpreted as symbolic acts or as "image acts" (Bredekamp 2018). In the case of the Lateran Treaty, the two spheres came together. Warburg felt compelled to attend the event in person.

But that's not all. After reporting in detail in the KBW diary about the celebrations marking the signing of the treaty on 11 February 1929 (GS *Tagebuch*, 406-408), Warburg attended a film screening related to the event on 18 February 1929: "Im Kino die Conciliazione miterlebt. Eine zauberhafte Mithilfe des Erlebens, trotz allem" ["Witnessed the Conciliazione in the cinema. A magical aid to experience, in spite of everything"] (GS *Tagebuch*, 410).

Jost Philipp Klenner was able to identify this film as *La conciliazione fra l'Italia e il Vaticano*, a 36-minute documentary demonstrating the high level of media interest surrounding the event (Klenner 2007b, 454. The film can be viewed on the Archivio LUCE website; it is unclear whether the digitized version provided by the Archivio LUCE is the exact film that Warburg saw in Rome in 1929: his description of the sequence of



8 | "The Fascists have acclimatized". *La conciliazione fra l'Italia e il Vaticano*, 1929, LUCE; sequence (click to watch).

events differs, and it contains passages that are not included in this version). The camera records the large number of other cameramen and photographers, repeatedly panning across a crowd of press to emphasize the scale of this media event. Perhaps some photographers seen in the film produced some of the photo prints in Warburg's Atlas. Some of their photographs are reproduced in the film, as well.

In addition to the many photographs and postcards of the event that Warburg collected, the film corroborates his remarks about the event. One can easily imagine Warburg standing in the crowd "in the third row", soaked by the rain. On 19 February 1929 he wrote to his wife Mary:

> Mich trieb eine Art Pflichtbewusstsein auf den Platz von St. Peter, weil ich mir sagte dass, wenn einer den Historiker des Symbols markieren will, er selbst ein bischen Haut zu Markte tragen muss, auch wenn er gedrängt wird; das wurde er aber nicht einmal sehr. Ich wurde nur langsam bis in die dritte Reihe vorgeschoben, fast bis an den Militärkordon, den Kgl. Ital. Grenadiere im grauen kurzen Mantel und Stahlhelm formierten. Letzterer kam den Truppen sehr zu statten denn da ein ganz furchtbarer Platzregen losging, brauchten sie einfach etwas mit dem Kopf zu nicken, und das Wasser floss ab, während wir Zivilleute gänzlich durchweichte Filzhüte nach Hause brachten.



21. Briefmarken zum Bündnis Hitler-Mussolini, Italien 1941



9, 10 | Italian stamps marking the alliance between Hitler and Mussolini ("Two Peoples at War") from the *Bildindex zur Politischen Ikonographie* (Warnke 1992, 194). The stamp (right), designed by Italian artist Corrado Mezzana in 1941, depicts a kind of morphogenesis. The bundle of rods on the right transforms into the insignia of German fascism on the left. Bayonets decorated with oak leaves lead into an antique-style column with a Corinthian capital bearing an imperial eagle with a swastika.

> [A kind of sense of duty drove me to St. Peter's Square, because I told myself that to distinguish oneself as an historian of the symbol, one must put oneself out there […]. I was slowly pushed forward to the third row, almost to the military cordon of Royal Italian Grenadiers in gray short coats and steel helmets. The latter was very practical for the soldiers, because when a heavy rain shower started, they simply had to nod their heads and the water ran off, while we civilians took our completely soaked felt hats home with us] (GS *Briefe*, I, 739).

> Ich habe, da ich ein kleines Fernglas bei mir hatte, den Papst und die ganze Zeremonie sehr gut sehen können. Etwa 200.000 Leute mögen auf dem Petersplatz gewesen sein. Der Papst segnete mit beiden Händen, sonst wäre wohl zu wenig auf jeden gekommen, und lüftete sogar seinen Sommerhut, als er wieder in d. Kirche verschwand.
>
> [As I had a small pair of binoculars with me, I was able to see the Pope and the whole ceremony very well. There must have been about 200,000 people in St. Peter's Square. The Pope blessed with both hands, otherwise there would not have been enough for everyone, and even lifted his summer hat as he disappeared back into the church] (GS *Briefe*, I, 739).

Warburg also comments upon Mussolini's performance at the event. At first, he notes, the Duce makes himself scarce:

> Das Feinste am ganzen Vorgange ist wohl, dass der Duce sich an diesem Tage nicht persönlich zeigte. Der Papst und der König erscheinen, aber er lässt sich nicht auf den Balkon des Palazzo Chigi herausrufen; nur die beiden Fahnen, die die seelische und materielle Großmacht darstellen, werden vor dem Palazzo Chigi sichtbar.





11 | Giovanni Bellini (attributed), *Portrait of Jacopo Antonio Marcello*, illumination on parchment (13 x 18,7 cm), c. 1453, Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Ms. 940, f.38v.
12 | Sandro Botticelli (attributed), *Portrait of Giuliano de' Medici*, tempera on wood (39,3 x 59,5 cm), c. 1478-1480, Bergamo, Accademia Carrara.
13 | Benito Mussolini in Rome, 11 November 1937.

> [The finest thing about the whole affair is probably that the Duce did not show himself in person on that day. The Pope and the King appear, but he does not allow himself to be called out onto the balcony of the Palazzo Chigi; only the two flags representing spiritual and material power are visible in front of the Palazzo Chigi] (GS *Briefe*, I, 740; see also GS *Tagebuch*, 410).

Warburg's first observations of Mussolini focus on his clothing:

> Freilich, die Fascisten haben sich akklimatisiert, vom Schwarzhemd ist nichts mehr zu sehen, das missing link zwischen Frack und Schwarzhemd, der Cutaway, ist das Kleid der eleganten fascistischen Minister.
>
> [Of course, the Fascists have acclimatized. There is no longer any sign of the black shirt, and the missing link between tailcoat and black shirt, the cutaway, is the dress of the elegant Fascist ministers] (GS *Briefe*, I, 740).

Warburg subsequently remarks upon Mussolini's physical and facial expressions:

> Mussolini, in gestraffter Haltung, ohne alle Zwinkerlichkeit im Wesen, ist ganz Aufmerksamkeit. Man sieht, wie sich sein Mund beim Sprechen formt; ich war erstaunt über die schöne caesarische Bosheit seines Lippenspiels.
>
> [Mussolini, standing ramrod straight and without any hesitation, is completely focused. One sees the forms his mouth takes as he speaks; I was amazed at the beautiful Caesarean malice of the play of his lips] (GS *Briefe*, I, 740; see also GS *Tagebuch*, 410).

At first glance, this remark conveys a strange combination of fascination and fear (*Angstlust*). On the one hand, Warburg may have admired Mussolini's exaggeratedly heroic masculinity, a trait also reflected in many contemporary descriptions. On the other hand, his remark alludes to the language of the body, treating it as a stage for politics, a theme later also continued by Martin Warnke (Modes 2022).

Warburg's detailing of Mussolini's *Lippenspiel* reveals the former's interest in the eloquence of the body, a theme he had previously explored through dance and expressive gestures (*Pathosformeln*). Warburg's iconography goes beyond art-historical interpretation, questioning the mechanisms and effects of political influence. Building upon this orientation, Martin Warnke later developed the field of political iconography. Like Warburg's *Bilderatlas*, Warnke's *Index of Political Iconography*, which is still at the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg today, was designed as a working and analytical tool (the index has recently been digitized by the German Documentation Center for Art History as part of a DFG project (2020-2024) and will be made available online). It is worth mentioning Warnke's note on the motif of the "raised head", which originated in medieval portraits of saints and was a gesture of "adoration towards heaven", intended to express piety. Later, this meaning was secularized to signify military resolve and was ultimately coopted by the "tyrants of modern times" (Warnke 1992). Warnke concludes his series of illustrations with two postage stamps from 1941, each featuring double portraits of Hitler and Mussolini.

As someone interested in stamps as *Bilderfahrzeuge* ("vehicles for images"; see Esposito 2020), Warburg also would have noticed the fascist insignia in the depiction. On the right is the name-giving bundle of rods with an axe, the fasces, which Mussolini had chosen as the official emblem of the Kingdom of Italy in 1926, and which Warburg had already analyzed in his correspondence with Fritz Saxl as a sign of identification with the Roman Empire.

Warnke's remarks largely substantiate Warburg's observations on iconography. Bearing in mind Mussolini's self-portrayal, Warnke's attention to the raised head or the emphasis of the chin can also be traced to Renaissance portraits by Bellini and Botticelli. In a portrait of Giuliano de' Medici by the latter, the lowered gaze could be cited as an example of a motif-based relationship that can be traced back to Mussolini.

In Mussolini's case, this gesture later became exaggerated to a point of absurdity. It can be assumed that the dictator was aware of the effectiveness of this staging. Even intellectuals such as the philosopher and cultural official Giovanni Gentile, who vehemently campaigned for Mussolini, were affected by the dictator's appearances. Warnke writes, "In Romance countries […] there is still a sensitivity to body language", which is particularly important for the impact of "the political image" (Warnke 1992). He concludes by expressing the hope that the "raised head" gesture has been rendered outdated

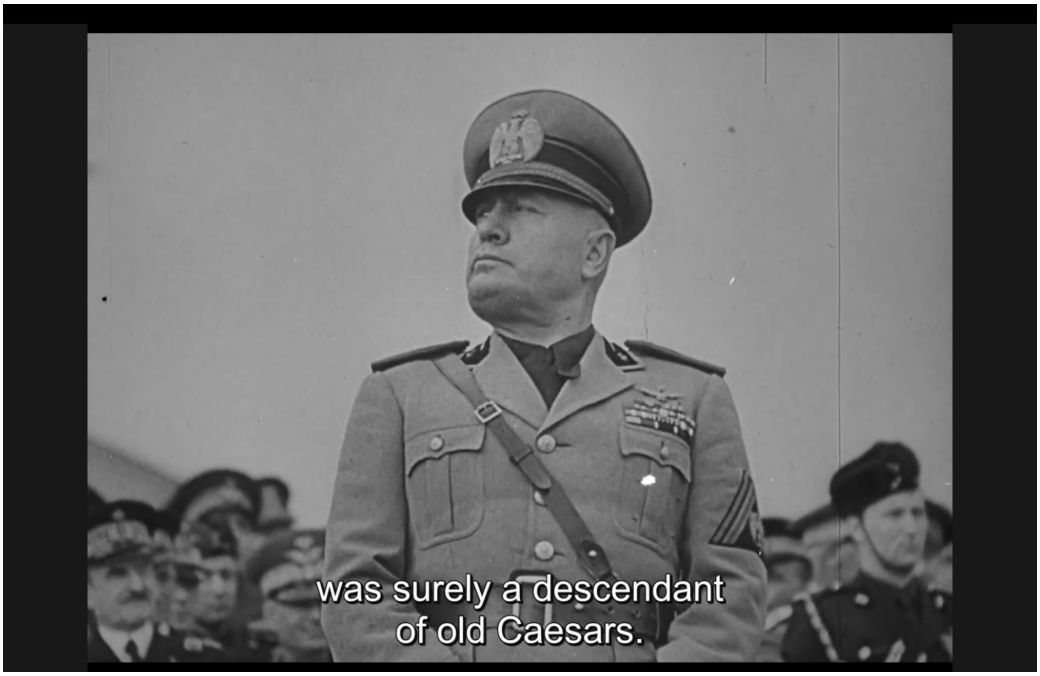
by twentieth-century dictators. The current US president's social media presence (*Bilderfahrzeuge* of a new generation), however, reveals that this is far from the case.

Warburg's seemingly uncritical word choice, "The beautiful Caesarian malice", is belied by his careful monitoring of fascism since at least 1923. As a Jewish scholar without a university position, Warburg was acutely aware of the fascist party's impending excesses. Of particular note is Warburg's interest in Karin Michaëlis, a Danish journalist and writer who criticized Mussolini and Gabriele D'Annunzio in various daily newspapers. Warburg collected these and forwarded them to his scientist friends. He also took notes, which Julius Goldstein then used for his review of Michaëlis's book *Der Fall D'Annunzio* (*The Case of D'Annunzio*), in consultation with Warburg, but without mentioning his name (Goldstein 1925). Warburg and Michaëlis exchanged personal correspondence regarding her mistaken description of D'Annunzio as Jewish, which perpetuated anti-Semitic propaganda (see the letter from Karin Michaëlis to Aby Warburg from 16 November 1925 and Warburg's reply from 28 December 1925). A committed feminist and pacifist, Michaëlis continued to criticize Hitler and Mussolini, and provided shelter to Helene Weigel and Bertolt Brecht, among others, before emigrating in 1940.

1965

Warburg's fixation upon a detail such as Mussolini's "lip movements" is surprising. It seems as if he used cinema ("a wonderful aid in experiencing") in a similar way as the binoculars through which he had observed the Pope in St. Peter's Square. This leads to a later discussion of fascism as a phenomenon that widely utilized film as an analytical tool (*Mithelfer*). The anti-fascist documentary film, *Ordinary Fascism* (Обыкновенный фашизм), by Soviet director Mikhail Romm and released in 1965, uses a compilation of historical photographs and film evidence to expose the propaganda machinery of fascism. Romm comments, for example, in narrative voice-over, upon public speeches of Hitler and Mussolini, focusing upon their delivery, performance, and mannerisms, calling their expressions and gestures artificial.

In this way, the film underwrites Warburg's approach to a later film document featuring Mussolini. Since his appearance in the 1929 footage we saw previously, Mussolini had refined his mastery of film as a medium. As with Hitler, many of his speeches were recorded on camera in close-up. Romm notes that the production of these images was closely controlled, citing the retouching of images to remove unwanted figures (contrary to Romm's assumption, it was not King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy who was retouched out of the picture, but the heads of two unidentified figures in the background. The speech given by Mussolini has not been dated). It is worth noting also that the cutaway, which Warburg mentioned in 1929, had been replaced by a uniform. The mimicry of normality towards the Church gave way to the open display of militarism. Fascism had elevated itself to the status of a cult. Instead of religious processions, we now see torchlight marches and military parades, a development that Warburg had already foreseen. Mussolini's facial ex-



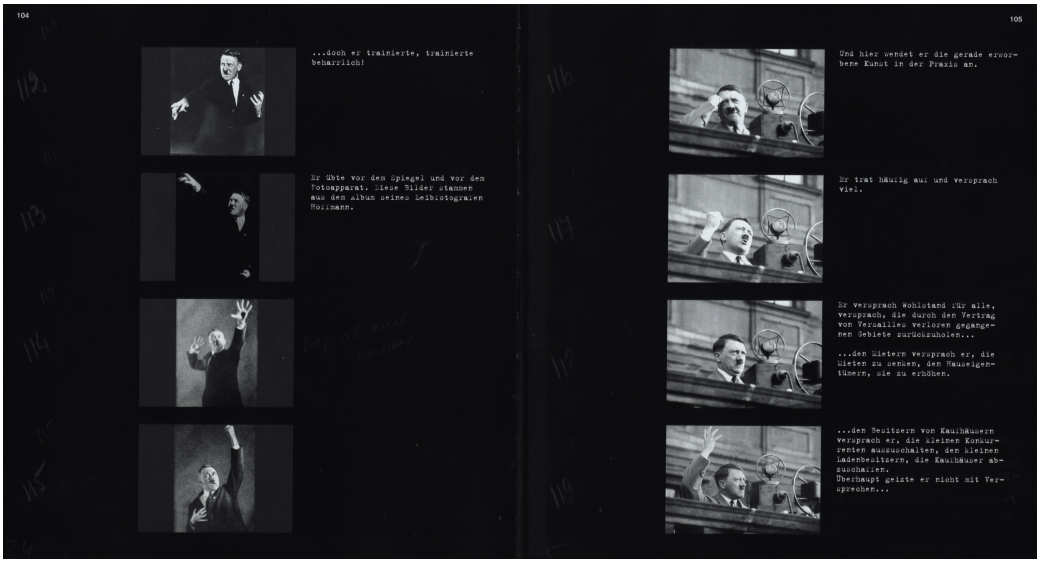
14 | Mikhail Romm, *Ordinary Fascism*, 1965; sequence (click to watch).

pressions appear exaggerated, as if he were "acting for the back row", yet captured in close-up.

Hitler was also known to use theatrical gestures. The photographs taken by his personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, which Romm also appropriated, have become quite famous. Like film stills, they depict Hitler rehearsing his repertoire of facial expressions and gestures, enacting a narcissistic mirror stage, creating a form of communication that accepts no contradiction.

Despite being subject to censorship—ironically, in the Soviet Union—Romm's film was very successful internationally. Much of its found footage was being seen for the first time. The documentary is divided into sixteen chapters, separated by text panels, much like chapters in a book, and narrated via voice-over. Romm's extensive research for the film included around two million meters of film material from various archives, as well as large quantities of photographs and other documents. These were images of atrocities and propaganda, unlike the artworks used by Warburg, which did not bear long cultural histories. In Romm's work, visual art appears only as part of political propaganda.

Images in the film are interpreted through comparison and contextualization. Parts of the material are ridiculed from an antifascist perspective. The screenwriters, Maja Turowska-



15 | *Der gewöhnliche Faschismus. Ein Werkbuch zum Film von Michael Romm* (Beilenhoff *et al.* 2009, 104-105).

ja and Yuri Chanjutin, aimed to depict the collective unconscious, according to Siegfried Kracauer's 1947 study, *From Caligari to Hitler*. The film asserts that the present is shaped by the past, as suggested by the children's drawings at the beginning. Aesthetically, the film relies upon abrupt cuts and Eisenstein's "montage of attractions" (Beilenhoff *et al.* 2009, 12-17). Additional scenes shot for the film follow principles of ethnographic observation and *cinéma vérité*. It is worth mentioning as well that the film was originally conceived as a book, too, but was not published until 2008 due to censorship.

2025

Returning to Warburg's conception of film as a "magical aid" and the potential he saw in film with regard to political iconology, we should remember that he did not consider film to be an art form in its own right. Rather, he considered it a recording technique, and cinema, a stage for social negotiations. *La conciliazione fra l'Italia e il Vaticano* documented on film the union of Church and State, and the ritualized procession associated with it, preserving it to be experienced beyond St. Peter's Square and in other times. However, Warburg's short phrase "in spite of everything" is also crucial. It refers to the film's superficial propagandist intentions; intentions that can be subverted through analysis. Similarly, Romm's *Ordinary Fascism* could be understood as a guide to reading the images and testimonies of fascist propaganda in a way that undergoes their original intentions and reveals their falseness. This characteristic also caught the attention of Roland Barthes, who revisited Romm's film for his theory of the "third meaning" (Barthes [1970] 1973).



16 | *Afterlives* (Kevin B. Lee, 2025), Screenshot (Meyer 2025b).

Although Warburg was blind to the artistic qualities of cinema, he saw something in film that is more relevant today, in the post-cinematic age. In 1930, Béla Balázs described cinema as a "lexicon of gestures and facial expressions" (Balázs [1924] 2010, 12). Warburg would certainly have liked this proposition, and filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki have expressed similar ideas (In 1995, Farocki initiated a project with Friedrich Kittler and Gary Smith for a "visual encyclopedia of cinematic terms", which was discussed at the 2001 symposium, "Suchbilder. Schritte zu einem Bildarchiv filmischer Topoi" at Kunst-Werke Berlin, with reference to Warburg's Atlas. Consequently, Farocki

considers his video essays to be contributions to an "archive of cinematic expressions". For Godard's approach in this direction see Helbig 2024, 205f).

Today, this lexicon is not limited to film and cinema, however. Social media functions as a new platform for social negotiation processes. Given the format of short messages and fragmented quotations (GIFs, video clips, and memes) that characterize it, social media is well placed to initiate a modern archive of gestures. This is very much in line with Warburg's concept of the collective memory (*Mneme*), in which historical engrams, or embodied patterns of body language, are stored and passed on. Even traditional image agencies, such as Getty Images, have begun to collect and sell "expression movements".

As we know, things turned out differently. Digital archives of gestures and faces are primarily used for facial recognition by large organizations and companies. Social media is flooded with artificially generated images (so-called AI-Slop) and clips, while historical image archives and the discourse surrounding them are disappearing. In her recent book *Hyperreaktiv*, Annkathrin Kohout describes this phenomenon as "response without speech", borrowing a phrase coined by Jean Baudrillard, indicating that content is at risk of being buried by the gesture of hyperreaction (Kohout 2025, 17).

As Roland Meyer has shown, AI-generated content is fabricated to feed 'nostalgic' feelings and instrumentalized as political propaganda (Meyer 2025a). The sheer scale of this raises the stakes and demands new strategies for maintaining analytical or forensic perspectives to expose manipulation and fake news.

Looking ahead, I would like to mention Kevin B. Lee's new film *Afterlives*, which will soon celebrate its German premiere. It is probably just coincidence that the title refers to Warburg's well-known 'afterlife' theorem (*Nachleben*). Lee's film, which focuses upon propaganda images of the so-called Islamic State, makes the point that images which have disappeared from digital archives still exist as training data for digital image generators such as Stable Diffusion. These images form part of an archive of the visual unconscious. Lee allows the images to become visible again by feeding the generators with targeted prompts, albeit only as distorted and deformed surrogates (Meyer 2025b).

Antidote



17 | Norman McCabe, *Looney Tunes: The Ducktators*, 1942, Warner Bros (click to watch).

The letters from Warburg quoted here were translated by the author. In some cases, existing translations (Schwartz 2020) were used and modified slightly. I thank Nicole Coffineau for her support.

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Abstract

Thomas Helbig's contribution examines Aby Warburg's engagement with cinema, focusing on his 1929 encounter with the documentary *La conciliazione fra l'Italia e il Vaticano*. Drawing on his letters, diary entries, and the Mnemosyne Atlas, the article traces Warburg's analysis of fascist imagery—particularly Benito Mussolini's body language and self-staging—and situates it within a broader genealogy of political iconography.

keywords | Kevin B. Lee; Martin Warnke; Mikahil Romm; Siegfried Kracauer; Mussolini.

Crowded masses

Downloading Martyrs

Turkey's Commemoration Campaign for the Failed Coup Attempt of July 15, 2016

Elif Akyüz



1 | News Anchor Hande Fırat on the night of 15 July 2016, talking to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan via Face Time during a Live Broadcast on CNN Türk. Photo: DPA/CNN Türk.

Early in the 2010s, digital media technologies and platforms fueled by user-generated content were widely regarded as instruments of political emancipation. In activist movements that peaked around that time, they were heralded as an intrinsic tool of societies poised to free themselves from the clutches of authoritarian power. What began in Tunisia in December 2010 was a wave of far-reaching uprisings and activist movements that swept rapidly across North African countries and soon spread to the Arabian Peninsula. The protests were collectively labeled as the "Arab Spring". This terminology evoked associations with former historical episodes in Europe like the "Springtime of the Peoples" (1848) or the "Prague Spring" (1968), where progressive social movements were violently suppressed. Events in several countries appeared to validate the notion that platforms such as social media and file-sharing networks could circumvent censorship and state control to accelerate grassroots communication on an unprecedented scale. Popu-

lar watchwords like "Facebook Revolution" and "Twitter Activism" captured a widespread assumption: the internet's structural features, such as its ability to decentralize information flows, allow free access and encourage peer-to-peer distribution, were understood as inherently democratizing (Tufekci 2017). This techno-political optimism was not just a reaction to the recent events but was rooted in one of the internet's own founding myths. Already in Tim Berners-Lee's 1989 proposal for a new communication infrastructure at CERN in Geneva, the structure that would soon become the 'World Wide Web' was imagined as a decentralized system designed to resist hierarchical control and to facilitate the exchange of knowledge (Berners-Lee 2008).

What began as a technological design principle, increasingly turned into the subject of interpretations that centered around an emancipatory promise. In fact, the internet seemed to be the realization of a claim that the German writer Bertolt Brecht had articulated in his democratic media-theoretical observations on the radio as early as the 1930s. In his writings, he called for the transformation of a distribution apparatus (that the radio clearly was) into a two-way communication apparatus in which every user could act as a sender as well as receiver of information (Brecht [1932] 1967, 129). This demand, central to what became known as Brecht's *Radiotheorie*, remained utopian for the medium of the radio, as its broadcast structure precluded reciprocal communication. This seemed finally technically enabled by the 'WWW', which marked one of the twentieth century's most significant media technological democratization processes.

Yet the techno-optimistic moment of the uprisings that forced political leaders in Tunisia, Egypt and beyond into resignation proved short-lived. Within a few years, authoritarian regimes began deploying the same structural features that once enabled a wave of emancipatory activism (Howard, Hussain 2013, 69). Unlike traditional propaganda, which was structured around explicit ideological doctrines and promoted a sanctioned worldview, often suppressing political pluralism, contemporary authoritarian regimes increasingly appropriate the visual languages of grassroots culture and adopt the aesthetics and dissemination mechanisms of democratic protest (Bogerts 2017). This article examines this phenomenon through a striking case study: the Turkish government's commemoration campaign following the failed coup attempt of 2016.

On the first anniversary of Turkey's failed 15 July 2016 coup attempt President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government released a series of sixteen poster designs commemorating the events of the night, when parts of the Turkish Military aimed to overthrow the president and his administration. Titled *15 Temmuz Destanı* ("The 15 July Epic"), these images combined an abundance of what appeared to be snapshots of diverse provenance: several street scenes, a deployment of video game aesthetics, and motifs that were reminiscent of revolutionary iconography, sometimes even of propaganda posters of Soviet origin. The combination of those hybrid visual elements was the very material that supported a heroic narrative of what had happened on Turkish streets during the said military

operation. Crucially, the posters were distributed not only through traditional channels, such as large-format billboards in urban spaces, but also as free downloads available on a website for anyone inside and outside the country. This distribution strategy relied on the internet's viral dynamics and encouraged users to share the poster designs via social media and thereby simulated circulation practices that had characterized the so-called Arab Spring and Turkey's own Gezi Park protests of 2013, but which served entirely different ends: the stabilization of an official historical interpretation under authoritarian control. This article analyzes the July 15 commemoration campaign across three successive media formations. The first part examines President Erdoğan's FaceTime appearance during the night of the attempted coup in 2016 as a moment of a televised authoritative imperative. In the second part it turns to the 2017 poster campaign, which constituted the central visual program of the commemoration targeting the political narrative of state martyrdom. Central to the campaign is its appropriation of first-person shooter aesthetics, its use of photomontages, and its invocation of documentary authenticity. Finally, the article analyzes the July 15 Memorial Museum in Istanbul, opened in 2019 as the architectural consolidation of this visual regime. As a whole, the campaign appeared like a carefully orchestrated transmedia evolution that was initiated with an ephemeral digital moment and reached its peak with the opening of the physical monument of the museum providing architectural permanence for the campaign's imagery in material space.

For an iconological perspective, the July 15 poster campaign and the opening of the Istanbul museum stand as paradigmatic cases of how contemporary authoritarian regimes appropriate the visual and distributional logics of democratic activist movements, the rhetorics of post-colonial discourse and that of counter-monumentalism. On closer examination, it becomes evident that digital image production enables not the replacement of propaganda but its transformation from top-down messaging to simulated grassroots communication in state-controlled narratives. The emerging commemorative practice adapts the iconographical and discursive visual vocabulary of democratic dissent for authoritarian consolidation.

I. The President as Deus Ex Machina: The July 15 Coup Attempt and Its Immediate Medialization

In the late hours of 15 July 2016, reaching into the following day, one of the most significant events in Turkey's recent history ran its course. Parts of the military attempted to overthrow the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In fact, this was not the first military coup in the country's history. Since the founding of the republic in 1923, the armed forces had repeatedly intervened in politics, most notably in 1960, 1971, and 1980, as well as with the so-called "postmodern coup" of 1997. However, a significant difference between the events of that momentous night in 2016 and the earlier coups was the decisive role that the contemporary media environment played. Soldiers blocked bridges with tanks, occupied key infrastructural sites, and entered the broadcasting cen-

ter of the state television station TRT. While fighter jets were sighted over Ankara and shots could be heard in the streets of Istanbul, events played out almost in real time on television screens. Government reports drew a concerning balance sheet. Approximately 250 people died in the streets of the metropolises and thousands were injured. The Turkish government held supporters of the Gülen movement accountable for the deadly incidents. Existing since the late 1960s, this social network and religious circle was orbiting around the ideas of the Islamic preacher Fetullah Gülen, who had been living in exile in the United States since 1999. Gülen, who had maintained close ties with the Erdoğan government until their public break in 2013, denied all involvement in the coup attempt. Since 2015, the Turkish state has labeled the movement under the acronym FETÖ (Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü, "Fetullahist Terrorist Organization"), a classification that was contested massively by the movement itself, and, ultimately, led to the decline of its influence. In the coup's aftermath, tens of thousands of alleged Gülen supporters and political opponents of Erdoğan were arrested, dismissed from public positions, or had their passports revoked.

The president's improvised television appearance became the iconic moment of that night. Shortly after midnight and a few hours into the anti-governmental military operation, he was connected to a special broadcast on the pro-government channel CNN Türk via Apple FaceTime. From the display of news anchor Hande Fırat's private mobile phone, he appealed to the citizens of the Turkish cities of Istanbul and Ankara, encouraging them to take to the streets and to confront the putschists [Fig. 1]. At the time of the video call, Erdoğan was at a hotel on the Turkish Aegean coast and was transported to Istanbul by helicopter just minutes before the putschists arrived at the holiday resort in the course of an armored operation to arrest him. Screenshots of the broadcast capture a striking visual layering that metaphorically recalls the *deus ex machina* of ancient Greek theatre—the divine intervention lowered onto stage by theatrical machinery to resolve an otherwise insoluble crisis. Here, however, the intervention came literally through the machine: Fırat's concentrated, troubled expression as she holds her phone toward the studio cameras, the president's face compressed on the small rectangular screen of the white-framed mobile phone, surrounded by multiple scrolling news banners that frame and contextualize the emergency. This unusual form of layering multiple screens, modes of address and the stacking of visual information, by assembling "on the screen ribbons of text, photographs, graphics, and uneven audio […] (as was the case during the Persian Gulf War)" (Bolter, Grusin 1999, 8f.), created a 'hypermediacy' that proved crucial not only to understanding the broadcast's iconographic urgency but, arguably, also to the course of the events. With its poor video quality, providing pixelated images to the audience through an unsteadily held mobile device, and occasional audio disruptions, the broadcast paradoxically enhanced rather than diminished the broadcast's authenticity, while activating visual codes associated with citizen journalism and grassroots documentation rather than official state communication.

This unusual form of address, broadcast by the television station through a private communication device, created a paradoxical but highly effective visual situation: the call to defend democracy appeared in a format that combined the privacy of a personal video call and the poor, partially disrupted image and sound quality of the medium, with the authority of state power. This uncommon mode of direct presidential address recalled the communications strategies that defined the 'Arab Spring' uprisings. Most notably, Egyptian activist and later Sakharov Prize winner Asmaa Mahfouz's January 2011 video blog, filmed on a personal camera and uploaded to Facebook, directly addressed the audience with much quoted daring phrases like "If you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25", catalyzing the mass mobilization that filled Cairo's Tahrir Square in early 2011 (Mahfouz's original vlog has been reuploaded with English subtitles to YouTube). Mahfouz's amateur video that showed her seated in front of a simple white background was credited with sparking the Egyptian revolution. While this video represented grassroots activism bypassing state media infrastructure through user generated content, Erdoğan's FaceTime call, on the contrary, seemed to appropriate this aesthetic of intimate, peer-to-peer communication while broadcasting through a top-down channel. The president, set against the white curtains of a hotel suite rather than the representational environment of an official government facility, further emphasized the improvised, non-institutional character of the broadcast. In this speech, the president addressed two audiences simultaneously. By threatening the coup plotters with severe judicial consequences while mobilizing civilians to march in protest, the address became more than the mere case study of objective reporting on an internal power struggle. Through this visual arrangement, it was staged as a spontaneous moment of popular self-assertion, denigrating the rebellious threat and transforming citizens into active protagonists of national defense, defending nothing less than democracy and freedom. And indeed, the televised appeal led to massive involvement of civilians who, as it was officially reported, confronted the putschists and ultimately made a decisive contribution to the failure of the attempted *coup d'état*.

II. Heroes and Martyrs: A Poster Campaign for the Anniversary of the Failed Coup Attempt

One year after the events of 15 July 2016, sixteen graphic designs, each bearing the logo of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration, were commissioned and employed revolutionary iconography, as well as the digital aesthetics of popular imagery and video games. For instance, the complete poster series is embedded within a digital memorial platform. The government operated website presents biographical narratives of the 251 individuals killed during the coup attempt in heroic martyrological language, alongside downloadable commemorative materials including the poster designs, social media graphics, and other resources that reinforce the official narrative. The posters were distributed as free digital downloads and as large-format posters displayed in the urban spaces of Turkish metropolises. As they manifested a techno-aesthetic appearance,

the posters condensed the dramatic events that unfolded on the streets of Istanbul and Ankara into visual forms designed to resonate with contemporary protest imagery and infrastructure as well as media consumption habits.

When examining series as a whole, the posters can be categorized into two distinct formal-aesthetic groups based on their modes of address. The first group consists of images that adopt visual perspectives familiar to users of contemporary digital culture. One of the most prominent characteristics of the designs is their use of computer game aesthetics, both in content and form. By showing scenes in which beholders find themselves confronted with war related imagery—shooting soldiers, chaotic situations, or blurred images resembling amateur footage from zones of conflict—they create a sense of imminent threat. These designs employ the first-person perspective known from first-person shooter games to create not only an iconography of proximity, urgency, and menace but also transport the sense of agency and participation, as the beholder is positioned as an active participant in the scene.

The second group of motifs consists of collages that draw from photographic materials of diverse origin. Interestingly, most of the poster motifs are not self-referential, but draw their content from photographs formerly posted either on social media accounts by amateurs, predominantly on Twitter, or they recontextualize canonical icons of war photography. Using established iconographies of affective modes such as mourning or regret, the designs are utilizing them to serve the political narrative central to the campaign. In the poster series, the photographs are graphically reworked or embedded within a visual idiom that recalls historical revolutionary iconography rather than documentary reporting. It is remarkable that some of individuals whose private photos were alienated from their original contexts later publicly stated that their images had been used without consent. These collages therefore perform a Janus-faced operation: the depiction of private or amateur content functions as an event testimony, while the integration into the poster's informational context utilizes it for a historicizing interpretive framework. Crucially, these two levels work in productive tension, as the privacy or spontaneity of the private photograph or the integration of iconic material subsequently authenticates the martyrological symbolism that is a central part of the campaign's narrative.

III. Creating an Ambivalent Iconography: The First-Person Shooter Perspective as Design Principle

One poster exemplifies the first of these two formal-aesthetic groups [Fig. 2]. The composition shows an armed soldier in military tactical gear. The depicted figure of this scene, wearing a camouflage vest and a red beret, is identifiable as military personnel even without specific knowledge of Turkish Armed Forces uniforms. The soldier is positioned in the foreground, his weapon raised and aimed directly toward the beholder as the muzzle flash erupts in bright yellow-orange. His facial expression, rendered in a stylized, almost comic-book-like aesthetic, combines determination and aggression. Behind him, the background



2 | Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, *15 Temmuz Destanı.* Series of 16 poster designs, 2017.
3 | *Wolfenstein 3D: The Old Blood*, 2015, Gamestill. Foto: Zsolt Wilhelm.

dissolves into reduced resolution, refusing any specific identification of location and context, while the visible blurred greens and grays suggest an outdoor environment. Unlike all other posters in this series, this example does not identify a specific location, underscoring the emblematic character of this design. The degraded background, which appears to simulate the depth-of-field blur familiar from first-person shooter video games, throws the hyper-rendered soldier into sharp relief. In the left foreground, the composition features another dark silhouetted figure, functioning as *repoussoir*. This shadowed form, also appearing to wear military gear, frames the central soldier and functions as an identification figure, positioning the beholder to share this figure's perspective, looking directly into the gun barrel. While in nineteenth-century landscape painting this compositional strategy functioned primarily to generate spatial depth and to guide the viewer's gaze into picturesque distance, here the *repoussoir* positions the beholder directly in the line of fire. However, the visual indeterminacy surrounding both figures creates an ambiguity, resulting in compositional contradictions: the central soldier could either represent a putschist threat (positioning the shooting figure as perpetrator) or a loyal military ally (positioning the soldier as heroic defender).

Upon examining the records of 15 July, it becomes clear though that the central soldier is modeled after one of the loyal soldiers, Ömer Halisdemir, who died on that night upon being ordered to neutralize one of the plotters of the coup. Although this scene is officially narrated as heroic defense that changed the course of events, the visual composition remains ambiguous with the *repoussoir* making the beholder the target of the shooting by placing him in the soldier's line of fire. This visual convention was established in video games since the early 1990s (notably *Wolfenstein 3D*, 1992, or later editions like *Wolfenstein: The Old Blood*, 2015) [Fig. 3] and generates another layer of spatial ambiguity (Birken 2022, 19): are beholders invited to identify with the armed soldier as a defender of the nation, or are they positioned as potential targets of state violence enacted in the name of security? The poster's iconographic structure refuses to resolve this question. A second example [Fig. 4] positions a soldier in tactical gear as the dominant foreground



4 | Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, *15 Temmuz Destanı, Gölbaşı Özel Harekat Başkanlığı, Ankara.* Poster design, 2017.

figure, his back turned to the beholder while facing a chaotic street scene engulfed in flames and smoke. The composition is identified by the location marker "Gölbaşı Özel Harekat Başkanlığı, Ankara" ("Gölbaşı Special Operations Department, Ankara") in the upper right corner. Here too, the iconographic significance of the figures remains unclear. The visual grammar maintains indeterminacy in defining heroes and villains and allows the image to function simultaneously as protection narrative and a threat display at the same time.

The repeated caption of these design "15 Temmuz Destanı" ("15 July Epic"), clarifies not only the historical reference point, frankly mythicizing the events, but also sets the interpretive framework through which beholders are meant to understand what they see. The phrase "Şehitlerimize ve Gazilerimize Saygımızla" ("With Respect to Our Martyrs and Veterans") frames the image as an act of warfare against the nation-state and through the theological-political category of *şehit* (martyr), a term which presupposes righteous sacrifice for the nation and, crucially, positions those who died as religious martyrs. Recent scholarship has identified a revival of martyrological discourse in contemporary politics. For example, both Sigrid Weigel and Baldessare Scolari observe that the martyr figure, a category derived from religious or revolutionary contexts, is being politicized through media reproduction following events like 9/11, the attacks on the Paris headquarters of "Charlie Hebdo", or the Arab Spring, to transform casualties into symbols of national legitimacy (Weigel 2007; Scolari 2017). In his paper on emergence of national state martyrs





5 | Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, *15 Temmuz Destanı, İstanbul, Çengelköy*. Poster design, 2017.
6 | Twitter post by a Turkish citizen, Arda Ilkin Parlak, who identified himself on one of the poster designs shortly after they were published. Screenshot, 12 July 2017.

in modernity, Baldessare Scolari points out that the discursive invocation of this category functions to "Sacralize the victim, making it a symbolic body of the religious and/or political community, even where the victim refuses this categorization" and also marks a "Concealment strategy through which the sovereign state not only hides its power to decide on 'bare life' […], but in fact even transforms it […] into a symbol of and for the nation-state" (Scolari 2017, 25-26). By sacralizing the deaths of hundreds of Turkish citizens, the poster campaign performatively mythicizes the events into an epic and establishes the narrative of national sacrifice. This produces a binary commemorative logic that erases the boundary between passive victim and active combatant, subsuming both into the unified category of martyrdom. The putschists by contrast—even though the posters do not clearly mark any of the depicted figures as such—remain excluded from this category of political sacrifice, and were referred to in official sources as *hain* (traitor).

The posters' refusal to visually resolve the identity of uniformed figures serves a specific ideological function. By maintaining this indeterminacy, the designs avoid iconographically representing any Turkish soldier as perpetrator of violence against civilians. The putschists, though rhetorically condemned and excluded from martyrological commemoration, remain unmarked in the visual composition of the posters. This allows to denounce individual traitors through text and official discourse while preserving the military institution's visual and therefore actual legitimacy. In the above-mentioned designs no uniformed figure is depicted explicitly as villain. The distinction between loyal defender and Gülenist infiltrator remains a matter of invisible political allegiance, thereby protecting the military as institution from visual indictment even as specific officers faced condemnation.

IV. Adapting the Pathos of Grief and Defeat: Heroic Photomontages

The second formal-aesthetic group within the poster series operates through the technique of the photomontage rather than hyper-stylized illustration. Yet unlike the first

group's frank use of illustration, these designs simulate documentary authenticity through photographic elements whose sources remain deliberately obscure. Rather than drawing exclusively (or even primarily) on images from 15 July itself, the posters assemble figures and scenes from diverse, often unrelated sources into compositions that appear to document the coup attempt. This collage method leaves the provenance of the images opaque. Although, at first sight, the motifs seem to form an organic visual entity, closer examination reveals that in many cases it remains unclear where the photographs originate, whether they depict the events being commemorated, or even whether they come from Turkish sources at all. One example from the series proves insightful when trying to understand how—in Warburgian terms—*Pathosformeln*, as recurring gestural modes of depiction that carry emotional intensity across visual culture, function as a central strategy of the designs, and how their operation through affective mobilization is an inherent part of the posters' commemorative logic.

The composition identified as "İstanbul, Çengelköy" [Fig. 5] shows what appears to be a nighttime scene at one of the bridges linking the continents of Europe and Asia—specifically the *Boğaziçi Köprüsü* ("Bosporus Bridge"), which after July 15 underwent a much-discussed renaming to *15 Temmuz Şehitler Köprüsü* ("15 July Martyrs Bridge") and which, in fact, served as one of the main sites during the coup attempt. In the center of the composition, a man holds a large Turkish flag, the red fabric billowing across the frame in such a way that it partially reveals a military tank positioned in the middle ground. Behind them, the bridge itself stretches across the strait, its suspension cables illuminated in red lights that visually echo the colors of the Turkish flag while simultaneously constructing a visual link between two distinct iconographic motifs. Dark stains that suggest blood cover portions of the partially revealed asphalt before the tank. On the left side of the composition, a group of civilians is depicted with their arms raised, hands gesturing and mouths open as if shouting toward the military presence. Their gestures address a group of men to the right-hand side and in the background, who appear to be soldiers dressed in tactical uniform. The men's face expressions display what could be understood as a visual catalogue of negative affective reactions: the central soldier has his hands clasped together on top of his helmet in a gesture suggesting frustration, regret, or perhaps capitulation; another figure appears to hide his face behind his hand, a motion signaling what might be discomfort or embarrassment. These gestures, symbolizing regret, defeat, and shame, suggest that the soldiers depicted here are positioned as the vanquished rather than the victors.

Yet the poster's documentary appearance, which recalls the events of that night through the naming of specific places and the depiction of what appear to be actual sites, in fact conceals a systematic process of fabrication. A bearded man, visible in profile among the civilians on the left side later, identified himself publicly on Twitter, stating that his photograph had been taken from an entirely different context and had been inserted into this poster, as he emphasized, without his permission. This man, Arda İlkin Parlak,



7 | D. Turnley, American Soldier Grieving for Comrade, Persian Gulf War, 1991. © David Turnley / CORBIS.

spotted his own photograph on one of the designs when he encountered the prominently advertised series on the government-launched webpage where the posters were made available for download and sharing as part of the commemoration campaign. He posted what amounted to a side-by-side comparison image on his personal Twitter account on 17 July 2017 [Fig. 6]: on the left, a photograph showing him seated among a group of people; on the right, the official poster with a blue circle marking his face among the crowd of civilians confronting the military. A caption accompanies the image: "Ben bu afişte niye varım? Açıklama yapacak kimse yok arkadaş" ("Why am I in this poster? There is no one to explain, my friend"). The striking analogy of the juxtaposition revealed that his image had been extracted from an unrelated context and digitally inserted among the civilians at Çengelköy, thereby transforming him into an involuntary participant in the heroic campaign.

Another striking case of decontextualization involves the central soldier with hands clasped on his head—a figure that proves to be not from July 15, not from Turkey, and, remarkably, not even from the same decade. The soldier's facial expression was copied directly from David Turnley's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1991 Gulf War photograph showing U.S. Army Specialist Ken Kozakiewicz grieving in a helicopter beside the body bag of his comrade, Staff Sergeant Andy Alaniz, who had been killed in Iraq by friendly fire [Fig. 7].





8 | Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, *15 Temmuz Destanı, Atatürk Havalimanı, İstanbul.* Poster design, 2017.
9 | J. Wildener, "Tank Man" stops the advance of Tanks in Tiananmen Square on 5 June 1989, Beijing.

In Turnley's original photograph – which was published widely in international media – the gesture unmistakably signifies the overwhelming grief of a soldier confronted with the death of a comrade in war, captured in a posture of what can only be understood as overwhelming anguish. The photograph became iconic because it humanized military violence and foregrounded psychological cost rather than strategic triumph (Chouliaraki 2013, 329). In the July 15 poster, however, this same figure's facial expression was extracted entirely from its original context and reinterpreted within an almost encyclopedic variety of negative affective reactions that mark the depicted soldiers as defeated putschists. The gesture of hands clasped on head becomes in the Turkish poster a sign of regret, shame, or perhaps capitulation following the coup's failure. Other soldiers visible in the background reinforce this reading: one figure appears to hide his face behind his hand, another displays what seems to be a posture of dejection. The accumulated gestures – defeat, regret, shame – code these figures as the coup's failed perpetrators confronting their political failure, effectively transforming Turnley's documentation of grief into a *Pathosformel* of vanquished rebellion.

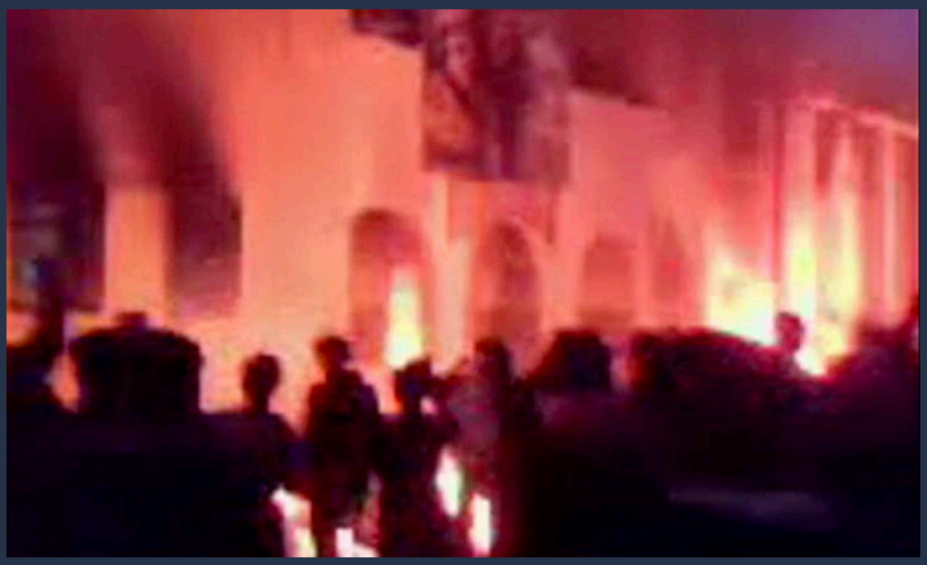
A similar logic of iconographic inversion operates in the poster situated at "Atatürk Havalimanı, İstanbul" [Fig. 8]. The composition centers on a figure lying prostrate before the treads of an advancing tank, his body positioned horizontally against the asphalt while civilians with raised flags surge forward in the background. The visual configuration unmistakably evokes the iconic 1989 photograph of the so-called *Tank Man* at Tiananmen Square in Beijing [Fig. 9], in which a lone protester stood upright before the column of military vehicles in what became a global symbol of individual defiance against state violence and was distributed as an internet meme for different bottom-up narratives ever since (Schankweiler 2021, 130; Shifman 2014, 10). Yet the July 15 poster inverts the context of this *Pathosformel*. Where *Tank Man*'s vertical posture signified resistance and civil disobedience, the prone figure in the poster suggests a more exaggerated sacrificial submission for the sake of patriotism, and recasts the tank as threat to the state and

the civilian body as object to the heroic mystification of a nationalist political statement. The massive Turkish flag, a central motif in the scene, completes the transformation and binds the individual body to the national collective, converts into the general heroic narrative of the commemorative campaign by using an icon of democratic resistance as a formula of authoritarian 'martyrdom'.

Across all sixteen designs, the Turkish flag serves not just as a marker of national identification but also as a revolutionary insignia in the tradition that Uwe Fleckner has traced through nineteenth-century political iconography in Europe. In Eugène Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830), the *Tricolore* becomes what Fleckner calls the "blue-white-red heroine" of the scene, positioned at the compositional apex where it unifies all directional impulses and carries the image's affective charge (Fleckner 2011, 326). The July 15 posters deploy the Turkish flag in much the same manner. In most of the designs, billowing red fabric with the white crescent dominates the visual field, structuring scenes of confrontation and serving as the focal point around which collective action acquires nationalistic legibility. Beholders are invited to interpret the lively folds as an "equivalent of politically inspired agitation" (Fleckner 2011, 326) and, in doing so, are drawn to the repository of their *musée imaginaire*, to the mental repository of images through which viewers recognize and interpret visual forms across historical contexts (see also Diers 1997, 41). In the Turkish examples, the iconographic role of the flag remains comparable to revolutionary iconography at the level of form across all analyzed cases, even though its political orientation shifts toward the commemoration and legitimation of a state-controlled narrative rather than revolutionary uprising.

V. Promising Documentary Authenticity: The Aesthetics of Citizen Journalism

Another important characteristic of these posters is the blurred quality in the depicted scenes. Media artist Hito Steyerl describes, with reference to the first days of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, that shaky, low-resolution cell phone photos by no means fulfill the documentary promise that major news broadcasters attribute to them when they use images and videos from amateurs on social networks to illustrate their media reports. The images broadcast on CNN during this the military invasion of Iraq often appeared like "green-gray color surfaces" that moved "like military camouflage" across the screen, which made the images appear like abstract compositions whose similarity to what they claimed to show could only be guessed (Steyerl [2008] 2020, 101-103). Despite their low informational content, these images served as markers of authenticity and were used in reporting both as immediate testimony and as visual substitute for what was actually unshowable, namely immediate military operations. This visual logic extends far beyond the Iraq War context. A striking example appeared in an article by Austrian daily newspaper "Die Presse" [Fig. 10]. In its coverage of the 2011 Libyan uprising, in which the video still of an amateur video was used for illustration, silhouetted figures appear before a burning building in Tobruk, how the caption informs the reader. Yet the photograph itself reveals almost nothing beyond orange flames and black silhouettes. The architectural structure



Ein Bild aus einem Amateurvideo zeigt Menaschen vor einem brennenden Polizeirevier in Tobruk (c) AP

10 | Newspaper article illustrated by amateur photograph to accompany article titled "Demonstranten stürmen Parlament in Lybien", 2 July 2022, screenshot.

remains unidentifiable, just as the anthropomorphic figures are rendered as pure shadows. This pattern of degraded-yet-authenticated imagery recurs throughout coverage of contemporary conflicts and uprisings, from Syria to Ukraine to Hong Kong, establishing this 'poor image' aesthetics as the dominant visual grammar of citizen journalism in the digital age (Schankweiler 2021, 93; see also: Andén-Papadopoulos 2014).

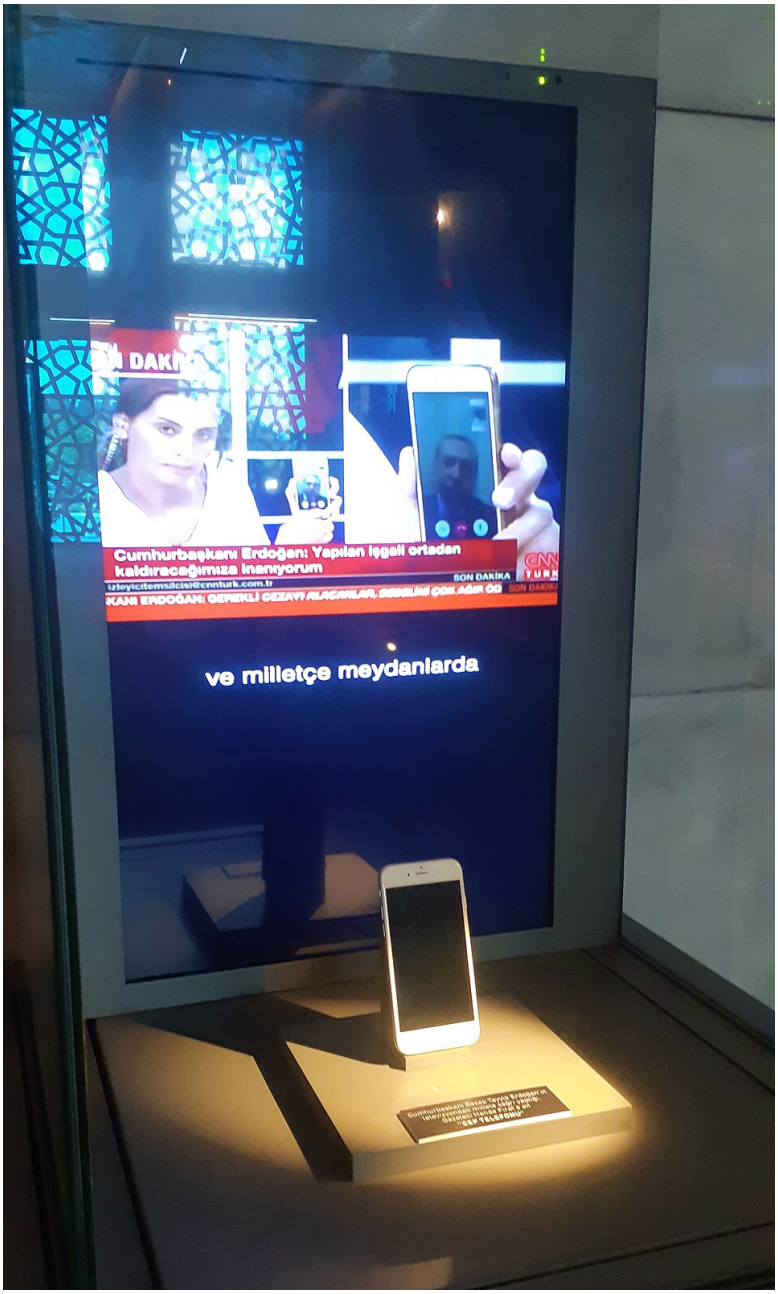
The July 15 posters do not quite embrace this aesthetic. They are, after all, professionally designed illustrations rather than compressed video stills. Yet they strategically appropriate its formal language and affective charge: while protest images from the Arab Spring and other revolts were mostly amateurish, blurred, and symbolic, the Turkish government posters adapt this aesthetic to transfer it into a controlled heroic iconography. The aesthetics of these posters thus work simultaneously as artefacts, familiar to the beholder's eye, as they connect to popular digital visual languages, and authoritative, because they mobilize these for a state-orchestrated heroic narrative. The posters' deployment of the concept of the poor image aesthetics reveals a sophisticated understanding of contemporary visual authentication.

VI. Iconographies of Heroism and Victimhood: The July 15 Museum in Istanbul as Culmination

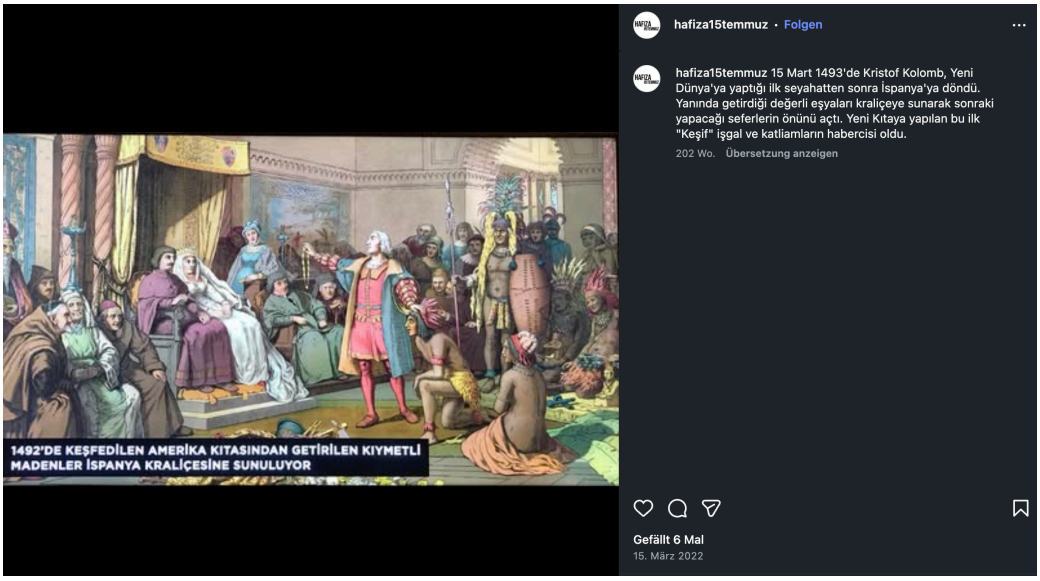
Three years after the attempted coup, objects central to the construction of its enduring heroic narrative, which was promoted through the widely disseminated poster campaign still accessible today, were installed in a newly built museum situated at the foot of the renamed *15 July Martyrs Bridge* on the Asian shore of the Bosporus. Given the revealing name *Hafıza 15 Temmuz Müzesi* ("Memory 15 July Museum"), on its website, the institution positions itself not only as a memorial to the coup attempt, but also prominently as a site addressing the much broader discourse of "Coups, colonies, and colonialism" in Turkey and the world. This rhetorical move exemplifies what Turkish scholars have identified as an emerging trend in Turkey and other parts of the world where "Anti- and postcolonial critiques are deployed in service of authoritarian regimes" (Çapan, Zarakol 2017, 194).

The museum concept for the Istanbul project was first articulated at a planning workshop held on 14 January 2017, organized by the newly founded 15 July Association in coordination with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Culture and Tourism Minister Nabi Avcı framed the institution as both physical and digital from its inception, stating that it would integrate new communication technologies to enable content distribution "Without time and space restrictions" (The speech is available on the webpage of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism). Accordingly, the downloadable poster campaign, launched six months later, was in fact part of a coordinated transmedia strategy conceived at the museum's earliest planning stages. Avcı additionally stressed that the museum would address "the prehistory of the coup tradition" explicitly including the 27 May 1960 military coup in this genealogy of recurring attacks on the nation. The museum opened on 12 July 2019 under the curatorial direction of architect Hilmi Şenalp, who had previously designed several state-commissioned projects, with President Erdoğan in attendance.

While the first section of the museum addresses the events by exhibiting artefacts from the night itself like the mobile phone from which news anchor Hande Fırat received the president's call on the night of the attempted coup, displayed alongside a screen showing the original broadcast [Fig. 11], a car crushed by a military tank or different personal effects invoking the presence of the people who took to the street, a second section aims to contextualize the events by linking them to atrocities of the colonial period. With this secondary narrative that was not yet present in the poster campaign launched two years earlier, the coup was framed not just as a domestic political conflict but as foreign infiltration of imperialist forces orchestrated by the Gülen movement from its base in the United States. To mark early stages of colonialism as relevant to the trajectory of the events leading to what had happened in 2016, the museum uses multiple in- and ex-situ media platforms. For example, on the museum's Instagram account there are several images that are also displayed on screens in the museum. One of those references is a post that



11 | Museum Display with the Mobile Phone of News Anchor Hande Fırat at the 15 July Memorial Museum, Istanbul, photo taken by the author.



12 | Instagram post on the account of the 15 July Memorial Museum, Istanbul, 15 March 2022, screenshot.

can also be seen on a multimedia exhibition display on the site. The image shows a late nineteenth century color lithograph by American artist Victor A. Searles depicting Columbus at the royal court of Spain in Barcelona presenting precious goods and treasures to Ferdinand II of Aragón and his wife, Queen Isabella I, on 15 March 1493 [Fig. 12]. The Instagram post not only shows the color lithograph, but also contextualizes the image in a post-colonial reading. The caption states as follows:

> 15 Mart 1493'de Kristof Kolomb, Yeni Dünya'ya yaptığı ilk seyahatten sonra İspanya'ya döndü. Yanında getirdiği değerli eşyaları kraliçeye sunarak sonraki yapacağı seferlerin önünü açtı. Yeni Kıtaya yapılan bu ilk "Keşif" işgal ve katliamların habercisi oldu.
>
> [On March 15, 1493, Christopher Columbus returned to Spain after his first voyage to the New World. He presented the valuable items he brought back to the queen, paving the way for his subsequent voyages. This first "discovery" of the New World heralded the coming of occupation and massacres].

This postcolonial framing is not only surprising given that by 1493 Istanbul had already been taken as the imperial capital of the Ottoman Empire for forty years and therefore possessed its own expanding territory and imperial history, but also because it establishes a crucial framework. By positioning July 15 museologically within a global narrative of resistance to foreign intervention and marginalization, the museum adapts the visual and rhetorical language of anti-colonial struggle and, more generally, that of victimhood. Furthermore, this adaption extends beyond narrative content to encompass formal strategies as well. In official sources, the museum positions itself explicitly as a



13 | Museum Installation titled *Şehitlerimizin Ayakkabıları* ("Our Martyrs' Shoes"), 15 July Memorial Museum, Istanbul, photo taken by the author.

counter-monumental site and strikingly adopts design principles developed in contexts of democratic memorialization, particularly post World War II memory culture. The blending of two seemingly contradictory, even paradoxical narrative lines, that include the concepts of heroism and victimhood, finds its synthesis in the concept of the martyr, which allows both readings to coexist without resolution. The museum bases its concept on a

universal repertoire of colonial violence, linking disparate historical episodes into a narrative of Western imperialism.

In an adjacent gallery, visitors encounter a concrete-walled installation where dozens of shoes—sneakers, dress shoes, plastic slippers, house shoes, sandals, work boots—lie draped across the floor in apparent forward movement, while additional pairs ascend a wall display, arranged on the steps of a staircase apparently leading to heaven [Fig. 13]. Above, a poetic inscription in metal lettering accompanies the capital letters of the label "Şehitlerimizin Ayakkabıları" ("Our Martyrs' Shoes") and reinforces this reading, while a glass barrier bearing what appear to be bullet-holes separates neighboring spaces from the accumulated footwear.

The memorial complex comprises multiple integrated elements: a museum building housing exhibitions and artifacts, a domed outdoor mausoleum with a strong religious connotation (*Şehitler Makamı*) inscribed with 251 names, a memorial forest (*Hatıra Ormanı*) of 251 trees for each person reported killed, and a *mescid* ("prayer room"). What proves analytically significant is the complex's deployment of visual and spatial strategies derived from internationally recognized non-heroic commemorative forms, directly from post-1980s European counter-memorial discourse developed in response to the so-called memory boom and the prevailing skepticism toward heroic forms of commemoration (see Young 1992). Counter-memorial forms emerged from the premise that after genocidal violence, memory could no longer rely on affirmative, heroic representation but had to register absence, doubt, and the refusal of triumphalist narratives (Widrich 2020, 57). Turkey's monumental discourse, by contrast, developed from a very different political setting: The Ottoman Empire as an Islamic empire maintained no figurative public monument culture comparable to nineteenth-century European statuary; monumental commemoration entered the region as a state-driven Republican project institutionalizing what art historian Aylin Tekiner describes as the sacralization and eternalization of the state through representation (Tekiner 2010, 32; see also: Doğramcı 2004, 97-98). Although today there is indeed counter-monumental practice among Turkish contemporary artists, no epistemic break comparable to Europe's "memory boom" disrupted the heroic commemorative logic established during the early years of the republic with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The shoe display exemplifies this disjunction: personal effects functioning as metonymic traces of absent bodies, the scattered arrangement suggesting interrupted lives, all following visual grammar developed to resist spectacle, heroization, and the sacralization of violence. The trope of the victims' shoes was historically stabilized within Holocaust museum practices as a specific form of commemoration. Beginning with early exhibitions at Auschwitz-Birkenau after 1947 and reinforced through subsequent displays, photographs, and educational media that circulated internationally, shoes were gradually transformed from mundane personal objects into globally legible metonyms of absence,

loss, and mass death (David 2024, 66). Commemoration sites in New York, Jerusalem and Budapest developed this visual language as a particular way of representing the unpresentable scale of the atrocities, using everyday objects as substitutes for absent bodies and endowing them with a fixed moral and emotional grammar. This form of commemorative practice, developed and established within museum contexts, was only later adapted by protest movements as a symbol for very different political purposes (David 2024, 69). An academic study, republished by the Presidential Communications Directorate in 2022 provides insight into how the government aimed to conceptualize these visual practices. Authored by Rabia Zamur Tuncer and titled *15 Temmuz Darbe Girişimi ve Toplumsal Belleğin Hafıza Mekanları* ("The Coup Attempt of 15 July and Memory Spaces of Social Memory"), the study analyzes the museum concept and mobilizes canonical Western memory theory of the twentieth century, from Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora to Jan Assmann, and explicitly references different definitions of counter-monuments, among them one that identifies displays of Holocaust victims' shoes as a paradigmatic anti-heroic, counter-monumental (*karşı anıt*) memorial form (Tuncer 2022, 172). Without explicitly ascribing counter-monumental status to the 15 July Museum, the study attempts to determine through quantitative methods whether the museum (among other significant places for the commemoration of 15 July) has successfully achieved the status of a *lieu de mémoire*. Tuncer's own quantitative findings reveal that the respondents expressed anxiety about the ubiquitous use of the term 'martyr' and perceive name changes as part of a "perception creation process" (*algı oluşturma*) (Tuncer 2022, 302). While not addressing the contradiction between the museum's actual heroic form and the theory of the counter-monument, the study simultaneously employs the category of 'martyr' throughout the analysis, which itself is a theological-political term that presupposes sacrificial legitimacy and forecloses the skepticism definitive of counter-memorial practice.

This reversal can be understood through political theorist Baldassare Scolari's analysis of modern state martyrologies. Scolari's primary concern is with linguistic performance and how martyrological rhetoric underwent secularization from theological to political spheres of meaning while retaining what he calls, drawing on a term coined by Giorgio Agamben, its "signature". Signatures, in this framework, are signs transposed from one semantic field to another while preserving residual force from their earlier context (Scolari 2017, 8). Scolari demonstrates that martyrological language activates associations with absolute victimhood and moral incontestability in order to transform political violence into sacred history. His central intervention is the concept of the "state martyr". Unlike martyrs of resistance movements who challenge sovereign authority, state martyrs legitimate existing power. While Scolari analyzes primarily discursive practices, for example political speeches, media representations, commemorative rhetoric, his framework proves equally applicable to material commemoration (Scolari 2017, 9). The shoes, trees, and inscribed names function as visual signatures in his sense: they activate as-

sociations developed in different contexts of memory culture without explicit reference, lending borrowed moral authority to an entirely different political project. The combination of established memorial forms with Islamic devotional architecture produces a "translational memorial", addressing diverse and potentially international audiences through globally legible iconographies of victimhood while grounding domestic reception in the frameworks of Islamic martyrisms in order to reproduce the heroic narrative central to the commemoration of 15 July 2016.

VII. Conclusion: Authoritarian Afterlives of Protest Aesthetics

With rising authoritarian conservatism and regimes worldwide increasingly finding more far-reaching ways to present political narratives and ideologies, it becomes ever more important to understand how new media comes into play within these processes. Turkey's July 15 commemoration campaign offers a paradigmatic case of how the state adapts different democratic visual forms, like popular media and consumption habits, or citizen journalism, counter-monumental theory and forms, as well as post-colonial discourse. The Turkish campaign evolved through three stages utilizing the full spectrum of contemporary media communication both in content and form: President Erdoğan's FaceTime call broadcast on television the night of the events, the downloadable poster series launched for the first anniversary, and the museum opening in Istanbul and Ankara in 2019. This trajectory transformed a contested national event into sacred history through distinct formal languages calibrated for different audiences: younger groups through digital media, older demographics through posters and television.

The museum, inaugurated three years later deployed markedly different formal vocabulary, combining postcolonial framing with the appropriation of counter-memorial aesthetics developed in European memory culture. This turn acquires significance within Turkey's commemorative landscape. Ottoman-Islamic restriction to figurative representation meant no monument culture comparable to European statuary until the founding of the republic; republican monumentalization institutionalized the sacralization of state representation, without the impacts of the epistemic break that Europe's post-Holocaust memory boom introduced. With the 15 July 2016 commemorative campaign, the Turkish government under Erdoğan faced a specific challenge: how can a heroic epic, an official interpretation of the failed coup attempt, be visually remembered and disseminated while addressing a broad audience familiar with Western aesthetic principles? The existing solution produced a paradox where anti-heroic aesthetics serve the heroic narrative, while the ideological content remains consistent across all three stages through the martyrological narrative. The museum reinforces this reading through architectural elements while framing the coup through postcolonial rhetoric resulting in a hybrid and highly ambivalent concept of a "translational memorial", borrowing European memory culture's moral authority for international audiences while grounding domestic reception in Islamic devotional frameworks through a domed mausoleum, prayer room, and a metonymic shoe-display suggesting ascension.

Ten years ago, in 2016, Turkey's case appeared like an exceptional context where authoritarian commemorative strategies seemed like an isolated aberration. In contemporary political culture with its rising authoritarianism, these patterns have become symptomatic of broader tendencies. The Turkish case illuminates this pattern, demonstrating how regimes strategically adapt multiple historical and contemporary formal vocabularies while maintaining an ideological content and inverting democratic as well as counter-hegemonic languages to foreclose the very contestation these forms were designed to enable.

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Abstract

Elif Akyüz's article analyzes how contemporary authoritarian regimes appropriate the visual languages and media practices originally associated with democratic activism. Focusing on the Turkish government's commemoration campaign following the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016, it examines how protest aesthetics, citizen journalism, and counter-memorial strategies are reconfigured within a state-controlled narrative. The study traces the campaign across three successive media formations: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's FaceTime appearance during the night of the coup attempt, the downloadable poster series released for the first anniversary in 2017, and the July 15 Memorial Museum in Istanbul opened in 2019. Through iconological analysis, the article demonstrates how the campaign mobilizes visual vocabularies such as first-person shooter imagery, photomontage, *Pathosformeln* of revolutionary iconography, and the aesthetics of the "poor image" associated with citizen journalism. These forms are combined with martyrological rhetoric and with memorial strategies derived from European counter-monument discourse. The result is a hybrid commemorative regime that transforms a contested political event into sacred national history while simulating grassroots communication. The Turkish case illustrates a broader tendency in contemporary political culture in which authoritarian regimes adapt and invert democratic visual languages in order to stabilize official narratives and foreclose political contestation.

keywords | July 15 Coup Attempt; State martyr; Hafıza 15 Temmuz Müzesi; Counter-Monument.

A Neoliberal Caspar David Friedrich

The AfD's Ethnoscape

Jacopo Galimberti





1 | Video posted by alice.weidel Instagram account on 26 January 2025, frame 00' 14".
2 | Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman before the Setting Sun*, oil on canvas, ca. 1818, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Nationalgalerie.

> Capitalism had no other choice than that which it has excellently made with fascism up until now; yet it would certainly prefer old liberalism to romantic "anti-capitalism" (without which business could admittedly no longer be done in Germany).
> The blood myth […] is not the most desirable servant of capitalist reason.
> (Ernst Bloch, 1929)

> The crowd symbol of the Germans was the army. But the army was more than just the army; it was the marching forest […].
> The parallel rigidity of the upright trees and their density and number fill the heart of the German with a deep and mysterious delight.
> To this day he loves to go deep into the forest where his forefathers lived; he feels at one with the trees.
> (Elias Canetti, 1960)

In the national elections of February, 2025, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) secured its highest share of the vote, 20.8%, since its founding in 2013. The party initially emerged as a conservative force, critical of Angela Merkel's management of the Eurozone crisis. It was only after the so-called "migration crisis" of 2014-2015 and the party's convention in Essen, at which the founding leader, Bernd Lucke, was ousted, that the AfD began to take on the characteristic blend of nativism and neoliberalism for which it is known for today. With the deterioration of the country's economy, exacerbated by international sanctions limiting the manufacturing sector's access to Russian gas, the AfD gained further consensus by stylising itself as the defender of "national interest" and by promising a reliable energy supply based upon fossil fuels and nuclear power. The party's electoral base has

only continued to grow, particularly amongst young voters and in former East Germany, where recession and unemployment has been especially severe.

The AfD incorporates disparate far-right currents, at least two of which have achieved national prominence. First, it includes factions often described as *völkisch*, a word that is notoriously untranslatable and here means chauvinistic, socially conservative, eager to revive "Germanic" traditions and critical of American cultural colonisation. Second, are AfD's neoliberal elements, epitomised by the party's 2025 candidate for Chancellor, Alice Weidel. Weidel joined the AfD in 2013 and was elected to its federal executive committee less than two years later. By 2017, she stood out as one of the party's leading Bundestag candidates. A former Goldman Sachs analyst, Weidel holds a doctorate in economics and speaks Mandarin. Her extremely rapid rise within the party, however, cannot be explained solely by her competences and connections. Weidel's public profile corresponds with a trend that, as Luciano Cheles noted, is also reflected by Rassemblement National and Fratelli d'Italia – the prominence of relatively young, blonde women as conservative leaders (Cheles 2023, 153). Without reducing their leadership to an aesthetic strategy, this choice nonetheless signals an attempt to undermine the stereotype of far-right parties as hinged upon patriarchal, warrior-like masculinity. Weidel's case, takes this further. She is openly gay and lives with her Sri Lankan-born partner.

The AfD's campaigns, by now, based heavily in social media, are orchestrated to generate controversy (Fielitz, *et al.* 2024). From Björn Höcke's electoral tour on a Simson motorcycle, a cultural icon of the former GDR, to scandalous images of things such as fake "remigration" flight tickets or parents protecting their children with Hitler salutes, the party has adopted a formula of political communication, marked by "provocation, calculated ambivalence and denial" (Wodak 2021, 20). Through deliberate scandalisation and "ready deniability in case of critical rebuke", the AfD influence the political agenda (Herzog 2025, 9). For the 2017 elections, the party's campaign was managed by an American firm, Harris Media. But for the 2025 campaign, the AfD issued no official statements regarding its communications agencies (Doerr 2021; Schicha 2019; Feng 2023). Nonetheless, Alexander "Malenki" Kleine, a former activist of the Identitarian Movement and managing director of Tannwald Media UG, has been linked to the AfD's 2025 election campaign, particularly its AI-generated graphics. Commentators have also highlighted overlaps between Tannwald Media and the Instagram troll account wilhelm_kachel, whose neo-*völkisch* memes occasionally bear similarities to the AfD's official posts (Ayyadi 2024).

For the 2025 general elections, Weidel introduced herself in a 52-second, untitled short film that circulated widely across the party's social media channels. Its authors have not been disclosed. Months after its release, the video remained pinned to the party's Instagram account, casting it as a quasi-programmatic manifesto. This article concentrates upon this short film, unpacking its meanings from an art-historical perspective, combin-





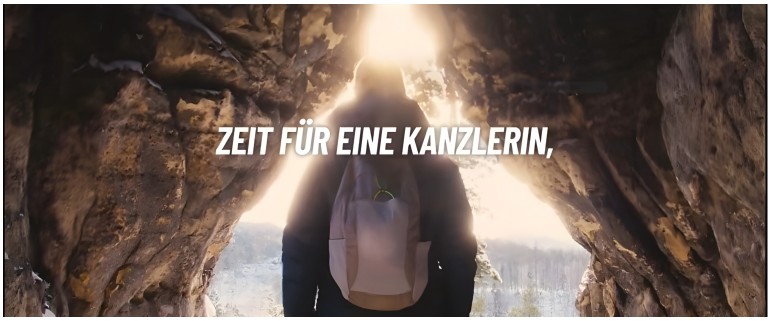
3 | Video posted by alice.weidel Instagram account on 26 January 2025, frame 00' 17".
4 | Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, oil on canvas, 1808-1810, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Alte Nationalgalerie.

ing political iconology in the tradition of Martin Warnke with Marxist ideology critique. Here, "ideology" designates a set of transfigurations of the economic determinations that stabilise social forms. It denotes the discursive formations through which the ruling classes seek to displace and to justify social contradictions, while preserving, for themselves and for society at large, a reassuring semblance of coherence.

Enlisting Caspar David Friederich

Constructed in the style of a film trailer, the video begins with inserts of Weidel dressed in hiking gear and a blue scarf, the AfD's official colour. There are intermittent cuts to details from a mountainous landscape: fir trees, glittering snow, a babbling brook, etc. The soundtrack blends dramatic music with natural sounds. Melting stalactites of ice intimate the first stirrings of thaw, an allusion to the timing of the 2025 elections. Suddenly, the screen turns black and the music stops. Out of this darkness, Weidel's voice breaks the silence. Her disembodied speech pronounces the official oath recited by German Chancellors upon assuming office: "I swear that I will dedicate my efforts to the welfare of the German people, promote their welfare, protect them from harm, uphold and defend the Basic Law and the laws of the Federation, perform my duties conscientiously and do justice to all. So help me God". The oath implicitly responds to those who accuse the party of being unconstitutional (*verfassungswidrig*), while simultaneously introducing a religious dimension. Since 1998, the reference to God has indeed been omitted from the official oath, with successive Chancellors opting for a secularised version. In the final sequence, Weidel stands in a grotto and looks out over a sunlit forest, as two sentences of text overlay her shoulders, one after the other. The first reads, "Time for a chancellor who remembers the oath"; the second, "Time for Germany". The second sentence is accompanied by the AfD's logo, superimposed onto Weidel's backpack.

Weidel's video contains no crowds, flags, microphones. Yet, politics appear in the form of references to Caspar David Friedrich, whose 250th anniversary was being commemorated with exhibitions throughout Germany at the time of the video's release. Allusions to his





5 | Video posted by alice.weidel Instagram account on 26 January 2025, frame 00' 17".
6 | Caspar David Friedrich, *Rock Gate in Uttewalde Gorge*, oil on canvas, ca. 1820-1823, Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste.

paintings saturate the video, such as *Woman before the Setting Sun* [Figg. 1, 2], *Monk by the Sea* [Figg. 3, 4], and *Rock Gate in Uttewalde Gorge* [Figg. 5, 6].

Broader political motifs used by Friedrich, such as the foggy forest to the snows that often cover his landscapes, are also quoted in the video. Between 1806 and 1815, the blanket of snow coded the experience of French domination (Warren 2017; Hermand 2011, 14-34). The video also appropriates one of the painter's key conceits, the "spatial barrier", in which the landscape is mediated through back-turned figures who both obstruct and beckon the viewer's gaze. Weidel is indeed depicted almost exclusively from behind, serving as a surrogate with whom the viewer can identify, but also follow. From another of Weidel's Instagram posts, we learn that the filming took place in Saxon Switzerland, one of Friedrich's favoured landscapes (posted on Instagram by alice.weidel on 13 January 2025). That Friedrich's imagery, including the iconic *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, is perceptible to a broad, far-right audience as a subtext of the video is indirectly corroborated by "Compact", a magazine that forms part of the AfD's media ecosystem. In 2019, "Compact"'s cover [Fig. 7] quoted the figure seen from behind in *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, superimposed onto a forest of wind turbines.

A brief analysis of the twentieth-century German reception of Friedrich offers a lens to examine the politics of the AfD's video. After attracting considerable attention between 1808 and 1820, Friedrich's work was neglected for decades until its rediscovery in 1906 (Hinrichs 2009). On the eve of the First World War, Friedrich's production was frequently interpreted as a "Nordic" and patriotic. The former term, "Nordic", was associated with Friedrich during his lifetime, but it lacked nationalist overtones and instead indicated that he consciously favoured the landscapes of Northern Europe over those of the Grand Tour, the customary rite of passage for artists. Following the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire by Napoleon in 1806, and especially during the Wars of Liberation (1813-1815), Friedrich's landscapes took on anti-French undertones, often couched in allusive imagery



7 | "Compact" special issue 22, June 2019.



8 | Video posted by afdnrw's Instagram account on 26 January 2025, frame 00' 6".

to circumvent censorship. Anti-French sentiment was conveyed through references to "anti-Latin" Germanness, such as tombs of ancient Germanic tribes, Gothic architecture, traditional costumes, and, in a more pointed way, Arminius, whom Friederich celebrated in *The Tombs of the Old Heroes*.

Arminius was the chieftain who defeated the Romans in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest and was mythologised as a national hero in the nineteenth century. Likewise, the motif of the impenetrable forest functioned as a symbol of emergent German identity, as in *Chasseur in the Forest*, in which a lone French soldier hesitates at the threshold of the woods as a raven sitting on a stump foretells his fate. As art historian William S. Heckscher observed in the late 1930s, this enacted myth of ancient Germans as "Noble Savages" became foundational for modern German identity*.

The association of the forest with Germanness partly originated in Tacitus's *Germania* (c. 98 CE), which describes the land's primeval biome and the resilience of its inhabitants. Tacitus, who, incidentally, never went east of the Rhein (Zechner 2016), set the "Germani" in opposition to the Romans, portraying them as unsullied by luxury and devoted to martial traditions. Their freedom, according to Tacitus, manifested itself in the political and military sphere. Deliberations were conducted by assemblies of free warriors, and leaders secured their loyalty by the force of personal value (Dörner 1996).

The Nazis admired the "Nordic" atmospheres of Friedrich's paintings. Yet, they misrepresented his sylvan landscapes as sinister "ethnoscapes". This term describes the projection of nativist fantasies onto the landscape, in this case, an intimate kinship between Aryan blood and the German soil (Smith 1999). Nazi art historians viewed Friederich's paintings as instantiating "blood and soil" culture (Eberlein 1939). Popularised by Walther Darré, Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture, this ideology postulated an ancestral tie between racial purity and the German homeland, one that provided a mythic justification for expansionist policies in Eastern Europe (Gies 2019; Brüggemeier *et al*. 2005). The anti-aristocratic and democratic elements inherent to Friedrich's nationalism were largely ignored in the 1930s. With the regime of censorship marking the 1820s "Persecutions of demagogues", a campaign of repression targeting liberal intellectuals across the German Confederation commenced. It then became evident that the anti-Napoleonic struggles had primarily strengthened the princes' power. The traditional German garments worn by some figures in Friedrich's paintings can indeed be read less as a proto-racial symbol of the "Blood and soil" mystique and more in a liberal-democratic key, given that such attire had been banned because of its associations with opposition to princely authority (Hermand 2011, 14-34).

Following World War II, exegeses of Friedrich's work in West Germany emphasised its pietistic roots (Börsch-Supan [1973] 1974). The GDR, by contrast, sought to promote a progressive reading, not least because a portion of his works were held in East German museums (Hinz 1974). In the 1970s, a new generation of art historians turned to Marxism

in their analyses of Friedrich. They suggested that the fraught legacy of his work offered a mirror to German history, from the dawn of national identity to the capitalist culture of West Germany, which by then had appropriated Friedrich's paintings to market exotic travels or modern cars (Hoffmann 1974).

Friedrich's reception until the 1970s, followed by studies by Johannes Grave, Joseph Leo Koerner and Nina Amstutz, provide insights for interpreting the AfD's enlistment of his oeuvre. They note that the master trope of Friedrich's art, the landscape observed by *Rückenfiguren* (figures seen from behind and connotated as contemporaneous with the viewer) perform several key functions (Sugiyama 2009). Firstly, Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren* invited the early-nineteenth-century bourgeois public to project itself into the scene, allowing for a mode of absorption that did not exist within eighteenth-century pastoral landscapes, which were embedded in biblical or classical narratives. Secondly, this strong sense of immersion was mitigated by the perception of nature from a distance. For all Friedrich's debt to Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, his works complicate the ideal of communion with nature by maintaining a spatial barrier between the figure and the landscape (Hoffmann 1974).

Friedrich's majestic vistas resonate with Kant's conception of the sublime, not merely as experiences of awe or disorientation, but as moments in which the subject becomes aware of its supersensible vocation (Clewis 2001). The viewers of Friedrich's paintings, like the bourgeois figures depicted within them, can be understood as experiencing themselves as free, rational agents whose ultimate essence lies beyond the domain of sensibility. Thirdly, Friedrich's oeuvre envisions art as a tool to invoke a "Community of feeling" or *Gefühlsgemeinschaft*, a notion that has been used to characterise the AfD as a party that furnishes its electorate with affective home and empowering forms of identification (Spissinger 2024; Amstutz 2015, 449). Friedrich's often solitary figures invite a sense of fraternity by suggesting shared acts of perception and, thusly, an affective community. Despite this pronounced intersubjectivity, however, the artist confines the beholders of his paintings to the role of a "secondary spectator" observing the observer (Grave 2023). Fourthly, Friedrich subjectivises nature. Instead of a rational, connective middle ground between his wanderers and the deep background, ambiguous, atmospheric light and colour dissolve the horizon. The landscape is thus a visual phenomenon, rather than a spatial one, manifesting as an internal and indistinct picture in the mind. His works indeed exemplify a form of *Erlebniskunst*, an "art of lived experience", in which the landscape fuses outer scene and inner vision, becoming, in a sense, a self-portrait of the artist (Koerner 1990).

These unresolved tensions between affective, national community and artistic individuality converge in the expanse of trees unfolding before Weidel, framed as one of Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren*. Her sublime encounter with nature, in which the viewer vicariously shares, has little, however, to do with the Kantian "revelation" of moral freedom granted to the

bourgeois subject. Cast in the mould of the Romantic genius-artist, the video enacts the motif of "politician as artist", explored by Marin Warnke, who demonstrated the widespread use of this metaphor, by which the state was a work of art, and the people were a pliant matter to be shaped (Warnke 2007). In this video, Weidel's inner vision appears to witness the epiphany of the German woods qua *Volk*. According to Georg Mosse's analyses of pre-Nazi right-wing culture, *Volk* should be understood as, "The union of a group of people with a transcendental 'essence' […] fused to man's innermost nature and represent[ing] […] the source of his creativity, his depth of feelings, his individuality, and his unity with other members of the *Volk*" (Mosse 1964, 4). The omniscient perspective offered by drone photography suggests power and oversight rather than the inner exile exalted by the far-right intellectual Ernst Jünger in *The Forest Passage* (1951), which features on wilhelm_kachels stickers. The landscape before Weidel's eyes, at once material and fantasised, delineates an ethnoscape projecting identity symbols onto the woods. It evokes the idea of "eternal forest" (*Dauerwald*), which embodies a silviculture, first adopted in the 1920s, as much as it is an analogy to connote the German Volk as perpetually comprised of native species (Imort 2005).

"Compact", briefly banned as a "right-wing extremist publication" in 2024, also praises the German forest along similar lines. Friedrich's "sacred groves" are described as "mysterious and legendary", emblematic of a tradition immortalised "by countless German writers, poets, and artists" (Elsässer 2021). "Compact" also drew attention to another topos of *völkisch* culture that is routinely invoked alongside that of the German forest, the myth of Arminius' victory. The magazine heralds the story of Germanic tribes ambushing Roman legions by concealing themselves in the woods as "The most important day in our history" (Pföhringer 2023). Indeed, in a 2025 Instagram video, Weidel was interviewed standing before the 1875 monument to Arminius [Fig. 8].

Recasting Tacitus's notion of *libertas* in an anti-statist, economically libertarian register, which, incidentally, echoes the Nazis' celebration of "decentralisation" as an expression of German "essence" (Chapoutot [2020] 2023), "Compact" argued that the defining trait of autochthonous populations lay in their "will to freedom […]. Unlike […] the Romans, the Germanic tribes knew neither a state, nor codified legislation, nor bureaucracy" (Pföhringer 2023). In her book *Widerworte*, Weidel avoided references to Germanic figures, situating her thought according to political and economic liberalism, from Locke and von Mises to one of neoliberalism's putative fathers, Friedrich von Hayek (Weidel 2019). Taken together, Weidel's pantheon of references and "Compact"'s portrayal of Germanic tribes introduce an additional semantic layer to the AfD's campaign video. The romantic landscape stands out as a hybrid of Nordic mythology and neoliberal anti-statism. In this synthesis, the AfD transforms Friedrich's motifs into a distinctly neoliberal idiom, intertwining *völkisch* myths of Ur-Germanic prehistory with the Lockean ideal of possessive individualism, articulating both within an anti-welfare discourse (Macpherson 1962).



9 | Image posted by Fabian-Jank-afd Instagram account on 7 January 2025. The text reads "Make environmental activists right wing again".
10 | Image posted by afd.bund Instagram account on 15 January 2025. The text reads "Merz opposes reliable nuclear power. It's time for affordable energy with the AfD. It's time for Germany".
11 | Carl Theodor Protzen, *RAB-Baustelle. Lahnbrücke* ("Motorway construction site: Lahn Bridge"), 1938, oil on canvas, 83 × 130 cm, München, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau.
12 | Image published by chrupallatino Instagram account on 1 November 2023.
13 | Poster for the municipal elections in Hesse, 25 April 1948.

Weidel admits, however, to the ideological underpinnings of this view of nature in a passage describing left-wing ecology as an "ersatz religion". She reveals indirectly that the iconography of the video embodies a compensatory fantasy. In *Widerworte*, she writes:

> The longing for a return to a pure, unspoiled nature, together with the rhapsodic idealisation of the forest and of life outdoors, has been a persistent motif in the national self-understanding of the Germans since Romanticism, at the latest. […] Above all, in times of political impotence, the turn towards nature has experienced a marked resurgence. Such was the case around 1800, at the birth of Romanticism, when the country was fragmented and subject to the foreign domination of Napoleonic rule (Weidel 2019, 29).

This quote suggests that there is more to the video than escapist fantasies. While the reception of Friedrich's painting and the semantics of the German forest helped explain some of its historical references, the AfD's instrumentalising of "unspoiled nature" must be examined further.

Cyclical Temporality, *Völkisch* Ecology and Political Theology

The polemical register of *Widerworte* locates the "good old days" in the era of the Deutsche Mark, prior to the adoption of the single European currency (Weidel 2019, 84-85). This nostalgia, however, is absent from the video. The thaw that heralds the return of Spring suggests the advent of a new era. The final motto, "Time for a chancellor who remembers her oath—time for Germany", and teaser-like structure of the video builds anticipation for this new phase. The concept of renewal is presented as the fulfilment of a destiny rather than the outcome of an election. Just as Spring is bound to return, the AfD is destined to lead Germany out of a political Ice Age. This cyclical understanding of time, in which the ascent of the leader mirrors climatic rhythms, participates in what Bernhard Forchtner and Christoffer Kølvraa term the "Primordial imaginary world" of the contemporary far-right, which they explored in a study of narrative fiction. They write, "Temporal vistas are typically […] 'trans-millennial'" and can take "meta-subjects" as their protag-

onists (Kølvraa, Forchtner 2024, 55). This temporal mode punctuates German far-right thought. It is the same temporality embraced by the Nazi regime, advocating a break with the modern experience of time as a relentless repetition of the new, and tending to collapse past, present, and future into a transhistorical continuum premised upon the idea of racial destiny (Clark 2019). Figures loosely associated with Traditionalism, a philosophical current that has become central to today's far right, also valorise cyclical conceptions of the passage of time that stand in contrast to progressive narratives underlying "modernity" and the Judeo-Christian experience of time (Eliade [1949] 1954; Sedgwick 2023; Teitelbaum 2020).

Attuned to the cosmic rhythms of celestial rotation, the temporality evoked by the video severs nature from climate and the anthropogenic forces that shape its transformation. The winters of Saxon Switzerland are, however, no longer those of Friedrich's time. They bring far fewer frost days and increasingly prolonged dry spells. Focusing upon an ahistorical "nature" allows for a synthesis between the primordial imaginary of far-right fiction and a fixation upon the "eternal now" typical of post-Cold-War temporal regimes, which are characterised, according to François Hartog, by musealisation of the past, anxieties about the future and modes of governance grounded in crisis management (Hartog [2003] 2015). Ultimately, the AfD instantiates a crucial aspect of what situationists called spectacle. Under the guise of celebrating nature's "rebirth", the video elides the political dimension of snowy winters, invoking the image of the thaw only to more effectively freeze the historicity of climate. Guy Debord writes, "The spectacle, being the reigning social organisation of a paralysed history, of a paralysed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time, is in effect a false consciousness of time" (Debord [1967] 1995, 114).

Koerner argues that Friedrich's approach to landscape at once affirms and denies the immanence of God in nature (Koerner 1990). Along similar lines, the AfD's video reveals a "false consciousness of time" through the invocation of transhistorical subjects, like divinities, and Weidel's oath hits on a politico-theological register that has largely fallen out of use. As Carl Schmitt, the jurist and political theorist who briefly aligned with National Socialism, famously argued, modern state theory largely rests upon secularised theological concepts (Schmitt [1922] 2005). In the video, the appeal to divine assistance is an invocation of Europe's Christian roots. This is nothing new for far-right movements. Aby Warburg had already noted the sacral legitimation of fascism in his 1929 analysis of the iconography surrounding the Lateran Pacts. He observed that Mussolini embraced a "Thoroughly medieval, absolutist, Catholic theory of the state [*Gewalttheorie*]" (Warburg's letter to Alfred Doren, 15 March 1926, in GS *Briefe*, 646). Critical of the Church's occasional promotion of compassion for migrants, the AfD treats religion mostly as an element of identity rather than devotion (Cremer 2023). At the same time, it also references medieval motifs. In the video, the leader's divine sanction is reinforced by the final image, which frames Weidel as a quasi-sacred figure, enshrined in, and organically bound to, the grotto.

She is encircled by a vulval outline often employed in sacred architecture and iconography known as a *mandorla*. The motif bears a twofold signification. On the one hand, the vulva-like shape evokes birth; on the other, it can be seen as the intersection of two circles, symbolising the conjunction of two realms, the material and the spiritual. For this reason, the *mandorla* traditionally frames holy or anointed personages such as Christ, the Madonna, or sovereigns who claim to rule "by the grace of God".

Weidel emerges from the grotto as an authoritative, guardian figure associated with Cybele, a deity venerated by the Romans from c. 200 BCE onward. A goddess of fertility, her sanctuaries were at times situated in caves. Such an analogy might appear arbitrary, were it not for the fact that Alessandro Giuli, the current Minister of culture in the far-right Italian government, published a volume devoted to Cybele (Giuli 2018). Whether intended or not, however, the AfD's allusions should not be overestimated. The AfD also drew upon more mainstream references in order to address a broader audience, not necessarily familiar with Friedrich's paintings or the iconography of Cybele. The party logo, conspicuously akin to Nike's swoosh, appears even closer to the brand's iconography when, in the video's final shot, it is superimposed onto Weidel's backpack. Similarly, while there are discernible echoes of those "tales of longing for high places", typical of the *Bergfilm* genre that made Leni Riefenstahl famous, Weidel's video resonates more closely with hiking clips posted on social media by countless amateurs (Sontag, 1980, 86). Through invocations of fertility goddesses, pantheistic visions of forests, cosmic temporalities and a supposed a-historicity of climate dynamics, the video's iconography implicitly posits a divide between a local, pure, "natural" environment and global climate change—a dichotomy that underpins the ideology of far-right ecology. Unpacking the complexity of far-right ecological imaginaries in Germany will be helpful before returning, in the conclusion, to the political and affective reasons that pushed the party to produce campaign videos of this kind.

Concern for the natural environment has been a persistent feature of the German far-right since the beginning of the twentieth century, from the *Heimatschutzbewegung* (homeland protection movement) after World War I, to the Nazis' biodynamic farming, to postwar organisations such as the World Federation for the Protection of Life (particularly under Werner Georg Haverbeck) and the political discourse of Herbert Gruhl (Biehl and P. Staudenmaier 2011; Uekötter 2006; Olsen 1999). These movements and figures combined holistic conceptions of the "fatherland" as an interdependent and self-contained organism, with a quasi-religious cult of nature understood as the cosmic unity of living beings. Factions within the AfD embrace this perspective, as suggested by an AI-generated image posted on Instagram in 2025 [Fig. 9]. Created by the same designers responsible for the wilhelm_kachel web project, the image depicts an anthropomorphic bear in a forest, imbued with the naïve clarity of a children's book. The slight tilt of the all-caps, sans serif slogan in white lettering on a blue background adds a juvenile dynamism. The phrase, "Make environmental activists right wing again", is written in *Denglish* (the hybrid of Ger-

man and English typical of youth vernacular) and clearly borrows the format of Trump's MAGA slogan. The animal's pose allegorises nature, asserting and saluting its right-wing essence. As some comments to the post note, however, the bear's upward-pointing finger recalls a conventional, celebratory gesture signifying the oneness and sovereignty of God in Islamic iconography. These images have probably found their way into the databases used to train artificial intelligence, which by now occasionally lends far-right imagery an involuntary incongruity.

Much like other far-right political forces, the AfD has advanced climate-obstructive policies (Malm, Zetkin Collective 2021). At the same time, it would be a mistake to dismiss the party's arguments as politically-motivated fabrications. The AfD's articulated ecological perspective hinges upon a perceived disjunction between the local and the global, between *Heimat* (home or homeland) as a site of belonging and rootedness, and the abstract, planetary scale of climate governance. Drawing upon the analysis of magazines associated with the AfD and the German far right more generally, Bernhard Forchtner and Özgür Özvatan have revealed the tension between these two spatial imaginaries (Forchtner, Özvatan 2019). The global, they argue, is construed as homogenous and deprived of inherent value. It is viewed as a domain in which human beings are interchangeable units. Institutions combating climate change are portrayed by these magazines as emanating from cosmopolitan liberalism with agendas that run contrary to national industrial priorities. Conversely, a rooted ecology, oriented towards the specificity of place and tradition is promoted, and cast as natural rather than political. Within this perspective, an element such the forest can embody the historical continuity of a cultural identity. Human beings, flora and fauna are construed as parts of a unified habitat, virtually beyond the Christian dualism of natural and supernatural (White 1967). While this approach superficially resembles non-anthropocentric ontologies, it differs fundamentally in that it re-naturalises cultural identity, rather than destabilising it. Simply put, the AfD extends the concept of environment to include its inhabitants. The protection of the former thus implicitly values the protection of the latter because of this essential bond within an exclusionary, when not outright xenophobic, logic of belonging. Migrants are, therefore, represented as forms of contamination or destabilising agents that threaten the equilibrium of a timeless order. Likewise, the visual analogy between wind turbines and minarets may operate at a subconscious level, contributing to the transformation of the former into one of the AfD's chief targets (Malm, Zetkin Collective 2021, 88). This ecological imaginary at times incorporates a critique of capitalism by acknowledging anthropogenic climate change. It conceives of capital, however, in a particular way, as symptomatic of a broader moral malaise induced by technological modernity, rather than as a systemic totality driven by a "mute compulsion" towards perpetual growth. Environmental remedies thus come in the form of moral appeals to restore the harmonious exchange between humanity and nature, a line of argument which occasionally converges with leftist ecological thought. A widespread tendency amongst contemporary artists, for example, as Linn Burchert observes,

is the call for a re-enchantment of the world and endorsement anti-consumerist lifestyles as antidotes to capital's expansion (Burchert 2024).

Olsen and Forchtner conduct a detailed analysis of the visual materials used by *Die Kehre*, a magazine whose title refers to Martin Heidegger's critique of instrumental rationality (Forchtner, Olsen 2024). Key figures associated with *Die Kehre* are Benedikt Kaiser and Götz Kubitschek, intellectuals of the German New Right close to the *völkisch* wing of the AfD. According to Olsen and Forchtner, images published by the magazine articulate two distinct "chronotopes", configurations of time and space that generate subjectivity through affect and other means. Echoing the analyses of the four far-right magazines discussed earlier, they define the "Promethean chronotope" as characterised by relentless acceleration and growth. Time is future-oriented, space is abstract and the human subject is unanchored, propelled by a belief in progressive technological mastery. In contrast, the "Idyllic chronotope" envisions a temporality of slowness, in which space is imbued with tradition, limits are embraced as sources of moral balance and the subject appears self-restrained and rooted in a landscape, untouched by, for instance, wind turbines, which are perceived as aesthetically disrupting (Schneider, *forthcoming*).

Both Promethean and Idyllic chronotopes exist within the AfD's visual repertoire. In an effort to discredit wind turbines on economic grounds and advocate a return to nuclear energy, for instance, the party has posted images on Instagram of nuclear power plants nestled in green plains, overlaid by an oversized portrait of Friederich Merz, the CDU leader and current chancellor, in a greyscale that likens him to a rain cloud and presents him as an obstacle to energy sovereignty [Fig. 10]. This image makes apparent a dilemma confronted by the AfD, which is analogous to that faced by the National Socialists during the construction of the regime's motorway network. Several paintings commissioned by the Nazi regime exemplify an ideological effort to reconcile the pastoral, romantic ideals of Germany with the technological sublime of modern infrastructure, an enterprise that entailed extensive destruction of forested areas, yet was aesthetically redeemed through scenes of industrial grandeur [Fig. 11].

Another attempt to merge the Promethean and Idyllic chronotopes was instantiated in a series of AI-generated images posted by the social media accounts of party leader Tino Chrupalla in 2023 and 2024 [Fig. 12]. A nuclear family is viewed from behind, advancing on a dirt path towards an operating factory surrounded by the low roofs of a modest village, hemmed in by a small mountain range in the distant background. The Promethean imaginary of heavy industry is pastoralised through a verdant clearing. The scene operates simultaneously as a geographical territory and as a temporal projection into the future, embracing a motif of "wellbeing" (*Wohlstand*). The image can be defined as "chronotopic" insofar as it seeks to inscribe a political subject within a specific space-time nexus. It evokes a utopia that both inheres within the subjects in the foreground and lies within reach before them.

The motif invites identification while serving a predominantly didactic function. This gratifying fantasy of harmony also defines and characterises the objects and limits of desire, functioning, as Slavoj Žižek argues, as a property of ideology (Žižek 1997). In the late 1940s, Christian Democratic campaigns mobilised the same chronotopic motif with a poster that harkens back to *Friedrich's Woman before the Setting Sun* [Fig. 13]. A chromatic progression on each side of the image—from the black of the war years to the colours of the German flag—frames the centre of the composition and functions as a temporal marker, setting the stage for the fantasised return of Germans to the territories east of the Oder-Neiße line (now within Poland). The party devised this image to fuse rural bliss with a deferred sense of personal fulfilment. The CDU's logo is transformed into a sun embracing the word *Du* ("you"), while a widow and her children, emerging from the rubble of war, receive the promise of collective, if parochial, plenitude. The italic font of the phrase, "Dein Recht durch [die CDU]" ("your right through the CDU") further individualises the address, appealing to the voter in an almost intimate manner. In the AfD's post, the figures are an AI-generated, white, heterosexual nuclear family with two children, visualising the fiction of a standard German family that contradicts contemporary demographic realities. This generic visual characterisation is impersonal and temporally structured by a recursive nostalgia in which the future is envisioned as the revival of an idealised version of the 1960s and 1970s. Within the affective economy of these images, longing functions as a political technology, suturing nostalgia for a promethean idea of growth anchored in fossil energy to a dream of idyllic family life.

Friedrich's Bastard

A few days before the release of the AfD's campaign video, wilhelm_kachel posted an AI-generated image on Instagram echoing Weidel's commitment to tearing down the "Wind turbines of shame" [Fig. 14]. The logo, a kind of Reich-era soldier with a spiked helmet and a modern headset, is in the lower-right corner. Towering above it, a portrait bust resembling Weidel, composed in the latent space of AI, appears against a fiery sky. Her gaze, carved in deep shadow and poised in impassive restraint, recalls the psychological distance of 1920s Neue Sachlichkeit painting. In the background, atmospheric mountains rise, as if awaiting the punitive blaze that will level the windmills that separate them from the forest and hamlet in the middle ground. Felled timber occupying the foreground suggests that the turbines are themselves the cause of despoilation. Two small figures roam over the pile, mirroring the chronotopic motif described above. Yet the space-time configuration of this image departs from historical time, intimating catastrophic destruction, or an apocalypse, in the biblical sense of revelation. Neither an instance of what Cara Dagget called "petro-masculinity" nor the nurturing Cybele of the campaign video, here Weidel's AI-generated doppelgänger appears as a looming, divine figure of Old Testament wrath (Daggett 2018).

In a text dedicated to Marina Vishmidt, Daniel Spaulding underscores the importance of continuing to engage with bourgeois art, even though the ethos of the class that once



14 | Post published by wilhelm_kachel Instagram account on 11 January 2025.

produced and admired it has long changed. He writes, "We have to look at bourgeois paintings […] in ways that the bourgeoisie itself no longer can: maybe […] to preserve an archive of ways of feeling and seeing that don't fit into the present world. And also to keep vivid the fact that even oppression was once different" (Spaulding 2025, 53). Through a strategic resignification of bourgeois painting, in particular of the politically laden reception of Friedrich's oeuvre, the AfD's 2025 campaign constructed "ways of feeling and seeing" that shape the world the party seeks to bring into being. What emerges in the video is a calculated synthesis of heterogeneous imaginaries in a nuclear-energy-

friendly, neoliberal rearticulation of Friedrich's Nordic landscapes. At one level, the video's iconography pays homage to the party's *völkisch* wing, an intention confirmed by Weidel's quotation of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808) in the runup to the 2025 elections (Maitra 2025). On another, recourse to this visual rhetoric betrays the inability of leaders steeped in neoliberal or ordoliberal economic doctrines to affectively mobilise potent imagery emanating from their cultural background. The repertoire on which they draw remains fundamentally alien to the intellectual universe of Mises or Hayek.

As Quinn Slobodian and Melinda Cooper have demonstrated, the contemporary far right has sought to forge an alliance between its libertarian currents and the hierarchical and racialised imaginaries long cherished by social conservatives. Their search for ideological convergence has crystallised, for instance, around the icon of the (white) "Traditional family", whose elevation functions within a broader project to reallocate the responsibilities of social reproduction from the welfare state to the family, seen as a privatised apparatus of wealth transfer and affective labour (Slobodian 2025; Cooper 2017). If such neoliberal formations can be described as, in Slobodian's words, "Hayek's bastards", then the AfD's video may perhaps be seen as "Friedrich's bastard", the illegitimate progeny of the religious and nationalist German bourgeoisie who rediscovered Friederich at the beginning of the twentieth century.

*In the archive of William S. Heckscher, which is held at the Warburg Haus in Hamburg, two texts, probably dating from the late 1930s and respectively titled *Tacitus, Shakespear and the Nazis* and, *The Noble Savage: Case History and Therapy, elaborate on the Nazi cult of Tacitus'* Germania. I wish to thank Karen Michel for pointing this out.

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Abstract

Jacopo Galimberti's article examines the AfD's 2025 campaign imagery through a close reading of a short promotional film featuring Alice Weidel. Combining political iconology and Marxist ideology

critique, Galimberti argues that the video appropriates the visual legacy of Caspar David Friedrich in order to articulate a hybrid ideological formation, where *völkisch* mythology, neoliberal anti-statism, political theology, and far-right ecological imaginaries converge. By staging Weidel within a Romantic landscape coded through motifs of forest, seasonal renewal, and sublime contemplation, the film transforms bourgeois-national imagery into a contemporary affective device of identification, rootedness, and exclusion. The article shows how this visual strategy naturalises nationalist politics, obscures the historical dimensions of climate and capitalism, and helps explain the AfD's attempt to reconcile neoliberal leadership with ethnonationalist fantasy.

keywords | AfD; Alice Weidel; Caspar David Friedrich; völkisch Culture; German New Right.

False Flags?

Semiotic Operations and Assemblages of (Neo) Fascist Propaganda and Protest

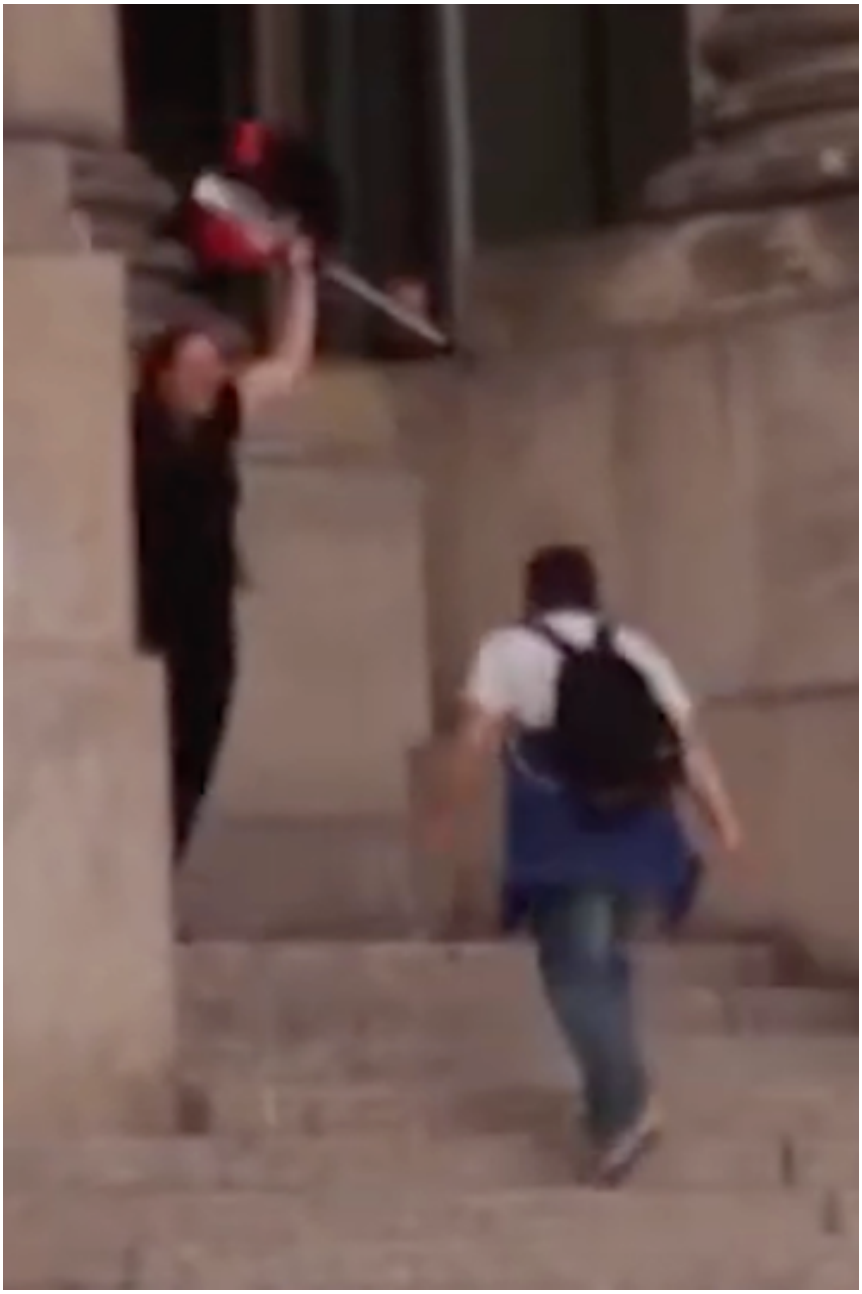
Tom Holert

Prologue: Bad Object

On the steps leading to the main entrance of the Reichstag building in Berlin, the seat of the German Bundestag, a female figure waves what appears to be a crumpled *Reichsflagge*, a German Empire's flag (evidenced by its black, white, and red colors) attached to a small white staff with her left hand. The image is an enlarged detail from a screenshot of a video taken on the evening of August 29, 2020, during a turbulent gathering of around 400 demonstrators on the Reichstag steps, culminating in what infamously entered the historical archive as the "Sturm auf den Reichstag" ("Storming of the Reichstag"). In many ways, this figure serves as a kind of secret protagonist of this text and the research that underlies it. Her blurred, anonymous presence represents a sense of rage directed against a state's political establishment, with the express desire to enter the Reichstag that she and her fellow demonstrators identified as, in the heat of that moment, the building of the people, the *Volk*.

By equipping and extending herself with a specific, and, moreover, controversial flag, presumably to underscore her rage, the figure embedded herself in an event which was cluttered with flags– and not only *Reichsflaggen* – as seen in various visual documents of the event. The demonstration at the Reichstag building took place alongside a larger demonstration protesting measures related to the coronavirus. It was a diverse, motley crowd, comprising QAnon supporters, so-called Reich citizens, and various fringe critics of pandemic policy. A majority of those gathered in front of the building were right-wing extremists, many of whom made their ideological positions graphically clear through the display of various flags, visible to the numerous cameras operating on site. While it would be worth discussing further the extent to which these flag wavers were fascists in any theoretically and historically meaningful sense, it can be easily observed that they displayed convictions that tapped into a growing mood of stark opposition to most features of liberal democracies.

In many ways, the flag flying in front of the Reichstag building on August 29, 2020, may reinforce the prejudice that the flag itself is an essentially problematic, if not outright 'bad object' in the psychoanalytic sense. My own interest in this object of contestation, identification, and embodiment originates in a deep unease with what any nation-state flag



1 | August 29, 2020, the first demonstrator entering the stair landing of the Reichstag building. Enlarged detail from screenshot. YouTube, The Honest Club.

represents and potentially entails in terms of affect and potential violence. The origin of the flag as a banner or standard in the military and on the battlefield renders any critique of its eventual weaponization tautological. With some exceptions, such as truce or rainbow flags, where flags fly, the violence of war and colonialism, exclusion and oppression, are not far away. In whatever ways they may have used in painting, photography, or film to depict or to represent politically progressive intentions and perspectives, this intrinsically violent iconographic legacy, which extends to contemporary art and its adaptations of the flag as motif and material (e.g. Fleckner 2011), cannot be obscured. Attempts to frame a flag as a unifying or harmonizing symbol of democracy, patriotism, or overcoming of tyranny must reckon with the fact that flags are historically embedded within nationalism, chauvinism, and conquest. As one pioneering researcher on the semiotics of the flag formulated in 1973, "in order to impress other nation-states with its military potential, the nation-state must somehow harness each successive generation of its nationals to this collective objective of military readiness" (Weitman 1973, 361). Just as the topic of this "Engramma" issue, "Political iconology of far right-wing culture", does not necessarily promise optimistic, life-affirming research, so too may inquiry into the political performativity of the flag in past and present "image space" prove disturbing.

Flying/Dying: The Totemist *Telos* of the Flag

While the second part of this text focuses upon the semiotics, iconology, and performativity of the flags displayed on August 29, 2020, I will begin by outlining the concept of the flag as totem, before examining the functions of flags in historical fascism to clarify the genealogy of the crumpled Reich flag. The pairing of flags and fascism seems to be an obvious connection. And yet, apart from some exceptions referring to historical fascism in Germany and Italy, there is surprisingly little interesting research on flags in contemporary right-wing extremist, authoritarian, and fascist movements, societies, and systems. This relative lack of inspiring work on the flag/fascism complex can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that isolating flags from the symbolic and ritual apparatus of political movements and state structures yields little in terms of historical and iconological insights. Here, I tend to agree with Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, authors of 1999 *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation. Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, that it is likely "that scholars have not expected to find interesting patterns in such data (i.e. representative data from the field of practices relating to displays of flags and other national symbols). If everyone knows what the flag means and how it is displayed, there is little for scholars to say" (Marvin, Ingle 1999, 317). It does not seem effective to focus primarily or exclusively upon the flag as a designed and symbolic object, rather than upon the performative, rhetorical, and embodied aspects of the use and display of flags in image spaces of "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995) and blatant propaganda. National flags are flown in front yards in many countries, most notoriously in the United States. They are deployed in the PR strategies of major global sporting events and their brand-related displays of national pride. They fly at military parades and as manifestations of white supremacy

and xenophobic attitudes, both offline and online. Such featuring in complex, intermedial, semio-praxeological assemblages, demands that the analysis of flags gives attention to the material, political, and social dimensions of semiosis, areas where semiotic research on flags has rarely gone, despite some attempts in this direction (e.g. Firth 1973, 328-367; Weitman 1973; Cerulo 1993, Reichl 2004; Leone 2021). If semiotics, according to Umberto Eco's jocular definition, is the "discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie" (Eco 1976, 7), then a semiotic approach to flags seems particularly appropriate in the context of right-wing extremist and fascist politics, even if this truism applies to all politics.

For some years now, historians Philippe Lagadec and Laurent Le Gall have been working with the concept of "vexillary regime" (*régime vexillaire*), defined as, "a set of devices and practices adopted by a group, and by extension a society, which induce representations, sensibilities, and imaginaries, thereby conforming, through more or less implicit rules of conduct, an order of discourse and ways of talking about flags and making them speak" (Lagadec, Le Gall 2023, 9). Lagadec and Le Gall further expand upon the performative functionality of the flag, which they conceive of as "a latent resource, […] a materially tangible surface that allows [political/social actors] to project themselves into relationships, sometimes paradoxical, with more or less elementary forms of collectivity […]" (Lagadec, Le Gall 2023, 13).

The phrase "elementary forms" of course evokes Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in which the sociologist and ethnologist dedicated few, but pertinent, paragraphs to the issue of totemist emblems and flags. Durkheim attended to the "contagious" relationships between things, feelings, and symbols – the close, mental connection between "the idea of the thing and the idea of its symbol" which enables the phenomenon that "the feelings evoked by one spread contagiously to the other" (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 221). Durkheim, anticipating gestalt psychology as much as communications theory, seemed aware that "this contagion […] is much more complete and more pronounced whenever the symbol is something simple, well defined, and easily imagined" (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 221). For him, the reality of the symbol supersedes and dominates the emotional involvement over any reality it may symbolize, thus granting a peculiar agency to the flag or banner to evoke the animistic collapsing of dualisms such as signifier/signified or subject/object, endowing the flag with the status of a living being. As stated, for example, in U.S. Code Title 36, § 176 ("Respect for flag"), "The flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing".

Intimacy and identity are rooted in symbolic relationships, on the ideational level of the sign, they may therefore be called 'idealistic' in a very specific sense. Durkheim could thus not be more explicit in the years of heightened nationalist chauvinism and warmongering in the run-up to the First World War, when he states, specifically in relation to the flag:

> It is the symbol that is loved, feared, and respected. It is to the symbol that one is grateful. And it is to the symbol that one sacrifices oneself. The soldier who dies for his flag dies for his country, but the idea of the flag is actually in the foreground of his consciousness. Indeed, the flag sometimes causes action directly. Although the country will not be lost if a solitary flag remains in the hands of the enemy or won if it is regained, the soldier is killed retaking it. He forgets that the flag is only a symbol that has no value in itself but only brings to mind the reality it represents. The flag itself is treated as if it was that reality (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 221-222).

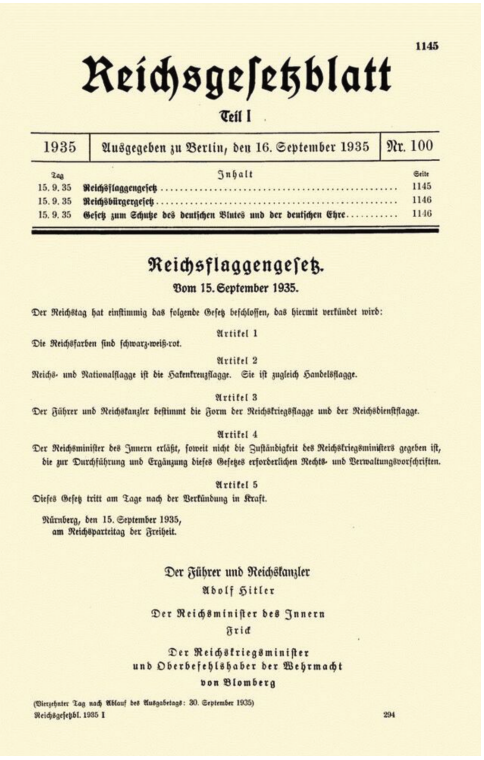
One who believes in the totemist power of the flag is framed as oblivious to the flag's semiotic functioning. For Durkheim, the veneration and martyrdom exercised in the face of the flag is thus a testament to a momentary suspension of enlightened, secular reasoning, a reminder of modernity's disenchantment.

Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle expand upon Durkheim's (and only a few others') anthropological approach to flags, underscoring the crucial dimensions of violence and martyrdom with regard to the semiotics of the flag as totem. They argue that these dimensions indeed add to the flag's power to promote national solidarity through individual and group acts of "willing sacrifice" (Marvin, Ingle 1999, 73-78; see also Shanafelt 2009, 13-14). Seen along these lines, the flag's violent teleology is embodied in the image of the blood flag, or the *Blutsfahne*, so dear to fervent nationalists and National Socialists.

Marvin and Ingle's sociological semiotics have a lot to offer a post-Durkheimian understanding of flags that exceeds better-known musings on flags' power and poetry, such as Elias Canetti's maxim, "Flags are wind made visible" from his 1960 *Crowds and Power* (Canetti [1960] 1963, 86). For Hilmar Hoffmann, who prefaced his 1988 study on Nazi propaganda with a chapter on the symbolism of flags, Canetti's oft-quoted aphorism at the end of a section not on politics or nationalism, but on wind, summed up "the nature of flags in terms of two basic characteristics: their exposed position, visible from great distances, as they wave in the breeze above people's heads; and the relationship between the material from which they are made – cloth or, in the case of weather vanes, metal – and their immateriality, i.e., their suitability for expressing abstract ideas, their symbolic function" (Hoffmann [1988] 1996, 1). Perhaps, though, as Hoffmann pointed out, Canetti is essentially connecting the numinous-magical aspect with the imperialistic-military function of the flag when he writes that flags "are like bits cut from clouds, nearer and more varied in color, tethered and given permanent shape. In their movement they are truly arresting. Nations use them to mark the air above them as their own, as though the wind could be partitioned" (Canetti [1960] 1963, 86). The "truly arresting" supernatural powers of flags contribute to their totemist appeal. Moved by the wind, they divide the sky and define territorial boundaries—or, at least, that is their impact upon those who believe in them.

The distinctive nature of flags as informative signs and emotionally charged symbols is a key feature of any discussion about them, but this semiotic dimension should, as La-





1145

Reichsgesetzblatt

Teil I

1935	Ausgegeben zu Berlin, den 16. September 1935	Nr. 100

Tag	Inhalt	Seite
15. 9. 35	Reichsflaggengesetz	1145
15. 9. 35	Reichsbürgergesetz	1146
15. 9. 35	Gesetz zum Schutze des deutschen Blutes und der deutschen Ehre	1146

Reichsflaggengesetz.

Vom 15. September 1935.

Der Reichstag hat einstimmig das folgende Gesetz beschlossen, das hiermit verkündet wird:

Artikel 1

Die Reichsfarben sind schwarz-weiß-rot.

Artikel 2

Reichs- und Nationalflagge ist die Hakenkreuzflagge. Sie ist zugleich Handelsflagge.

Artikel 3

Der Führer und Reichskanzler bestimmt die Form der Reichskriegsflagge und der Reichsdienstflagge.

Artikel 4

Der Reichsminister des Innern erläßt, soweit nicht die Zuständigkeit des Reichskriegsministers gegeben ist, die zur Durchführung und Ergänzung dieses Gesetzes erforderlichen Rechts- und Verwaltungsvorschriften.

Artikel 5

Dieses Gesetz tritt am Tage nach der Verkündung in Kraft.

Nürnberg, den 15. September 1935,
am Reichsparteitag der Freiheit.

Der Führer und Reichskanzler
Adolf Hitler

Der Reichsminister des Innern
Frick

Der Reichskriegsminister
und Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht
von Blomberg

(Vierzehnter Tag nach Ablauf des Ausgabetags: 30. September 1935)

2 | Hubert Lanzinger, *Der Bannerträger* ("The Standard Bearer"), 1937, post card version by Heinrich Hoffmann, 1938, Washington, DC, United States Army Center of Military History.
3 | *Reichsflaggengesetz* ("Empire's Flag Law"), September 15, 1935, Reichsgesetzblatt 100 (1935).

gadec and Le Gall suggest, "be linked to other forms of mobilization and other political mechanisms (demonstrations, strikes, etc.) within which it nestles and which operate as possible reverberations, thereby influencing the meanings that actors attach to it" (Lagadec, Le Gall 2023, 17). Here, they helpfully understand the flag – following Michael Billig's notion of "banal nationalism" in which the symbols of the nation pass largely unnoticed, in other words, as naturalised – "as a resource that can be used by the state to mobilize on behalf of the nation or to justify discourses that advocate unity around the emblem – and what it is supposed to represent" (Lagadec, Le Gall 2023, 17). Further on, it will be discussed how the "resource" of the flag is tapped not only by states, but also by organizations and movements that oppose the state and statehood, in reference either to past states or rebellious counter-nations.

Filling the Frame: Performing the Swastika

Historical fascism, like most nation states in the interwar period, sought to establish a highly visible and affectively charged bond between citizens and the state. Under Nazism,



4 | Final minutes of *Der Rebell* [*The Rebel*], Luis Trenker, 1932 (click to watch).

this relationship was framed as the organic unity of the Volksgenossen and the party. Those responsible for designing this particular "vexillary regime" understood the new popular sciences of PR, branding, and logo design, introduced in the 1920s and 1930s by right-wing designer Hans Domizlaff (Friebe 2007). They emphasized the flag in Nazi propaganda, education, urban design, and festivals.

Malcolm Quinn, author of *Swastika. Constructing the Symbol*, compares the Nazi swastika and the corporate logo on the assumption that both, in their own way, transcend or overturn existing exchange relationships and value systems. He writes, "What the logo now establishes as a 'free gift' and supplement to commodity laws of value, the Nazi swastika instituted as an injunction and a law in its own right, in the form of a 'national awakening' in which the individual subject was returned to himself as a member of the Aryan aristocracy" (Quinn 1994, 126). The quasi-legal power of the swastika symbol on flags, posters, badges, etc. contributed semiotically to the stigmatization and negation of Jews and other groups, who, according to the Nazi racial ideology enshrined in the Nuremberg Laws, were considered unworthy of life and rights.

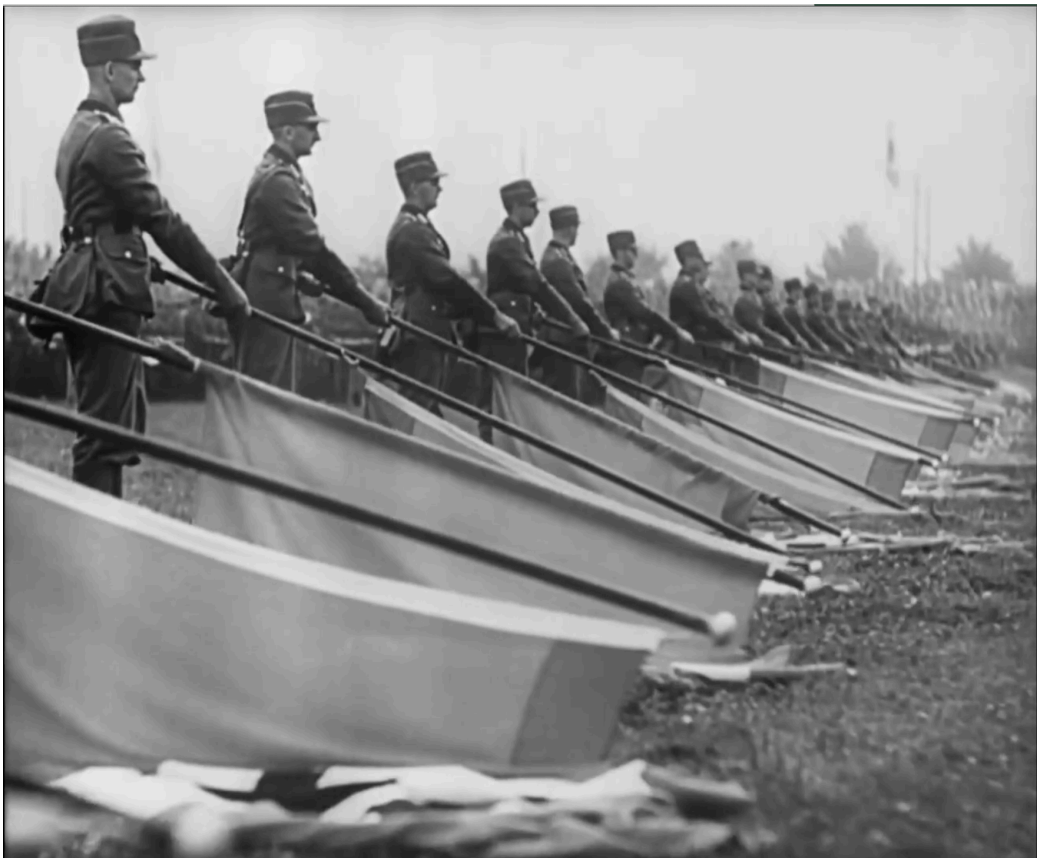
Yet, the images created in the process of imposing the law-like character of the *Hakenkreuz* were always intended to demonstrate that the swastika flag was both autonomous and embedded, seemingly doing its sign work on its own, while at the same



5 | Final minutes of *Hitlerjunge Quex* [*Hitler Youth Quex*], Hans Steinhoff, 1933 (click to watch).

time integrated into rituals, architectural structures, films, or a mass stagings [Fig. 2]. In the visual, literary, and musical propaganda culture of the Nazis, the cult surrounding the flag played a prominent role in the ideological indoctrination of young people. The flag was introduced as a sacred object directly linked to the figure of Hitler, and as the bearer of his personalized swastika banner, which became the flag of the German nation/empire in order to defeat death and be led into the fascist future. The two verses and the chorus of the so-called *Flag Song* of the Hitler Youth, the lyrics of which were written by Reich Youth Leader, Baldur von Schirach, signal aggressive combativeness, devotion to the flag, loyalty to the Führer, and contempt for death: "Our flag flutters ahead of us! We march into the future, man for man! We march for Hitler through night and hardship, with the flag of youth, for freedom and bread! Our flag flutters ahead of us! Our flag is the new era! And the flag leads us into eternity! Yes, the flag is more than death!".

Hitler claimed to have invented the swastika logo himself in 1920, although the final design is attributed to Friedrich Krohn, a dentist and member of the *völkisch* Thule-Gesellschaft. Krohn claimed to have been asked at the "Gründungsversammlung" of the



6 | Excerpt from *Triumph des Willens* [*Triumph of the Will*], Leni Riefenstahl, 1934 (the video excerpt could not be uploaded due to You Tube policy restrictions).

NSDAP on February 24, 1920, to draw the sign (Goodrich-Clarke 2004, 151; Hartmann *et al.* 2016, 1248, fn. 85, 1250, fn. 93; Witamwas 2016, 43). That said, Hitler associated the swastika and the swastika flag with a call for modernization. As he wrote in *Mein Kampf*, "[We see] in the swastika the mission of struggle for the victory Aryan man, and, by the same token, the victory of the idea of creative work which as such always has been and always will be anti-Semitic" (translation quoted from Kasher 1992, 50). For Steven Kasher, Hitler's "idea of creative work" refers, "to the notion of an aestheticization of labor and social relations that would negate class conflicts and unite the Volk". The swastika was the symbol of a militant process, Hitler's *Kampf*, aiming at "a totalized society rigidly stratified along sexual, racial, and class lines. It stood for a program of aggressive racial, sexual, and cultural purification, a struggle toward a single transcendent culture" (translation quoted from Kasher 1992, 50).

The significance of the swastika flag to Hitler was made evident on September 15, 1935, when he convened a special session of the Reichstag in Nuremberg to announce, among other infamous "Nuremberg Laws", two laws concerning flag protocol [Fig. 3]. The swastika flag was declared the sole state flag of Germany, and Jews were prohibited from flying the German national flag. Furthermore, it was decreed that, "The Führer and Reich Chancellor determine the form of the Reich war flag and the Reich service flag". Hitler's anecdotal authorship of the flag was thus made into a law.

The question of how to deal with Bismarck's imperial black, white, and red flag was long settled by the time the Reich Flag Law of 1935 was enacted. The black, red and gold German flag of the Weimar Republic had been replaced by a provisional black, white, and red flag after Paul von Hindenburg issued his provisional flag decree of 12 March 1933, ending the so-called flag dispute (*Flaggenstreit*) that had lasted for almost the entire duration of the Weimar Republic. As "sacred and dear" as the black, white, and red flag under which he had fought in the First World War had been to Hitler – its colors "uniquely beautiful in their youthful freshness" – he did not want this flag to be understood as a "symbol for a future struggle". Therefore, he pressured Hindenburg to stipulate in 1933 that, "until the final regulation of the 'Reich colors', the black, white, and red flag and the swastika flag are to be hoisted together". The traditional symbol stood for "the glorious past of the German Reich", the new one, for the "mighty rebirth of the German nation". "Together", Hindenburg wrote, "They embody the power of the state and the inner bonds [linking] all the national forces of the German people" (Hindenburg, 12 March 1933, quoted from Hoffmann [1988] 1996, 17).

In popular media, Nazi propaganda developed a specific tropology and rhetoricity that prepared the ground for the swastika flag to become the ultimate, universal variant of its kind. Siegfried Kracauer, in his *From Caligari to Hitler*, traces one of those trajectories, suggesting a sequence beginning with the flag as a symbol of anti-French, tribalist resistance and heroic sacrifice for the nation (Tyrol) in Luis Trenker's 1932 movie *Der Rebell* (*The Rebel*), to Hans Steinhoff's *Hitlerjunge Quex* (*Hitler Youth Quex*) the following year, both treating the flag as a metaphysical medium to conquer death through martyrdom [Fig. 4]. "Through similar images", Kracauer argues, "both the Trenker film and the Nazi film point at the imminent triumph of national rebellions – a coincidence which strikingly confirms the identical nature of the rebellions themselves". Regarding *The Rebel*, he emphasized the manipulative cinematography of the flag, underscoring its connection to the cult of martyrdom ("apotheosis of rebellious ardor"). He writes:

> There is pictorial evidence that the Trenker film was nothing but a thinly masked pro-Nazi film. Photographed by Sepp Allgeier, it introduced symbols which were to play a prominent part on the early Hitler screen. To enhance national passion, elaborate use is made of close-ups of flags, a device common with the Nazis. In the visionary concluding sequence, the resurrected student, who along with two other rebel leaders has been executed by the French, moves onwards, a flag in his hands (Kracauer [1947] 2004, 262).

Kracauer then drew a direct line from the ending of *The Rebel* to that of *Hitler Youth Quex*, writing, "In the film's finale, the militant Hitler boy Heini, surnamed Quex, distributes leaflets in one of Berlin's proletarian quarters and there is stabbed by a communist [Fig. 5]. Abandoned, he lies on a dark street" (Kracauer [1947] 2004, 262). He continued with a quote from a 1943 study drafted by Gregory Bateson on, "the cultural and thematic analysis of fictional films", which attended to Hitler Youth Quex as its key example (Bateson 1943, 76): "The Nazis come and find Heini dying. His last words are, 'Our flag billows before…' The soundtrack takes up the Youth Song and the flag appears on the screen, giving place to marching columns of Hitler Youth" (Kracauer [1947] 2004, 262, and Bateson 1943, 76; for the context see Ponten 2020).

Bateson's reading of the performance of flags in *Hitler Youth Quex* also serves as a commentary both upon Canetti's proverbial "Flags are wind made visible", and upon Kracauer's focus on the close-ups of flags in Nazi films. Bateson writes:

> In translating the "Nazi Youth Song", the word *flattern* has been rendered as "billow". The dictionary meaning of this word is "flutter", and the German word is certainly sometimes used in this sense (e.g. in referring to birds). A small experiment shows, however, that Americans, when asked to visualize a flag fluttering, usually see a small flag moving rapidly or a large flag rather far away, whereas the image called up in Germans by the words *Fahne* and *flattern* is of a large flag close up. In Nazi films, the flags are usually photographed to fill the frame, so that the emphasis falls not to the changing outline of the flag, but rather on the wave motion in the middle of the fabric. This billowing motion is clearly intended to have a fascination similar to that of waves in water (Bateson 1943, 54, n. 6).

Amplifying the "fascination" of the Nazi flag by attending to its kineticism and thus filming it in a particular kind of motion, rendered effective by flooding the image with the moving fabric, was a formal strategy deployed in many instances, and probably most systematically by Leni Riefenstahl. For Kracauer, as for many others, the films of Riefenstahl, and especially *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*), which monumentalized the 1934 Reich's Party Convention (*Reichsparteitag*) in Nuremberg, epitomize the centering of Nazi propaganda on the image of swastika flags. Bateson would have found in them plenty of evidence for his thesis of the billowing effect of the close-ups on flags in film. In *Triumph of the Will*, Kracauer saw "an ocean of flags and people artistically arranged. Souls were thoroughly manipulated so as to create the impression that the heart mediated between brain and hand". To quote once again from Malcolm Quinn's study on the swastika:

> Kracauer's analysis […] offered a model for the Nazi colonisation of the visual field […] Kracauer suggests that Nazi film motifs and cinematography conspire to demonstrate cartographically a total victory over spaces and surfaces. This is the colonisation of space undertaken by the swastika as the symbol of the new regime, and the corrosion of materiality and ontology which it initiates is manifest in Riefenstahl's film (Quinn 1994, 123-124).

A short excerpt from *Triumph of the Will* may illustrate the points on the overwhelming diagrammatical force of the swastika in fascist image space made by Kracauer and Quinn.

Futhermore, it incorporates additional aspects, particularly regarding Riefenstahl's and the organizers of the Reich's Party Convention's cinematic and choreographed strategy of overwriting not only space but history with the totemist emblem of the swastika. In the flag ceremony of the Reich Labor Service (*Reichsarbeitsdienst*), stages of German military history are retraced through a sequence of the ritualistic lowering of large swastika flags onto the Nuremberg Rally's grounds, thereby treating the swastika as the super-symbol of this history [Fig. 6].

Threat to Public Order? The Legal Coding of Right Wing Flag Culture

Displaying and wearing the swastika has been prohibited in Germany, Austria, and other countries since the end of World War II. The Criminal Code of the Federal Republic of Germany, which regulates the "distribution of propaganda materials from unconstitutional and terrorist organizations" (§ 86), makes exceptions only in cases of "civic education, the prevention of unconstitutional activities, art or science, research or teaching, reporting on current events or history, or similar purposes" (paragraph 4). There are plenty of reasons for this ban, including the identification of the Führer and the flag, the cult of sacrifice associated with the flag, and the role that swastika flags played in the propaganda assemblages of the NSDAP and the National Socialist state. Since 1945 it has not been possible to stage such assemblages in the manner known from the historical record. In the present, however, there are new, differently motivated, coordinated, and choreographed manifestations of flags—in extreme cases, with the intention to substitute, displace, or camouflage the swastika. Mirroring, or rather, diffracting, the theater of official politics, for example, during state visits or military parades, a new typology of mass protests increasingly engendering images of flag display has evolved in the first decades of the twenty-first century, either in an attempt to enforce democratic conditions within a national framework, or, in the opposite case, to manifest and mediatize anti-democratic attitudes.

This revival of flags varies according to national context at unofficial events, at which political convictions are expressed and performed. Such variation depends upon the degree to which states culturally encourage or legally regulate the display of flags, particularly those whose political symbolism is deemed problematic or prohibited from the state's perspective. The psychological, anthropological, propagandistic, or historical-political dimensions of flag use and veneration are always supplemented by legal provisions. The state claims exclusive rights to determine how and when 'its' flag is displayed, hoisted, waved, etc. These protocols and criminal regulations, mostly codified with reference to constitutional law, tend to trigger semiotic reactions and strategies from those who question the state's monopoly on the interpretation of official symbolism. Arguably, the legally mandated absence of the swastika acts as a regulatory mechanism that ensures a level of creativity and performativity in the design, selection, and use of symbols deployed to criticize the so-called "freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung" ("free democratic constitutional order") and its state representatives in the contemporary mediascape.

In the late afternoon of August 29, 2020, about 2000 demonstrators gathered at Platz der Republik in front of the Reichstag building in Berlin. It was a loose group that had broken away from the main demonstration of around 38,000 protesters against coronavirus measures gathered at the Brandenburg Gate, Friedrichstraße, and Straße des 17. Juni, near the parliamentary complex. At around 7 p.m. some protesters – among them, the figure waving the small imperial war flag presented at the beginning of this essay – broke through police barriers and climbed the stairs of the Reichstag building, followed by around 300 others, to perform what they themselves had announced on social media and elsewhere as a "Sturm auf den Reichstag" ("storming of the Reichstag"), a formulation quickly adopted by politicians across the spectrum and by journalists and pundits in the mainstream media.

As part of a short documentary streamed on the website of the German weekly, "Die Zeit", in 2023, a police officer who now enjoys the reputation of "hero of the Reichstag", and had been for years one of the most interviewed persons present at the scene, recounted the events of August 29, 2020 as follows:

> For me, it was an adrenaline rush. For me, it was a classic attack on German democracy. My name is Karsten Bonack. On August 29, 2020, I was deployed to the Reichstag. When we arrived at the operations room, my platoon was assigned to protect a rally directly below the steps of the Reichstag building. Several hundred people were at the site, and speeches were being made. […] What irritated me a little at that point was that various people turned up with different flags in their hands—Russian flags, upside-down German flags, Reich war flags, rainbow flags… (*Sturm auf den Reichstag: "Ein Angriff auf die Demokratie"*, "Die Zeit", 28 August 2023)

The officer's initial irritation about the presence of a multiplicity of flags whose public and mediatized display at the time were not punishable under German law, such as the Reich flag and the flag of the Federal Republic shown upside down, is worth mentioning. It bespeaks the practice of policing symbols and signs in public space, and the persecution of those deploying these symbols and signs, especially those that are deemed in conflict with the Constitution and the legal interests of public order or peace.

These statements by a German police officer, who by default represents the executive branch responsible for upholding and enforcing laws, already emphasize, if indirectly, the significance of the legal framework around the practices and uses of flags. This legal dimension is crucial in the discussion of the performative, symbolic strategies of the far right, because it is intended to guarantee and secure historical and ideological distance from the Nazis' use of the swastika flag. Approached from the iconological angle given by the concept of "vexillary regimes", proposed by Lagadec and Le Gall, a large part of the appeal for members of far-right organizations of displaying *Reichsflaggen* and the like is their contested, problematic legal status, the anticonstitutional provocations they signal and entail, and the racist, anti-Semitic, or political violence they potentially imply.

The dissemination of propaganda and the use of symbols of unconstitutional organizations are punishable by law (Criminal Code § 86). This also includes symbols, "which, according to their content, are intended to continue the efforts of a former National Socialist organization". Symbols are defined as, "flags, badges, uniform items, slogans, and forms of greeting". Thus, displaying the Hitler salute and using the swastika are punishable offences. But even the traditional Reich war flag which used to fly over some allotment gardens, mostly in West Germany, has brought politicians onto the scene since the 1990s, as it was increasingly being used by right-wing extremists. The flag was not banned, but its display was forbidden, but, even then, only under certain conditions. Bavaria, for example, refused to take action against the flag's display.

In the wording of the Verfassungsschutz (the "Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution"), because the flag provides a "crystallization point" for criminal acts, such as displaying the Hitler salute, singing Nazi songs, or expressing insults or incitements of hatred, the police must also confiscate the flag. As for the Imperial War Flag, displaying it (except for the *Reichskriegsflagge* used by the National Socialists from 1935 to 1945) does not constitute an offense under the Criminal Code or the Administrative Offenses Act, even while it "can be seized under general police and public order law if this is the necessary, appropriate, and proportionate measure in specific individual cases to avert specific dangers to public safety and order. This is the case, for example, if the flag is the focal point of a specific imminent danger and this danger can be averted by confiscating it" (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2022, 53-54). Hence, on August 29, 2020, "the display and use of both the Reich flag and the Reich war flag was not prohibited". As one commentator argued, however, confiscation or seizure of these flags may have been considered under police and public order law (Müller 2020). Apparently, such measures were not carried out, as the police seemed either to have been overwhelmed by the situation or legally unprepared to do so.

In the aftermath of the events, however, legal restrictions regarding the display of black, white, and red flags were tightened by decrees issued by the Ministries of the Interior of the federal states over the course of 2021 and 2022. Using the same text blocks, these decrees stated that, in spite of the Reich and Reich war flags not being prohibited under the Criminal Law:

> When used in public, [these flags may] constitute a lasting impairment of the conditions for orderly civic and human coexistence and thus pose a threat to public order. […] This threat to public order always exists when, viewed as a whole, provocative and aggressive circumstances accompany the display of the flags, which are likely to impair the orderly civic coexistence of citizens and create a climate of violent demonstration and potential readiness to use violence (Brandenburg, Ministry of the Interior 2021).
>
> In this context, it becomes necessary to assess the existence of a provocative and intimidating effect based on the overall circumstances of the individual incident. In particular,

> the decree elaborates, the slogan and the context in which the flags are displayed and used must be considered. Thus, "a threat to public order" in connection with the display of a non-prohibited Reich or Reich war flag may exist—according to these post-*Sturm-auf-den-Reichstag* regulations, in particular when a Reich flag is hoisted or used at a location or on a date with historical symbolic significance, when the display of the flag is accompanied by that of signs and symbols related to National Socialism, the chanting of xenophobic, anti-foreigner, or otherwise intimidating slogans or song lyrics, as well as intimidating effects due to threatening behavior produced by paramilitary-style gatherings or marches, for example, in combination with drums, torches, uniforms, marching in formation or the existence of the appearance of an association with Nazi flag marches (Brandenburg, Ministry of the Interior 2021).

Despite these decrees, however, the authorities' powers of enforcement and sanctions remain limited (fines of €1,000 are mentioned) and are, above all, at the discretion of the regulatory and police authorities on site, who must assess whether "there is a concrete threat to public order", based upon documented facts collected "by means of photos and video recordings, insofar as this is legally permissible". In the event of specific danger, the confiscation of flags is possible under certain conditions – regarding "the use of Reich (war) flags in connection with assemblies, a quota system for flags should be considered as a less severe measure" (Brandenburg, Ministry of the Interior 2021).

A balancing act between conflicting legal interests is evident in every line of this code. The protection of public order versus the right to assembly, and the prevention of violent behavior in public spaces, including that expressed through symbols and their use, versus the preservation of the right to freedom of expression, are two primary tensions. Flags as components of entire arrays of official and informal, legal and illegal political signs, rituals, and symbols, are thus not only a semiotic fact, but also a constitutional and, arguably, social one. What is more, the decrees are clearly informed and influenced by intelligence gathering on the performativity and aesthetics of right-wing extremist, fascist organizations and subcultures, and their navigation of the boundaries of the sayable and the showable. Considering the strategic use of symbolic dates and anniversaries to hoist the *Reichsflagge* or a variant of it, the staging of processions and marches in which flags are a constitutive element, the legislator knows, or pretends to know, that the provocativeness of specific flags is amplified by their integration into various contexts, displays, rallies, social media stories, and memes.

Interferences: Disturbing the Official Flag Protocol

One of the countless photographs and videoclips produced on August 29, 2020, shows a situation far more akin to a somewhat hurried walk to the German parliament building stairs than a dramatic storming of those steps [Fig. 7]. Close to the camera is a man wearing a *Reichsflagge* around his neck with which he or some other has inscribed (by hand) "Peace treaty" (*Friedensvertrag*) on the white stripe. To the left of him, another man sports a sleeveless shirt the back of which features a printed variation of the well-known Antifa logo with the overlapping black and red flags, but this time in gold. The text written on the



7 | August 29, 2020, "Sturm auf den Reichstag", Berlin, at around 7 pm. Photographer: Fritz Engel/Zenit

logo is barely legible, it is nonetheless fair to say without any hint of overstatement that appropriation and intended mockery are expressed.

During the afternoon, coinciding with the main demonstration, a small audience had attended an event organized and registered by Rüdiger Hoffmann, a notorious right-wing activist and self-acclaimed Reichsbürger, to take place in front of the Reichstag building. In the audience, a person wearing a *Reichsflagge* around his neck, while waving another Empire's flag on a pole can be seen [Fig. 8]. These people and a large proportion of those who, from about 5 p.m. onwards of that day, had made their way to the Reichstag, are adherents of the heterogeneous scene involving the so-called "Reich Citizens" (*Reichsbürger*) movement consisting of several anti-constitutional revisionist groups and individuals in Germany and elsewhere who reject the legitimacy of the Federal Republic of Germany, in favor of the German Reich which they believe was not succeeded by the Federal Republic under the principle of state succession. Instead, they hold that the Reich continues to exist in its pre-World War II or pre-World War I borders, and its legitimate government is one or another of the *Reichsbürger* organizations.

Some members of Hoffmann's audience had broken a few police barriers on the Platz der Republik (the lawn area in front of the parliament) that had been erected to keep the main demonstration participants from entering the ascent to the Reichstag building. By means of their Empire's flags' display they signaled affinity with the *Reichsbürger* movement. These flag bearers were joined by other members of assorted fringe groups. Some of those waiting to get closer to the Reichstag wore yellow vests in reminiscence of the French *gilets jaunes*, though primarily they were followers of QAnon, the conspiracy who, like others, spread rumors throughout the afternoon that Donald Trump was in town and would be waiting for them to negotiate peace.

A photograph taken shortly before the so-called storming of the Reichstag, reveals five flags identifiable in the crowd—three Empire's flags, a Russian flag and a flag of the United States [Fig.9]. In the image they are framed by three German flags hoisted on two flagpoles placed to the left and the right of the stairs and one of the flagpoles on the roof



8 | Imperial flags in the audience of a speech of right-wing activist and *Reichsbürger* Rüdiger Hoffmann delivered from a stage in front of the Reichstag building, August 29, 2020.

of the Southwest tower of the Reichstag building. The photo thus also documents how the various flags displayed by the demonstrators interfered with the official display of the German flag. The latter is organized according to the government's flagging decree which stipulates that the official buildings of the highest federal authorities, as well as buildings housing offices of such authorities, should be flagged every day, including: one federal flag and one European flag (each 3m x 5m) in front of the east and west entrances to the Reichstag building, one federal flag (5m x 7m) on each of the three towers of the Reichstag building, one European flag (5m x 7m) on one tower of the Reichstag building, and a flag of unity (6m x 10m) on the Platz der Republik in front of the Reichstag building (Beflaggung beim Deutschen Bundestag).

The Flag of Unity is a national monument to reunification that stands on Platz der Republik in Berlin in front of the west entrance to the Reichstag building, a few meters from the southern end of the lower staircase. The oversized German flag was first raised on October 2, 1990, as part of the celebrations marking German reunification. The raising of the flag was deliberately timed to coincide with the coming into effect of reunification at midnight and to accompany it, along with fireworks and the playing of the national anthem. Measuring six by ten meters, the flag of unity is the largest official flag of the Federal Republic of Germany.



9 | August 29, 2020, early evening, gathering in front of the German parliament in advance of the "Storming of the Reichstag". Imago Images/Future Images.

One of the most official and widely publicized photographs of this event, kept in the Federal Archives, also shows a hand holding/waving a small Reich War Flag, the war flag of the armed forces of the German Empire until 1921, including versions derived from it in the Weimar Republic and the flags used during the Nazi era. This tiny flare-up of nationalist, even right-wing extremist sentiment in the foreground of the image indicated how the reunification could also be viewed in continuity with the nationalist and expansionist politics of the Reich, here to be understood as affirmative rather than critical. The small, handheld version of the *Reichskriegsflagge* certainly wasn't the only one during that night in Berlin, as two other photos made elsewhere in Berlin on the night of October 2/3, 1990, suggest. One, also kept by the Bundesarchiv, shows a crowd of mostly men waving predominantly black, red, and gold German flags, while photographer Peer Grimm pointed his camera at a large black, white, and red *Reichskriegsflagge* with the Iron Cross, but in a fantasy design that the person waving it had apparently created himself without a correct historical model. The other photo, by Jochen Eckel, features a mustached man, holding the *Reichskriegsflagge* (in the design used between 1903 and 1921) above his head with one arm, while raising the other for the Nazi salute and sporting a small black, red and gold German flag, which he has pinned to the chest of his jacket [Figs. 10, 11, 12] .

In all three instances, there was (and still would be) no criminal offense under German federal law because, despite the well-documented connection between the *Reichskriegsflagge* and the self-promotion of the right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi





10 | Hoisting of the Flag of Unity (*Einheitsflagge*) at midnight of October 2/3, 1990. Photographer: Peer Grimm. Bundesarchiv.
11 | Self-made *Reichskriegsflagge* amid a crowd in Berlin during the reunification ceremonies in the night of October 2/3, 1990. Photographer: Peer Grimm. Bundesarchiv.
12 | A man displaying a *Reichskriegsflagge* and a Nazi salute in the vicinity of Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, 2/3 October, 1990. Photographer: Jochen Eckel/Imago.

scene, displaying this flag falls under the constitutional right to freedom of expression. This exemption from punishment does not, of course, alter the functions displaying this flag serves – as a symbol of recognition within the far-right movement and as a provocation toward the democratic majority population and the executive and judicial branches of government.

Almost 30 years later, the first handful of demonstrators rushed up the stairs, soon to joined by around 300 more, some of whom had broken through the next line of police barriers. Those who brought flags (some of which displayed upside down, likely as a sign of protest) were flying them on their way up or started to wave them as soon as they had reached the top of the stairs [Fig. 13]. Considered that a "Sturm auf den Reichstag" had been discussed and announced in several right wing Telegram chats in the days leading to August 29, and that on the same day some of those who delivered speeches from the *Reichsbürger* stage encouraged the audience to enter the building, it took surprisingly long until the first police officers arrived at the scene, enough time for the gathering of a considerable crowd on the parliament's stairs in order to create an image of proto-revolutionary upheaval, complete with numerous of those either posed dressed in the flag or waving flags on poles. This process created the sight of a certain variety of flags – a vista clearly orchestrated for the many handheld cameras and the several tv camera teams on site.

Whether this was a staged event involving so many flags may or may not invite comparisons with Leni Riefenstahl's staging of flags and people for the camera – that is for us to decide [Fig. 14]. In any case, the action on August 29, 2020, was quite obviously an allusion to the "Storming of the Reichstag", organized and staged in November 2017 by theater director and provocateur Milo Rau (itself reminiscent of the storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd in November 1917 or rather the "mass action" directed by Nikolai Evreinov on the third anniversary of the revolution in 1920). The second, more immedi-



13 | August 29, 2020, the first demonstrators entering the stairs of the Reichstag building, screenshot. YouTube, The Honest Club.

ate precedent of the August 29 events, however, were protests such as the one taking place outside and inside of the State Capitol in Lansing, Michigan, on April 15, 2020, organized in part by far right groups and extremist Trump supporters but also mobilizing others who were, for a variety of (mainly economic) reasons, dissatisfied and concerned with the Covid related lockdowns and other measures [Fig. 15]. Here too, numerous flags were present on the scene, and not only the US flag, anticipating the "vexillary" character of many of the photographs and videos taken at the riots at the Capitol in Washington on January 6, 2021.

Leaving aside the specifics of jurisdiction and right-wing symbolism regarding Reich flags for now, what else can be said about the August 29, 2020, events in terms of flag use and display? It is worth mentioning that the police officer in the video cited earlier consistently used the colloquial term *Fahne* when he should have said *Flagge*, following a common, but at the same time hardly observed, distinction. There is no exact equivalent in English for the distinction between *Fahne* and *Flagge* in German. *Fahne* would probably be closest to 'banner', (battle) standard or field sign. The term is thus linked to totemist, tribal and military uses of textile objects that signify a nation's, a family's, a guild's or a corporation's identity and pride. Not incidentally, the pseudo-scientific discipline of flags and banners called vexillology derives its name from the Latin *vexillum* and thus refers to the military tradition of the flag, which historically precedes that of the flags of nation states and other state entities.





14 | "Sturm auf den Reichstag", reenactment, organized by Milo Rau/IIPM (Institute of Political Murder), during the "Generally Assembly", Berlin, November 7, 2017. YouTube, Schaubühne Berlin.
15 | Protesters in Lansing, Michigan, rallying at the state capitol against their state's business lockdown, April 15, 2020. Photographer: Paul Sancya/AP.

Attending to the semantic slippages in the usage of *Flagge* and *Fahne* in German could prove helpful in approaching the events of August 29, 2020. For, arguably, the *Reichsbürger* and *Querdenker* protestors climbing the stairs of the Reichstag building, carrying and waving their respective flags, intentionally or unintentionally referred to the etymology of *Fahne* rather than *Flagge*, for they imagine themselves to be caught in an act of (para-)military conquest and battle, interpellated by the projects and ideologies symbolized by the flags, at times clinging to these pieces of textile as quasi-sacred objects requiring protection and display to a public eye that they are certain will be antagonized and provoked by such visual demonstration. The anthropological and sociological underpinnings of such performances of flags, the Durkheimian "contagion" of the flag carriers and the crowd by its presence is difficult to test or measure and would probably need specific analytical and methodological tools to be applied to properly assessing the motivations and tactics of the motley assembly of protestors on that day.

That said, the events on the stairs of the Reichstag produced images in the German media that where bound to astonish and outrage the political class. Any assessment of the behavior of the protesters, with and without flags, on August 29, 2020, should take into account: political and media reactions; the questions of why the police were so ill-prepared and why Reich citizen Rüdiger Hoffmann was allowed to set up his stage (not for the first time) directly in front of the Reichstag steps; and what impact the images and comments on the "Storming of the Reichstag" had upon public opinion regarding critical opposition to the coronavirus measures taken by federal and state governments. One of the voices that is generally and officially accepted is that of the 'alternative' journalist, Aya Velásquez, an early and outspoken critic of coronavirus governance. Two years after the events, having reviewed a wide range of sources and media reports, she questioned the prevailing narrative about the 'storming' that threatened democracy, criticized the devaluation of the widespread and often successful form of protest involving the occupation





16 | Protesters at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC, during the January 6, 2021 riots. Photographer: Samuel Corum/Getty Images.
17 | A protestor with a rolled-up US flag sits at a desk of a delegate's office after invading the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021. Photographer: Saul Loeb / AFP via Getty Images.

of parliament buildings or their steps, pointed to gaps and contradictions in the statements of police and politicians, and even put forward a suspicion of a 'psy op' involving the *Verfassungsschutz*, police, politicians, and the media. One does not have to agree with Velásquez (Velásquez 2022) on all points, but her doubts about the prevailing narratives and frames seem legitimate, considering the comprehensive media archive of the event, including the attempt by a team of reporters of the German weekly, "Die Zeit", to reconstruct the events three years after the fact, without presenting any substantial correction to the official narrative (Artun *et al.* 2023).

From today's perspective, it seems impossible to view August 29, 2020, independently of the January 6, 2021, storming of the Capitol in Washington, DC. The images of the violent mob outside, but above all inside, the building where the two chambers of the United States Parliament meet, and where the Senate and the House of Representatives were supposed to formally confirm Joe Biden's 2020 presidential victory, have been burned into historical memory and have overshadowed other stormings of parliaments in 2020 and 2021 [Figs. 16, 17]. The significance and function of flags during the storming of the Capitol, strongly tangible in the photographs and videos taken on that day, is the subject for a separate essay. But, to say the least, the use of flags there shares a striking heterogeneity with that of the Berlin 'storming', as if the spectrum of protesters wanted to assure their own internal diversity of concerns, ideological origins, and identifications through the use of flags.

As indicated at the beginning of this essay, viewing the video footage of the first protestors passing the barriers in front of the Reichstag and climbing the stairs to the main entrance, I followed the path of the figure in the middle who was carrying something resembling a bundled black, white, and red-colored *Reichsflagge*, the controversial and near-illegal symbol of the German empire, associated with the far right. Once she reached



18 | German flags on the stage of a AfD federal party conference, Riesa (Saxonia), January 11, 2025. Photographer: Sebastian Kahnert / picture alliance / dpa.

the platform on the top of the stairs, she waved the as yet not fully unfolded flag affixed to a short pole, while other flag carriers – one displaying an upside-down German flag on a pole, another two holding the flag in their hands, and another wearing a *Reichsflagge* as a cape around his neck – followed suit. It was the beginning of a robust, right-wing happening on the Reichstag's stairs that was badly managed, if at all, generating the many images found by many to be shocking proof of imminent danger to democracy. The question remains as to what extent this spectacle can be counted within the rubric of flag activity that Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle have deemed 'popular' (in contradistinction to totemist and affiliative), defining it as, "the disorganized, creative flag-waving substratum of the people, a fertile body of social matter and energy to be harnessed for totem sacrifice or affiliative competition" (Marvin, Ingle 1999, 319).

The AfD (Alternative for Germany) benefited enormously between 2020 and 2022 from the coronavirus policies of the German government and media. They have adopted the position of several alternative media outlets that the "Storming of the Reichstag" was a conspiracy theory designed to produce images of Reich flags that could be used to delegitimize critics of coronavirus measures. The AfD has its own flag mission, and fills its stages and studios with the German flag, following with the deliberate 'flag mania' of its political counterparts in France, Italy, and the United States [Fig. 18]. In all contemporary instances, the legitimate, officially sanctioned flag is treated in such a way as to imply distance from the unrestrained, extreme right and its penchant for the Reich flag and Re-

ich war flag. The flag policy and decorum of the far right is thusly supposed to remain distinguishable from the totemic and riotous flag performances of the streets and assemblies. The common tactic of 'colonizing' symbolic and visual spaces with flags, however, remains beyond such a division.

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Abstract

National flags have played significant roles in the political and media image production of historical fascism. The current recirculation and updating of this archive of semiotic demagoguery, which has always been kept open, proves difficult to understand and cumbersome to regulate. Taking its cue from a notorious event in Berlin during the first Covid summer, the so-called "storming of the Reichstag" on August 29, 2020, this essay discusses: aspects of existing socio-anthropological studies on the totemic dimensions and death cult activated in Nazi iconology; how this iconological heritage lives on in contemporary manifestations of right-wing extremist and neo-fascist protests (directed against buildings and flag protocols embodying the self-understanding of liberal democracies); and attempts to legally regulate the semiotic maneuvers of the right performed by the use of controversial flags.

keywords | Reichsflagge; Reichsbürger; Alternative für Deutschland (AfD); Vexillary regimes.

The Visual Politics of 'Danishness' and the Mainstreaming of Xenophobia in Danish Party Politics

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen



1 | Spacecampaign: "Valgaften foran Christiansborg", 2001, performance.

In recent years, Denmark has become something of a reference point in attempts to introduce harsher asylum and immigration policies across Europe. Both the German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, and the UK Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, have spoken admiringly of the tough migration policies implemented by the Danish government led by the Social Democratic Mette Frederiksen and previous Right-wing governments. In a joint written opinion piece in "The Guardian" in December 2025, Starmer and Frederiksen write: "Denmark has led the way here, with tough but fair reforms which have delivered results.

Last year, the number of people being granted asylum in Denmark was the lowest in 40 years. […] That's what people want their governments to do—maintain control over who comes and who stays, and do it on our terms" (Starmer, Frederiksen 2025). Denmark has become something of a leader in matters of immigration and refugee politics transcending the left-right political divide in Europe. Friedrich Merz praised Denmark, saying that what it "has achieved in recent years is truly exemplary", and that, thanks to Danish initiatives, Europe "is moving towards new and stricter asylum rules" (Liboreiro 2025).

It is not only centre-left or centre-right politicians who take inspiration from Denmark. Since gaining power in late 2022, Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni, leader of the Brothers of Italy, has continuously sought inspiration in Denmark's immigration policies in an attempt to curb the number of migrants and refugees arriving in Italy. The interest is mutual: the Danish Social Democrat has been eager to join forces with the far-right Italian prime minister. In May 2025 Meloni and the Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, published a joint letter, co-signed by seven other EU countries, calling for reform of the European Court of Human Rights. "We should have more room nationally to decide on when to expel criminal foreign nationals", the letter stated. The two prime ministers wrote that the European Court has stretched the European Convention beyond its original intent, especially in matters concerning migration. The letter paints a picture of migrants flooding Europe's borders and portrays them as a threat to European values and national communities. Meloni and Frederiksen activate colonial stereotypes such as primitive/civilised, lazy/productive and criminal/law-abiding (Hall 1997, 247-248). According to Meloni and Frederiksen, migrants and refugees have "chosen not to integrate, isolating themselves in parallel societies and distancing themselves from our fundamental values of equality, democracy and freedom". Furthermore, when European societies have welcomed migrants, they have "chosen to commit crimes". Therefore, Frederiksen and Meloni argue that it is necessary to relax rules and regulations to allow countries to expel "criminal foreign nationals" and "keep track of […] criminal foreigners who cannot be deported". The letter portrays concerned national leaders dedicated to the welfare of their citizens trying to combat criminal foreigners protected by an autonomous court that is unable to understand the situation. While it is understandable for the court to refer to the horrors of the World Wars and international rules, this is a new situation that requires a new strategy. "The safety and stability of our own societies should have the highest priority".

The letter is an example of the "political demonology" (Rogin 1987) that has been prevalent in Danish politics for over two decades. Not only are migrants and refugees presented as foreigners, they are also presented as a problem that threatens to undermine Danish society and an imagined idea of Danishness. In April 2024, Frederik Vad, a member of the Danish Parliament for the Social Democrats, warned against seemingly well-integrated migrants who could be destroying Danish society. Many migrants and ethnic minority citizens have jobs and go to work like the rest of us, but can we be sure that

they are not using their "positions to undermine Danish society from within?", Vad asked from the podium in the Danish Parliament (Vad 2024).

Denmark is one of the wealthiest countries in the EU and has one of the lowest migrant populations. Nonetheless, it has played a leading role in the xenophobic and Islamophobic backlash that has emerged since the end of the last century. Although Denmark, like most Western European countries has undergone a process of intense neoliberal globalisation involving state cutbacks, pension reductions and financial liberalisation since the 1980s, the xenophobia has a clear superstructural dimension. Given the small number of refugees and migrants, the relatively stable class relations, and the complete absence of any opposition to capitalist hegemony, the intense focus on Danishness and the fear of national decline is clearly more 'cultural' than 'material'. As Wilhelm Reich pointed out when attempting to explain the emergence of German fascism and its ability to mobilise German workers against their own interests, it is necessary to supplement the analysis of capital and labour with an "account of what happens 'in people's heads'" (Reich 1971, 5). The point being that fascism offers its followers something, namely pleasure, the pleasure of aggression and meanness.

In this article I will analyse how this came about, focusing on the role of Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party) and how its Islamophobic rhetoric became mainstream in Danish politics, culminating in a situation where a Danish Social Democratic prime minister is seen as the natural ally of far-right parties across Europe. First, I will address the core terminological issue of whether the new far-right should be understood as an example of populism or fascism. Then, I will provide an overview of the Danish People's Party's history, and how its racist rhetoric was adopted by the political mainstream in the country. Finally, I will analyse the way the party visualises Danishness.

Right-wing populism or (post-)fascism?

When analysing the Danish People's Party and its image politics, it has become commonplace to categorise the party as an example of right-wing populism. Indeed, the party aligns closely with Cas Mudde's influential description of the 'populist radical right' characterised by a strong emphasis on "nativism [and] authoritarianism" coupled with "welfare chauvinism" (Mudde 2017, 4). When the Danish People's Party first appeared on the political scene, it adopted a strongly populist rhetoric, arguing that the political elite had allowed migrants to come to Denmark contrary to the wishes of the population. Throughout nativism has been at the core of the party's ideology; Denmark is conceptualised as a tightly knit national group that needs protection. Nationalism and xenophobia are combined in the belief that the nation-state is naturally reserved for members of the native group. Non-native elements are considered a "threat to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde 2017, 4). From the outset, the party has also emphasised the importance of law and order. More police are needed, and a tough stance on crime is important, especially regarding the 'many criminal migrants' that the party frequently invokes. Other

political parties have failed to do so and seem intent on letting the national community slowly disintegrate, the populist line goes.

Mudde's description is insightful, and applying the term "right-populist" to the Danish People's Party and similar parties has provided valuable analysis (Awad *et al*. 2022; Jensen 2009; Jordan 2024; Siim *et al*. 2016). However, as Eric Fassin and Enzo Traverso have argued, the term 'populism' tends to normalise far-right politics by focusing on how populist parties communicate (Fassin 2017, 21-22; Traverso 2019, 20-22). Furthermore, it implicitly privileges the political centre as a natural point of orientation, portraying left- and right-populism as political extremes that are somehow alike. As John Bellamy Foster argues, the notion of 'populism' normalises democracy and privileges the centre, hiding the seesaw that enables democracy to adopt fascist forms of power in times of crisis (Bellamy Foster 2017, 57-88).

The Danish People's Party is rarely analysed as a fascist party. Even critical analyses of the party's virulent ultra-nationalism tend to avoid labelling the party as such. This is partly due to the difficulty of using the term 'fascist' as a political description today, as it invokes the worst episode in human history. However, it is also because there is a desire to focus on the novelty of parties like the Danish People's Party, which are therefore most often described as right-wing populist. Right-wing populism is considered a contemporary political formation, whereas fascism is viewed as an outdated historical phenomenon that cannot return. As Geoff Eley, Alberto Toscano and I have argued, however, this use of the term 'fascism' is based on a reductive, Eurocentric understanding of the phenomenon, limiting it to the two interwar political regimes of Italian fascism and German Nazism (Bolt Rasmussen 2021, 1-11; Eley 2020, 284-285; Toscano 2024, 1-4).

As demonstrated by generations of anticolonial and Black radical thinkers and activists, as well as the first generation of Frankfurt School scholars, fascism cannot be viewed as a historical exception and something that belongs to the 1920s and 1930s. Rather, it should be understood as a constant possibility within modern capitalist society. As Étienne Balibar explains, the racist violence of fascism "is anchored in [the] material structures (including psychical and sociopolitical structures)" of national identity. In crisis situations this racism is acted out "on a scale which runs from mere words to 'individual' violence and from this to the organized movement whose ultimate objectives are an institutionalization of exclusion and discrimination" (Balibar 1991, 219).

Fascism is less a specific political regime than a way of treating internal enemies by placing them in situations of extreme state terror or state-sanctioned violence. As George Jackson asks: "Fascism for whom?" (Jackson 1990, 118-119). Modern liberal democracies may appear to be societies characterised by rules and norms, but for enslaved, racialised or colonized people, they have historically been characterised by forms of racist state terror. As Jackson writes (from a prison cell), white citizens in the US in the late 1960s were unaware of fascism as they went about their daily lives of work, family and

leisure. For Black militants like Jackson, however, racism and fascism were a daily reality. Jackson himself spent his entire adult life in prisons, having been given an indeterminate prison sentence of one year to life in 1961 for the unarmed robbery of $70 from a gas station, before being killed by a prison guard at San Quentin in 1971. From this perspective, fascism has never really gone away. This does not mean that history is repeating itself and that regimes embracing the term 'fascist' in the interwar period are making a comeback. Rather, we should free the term from the stranglehold of the 1930s and understand fascism as a broader concept. This is why Aimé Césaire was so puzzled by the European exceptionalisation of fascist state violence, stressing the connection between the unspeakable violence of colonialism and the horrors of National Socialism. Europeans had inflicted barbarism on non-European peoples in the colonies for a long time. 1930s European fascism was a boomerang effect of this violence (Césaire [1955] 2000, 36).

In the case of Denmark, it is important to emphasize the fact that Denmark remains a colonial power that has gone to great length to keep Kalaallit Nunaat (the territory known as Greenland) as a territory under Danish rule (Hermann 2021). Colonial practices included the forced sterilisation of Greenlandic women during the 1960s and 1970s, when Danish doctors under the direction of government officials placed intrauterine devices in thousands of Inuit girls and women in most cases without consent. The racist migration laws clearly echo the policies Inuit people indigenous to Kalaallit Nunaat have been subjected to by the Danish state. As Christina Petterson has argued, the Danish state's colonial violence has been erased by a discourse on Danish colonial exceptionalism according to which Denmark is in fact not a colonial power and Kalaallit Nunaat not a colony (Petterson 2012, 29-31).

Adopting an expanded understanding of fascism, we can say that the Danish People's Party embodies a kind of post-fascist ideology. This ideology does not subscribe to all the features of interwar fascism; most notably, it does not have the anti-democratic dimension that characterised both Italian fascism and German Nazism. Similarly, it lacks the organisational structure that characterised the ultra-nationalist movements in the interwar period. However, the party clearly exhibits features that align strikingly with fascism. Not least among these is an extreme form of nationalism coupled with what often appears to be an outright hatred of socially constructed others, primarily people from Muslim countries. This fear legitimises state violence towards people deemed intent on destroying the national community. Like most other post-fascist parties, from Rassemblement National to Alternative für Deutschland, the Danish People's Party directly attacks the demands for social justice – in terms of equality, representation and recognition – that have been advanced by generations of Marxist and feminist militants, as well as anti-, post- and decolonial movements. Post-fascism is not a mere repetition of inter-war fascism, but a continuation of much of the same programme with local specifics. And both inter-war fascism and contemporary racialised control can be traced back to colonial hierarchies of value.

Nationalism and xenophobia remain the key features of the party's politics. If you visit the party's homepage in late 2025, you will see a text superimposed on a slideshow of images depicting some of Denmark's most iconic landmarks, natural landscapes and historical sites, ranging from the castle Kronborg and the coast of Jutland to the royal ship Dannebrog (incidentally, also the name of the Danish flag). The text reads: "We are fighting for a country. A people. For the future of us all. Since 1995, the Danish People's Party has stood up for Denmark and the Danish people, and we are the only party that puts the Danish people first. Not foreigners, not the EU, not the experts – the Danish people!". This is a fairly exemplary tale of a party fighting for the people: the nation as a spiritual entity. This phenomenon, the nation as a mystical community, differs from the state apparatus and the bodies that are endowed with Danish citizenship. Much of the party's rhetoric strives to distinguish this mystical, truer Denmark from the existing state and (some of) the bodies currently inhabiting it.

The Danish People's Party

The history of the mainstreaming of xenophobia in Denmark is closely linked to the emergence of electoral success of the Danish People's Party (see Meret 2010, 95-144; see also Trads 2002). The party was established in 1995 as a splinter group from the anti-establishment Progress Party, a party that was established by the scandal riven and rather grotesque lawyer Mogens Glistrup in 1972 on an anti-tax, ultra-libertarian and xenophobic platform. Glistrup became a household name in Denmark in 1971, when he claimed on live national television that he was not paying taxes, in an act of defiance similar to that of Danish resistance fighters during the German occupation in World War Two. Glistrup was eventually sentenced to three years in prison for tax evasion. In keeping with Glistrup's impulsive and somewhat chaotic approach, The Progress Party was a loosely organised party, characterised by frequent splits and internal schisms. Throughout the 1980s, the Progress Party was the only party in the Danish parliament with an explicitly xenophobic stance. At that time migration was primarily seen as a labour market issue (Padovan-Özdemir, Øland 2022, 51-56). The Danish People's Party was established in 1995 by four former parliamentary members of Glistrup's party. Led by Pia Kjærsgaard—a former home care service worker who had initially stood in for Glistrup while he was in prison – the new party sought to distance itself from the chaos of the Progress Party. To this end, it repeatedly expelled candidates and members to avoid the appearance of being a group of village idiots or political extremists. In the early years of its existence, the party expelled a long list of members for using nazi terminology or referring to historical fascism. The party leadership was adamant about distinguishing between an ultra-nationalist stance and fascism as a historical excess. This strategy of deliberate contradictoriness where it distances itself against what it calls fascism all the while engaging in extremely racist rhetorics demanding stronger walls to protect the nation-state proved extremely successful and after a few years the party had acquired a remarkable political respectability in Danish politics.

In the 1998 election, the party campaigned for tougher migration policies and received over 7% of the votes. Unlike its predecessor, the Progress Party, the new party was keen to collaborate with other right-wing parties. Initially, most other parties shunned the party, regarding it as an offshoot of the Progress Party. However, the party gained ground with the help of a series of racist newspaper articles in Danish right-wing tabloids and papers about cheating Muslim migrants. Migration went from being an issue of labour market politics to being a social problem to finally being an external threat to national unity.

In 1999, the then Social Democrat prime minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, unsuccessfully attempted to insist on a crucial difference between the Danish People's Party and the other parties in the Danish parliament, stating that the party would never be considered respectable. However, spurred on by the tabloid campaign against migrants, the competition for the racist votes was already in full swing, with the Social Democrats under Nyrup Rasmussen participating wholeheartedly. As early as 1997, Nyrup Rasmussen had appointed Thorkild Simonson, then mayor of Aarhus, as Minister of the Interior. Simonson's explicit mission was to tighten the asylum system, including cutting benefits to asylum seekers, restricting family reunification and shortening the duration of residence permits (for a useful analysis of how the Social Democrats quickly adopted elements of the Danish People's Party's xenophobic policy proposals, see Engelbreth Larsen 2001, 150-197). These changes resulted in criticism from the UNHCR, who stated that the reduced integration benefits violated Article 23 of the Refugee Convention. The Un body also questioned the legislation's rules on restricting the free allocation of housing for refugees. The Social Democrats' introduction of these changes effectively opened the door for the Danish People's Party, which continued to press for further restrictions.

In the November 2001 election, shortly after 9/11 and the launch of the so-called 'War on Terror' (where Denmark participated in the invasion of Afghanistan and later Iraq as part of the so-called 'coalition of the willing'), the Danish People's Party gained 12% of the votes cast, becoming the third-largest party in the Danish parliament. 9/11 was used to further mobilise anti-Muslim sentiment, and 'the clash of civilisation' discourse of academics such as Samuel Huntington, who lent legitimacy to Islamophobic rhetoric in most national public spheres and further accelerated what Wendy Brown has called "fantasies of containment" (Brown 2010, 117-119). The optimistic discourse surrounding globalization in the 1990s took on a new, sinister tone, and the world became sharpy divided into two opposing groups: the free, democratic world and backward-looking Islamists locked in a deadly fight. This worldview aligned perfectly with the ideology of the Danish People's Party, which, since its inception, has maintained that Denmark and the West was being undermined by the influx of migrants from Muslim countries who cannot assimilate into Danish society.

The 2001 election led to the formation of a right-wing government led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen and supported by the Danish People's Party, which had become a key player

in Danish politics. The party supplied the necessary votes for the new government. This further legitimised the party and its far-right, ultra-nationalist stance. The party skilfully managed to support the neoliberal agenda of the Fogh Rasmussen government, approving all annual budget negotiations, while pressing for tightener asylum and migration policies. The Danish People's Party presented its support for the new government as a system change, in which a left-wing political and intellectual elite was challenged by a popular revolt embodied by the party. According to this narrative, the intellectual elite had become enamoured with the idea of multiculturalism, therefore losing any understanding of what the party referred to as 'Danishness': This framing was so effective that influential local center-left intellectuals such as the editor of the daily Information Rune Lykkeberg adopted it and used it an analysis of modern Danish political history (Lykkeberg 2008).

For a number of years, the Danish People's Party acted as a loyal supporting cast for the right-wing government of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, voting in favour of a series of neoliberal reforms, but getting a select number of small welfare adjustments in favour of senior citizens, as well as high-profile tightening of asylum rules, each year. While the party had initially been on the fringes of Danish politics, the party was now close to power and well respected. Most parties, with the exception of the Red Green Alliance, were in favour of tight asylum rules and competed with each other to be the most rhetorically harsh against particular racialised groups of citizens and migrants.

In the 2005, 2007 and 2011 elections, the party enjoyed fairly stable voter support, winning 24, 25 and 22 of the 189 seats in the Danish parliament, respectively. In the 2015 election, the party became the largest right-wing party in the Danish parliament, winning 37 seats and 21,1% of the vote. However, it did not form a government, instead remaining a loyal supporter of a minority right-wing government. However, under the leadership of Kristian Thulesen Dahl, who sought to present the party as respectable and willing to enter government at some stage, toning down the Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric, the party however lost support during the following local elections.

Following the emergence of a series of new far-right parties combining a more explicit neoliberal profile with a strong emphasis on xenophobia, the Danish People's Party quickly dropped in the opinion polls. In the 2019 election, it lost more than half of its parliamentary seats. At this point, most local political commentators concluded that the party had become redundant due to its own success. Over the course of 20 years, the entire political spectrum had moved dramatically to the right on matters of asylum and migration policies, making it difficult to distinguish between centre-left and a far-right positions.

The Danish People's Party's aggressive Islamophobic discourse had at this point more or less whole-heartedly been appropriated not only by other right-wing parties, but also by centre-right, centre-left and even left-wing parties. Notably, several parties from both the centre-right and the centre-left ran campaigns that stigmatised and mocked migrants, as well as Danish citizens with a mixed background or whose parents were migrants to Den-



2 | Minister of Immigration, Inger Støjberg, posted a photo of herself on Facebook with a cake in celebration of passing the 50th law cracking down on migration to Denmark, 2017.

mark. Throughout the noughties and 2010s, racist and xenophobic campaigns were the norm in Danish politics. In 2015, the Social Democratic Party, led by Helle Thorning-Schmidt, launched a campaign called "Det Danmark du kender" ("The Denmark you know"), featuring a series of posters. One of those posters showed a smiling Thorning-Schmidt standing in front of an out-of-focus old building, accompanied by the text: "If you come to Denmark, you have to work". The point is that even refugees escaping civil wars or climate disasters should not expect an easy time once they arrive in Denmark. Another poster from the same campaign, featuring the same photo of the Social Democratic leader, read: "Stricter asylum rules and more demands on immigrants". In 2017, Inger

Støjberg, the Danish Minister of Migration at the time and a member of the governing right-wing party Venstre, posted a photo of herself on Facebook with a traditional Danish Othello cake bearing the number of 50 in chocolate, to celebrate the fact that she had managed to tighten the asylum law 50 times in her capacity as minister [Fig. 2]. Such visual representations of official state xenophobia accompanied the material transformation of Danish immigration law, which included continuous cuts to benefits, postponement of the right to family reunification and tightening of border control. The previous year, Støjberg introduced a series of amendments to the Danish Aliens Act, including the so-called jewellery law, which allows Danish authorities to seize cash and valuables from asylum seekers to fund their maintenance, with the explicit goal of making Denmark less attractive to asylum seekers.

Using the terminology of Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss, this can be described as an extended process of "anesthetisation" (Buck-Morss 1992, 6), whereby Danish voters are become accustomed to viewing socially constructed 'others' as having little to no value; as being less than human; as being unworthy of Danish citizenship; and as being legitimate objects of ridicule, mockery, imprisonment, misery and exclusion. New emotional registers and new conditions of conscience are being produced (for an analysis of how ordinary Germans in the 1930s were prepared for state terror and wartime atrocities through the dissemination of racial concepts by legal discourse, pedagogical incitement and media representations – including magazines, exhibitions and humour – see Koonz 2003). As Koonz demonstrates, the state terror of the Nazi regime was less the result of the instilling of a specific Nazi conscience than the eradication of a universal humanist conscience, which enabled a "loose consensus" about "ethnic organism" (Koonz 2003, 10). The Danish People's Party, the Social Democrats and all the other parties have participated in a decades-long training exercise in numbness, which visually culminated in 2017 when a photographer from the newspaper Information took a picture of a middle-aged Danish man spitting at Syrian refugees from a highway bridge. This is a modern-day version of the sense-dead subject, Benjamin observed in German fascism (Bolt Rasmussen 2026). Feeling just a little bit better by spitting on the 'other'. This was the pleasure of aggression and violence that Reich sought to analyse in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Fascism simplifies and concretises complex political-economic process by targeting and lashing out at socially constructed 'others'. It enables people to be vicious towards those they perceive as vulnerable.

Since the early noughties, Denmark has seen a steady shift towards increasingly stringent asylum laws, regardless of which government has been in power. These measures have not only affected asylum laws, but also other areas enabling external and internal racialised control and urban racial exclusion. In 2018, the so-called 'ghetto' or 'parallel societies law' came into effect, enabling the state to demolish apartment blocks in areas where at least half of the residents have a 'non-Western' background. The designation of an area as a 'ghetto' enables higher penalties for crimes and the collective punishment of

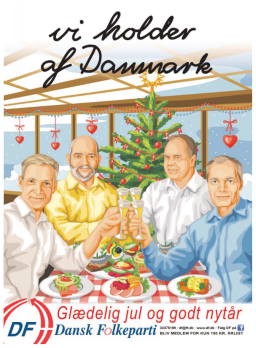
entire families through eviction if one of their members commits a criminal act. In 2021, the Social Democratic-led government passed a law allowing refugees arriving in Denmark to be moved to asylum centres in partner countries, such as Rwanda. This proposal was strongly criticised by the European Commission. The government also considered detaining asylum seekers on a remote island which previously housed a laboratory for contagious diseases (for an encompassing analysis of the Lindholm project and the way it exemplifies Danish asylum policy, see Björgvinsson 2025). In 2023, Denmark revoked residency permits for Syrian refugees, declaring some parts of the war-torn country safe for return, but then backtracked in the face of international backlash.

Following the near collapse of the Danish People's Party after the last election in 2022, the party has returned to its increasingly extreme xenophobic position under its new leader, Morten Messerschmidt, with a focus on remigration. In a recent interview with the right-wing paper Weekendavisen, Messerschmidt explained that between 50,000 and 100,000 people should be deported, and those who are unwilling to leave should be imprisoned (Messerschmidt 2025, 5). These prisons would be tougher than normal Danish prisons. It is necessary to be much tougher, Messerschmidt explained. This includes revising the entire citizenship acquisition process, which has already undergone dramatic changes in recent years. According to Messerschmidt, the 25,000-plus people who have acquired Danish citizenship in the last eight years must reapply under new, tougher conditions, including having a conversation with members of the Danish parliament about whether they are "truly Danish in their hearts". If you are a practising Muslim, this will be taken into account during the assessment process. The same applies to utterances against the State of Israel: "Whether it's a hundred thousand or ten thousand, people who have been convicted of crimes and people who cannot support themselves and live off public funds, should not be here" (Messerschmidt 2025, 5). As Mikkel Bjørn, one of the other leading figures in the party, has explained: "It must be made virtually impossible to live an Islamic life in Denmark" (Bjørn 2024, 20). The party's youth wing has also toughened its rhetoric and recently distributed thousands of fake one-way airline tickets with the text "from Denmark to the Middle East" in primary schools during mock elections, where children are introduced to political parties. When asked about the matter, the Social Democratic Minister of Education, Mattias Tesfaye, said he found the stunt acceptable as part of the political education of schoolchildren. The new, even harsher discourse has had an immediate effect on opinion polls, with the party once again becoming the largest right-wing party, forcing the Social Democrats and most other parliamentary parties in the parliament to follow suit.

The Danish Social Democrats' attempt to render the stance of the Danish People's Party indistinguishable from their own can be analysed as an instance of "fascisation" (Palheta, Bantigny 2021, 55-79). This is the process whereby traditional parties implement post-fascist demands to prevent post-fascist parties from gaining ground. This process involves a dual rise in racism and an authoritarian hardening of the state. As Ludivine







3 | Danish People's Party cover image on Facebook, 2018: "Denmark, democracy and community. There's so much we need to take care of".
4 | Danish People's Party, cover of "Dansk Folkeblad", October, 2007, showing the allotment house built at the annual party conference.
5 | Danish People's Party, poster, 2018: "We care for Denmark. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!".

Bantigny and Ugo Palheta argue, this process occurs as part of a "radicalisation of whole sections of the ruling class, out of fear that the political situation is escaping them", in tandem with the "social entrenchment of fascist […] ideas and affects" (Palheta, Bantigny 2021, 58). In other words, the fight against fascism cannot be limited to combatting the explicitly fascist parties; it must also address how the ruling class enables fascist sentiments to become official state policy in times of economic crisis (Hall 1988). The problem lies in the combination of political democracy and ultra-nationalism into what the Danish historian Carsten Juhl has termed "a national democratic authenticity totalitarianism" (Juhl 2002, 20). A contemporary antifascist perspective must combine critique of post-fascist parties with an analysis of political democracy within the nation state. We should abandon the idea that fascism and democracy are necessarily opposed to each other. Amadeo Bordiga analysed this as far back as 1923: "Fascism incorporates the counterrevolutionary struggle of all allied bourgeois forces, and for this reason is not necessarily bound to destroy democratic institutions" (Bordiga[1922] 2020, 168).

The Visual Politics of Danishness

Throughout its existence the Danish People's party has referred to Danishness in its slogans, campaigns and speeches [Fig. 3]. The party's name says it all: This is the party for Danish people; those who are Danish and belong to the Danish people. Not necessarily everybody in Denmark or with Danish citizenship. The name thus effectively distinguishes between Denmark as a political and legal entity, and Danishness as a cultural and spiritual community – a more ancestral Denmark that requires protection.

As with most ultra-nationalist parties and groups, the nature of the national element is difficult to define. Unlike parties that signal the political direction they want society to take—be it a socialist or a conservative, for example – the Danish People's Party is dedi-

cated to making Denmark more Danish. The question, of course, is what 'Danish' means. In a statement on Danish culture on the party's homepage, the party explains: "Denmark is a very small area in terms of language and culture. But it is ours, and it is precious and unique. Our cultural policy must therefore have one clear goal: to preserve and strengthen Danish culture and language. Our history, language, beliefs and traditions are our shared identity. They bind us together across generations and social divides and form the foundation for the valuable trust on which our society and public life are built". Aside from language, it is difficult to define more concretely what Danishness amounts to for the Danish People's Party. There is a clear tautological dimension at play, whereby Danishness is something one is simply by being Danish (Jøker Bjerre 2009, 16-17).

A group of Danish priests played a central role in formulating the party's ultra-nationalism in the 1990 and early noughts. Led by Søren Krarup, editor of the nationalist Lutheran journal "Tidehverv", these priests promoted an idea of Christian and intransigent nationalism. Already in the mid-1980s, Krarup and other Tidehverv priests campaigned against "Muslim immigration" to Denmark. According to Krarup he was engaged in a resistance fight similar to that of the Danish resistance fighters in World War Two, when Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany. Therefore, he argued, any comparison of "Tidehverv" and fascism was completely off the table.

The Danishness of the Danish People's Party is akin to Furio Jesi's visual clichés, which can be moulded and shaped in the most expedient way. In the vocabulary of Jesi, Danishness is an example of "ideas without words", i.e. abstractions that have been used so much that they have almost lost their meaning (Jesi 2011, 24). Danishness is a formula that does not need to be understood; everyone knows what it means. If you do not, then you are not Danish. It is that simple. The fascist myth is insidious because it is easy; you nod or agree even without really thinking about it. You cannot really dispute the myth of Danishness and end up going along with it, accepting it as reality. This is what Jesi warned about.

'Danish' is an amalgamation of values, traditions and customs that Danish citizens embody by being Danish (*danskhed*). By being Danish, Danish citizens conform to this idea of Danishness according to the national democratic tradition about 'danskhed'. There's an obvious auto-erotic dimension here. In this case, however, the myth is particularly banal, lacking any kind of transcendence that was historically, and is perhaps still today, present in other forms of European fascism and post-fascism. Danishness is a flat and particularly empty idea, that cannot easily be defined. But that is its strength. There is an obvious reactionary dimension to the ultra-nationalism of the Danish People's Party. Its project is to secure Danishness, i.e. how Danish citizens are Danish. This way of life must be protected against any threats, whether internal or external, be it migrants, the EU, or US popular culture, including left-wing culture as wokeism and cancel culture.

The party logo features two Danish flags wrapped around the party's abbreviation. The Danish flag features prominently in most of the party's campaigns. It is always present at party conferences and is frequently used in photos or posters. Often the flag is superimposed on a map of Denmark, or children are wrapped in the Danish flag. Most often with texts creating an opposition between external threats and Denmark.

The party has often invoked a particular, retro-idea of Danish post-war culture. This post-war culture was actively engaged in an producing an image of a previous, harmonious national community – an agrarian romanticised version of Denmark. This took place, not least, in the film adaptations of Morten Korch's agrarian romantic novels, in which national identity was rooted in the soil and the age-old, inherited peasant farm (Marklund 2014; Troelsen 1980).

In posters and speeches, scenes of Danish country life, a village church surrounded by green fields or a farmer on his tractor and his wife busy cooking in the kitchen or the nuclear family united in the garden, eating and drinking, are presented as examples of an ideal way of life [Fig. 3]. At a party meeting in 2007, an allotment house, which is typically associated with the post-war era when working-class families gained access to higher wages and purchased small plots of land on the outskirts of the cities, was constructed inside the convention centre where the party meeting was held [Fig. 4]. In 2018, the party ran a campaign with a series of posters featuring four leading members of the party, Kristian Thulesen Dahl, Søren Espersen, Peter Skaarup and Martin Henriksen, depicted as friendly, slightly caricatured cartoon faces painted in light pastel colours. With their painting-after-photography style, the campaign posters are reminiscent of a mixture of Jehovah's Witnesses and socialist realism. The faces of the four politicians are completely smooth, while the background has a slightly bumpy appearance, like a fresco or crumpled tin foil. On all the posters, they stand alone or together with their mouths closed, saying things like: "There is so much we need to protect" or "You always know what we stand for". There is an implicit understanding in these statements, just as there is in many of Donald Trump's slogans. In one of the posters, the four politicians were depicted sitting in front of a Christmas tree adorned with miniature Danish flags, in an allotment or summerhouse, about to enjoy a traditional, meat-centric Danish Christmas meal, complete with a red-and-white checked tablecloth [Fig. 5].

The idea that Denmark is under threat and needs to be protected has been a constant refrain. The description on the current leader of the party, Morten Messerschmidt's, Instagram simply says "Politician" and "Denmark back!". Since the mid-1990s, most of the party's slogans have emphasised this rhetoric. In 2019, the party launched a campaign under the slogan "Give us Denmark back". Most of these campaigns invoke a vague notion of a rapidly disappearing past that needs to be secured. The kitschy visual style of the campaigns is slightly tongue-in-cheek, enabling the party to make an explicit reference to an imagined, cosy past while also being xenophobic. The party has continued

to supplement the images and posters depicting an idealised rural lifestyle with anti-refugee representations. Maps of Denmark are combined with warning or demand texts: "We must help our own people before immigrants" and "There has to be a border", where the limit is understood in both a concrete sense, as strict border control, and in the sense of a limit to the number of migrants in Denmark.

Michael Rogin defines political demonology as "the creation of monsters […] by the inflation, stigmatization and dehumanization of political foes" (Rogin 1987, XIII). The focus of his analysis is the United States, and how the white ruling class has continually invoked and actively produced dangerous 'others' from native 'Indians' to 'Red' communists—who must be kept at bay to keep the nation safe. In the Danish context, since the mid-1990s, the monster has principally been people from Muslim countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Rogin describes the demonisation process as characterized by a "misplaced concreteness", whereby the countersubversive sees monsters everywhere and nowhere at all. To give form to the anxieties and fears that are part of political demonology, the countersubversive constantly mixes reality and fantasy. The monstrous 'other' thus takes on the form of an uncanny double that is independent and in formation. "The alien comes to birth as the American's dark double, the imaginary twin who sustains his (or her) brother's identity" (Rogin 1987, 284). Rogin discusses how Ronald Reagan referred to communism and communists as both specific individuals and nowhere to be seen, both an actual presence and an invisible threat. In the case of the Danish People's Party, they have not only repeatedly inflated numbers—for example, in December 2025, Morten Messerschmidt claimed that there were more than 15,000 foreigners sentenced to deportation living in Denmark, whereas all accounts suggest the figure is no higher than 1,500 – but they have also created the fear they invoke. During the 2011 election, Alex Ahrendtsen made and circulated a video titled "A Day in the Ghetto", in which he walked around in Vollsmose in Odense. Suddenly an elderly white woman was robbed and beaten by a man with darker skin in the background. This scene was staged by Ahrendtsen. It worked, however, and Ahrendtsen was subsequently elected to the Danish parliament.

Most of the Danish People's Party's posters allude to an unseen threat that it is difficult to identify, which makes it all the more important to stand firm. Other posters focus on representing the socially constructed other or attempting to make it visible. The hijab and the burka have been constant references to un-Danishness. According to the Danish People's Party, you cannot wear a hijab and be Danish, it's that simple. A 2001 poster shows the face of a burka-clad women facing the viewer, accompanied by large yellow text on a blue background: "Your Denmark: Is this what you wish for?" with a list of consequences between the question and the answer. "A multiethnic society with: Gang rapes, serious violence, insecurity, forced marriages, gang crime". Another poster from 2008 features a burka-clad female judge holding a gavel, with the words "So ruled the judge" at the top. Beneath the photo was a short text with the heading "Submission", which explained that the Danish parliament, as well as the courts, were planning to accept the hijab (The





6 | Danish People's Party, poster, 2009: "No to mosques in Danish cities".
7 | X post by Morten Messerschmidt, the leader of the Danish People's Party in 2023, reposting a poster from 2001 juxtaposing young blond women and hooded, bloodstained men holding the Koran. "In 2001 I was sentenced for stating the obvious… Today everybody can most likely see we were right".

term "submission" was a reference to the Islamophobic 2004-film by the far-right Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh, written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Van Gogh was stabbed and killed by Mohammed Bouyeri in November 2004). The fact that the woman in the picture was wearing a burka, not a hijab, and that only three people in Denmark at the time regularly wore burkas, according to the social authorities, was beside the point. The following year, the party ran a campaign against a mosque in Copenhagen in all the large newspapers and tabloids, using a manipulated photo of the 16-century Blue Mosque in Istanbul, in which the crescent moon had been replaced by two scimitars [Fig. 6].

In 2001, four male members of the party's youth wing, including Morten Messerschmidt, who is now the party leader, were convicted of racism for a poster published in a youth magazine with a print run of 45,000 copies [Fig. 7]. The poster juxtaposed two photos, one labelled "Denmark now "and the other "Denmark in ten years". "Now" showed three young blonde women in short tops, while "the future" showed three hooded, bloodstained men holding the Koran, accompanied by the text "Mass rapes. Serious violence. Insecurity. Forced marriages. Oppression of women. Gang crime. These are the things a multi-ethnic society offers us". This was an example of what we with Dagmar Herzog can called "Islamophobic pornography" where racism is mixed with titillating incitement (Herzog 2025, 9-17). DF-voters get to look at good-looking semi-naked young women and feel morally

superior to migrants from Muslim countries. In October of 2024, Messerschmidt decided to republish the poster on Facebook and X with the comment: "In 2002, I was convicted for stating the obvious… Today, everyone can see that we were right".

Antifascism Today

In his 1998 book *The Unveiling of National Icons*, the late Marxist art historian Albert Boime proposed an act of "patriotic iconoclasm", pointing to Jasper Johns' and Faith Ringgold's reinterpretations of the Stars and Stripes. However, I believe that we are now in a situation where this is no longer possible; it has become extremely difficult to envisage a progressive *détournement* of nationalist symbols (in the West). There are several examples of such iconoclastic gestures in Denmark during the emergence of the Danish People's Party, including when Lars von Trier made a short video in 2006 in response to the Minister of Culture's creation of a national cultural canon listing the most significant Danish art works. In the video, von Trier cuts up the Danish flag, removing the white cross, and then proceeds to raise the resulting all-red flag to the tune of "The Internationale". Von Trier was reported to the police, but no charges were brought against him. Another important attempt at challenging the mainstreaming of racist sentiments was Ellen Nyman's 2001-"Space Campaign" project where the Danish artist and actor Nyman dressed in a yellow tablecloth from IKEA would appear as an African refugee at political events. One action took place at the entrance of the Danish Parliament where Nyman confronted the then leader of the Danish People's Party Pia Kjærsgaard singing the Danish national anthem [Fig. 1]. While it may still be necessary to deconstruct and repurpose national symbols, we must also consider other modes of opposition. In light of the emergence of a new kind of fascism, it may be time to return to an earlier iconoclastic and anti-nationalist stance, similar to that of the inter-war Zimmerwald Left, which sought to formulate a staunchly internationalist perspective refusing to engage with parliamentary democracy (Chuzeville 2024). The Gaza encampment movement, which sprang up on campuses across the world in late 2023 and early 2024 in protest against the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza by the Israeli state, could be an early indication of such internationalism, or at least a necessary anti-imperialist stepping stone towards it. Obviously, we are very far from the kind of international solidarity that existed in the interwar period. The language of revolutionary internationalism did not survive the horrors of the 20th century and the neoliberal onslaught on the idea of a revolutionary change. However, Gaza has become a prism through which numerous injustices and forms of domination can be seen. Despite heavy repression and accusations of antisemitism, millions of people around the world have spoken out against the violence in Gaza, holding demonstrations, occupying campuses and blocking ports. The atrocities in Gaza have become a symbol of hundreds of years of colonisation, not only of Palestine, but of many other places too. As Nasser Abourahme eloquently put it, the synchronised, real-time witnessing of the so-called 'war in Gaza' is like "a condensed restaging of every colonial war in history, bearing every hallmark: the pummelling of dispossessed and besieged people by an

overwhelming military power in the name of self-defence and 'Western civilisation and values'; the demonology and language of savagery, zoology and bestiality; the devaluation of life in racial taxonomies that actively produce disposability as the condition of value everywhere; the presentism and the refusal of any claims of a historical past or historical injustice" (Abourahme 2024, 19). In the face of the near-total Western support for Israel – Denmark being among the staunchest supporters of Israel's "right to self-defence" – Palestinian liberation is once again emerging as a common cause. This is not yet an established historical consciousness, but rather a sense of historical necessity. Perhaps we are witnessing the beginning of an alternative to the accelerated process of fascisation we see taking place in country after country.

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Abstract

Bolt Rasmussen's article examines the mainstreaming of xenophobia and Islamophobia in Danish party politics over the past three decades, focusing on the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) as the primary vehicle through which far-right nativist ideology entered the political mainstream. Rejecting the dominant framing of the party as a case of right-wing populism, the author argues for an expanded concept of (post-)fascism – drawing on anticolonial thought, the Frankfurt School, and thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, George Jackson, and Wilhelm Reich – to account for the continuum between colonial violence and contemporary racialised state control.

keywords | Danishness; Dansk Folkeparti; Danish People's party.

Far-right Bodies

Surface Derangement

Preliminary Notes for an Inquiry into Trumpian Imagery

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…C'est dans les symptômes de l'Amérique que se déchiffrent au mieux les symptômes dans la culture, le malaise mondial dans la civilisation.

(Gérard Wajcman)

Trumpism: Political Disarticulation and Spectacle

"Trumpism" is at this point in time best understood as a coalition composed of the various segments of the American Right, among which the following are the most important ones: MAGA (Make America Great Again movement), which brings together the "American gentry" (Wyman 2021; Cooper 2022), the disgruntled petty bourgeoisie, and a portion of the downwardly mobile working class population; the Christian nationalist Right, whose long-term aim is to reverse the liberal progress of the last hundred-and-fifty years (Greenhouse 2023); the explicitly Alt Right, Far Right, neo-Nazi and fascist groups, which seem

to appeal in particular to the disaffected young men (Bouie 2025; Parker, Sherer, Miroff 2026); the leftovers of the imperial Neoconservative Right which used to dominate the Republican Party, but whose project for "The New American Century" has now been pared down to a set of more limited adventures within an increasingly hemispheric rather than a global horizon (Singh 2026); the techno-anarchist and monarchist Silicon Valley oligarchs in search of the political form that might enable them to evade the constraints of the bourgeois state and help cement the economic dominance they have established in the recent couple of decades (Slobodian 2025a; Slobodian 2025b, Slobodian 2025c; Glickmann 2025a; Glickmann 2025b); the private equity industry, whose asset-stripping methods represent finance capital's cutting-edge response to the crisis of industrial profitability and the persistent malaise of secular stagnation; and finally, MAHA (or Make America Healthy Again), a "diagonalist" formation which emerged out of the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, and which centers its conspiracist and eugenicist energies on the distrust of science, public health institutions, and vaccine provision (Callison, Slobodian 2021; Gaffney, Himmelstein, Woolhandler 2025). This is a diverse set, and while each of these groups may possess a project more or less coherent on its own individual terms, it is also the case that these different strands of the American Right are to a large extent mutually incompatible and do not share an overall political vision. They would not be able to construct an alliance by themselves, let alone achieve the popular support necessary to seize state power.

The singular feature of Donald Trump as a figure is that he has been able to function as a point of shared articulation for these diverse reactionary formations. Crucially, he has done so not by providing them with some overall political idea under which they could integrate into a larger coherent political project, but rather by standing for an absolute willingness to give up on the coherence of politics as such. The Trump-figure, we may say, is where politics loses coherence as politics, yet it is precisely for this reason that the American Right is able to cohere around it into something like a coalition. Trumpism in that sense names a situation in which the disarticulation of politics comes to serve as the very ground of political articulation. That the Trump-figure functions in this way is confirmed by the fact that he typically appears as an essentially sub-political figure: most commonly as a sort of a mob boss, a paternalistic head of a familial crime enterprise, or indeed as an idiosyncratic real-estate developer and speculator, in whose hands the art of politics is reduced to a form of naked deal-making (the "art of the deal"). But again, it is precisely this failure to exceed the level of the sub-political, the failure to ascend to some proper form of political figuration, that makes it possible for the Trump-figure to serve as a point of articulation in today's politics.

How does Trumpism concretely manage to hold together these disparate strands? It is possible to recognize in this situation, in which disarticulation functions as the condition of political totalization, the old logic of the spectacle. The Trump-figure has managed to connect the otherwise incompatible formations of American reaction precisely because

it has been able to shift the terrain away from politics and to rigorously submit any political project with which it comes into contact to the demands of the spectacular image (or, if one prefers, the demands of the media attention economy). Trumpism, after all, appears on the surface of things as a remarkable accumulation and proliferation of images. It manifests itself as a veritable *iconorrhea*: a flood of images that make a constant claim on people's attention; and it does so precisely because it is the logic of the spectacular image that in Trumpism has to do the work abandoned by more distinctly political forms of relation.

The standard formula for understanding Trumpism as politics-become-spectacle still has to be Walter Benjamin's description of historical fascism as "aestheticization of politics". Putting things in these terms should, however, also lead us to try to measure the distance between Trumpism and the older, twentieth-century forms of political reaction. In the case of Benjamin's critical concept of the "aestheticization of politics", the term "aestheticization" stood for a sort of alienation or perversion of something that could still be thought of as a properly historical mode of politics. "Aestheticization of politics" named a process whereby the fascism of the twentieth century mimicked the politics of revolutionary modernity even as it was in the process of dismantling it. For this reason, the fascist aesthetic perversion of modern politics remained recognizable as politics. And in turn, this remainder of politics under the disguise of fascist aestheticization – put simply, the fact that fascism still represented an attempt "to organize the newly proletarianized masses" or to "give them expression" (Benjamin [1936] 2006, 120-122) – was able to serve as the very terrain on which Benjamin could wager a reversal: the communist (re)politicization of aesthetics, which is to say the (re)discovery of aesthetics and art as sites of historico-political intervention.

The reactionary formation of Trumpism does not belong to the sequence of historical fascism in the sense outlined above and confronts us with a very different situation. Insofar as we can continue to speak of a certain "aestheticization" in relation to Trumpism, it seems clear that what is being "aestheticized" in this case is not some recognizable historical form of politics. Trumpian images may contain plenty of mimicking, but one would be hard-pressed to find in them some kind of consistent attempt at appropriation of politics proper, let alone of modern revolutionary politics. Trumpian "aestheticization" is not "of" politics, in the sense that no recognizable form of politics seems to precede it, logically, as its substantial source. And if one can still think of "aestheticization" as a perversion of something, one must in the case of Trumpism be able to think this moment of perversion as coming first, arriving as logically prior, and itself putting into place the semblance of the very thing ("politics") from which it is supposed to deviate (Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra"). Or to put it differently, if Trumpian "aestheticization" appears to us as a flood of images, a kind of spectacular iconorrhea, it is also the case that it is no longer possible to grasp this proliferation of Trumpian icons as alienation or perversion of some prior or more fundamental political logos. The situation of Trumpism is rather

one in which the flow of images (the moment of spectacle, of "aestheticization") breaks decisively from any anchoring in the discursive articulation of politics. There is no political form or deeper political meaning here that could continue to serve as the object of "aestheticization" or as the terrain upon which the perversion of spectacle is performed.

On this particular point, we may pause for a bit and draw a comparison with the work of the Italian philologist and mythology scholar Furio Jesi. In his book *Cultura di destra* ("Right-wing Culture"), first published in 1979, Jesi describes a crucial element in reactionary ideologies: a set of clichés, commonplaces, and stereotypes (including notions such as Homeland, Heritage, Family, etc.) that does not rely on any concrete discursive articulation. Borrowing an expression from Oswald Spengler, Jesi calls them "ideas without words", or we could say, ideas without logos. These are notions that seemingly transcend any pre-existing form of politics, come into being in a void, and as such become spiritualized, infused with metaphysical value. The hollowing out of any conceptual, historical, or cultural reference that accompanies the deployment of these ideas produces an effect of artificial transparency, a sort of semiotic flatness, which expresses itself in the sense that these ideas "go without saying". Jesi famously referred to such mental content as "pappa omogeneizzata" – mush, baby food: undifferentiated, tasteless, and easy to digest (see Jesi [1979] 2025, in particular *Il linguaggio delle idee senza parole*, 111-232, where Jesi uses the formula "pappa omogeneizzata"). While Jesi's analysis can primarily be situated in the context of print and literary culture, it strikes us as potentially useful to think of the status of Trumpian imagery – particularly the ever-greater pervasiveness in it of AI-generated images or the so-called AI slop – as performing an additional twist in Jesi's formulation. What we encounter in Trumpian imagery, which it would not be wrong to describe as a kind of homogenized baby food, is a certain fantasy that "ideas without words" may be directly visualized, that the image may be turned into a vehicle for establishing a seemingly unmediated circuit between some generic bit of meaning and its visual manifestation. This type of fantasy tends to reduce the function of the image, which after all possesses a certain discursivity of its own and often presents an obstacle rather than easy access to meaning, to the status of the visual or perhaps even the pornographic. So that we may add to Jesi's "ideas without words" the notion of "visuality without images" as another important aspect of contemporary rightwing culture: a proliferation of visual content that in reality shuns the (discursive) function of the image. And just as Jesi allows us to recognize in the rightwing *logorrhea* a fair amount of *logophobia* (a loquaciousness that seeks at all cost to avoid the effects and consequences of discursive articulation), we may observe how the *iconorrhetic* flow of Trumpian spectacle might in fact be underpinned by a massive strain of *iconophobia*, a profound anxiety about what images might do if one fails to harness them to the task of visual saturation.

The sense of aestheticization's precession is further reaffirmed in the present context by the increasing reliance on AI-generated imagery in Trumpian image production. This is the case not only because AI image generation proceeds from large data sets that con-



tain vast quantities of already existing images, and that what we therefore encounter with it are "images from images" (Somaini 2023). The loss of discursive anchoring is intensified also by the fact that AI-generated "images from images" are likely to become the largest part of the dataset or the archive on which the present and future AI models will be trained, so that AI images will increasingly be produced from "images from images", and then future images will be produced from "images from "images from images" and so on…. Alongside the effect of potentially indefinite forward regress created by this type of recursive image generation, there is also the fact that the functioning of the deep neural networks in AI image-generating models is a kind of "black box" and at present exceeds our ability to understand or discursively grasp it in human terms. Our attempt to make it produce an image depends on a machine learning process, during which we feed an AI model with data (a large set of images) and answers (textual descriptions or tags associated with these images). The learning process of an AI model consists in the model's extraction of the rules or a statistical structure from this input. It is this ability to infer the rules that then makes it possible for the AI model to automate the task we wish it to perform: that is, to generate a new image (for a useful introduction to AI-based machine learning, see Chollet 2021). What is crucial, however, is that the configuration of statistical parameters the AI model arrives at during the training process remains obscure to us and is, if we may improperly anthropomorphize for a moment, "known" only to the AI model. We do not know how, according to what "rules", what distribution of statistical weights, the AI model generated the image we prompted it to produce, which means that the image generated with the help of AI must always strike us at some level as irreducibly accidental. But it is precisely in this fundamental obscurity of its discursive condition that








the process of AI-based image generation finds a kind of structural affinity with Trumpism and its iconorrhetic excess – an affinity, we may add, that has become strikingly clear in the explosion of AI-generated imagery during Trump's second presidential term (for more on this question, see Meyer 2026).

Image and Crisis

The primacy of "aestheticization" over politics, the existence of the *iconorrhetic* flood ungrounded in political logos, triggers as a response the desire for deep, hermeneutic interpretation capable of moving behind or beyond the delirious flux of Trumpian images in order to nevertheless identify their true political or discursive meaning. Such desire to interpretatively arrest the Trumpian flux either takes the form of ideologico-political analysis (i.e., identifying Trumpism with fascism, or with the good old American racism and white supremacy, or with some new underlying development, such as "neo-royalism", for which see Goddard, Newman 2025) or seeks to unravel a set of deeper historical causes, as is for instance the case with the Marxist reading of Trumpism as a manifestation of the long economic downturn and the subsequent emergence of a new regime of accumulation called "political capitalism" (Riley, Brenner 2022; see also Riley, Brenner 2025). While we do not wish to suggest that these types of interpretations are wrong – on the contrary, they manage to illuminate Trumpism in important ways – from the perspective of someone interested in Trumpian imagery, their hermeneutic reach for the deeper meaning of Trumpism misses what is in some sense Trumpism's truly enigmatic part: namely, its appearance. Why must the deeper political or historical meaning which we are able to identify as essential to Trumpism appear in this particular way? Why, for instance, must "fascism", if that's what we grasp as the underlying reality of Trumpism, assume on the surface of things precisely this form of visual delirium and derangement? Rather than simply follow the hermeneutic interpretative imperative – "Do not get taken by the surface delirium of Trumpian spectacle, focus on the deeper meaning these images seek to distract you from!" – it seems to us that it is just as important to trace the phenomenon of Trumpism along the opposite path as well, which is to say, to grasp it along the

way on which the "deeper" meaning of the phenomenon comes to assume the specific surface appearance of Trumpism itself. What requires explanation is not merely the underlying meaning of Trumpism, but also – and perhaps especially – its genuinely confounding mode of appearance, its superficial manifestation. It is the form in which things appear that contains the secret of Trumpism's historical novelty, perhaps even its historical singularity. Paying attention to the surface form, we rush to add, does not invalidate the deeper interpretation, but it might help provide us with a more concrete, as well as usefully estranged, sense of how these histories may be informed by a critical and historical ontology of the present.

With respect to this question of what is new and singular about Trumpism, we may continue to draw a sharp distinction between the critical theories of twentieth-century historical fascism and the theoretical resources that may be needed in our present moment (in this, we take inspiration from Toscano 2023). To be made intelligible, the historical fascism that emerged during the inter-war years of the previous century required theorizations of historical time that were profoundly dialectical. In perhaps the most famous elaboration, Ernst Bloch in his *Heritage of Our Times* made sense of the historical crisis that helped produce fascism by introducing the concept of the "contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous", thereby linking the phenomenon of fascism to the force of dialectical contradictions within historical time itself. Contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous referred in Bloch's usage to the coexistence of heterogeneous times within the time of the present. Above all, the concept named the fact of unfinished capitalist modernization: the persistence of real remnants of the past (peasant, premodern and pre-capitalist forms of life) that continued to assert themselves and exercise a strong subjective pull in the lives of the large part of the population. Historical fascism, which drew on this temporal tension within the present, within modernity that was not yet fully itself, thus mobilized a genuine dialectical (and negative) moment at work in historical time, which it then diverted toward its reactionary ends, its nostalgic longing for the past and the violent fantasies in which it imagined the purging of the very element of heterogeneity from which it drew its initial appeal.

The status of the image, as it was critically elaborated in the situation of twentieth-century historical fascism, similarly relied on this dialectical coexistence of heterogeneous temporalities, for which the radical tension between the past and the present served as a kind of matrix. In Bloch – but also in Benjamin, and in a yet different way in the work of Aby Warburg – the image was grasped as a dialectical (or, in the case of Warburg, perhaps more as a tragic) configuration of incompatible times. The strength of the image was identified with its unique capacity to bring together, make con-temporaneous, times that lacked any shared measure. This incommensurability, the essential division of time, for which the temporalization of the image was nevertheless seen as providing a dialectical measure, expressed itself in the fact that the image appeared as something punctual, a sudden crystallization of a crisis. One can see this dynamic captured in Bloch's concepts





of "montage" and "abrupt mediation", Benjamin's concept of the "critical moment" and his idea of the image as "dialectics at a standstill", as well as in Warburg's interest in the *Pathosformeln* that inscribe the trace of suffering and disrupt the classical composure of pictorial form.

However, unlike the thinkers of the interwar period, we find ourselves in a situation of completed modernization. Over the course of the twentieth century, capitalism became global and has, through an imposition of a planetary present, snuffed out the remnants of any genuinely historical past. The kind of heterogeneity of time that constituted the historical dialectic of the early twentieth century no longer obtains. In distinguishing the situation of incomplete modernization from that of completed modernization, we borrow from Fredric Jameson's distinction between the historical situations of modernism and postmodernism. In his *A Singular Modernity* (Jameson 2012), Jameson writes:

> What we call artistic or aesthetic 'modernism' essentially corresponds to a situation of incomplete modernization. It is a situation [characterized by] the astonishingly belated survival of modernity's feudal context in some European countries up to the very end of World War II: and by the same token, modernity's emergence in limited commodification. The new bourgeoisies of the properly capitalist era […] are still relatively small segments of the overall and still predominantly peasant population. […] This makes for a world that is still organized around two distinct temporalities: that of the new industrial big city and that of the peasant countryside. And I will remark in passing that one of the great themes which has conventionally been identified as a dominant in literary modernism – namely temporality itself […] – is very precisely the mode in which this transitional economic structure of incomplete capitalism can be registered and identified as such (Jameson 2012, 141–142).

Consequently, the situation of postmodernism can then famously be described in the following way: "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good" (Jameson 1991, IX).

Yet we would be mistaken to think that this completion of the modernizing process signals the disappearance of all non-contemporaneity or temporal heterogeneity as such. It is rather the case that what disappears with it are the distinct forms of historical non-contemporaneity, which have been replaced by the properly capitalist forms of temporal dislocation. Though often regarded as a homogenizing force, capital in its envelopment of the planet does not rely primarily on its ability to make time homogenous, but rather on the ceaseless exploitation of temporal differences, which it in turn (re)produces through its movement. There exist, in other words, forms of non-contemporaneity that are distinctly capitalist or immanent to capital. A central example: surplus-value, around which the entire movement of capital revolves, is produced in the sphere of production (through capital's consumption of labor-power), but it is only realized in the sphere of circulation (through the exchange of commodities, where it comes into existence as profit), which is to say that surplus-value is necessarily, structurally non-contemporaneous with itself. This type of non-contemporaneity can hardly be considered historical, since it does not consist of two distinct and heterogeneous times (past and present), but is rather internal to a single moment (the emergence of surplus-value) in the capitalist structure. Or put differently, temporal fracture in capitalism does not point to the incommensurability between two historical temporalities, but rather inheres in the temporalization of a single phenomenon which is incommensurable in relation to itself (i.e., surplus-value is the lack of common measure constitutive of capital as value in motion). In this sense, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of this phenomenon as one of temporal discontinuity rather than non-contemporaneity, reserving the latter term for those situations in which temporal heterogeneity assumes one of its distinctly historical forms.

Capitalist discontinuity does not require the invention of contemporaneity as the form to mediate the temporal incommensurabilities that capital seeks to exploit. Contemporaneity, understood as a possibility of synthesis (or totalization) in the face of temporal difference, is essentially a historical problem and in that sense implies a collective human subject as an agent capable of becoming con-temporary, of carrying out the work of synthesis and conquering the time of the present by mastering the heterogeneous temporal impulses that traverse it. In place of human history as the production of contemporaneity, capital, on the contrary, requires only continuity or the assurance of the continuous operation of its circuits across the discontinuities and interruptions which provide the movement of value with its own dynamism (see, in particular, Chapter 4, "The Three Figures of the Circuit", in Marx, Engels [1885] 1997). The formula of the problem proper to the movement of capital can therefore more correctly be stated as that of the continuity of the discontinuous, and can as such be seen as fundamentally different from the

historical problematic of temporal synthesis signaled by the Blochian concept of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous.

That the process of modernization has been completed, that capitalism has entrenched itself as a truly global world-system, could therefore also be expressed by saying that continuity has replaced contemporaneity as the dominant manner in which the problem of temporal difference, the fact that time is not one with itself, registers today. With this, the meaning of temporal difference has itself shifted: the latter can no longer be felt and experienced as non-contemporaneity (an encounter of the present with an irreducible past) and instead assumes the guise of the seemingly more sterile experience of discontinuity.

This shift may also be observed in the changed status of the image. No longer the privileged site for the dialectical articulation of heterogeneous temporalities, as it might have been the case in the twentieth century, the image has become a vehicle for the construction of an order of continuity, in which the previously temporally heterogeneous elements are translated into a set of discontinuities and then made to assume a form of simultaneous coexistence. Consider for instance the following AI-generated image, posted on the official X account of the US Department of Homeland Security, in which the silhouette of a cowboy is placed against a rugged Western background, and a B–2 strategic bomber flies in the sky above it.

The caption ("We'll have our home again", a popular white supremacist slogan) announces the sanctioned reading of the image: a vague but unmistakably white American heritage is somehow under threat, and must be defended with all the power afforded by American technological superiority. It is clear that this is not a montage between elements we are meant to experience as non-contemporaneous. There are no intimations of (temporal) incommensurability, nor does the image suggest some sort of intense contrast between the cowboy and the bomber. The frictionless juxtaposition between the two elements which underpins the propagandistic message of the image is hardly the crystallization of a divided historical time; rather, the image imposes a spatial continuity – the backdrop of the Western landscape as the 'home' the caption refers to – between the discontinuous elements.

If we wish to follow the example of the critical theories of the twentieth-century historical fascism and read such an image, in which the aspect of space predominates over any inscription of temporal contradiction, as an index of a crisis, we must then also observe that the crisis itself thereby no longer appears as strictly speaking historical – as a dialectical crystallization of temporal tensions that traverse the present and await the work of synthesis – but has come to assume a different form. How might one characterize this "non-historical" form of crisis? The French psychoanalyst Gérard Wajcman has recently suggested that we now live in a period in which the very sense of crisis – which, again, has typically been understood as a sudden moment of interruption or reversal that punctuates, and thus separates, two periods of calmness – has become inseparable from the



logic of seriality. So that in place of the sequence "calm–crisis–calm", we seem to find ourselves in the sequence "crisis–crisis–crisis". To put it in our terms, the crisis appears

today in the form of a continuous discontinuity, a critical interruption that perpetuates itself, recurs indefinitely, without interruption:

> This corrupts the very meaning of crisis, which presupposes a breach in the timeline, a critical moment of vacillation, an unbalanced suspension between a former state that has been broken and a future that has not yet come to pass. Today's crisis exists without rupture; it unfolds along a continuous critical ridge. An uninterrupted crisis, in which we ought to see the emergence of a hypercrisis. Finally, I find myself thinking that what we have called hypermodernity is, in truth, the era of perpetuated hypercrisis (Wajcman 2018, 23).

"A Disassembly Workshop": Trumpism, Seriality, and Myth

What Wajcman calls "hypercrisis" is the form of the appearance of crisis in the capitalist system as such: multiple, cyclical, repetitive, and inscribed into the normal functioning of the system itself. Another way of formulating Wajcman's thesis would be to say that in the moment of completed capitalist modernization, crisis and normalcy assume a relationship homologous to that of the two sides of a Moebius strip: the difference between crisis and normalcy is only legible if they are considered parts of the same, continuous movement, just as their unity is only graspable if we are able to see them as two distinct sides of the process. Crisis and normalcy may thus be considered as distinct moments, yet they are also practically indiscernible, and it is this strange articulation which renders the particular modality of serial crisis characteristic of the contemporary capitalist world-system.

This form of the appearance of crisis offers another way to measure the gap that separates the historical time of unfinished modernization and our present time of completed modernization. In the former, the dialectical regime of contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous allows crisis to materialize itself as also dialectical – in Benjamin's terms, a moment of catastrophe that illuminates the historical conditions that brought it into existence (Benjamin [1927-1940] [1982] 1999, 462). Indeed, it is precisely in the moment of crisis that the question of the emergence of the non-contemporaneous – and of its reactionary or emancipatory uses – poses itself: it is the "moment of danger", as Benjamin calls it, in which the past becomes susceptible to political appropriation and weaponization (Benjamin [1955] 1968, 255). In times of unfinished modernization, then, crisis presents itself as *apokalypsis*, bringing with itself the intertwined augurs of catastrophe and revelation.

No such meaningful encounter with crisis obtains in the context of completed modernization. Here, crisis assumes the more mundane traits of a feature of the capitalist system itself – a state of emergency that appears at once temporary and continuous, seemingly indiscernible from the one that preceded it and the one that will surely succeed it. As the Moebius strip of crisis-as-normality and normality-as-crisis, hypercrisis names a situation in which the political and aesthetic problem posed by the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous gives way to the experience of an intermittent but seemingly infinite

bout with trauma, whereby our ability to make sense of dramatic upheavals is hindered by the chaotic and relentless way in which they manifest themselves to us – or, in the Lacanian terms Wajcman uses, the symbolic finds itself unable to weave the traumatic real back into the fabric of collective experience. Crucially, this failure of the symbolic has itself become serialized: no longer a singular disruptive event around which some kind of narrative could still be articulated (as in the case of modernism), but a chain of repeated, multiple breakdowns that hardly registers as an event at all. The cultural form of the series and its seemingly irresistible popularity in recent times, Wajcman argues, are to be read as both the form that best captures this new regime of experience and one of the foremost symptoms of this inability to re-inscribe the trauma of crisis into our apprehension of the world.

While Wajcman writes his theorization with television series in mind, we believe it is possible to extend his arguments beyond any medium specificity and toward a formal theory of media seriality. From our point of view, series names in the most general sense a form that describes with a certain degree of coherence the visible surface of a phenomenon while also making it possible to grasp the absence or the falling apart of form as such. It is precisely in this tension that the most consequential stakes of seriality are played out: the inner limitation of the series (namely, its inability to attain complete coherence) is also what makes it a revealing aesthetic symptom of our times of hypercrisis. Itself a form-in-crisis, seriality also appears as the form of uninterrupted crisis: a sprawling, haphazard attempt at articulating a narrative that would bestow a coherent meaning onto recurrent encounters with trauma and assimilate them into the frame of collective experience but ultimately fails to do so, endlessly flirting as it does with narrative disintegration.

As much a descriptor for uninterrupted crisis as the form of an inability to fully narrativize it, seriality is one of the ways in which the aestheticization of politics appears in conditions of completed modernity. Its defining features of open-endedness and a-hierarchical organization, along with its symptomatic ability to index a novel situation in which crisis has itself become serial, seem particularly useful for shedding some light on the enigma we formulated earlier, namely, the reason why the essence of Trumpism – its deeper political or historical meaning – appears in this particular way. That the spectacle of Trumpism might carry a special relationship to seriality suggests itself as a justifiable hypothesis already due to the fact that the Trump-figure must itself be understood as a serial construction, produced over several decades through tabloid seriality, the televisual seriality of reality TV, and more recently, the seriality of social media and the internet, which in Trump's case function as an extension and intensification of televisual seriality.

It is perhaps not surprising that Wajcman would look primarily at America (through American television series) as the stage where seriality attains its most precise and sophisticated articulation. "The series", he quips, "is a disassembly workshop [*atelier de démontage*] of an America that is already misfit and rather deranged" (Wajcman 2018,

15). The terms Wajcman uses to describe contemporary America ("misfit" and "désaxée" in the original) evoke the situation of a country off-kilter, unable to find a steady alignment, a stable horizon that would provide some orientation for coherent political action. This discombobulation is a result of a slew of transformations in the global order that have taken place in the last thirty years or so: globalization, the rise of China and an increasingly multipolar international order, the war on terror and its failures, mass migration, financial crises and market instability, increasing inequality and social disintegration, ecological disaster, etc. It is clear enough that this is no longer mid-twentieth-century America relying on classical Hollywood and its genre system to establish the mythical narrative of a country "in the process of building itself" (Wajcman 2018, 15). In many ways, the "disassembly workshop" of the series fulfills the very opposite task: as an attempt to narrativize the thirty-year long crisis of the Pax Americana, it returns to us the deconstructed image of an America in crisis, fractured and erratic, in which traumas no longer register as traumas and crisis does not carry any promise of greater historical understanding. Seriality, then, responds to this new form of crisis by adapting its narrative logic to it, while at the same time ratifying the inadequacy of more classical forms of narrativization to capture the present moment.

With Trumpian seriality, however, it is not a simple case of one form of narrative superseding another, obsolete one. In a remarkable twist, Trumpian serialized imagery attempts to salvage and re-incorporate classical forms of narrativization. In Trumpism, in other words, the disassembly workshop of the series doesn't just deal in spare parts: against its avowed capabilities, it is also tasked with a tentative project of retrofitting. While a vast swath of Trumpian AI-slop fulfills the all-consuming task of trolling whoever dares to oppose the regime, there is another strand of content that functions according to a different, more ambitious mythologizing logic. It is rather obvious, at least in intent, that some part of the Trumpian content-generation frenzy confusedly aims for a revival of a certain American mythology. In pictures and videos mostly posted by the Department of Homeland Security's official X account, frontier lore and Civil War imagery intersect with pop-culture icons of various "golden ages": the Fifties, the Eighties, the Nineties (the exclusion of antagonistic moments in which historicity reappears – the Thirties, the Forties, the Sixties and, the Seventies – is as conspicuous as its motivations are transparent). Wajcman, however, is categorical: due to its fragmented and dispersed form, the series is entirely hostile to myth (Wajcman 2018, 15). The disassembly workshop of the series can process the undoing of an America *désaxée*, but cannot be effectively enlisted in the myth-building effort of a faltering empire. This is one of the contradictions at the heart of Trumpian imagery: the deployment of the series-form to carry out a task – rebuild a mythology – that it is structurally incapable of performing.

A closer look at Trumpian imagery, particularly the serial flux of frontier-themed art, reveals the inner incongruence of the notion of serialized myth-building. In this situation of general visual equivalence based in the continuity imposed on the discontinuous, there is

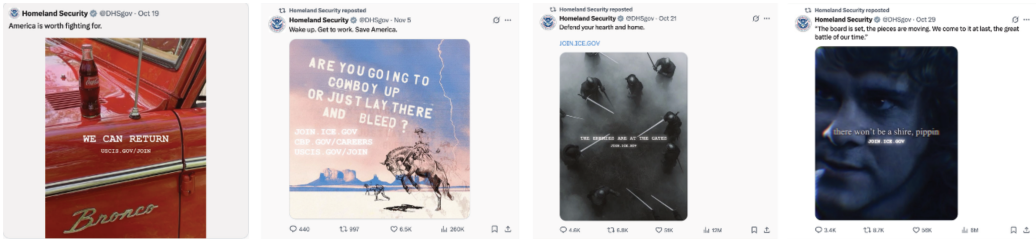




no meaningful difference between, say, the John Gast painting *American Progress* (1872) and the AI-generated picture of alligators with ICE hats lined up outside a penitentiary.

The inclusion of the painting into the series makes it aesthetically, if not factually, as much AI-slop as the alligator picture. It must be said that this 'slopification' of painting also reveals, conversely, the extent to which some paintings already display features that we would associate with AI aesthetics: a certain glossy smoothness, an obtuse, propagandistic obviousness, and so forth. The mythologizing intention of the Gast painting, however crude, would seem to set it apart from the puerile celebration of Alligator Alcatraz (the infamous South Florida immigration detention facility), but is in fact neutralized under conditions of seriality, as is that of the myriad frontier-themed images that populate the Trumpian iconosphere, where inaccurate citations from *Tombstone* ("Are you gonna cowboy up or just stay there and bleed?") line up alongside bottles of Coca-Cola and a Ford Bronco, AI renditions of medieval knights ("The enemies are at the gates"), and freeze frames from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy ("There won't be a shire, Pippin").

The general impression one receives from this serial onslaught of images is certainly not that of the genuine mythology of a new founding, the pioneering of a new iteration of America. What is offered is, far more modestly, the tatters of a narrative of restoration: the white supremacist fantasy of returning America to its glorious past by violently reasserting and patrolling an impassable dividing line between those who are included in the national community and those who are not. A useful framework for better understanding this form of nostalgic longing is the historical distinction Wajcman makes between a



world governed by a now-faded logic of limits, where borders are enforced and the enemy can always be identified as external; and a logic of the decay of limits that characterizes contemporary societies in a globalized world, porous societies that struggle to draw a proper distinction between interior and exterior and therefore exist in a state of constant panic aroused by the well-worn phantom of the 'enemy within.' In such societies we reach a paradoxical state of proliferation of borders whose effects have become tragically apparent in the recent occupation of a number of American cities (most notably Washington, DC and the Twin Cities) by federal immigration agents dispatched by the Department of Homeland Security: "to defend society against its enemies is to defend it against its own members… to defend society means to defend it against itself" (Wajcman 2018, 32).

One aspect that perhaps Wajcman does not emphasize enough is the phantasmatic quality of the former, limit-asserting logic. His thesis, in other words, should not simply be read as an account of two distinct phases in history succeeding one another. Rather, it is the case that the historical situation of globalization and its logic of limitlessness has given rise to a countervailing desire for clearer lines of demarcation between inside and outside, which in turn takes the form of a call for the restoration of a state of affairs that, in some sense, never existed in the first place – a time of sealed borders that is imagined as precedent but is in fact conceptually consequent. Indeed, the idea of an impassable border in modern times has never been more than a reassuring fiction, and no one has handled this fantasy more deftly – or has profited more extensively off of it – than Trumpism. Of course, the serial recurrence of the figure of the border in Trumpian imagery is, in some ways, the sign of a failure of that fantasy: as we have seen, the serialized narrativization of the current situation of hypercrisis can only occur in the move away from classical, mythical narrative forms, and no deployment, however obsessive, of a rag-tag border-themed iconography with its corollaries of spectacularization and cruelty can constitute an exception to this incompatibility of series and myth: there is no genuinely mythical narrative of a reconquest of the homeland to be had here. This is not, however, simply a failure of fantasy; we are dealing here also and at the same time with a fantasy of failure. The border must never be completely secure, lest its political value wane. It must remain porous,

so as to act as a catalyst for anxieties and reactionary sentiments: a fantasy of endless alertness justifying the Sisyphean work of fending off a siege.

There is, however, a certain ambivalence in the visual form that this fantasy assumes. By and large, the most copious reservoir of material for the border-series in Trumpian propaganda is frontier-related. At some level, this should come as no surprise. The frontier is, after all, the great founding narrative of America, and any attempt at mythbuilding in myth-averse conditions of seriality is bound to look for inspiration there. Secondly, the frontier and the border both qualify on the face of it as lines of separation, albeit of a radically different kind. While the frontier can also function nominally and ideologically as a border in American mythology (between, say, the 'garden' of white civilization and the 'wilderness' of Native American territories), its defining trait is that it advances, and with that westward advancement comes a promise of abundance and prosperity for the citizens of a newborn nation (and genocide and deracination for everyone else). There is a clear-cut vitalism associated with the frontier: if it is a line of demarcation, it is one whose worth and appeal reside in its impermanence and dynamism, as it is pushed further toward the Pacific against external foes by the providential design that the aforementioned Gast painting so clumsily captures. The border, particularly in its contemporary proliferating iteration, responds to rather different criteria, as the ICE alligators AI-slop adumbrates: a frozen, defensive posture guarding an immobile line – a wall – designed to interrupt movement altogether and reaffirm an irrevocable separation between the inside and the outside.

The shift from the frontier to the border as the dominant ideological figure through which America represents itself to itself tracks along the historico-political transformations of the country through the twentieth century and, more specifically, indexes the changing role that promises of abundance and fears of scarcity play in policy-making. It is perhaps useful to remember that the myth of the frontier encountered its first moment of exhaustion with the New Deal. Reckoning with the historical closing of the frontier forty years earlier and the end of the promise of endless expansion, the so-called Left Turnerists in the Roosevelt administration called for strong federal intervention and redistribution of wealth as the solutions for a new reality of finite resources. With FDR, the frontier was seen "less as mythology and more as pathology, a social disorder manifested in an insistence on national uniqueness", as Greg Grandin puts it (Grandin 2019, 176). The nominally universalist project of the New Deal, based on government support and oversight, remained active after the Second World War, but changed its complexion in the context of the boom of postwar productivity. During the rise of the liberal world order based on a vision of endless growth, the economic upswing offered the promise of a new abundance, and with the expansion of foreign capitalist markets, the myth of the frontier was once again open for business. But the New Deal idea of scarcity hardly disappeared from the political debate. A new racist worldview began to grow in the belly of the new liberalism. Assuming a complete rejection of New Deal universalism, the proponents of the so-called



'race realism' called for resources to be hoarded and protected from immigrants. The new defining figure of this worldview was no longer the frontier, but the border. As Grandin has argued, this shift eventually came to define one of the crucial aspects of Trumpism:

> It was the focus on the border and all that went with it – labeling Mexicans rapists, calling migrants snakes and animals, stirring up anger at undocumented residents, proposing to end birthright citizenship, and unleashing ICE agents to raid deep into the country, to stalk

> schools and hospitals, to split families and spread grief – that provided Trumpism its most compelling through-line message: The world's horizon is not limitless; not all can share in its wealth; and the nation's policies should reflect that reality (Grandin 2019, 8).

It is no wonder, then, that the deployment of frontier imagery to build a mythology around this vision would reveal a certain internal incoherence. The vitalism inscribed into the westward expansion and the promise of bountiful life it carried can hardly harmonize with the reactive and defensive ambition to hoard resources beyond guarded walls. This is evident also in some of the choices DHS makes in their perusal of frontier-themed art. Consider for instance this painting by Morgan Weistling where the horizon (and the expansionist promise it carries) all but disappears in favor of a celebration of the nuclear family of settlers inside the confined space of a wagon.

To use a Lacanian term, the mythology of the frontier and the fantasy of the border configure two opposite relationships to enjoyment: a future-oriented vision of prosperity contingent upon territorial enlargement, on one hand; and on the other, a violent reaction to scarcity aimed at recouping resources we feel entitled to from those who are unjustly enjoying their benefits. The sleight of hand of this resentful fantasy is that of implicitly casting the rancorous one as a victim in need of reparation from these thieves of enjoyment. It is not surprising that this aspect would remain somewhat hidden in favor of more triumphant themes (in right-wing dogma victimhood equals weakness), but it is clear that the animating spirit of this imagery is that of righting a perceived injustice.

The figure of the border and its attendant fantasy of resentment are both, in some way, underpinned by a general idea of limitation that we could summarily formulate as follows: the finitude of resources requires a partitioning of space enforced by state violence so as to secure the exploitation of said resources for the exclusive benefit of a particular racialized group of people. One of the basic exhortations of Trumpism, especially in the face of the most outlandish exploits of the administration, is that we must "be realistic": we must fortify America's existing limits (which, in Trumpism, take on an increasingly hemispheric scope) as well as force our competitors to accept the same conception of the limit. This zero-sum statecraft exercise which elevates the 'limit' to the level of both cause and effect of a changing post-globalized world finds a perhaps marginal but no less arresting moment of contradiction in the Trumpian visual field, whose conditions of existence we have tried to chart in this essay. "Limitlessness", writes Wajcman, "is at the heart of the series" (Wajcman 2018, 30). This sprawling, fragmented form is intrinsically indefinite, based as it is in the infinite recurrence of the elements that constitute it. The series, in other words, knows no limits. The serial form of appearance of the border in the Trumpian imagery thus contradicts the stated political content of the border-figure itself. What we are contending with is the paradox of a fantasy of a sovereign, world-building practice of limit affirmation (the proliferation of borders) that expresses itself through limitlessness, that is, through the infinite recurrence of a form that abhors limitation absolutely.

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Abstract

Arsenjuk and Resmini's contribution examines Trumpian imagery as the visual form of a politically disarticulated reactionary coalition. It argues that Trumpism achieves unity through spectacle: a proliferating and serial image regime that compensates for the loss of political articulation. Drawing on Benjamin, Jesi, Jameson, and Wajcman, the essay shows how contemporary Trumpian visual culture, especially in its AI-generated forms, is structured by seriality, discontinuity, and hypercrisis rather than by the dialectical temporality of historical fascism. Trumpian imagery thus appears as an unstable attempt to produce myth under conditions that render myth impossible. The article proposes seriality as a key category for understanding the historical specificity of Trumpist spectacle.

keywords | Donald Trump; Walter Benjamin; Trumpism; Furio Jesi; Hypercrisis.

The Masculine Aesthetics of Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro

Analysing Far Right Virilities in Digital Spaces

Erica Capecchi

Introduction

This article analyses the masculine aesthetics of Italian and Brazilian Far Right leaders Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro, exploring the performative dimension of their virile self-representation online. It advances a multimodal aesthetic analysis that centres visual and iconographic investigations of digital contents, supported by critical discourse, social semiotic, and historiographic methods. Far from providing an exhaustive account of how male identity is shaped in the online representation and discourse of the two leaders, the analysis draws on selected examples from Salvini and Bolsonaro's social media profiles and online news reports related to specific events and debates. This paper dissects some of the essential aspects informing the construction of a masculine aesthetics that cements the public perception of the two leaders around imaginaries of male dominance and patriarchal hegemony. It contributes to advance critical understanding of the ways the public image of Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro has been shaped through aesthetic strategies that, capitalising on the possibilities provided by the digital medium, consolidate their representation as strongmen in the public imaginary.

Despite the attention that the global rise of Far Right movements between the 2010s and 2020s has gauged among scholars, there is still a dearth of research engaged with the aesthetic dimension of far-right representation and discourse online. Consistent progress has been made in unravelling several aspects at the heart of Far Right politics including economic, religious, and cultural processes. Nevertheless, as Craig (2022) notes, less critical attention has been paid to how political consciousness and partisanship are shaped through aesthetic forms that imbue those politics with meaning and potentiality. Furthermore, current research seems to miss the potential of developing interdisciplinary approaches to examine the interplay of visual, textual, and discursive elements for the manufacturing of online narratives capable to legitimise far-right politics and ideologies in public debates.

In this context, few studies explored the parallels emerging from the multifaceted self-representation of far-right leaders online. Even less research has investigated the connections between personalities such as Salvini and Bolsonaro (Demuru and Sedda 2020; Adinolfi and Goulart da Silva 2024). Recent scholarship focused especially on the

figure of US President-elect Donald Trump (Kellner 2017; Nai et al. 2019; James 2021; Di Silvestro 2023; Bourne 2025), framing him as the main reference for comparisons around public identity, personality, and representation of far-right leader, while overlooking other possibilities. This is testified, for example, by the appellative given to Bolsonaro as the 'Trump of the Tropics', a definition that can be limiting because it relegates Bolsonaro in a position of subordination to Trump, stripping him of agency and specificity.

Investigating the virile performances that inform Salvini and Bolsonaro's online self-representation, this article suggests the existence of parallels and connections in the construction of their public persona, which boasts a masculine aesthetics that blends models of strong and authoritative leadership with imaginaries of ordinariness and imperfection. As Mazzoni and Mincigrucci (2023) observe, these leaders managed to overcome what Kane and Patapan (2012) defined as the "paradox of the democratic leader" by exploiting logics of celebrity politics and influencer culture to develop self-branding strategies online that foster their appreciation and popularity among the citizenship. Merging the characteristics of super and everyday celebrity politicians identified by Wood, Corbett, and Flinders (2016), both Salvini and Bolsonaro show a type of double-faced masculinity that is at the same time tough, exceptional, and unique, as well as human, fragile, and overall 'normal'.

This attitude is generally inscribed in the realm of a 'populist' politics and ideology that, in the past years, a broad range of research (Swank, Betz 2003; Alvares, Dahlgren 2016; Engesser *et al.* 2017; Wodak *et al.* 2013; Wodak 2019; Rodrik 2021) has juxtaposed especially with far-right movements due to the negative characteristics assigned to this concept, frequently associated with authoritarian tendencies, anti-elitism, and exclusionary ideas sustained by irrationality, and oversimplification. Drawing on Laclau's (2018) perspective, my analysis diverges from these interpretations by framing populism as an articulatory practice with its own logic and rationality. Populism is therefore considered here as a political discourse (Mudde 2004) and performative act (Cover 2020) capable to interpret complex social realities and shape political consciousness and identities around the pastoral figure of the leader, who oversees the unity of the group that they embody and represent. In this context, the group is defined by 'the people' understood as a qualitative concept. As Umberto Eco reminds in his analysis of Ur-Fascism (1995), in Far Right discourse, 'the people' is conceived as a homogeneous and monolithic entity enmeshed with the image of the authoritative leader. Building on this concept of populism, the argument highlights how the virile performances enacted by Salvini and Bolsonaro online foster the construction of a shared identity and sense of belonging to the same community group by boasting feelings of ethno-nationalistic unity through camaraderie, brotherhood, and male dominance.

Considering the specificities of the Italian and Brazilian socio-cultural landscape after the electoral victories of Salvini and Bolsonaro in 2018, this article unpacks the specific

strategies employed by the two leaders to shape public perceptions around their masculine body and role as political leads, outlining shared patterns and key differences. The investigation considers three main themes: the link with football popular culture, the rehabilitation of the memory of both countries' authoritarian pasts through praise of the military, and the fetishisation of phallic dominance and violence through the public exhibition of weaponry. The imaginaries awakened by these themes converge in the 'captain' character impersonated by both leaders, which is crucial for the enactment of their virile performances and the construction of their public identity.

The People's Captains

One of the main parallels that stands out from the construction of the public image and identity of both Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro is the aesthetics of the invincible leader exemplified by the Captain figure (*Capitão* in Portuguese and *Capitano* in Italian). Although the origins of this character and the iconography associated with it presents contextual differences, its meaning and goal in terms of manufacturing a specific masculine aesthetics imbued with *machismo* ("Machismo is characterised by a 'warrior ideology' that influences the socialisation and enculturation of males and sustains the organisation of humankind in gender hierarchies of superior male and inferior female social categories" Mosher 1991, 199) present cross-overs that align to a political and ideological agenda shared within a global Far Right network.



1 | Jair Bolsonaro wearing the Brazilian national football team shirt while giving a speech from a stage set in the Avenida Paulista, São Paulo, 19 February 2025. Instagram.

In the case of Bolsonaro, the appellative *Capitão* draws direct connections with the military past of the leader (Adinolfi, Goulart da Silva 2024; Turner 2024; Piazza, Landy 2024) referring to his career in the Brazilian Paratrooper Forces. It is not difficult to imagine why this appellative has been chosen to define the leader's public representation. By referring to a military vocabulary, the imaginary of the Captain contributed to build a stronger sense of male leadership around Bolsonaro, one rooted in the manufacturing of a sense of masculine identity imbued with socio-cultural constructs of strength and dominance as 'natural' traits of masculinity. Furthermore, framed within a military perspective, the captain figure awakens an idea of camaraderie and brotherhood that foster feelings of belonging to the same community group enhanced by the male bond established between the leader and his supporters.



2 | Jair Bolsonaro with his son Flávio, both wearing shirts that feature the yellow and green colours of the Brazilian flag. Instagram.



3 | Matteo Salvini wearing a Milan AC shirt gives the good morning to his 'Friends' with a cup of espresso, 1 August 2020. X.



4 | Matteo Salvini showing a takeaway pizza with a football game streaming in the background, 13 December 2020. Facebook.

A similar aesthetics can be found in the role of *Capitano* attributed to Matteo Salvini. In the case of Salvini, however, the use of this appellative refers more to a maritime vocabulary and imaginary that draws on the anti-immigration and exclusionary ideologies promoted by the leader. Salvini has indeed shaped most of his electoral campaigning and political activity around a "closed-port policy" (Aru 2023) to prevent the arrival of Black-African immigrants in Italy countries fleeing wars, poverty, and dreadful living conditions through the Mediterranean Sea route. Slogans such as "chiudiamo i porti" ("close the ports") and "a casa" ("go home") have been among Salvini's most successful lines during the campaign for the 2018 Italian general elections, when he promised naval blockades and the use of force to stop, arrest, and deport immigrants deemed 'illegal' back to Africa.

Before delving into the analysis of the military and maritime imaginaries evoked by this appellative, however, it is important to note another central aspect of the Captain aesthetics that draws on national-popular culture. The use of the term carries in both Salvini and Bolsonaro's examples a strong populist appeal in manufacturing perceptions of the leaders as popular idols and, at the same time, ordinary men, fostering their representation as embodiment of the voice of the people. This aesthetics has been extremely useful in depicting the two leaders as outsiders positioned against the establishment, a message conveyed through the adoption of informal and transgressive attitudes including the use of anti-elitist language and the exhibition of their bodies in anti-conformist outfits, settings, and postures (Demuru, Sedda 2020).

One of the central elements capable to blend the aesthetics of the popular icon and ordinary man draws on references to football culture, which remains as a highly male-dominated environment, affected by stark gender inequalities in Europe and worldwide (Culvin, Bowes 2023; Yiapanas 2025). Therefore, the role of the captain in football contexts is still anchored to an idea of masculine leadership, one capable of cheering up and mobilise the support of male audiences. The conflation of this aesthetics with the figure of the political leader creates a powerful imaginary wherein the role of the captain in representing the team is extended by association to the leader as representative of the people as one, united, entity.

Both Bolsonaro and Salvini have been particularly able to exploit the aesthetics of football captain for their electoral and self-representation goals. Their social media profiles frequently feature the leaders showing off shirts of either their favourite football clubs or their countries' national teams. In the case of Bolsonaro, the appropriation of the national Brazilian football shirt has become a signature of his propaganda, transforming it into a symbol of nationalistic pride juxtaposed with 'Bolsonarismo'. Figures 1 and 2 show two examples, among the many available on his social media profiles, of the use of this symbolism by Bolsonaro. Figure 1 portrays the leader during a public rally organised in São Paulo to gather support for his cause to obtain the amnesty in relation to the events of the attempted coup of 8 January 2023, for which he was later investigated and condemned to 27 years of detention. The sentence was enforced by the Supremo Tribunal Federal, after an investigation that ended in September 2025 found Bolsonaro guilty of orchestrating the coup plot aimed at keeping him in power despite the victory of his left-wing opponent Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva at the 2022 general elections (Armstrong 2025).



5 | Jair Bolsonaro at the stadium wearing the shirt of the football team Flamengo from Rio de Janeiro, 19 October 2022. Instagram.

The photo portrays the leader showing a tense facial expression while holding a microphone and delivering a public speech from a stage set up in the Avenida Paulista, one of the most popular locations used for his rallies in the heart of São Paulo. Bolsonaro is wearing a traditional yellow and green shirt of the Brazilian football team with the official logo of the Confederação Brasileira de Futebol (CBF) on the chest. On the left side of the photo, cameras and microphones are recording the speech, a visual element that contributes to amplifying the authority and the importance attributed to the moment. The focus on Bolsonaro and the cameras on the side standing out from a blurred background enhances the leader's perception as a team captain, or even a coach, captured while delivering a motivational speech to his teammates, personified by supporters. Further reinforcing this imaginary, this setting awakens also visual memories of post-game interviews and press conferences delivered either by the team captain or coach as representatives of the team.

The Brazilian national shirt shows up also in Figure 2, which features a selfie of Jair Bolsonaro with his older son Flávio. The setting here has completely changed compared to that of Figure 1 and conveys a different message to the leader's audience. Standing in an informal environment, likely a bar or a club given the bottles visible in the background and the decorations hanging from the wooden wall, the leader and his son show a relaxed and smiling expression to the camera, suggesting an intimate moment. This is further confirmed by Bolsonaro's caption comment wishing happy birthday to his son. While Bol-

sonaro is showing off the national Brazilian shirt, recognisable for its traditional colours and the CBF symbol on the chest, Flávio does not seem to wear a football jersey like his father.

Nevertheless, the shirt worn by Flávio matches that of his father in evoking nationalistic feelings through sport-related references, as suggested by the yellow and green colours and details such as what seems to be a participant number at the top left of his chest, and the logo of the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympics on the top right.

The visual resonance created by the Brazilian national colours worn by the two serve multiple goals. The most direct consists of amplifying the nationalism boasted by Bolsonaro as a sense of belonging to one community of like-minded people gathered around the figure of the leader-captain. Nevertheless, the matching shirts contribute to enhance another powerful element which is the father-son bond. The relationship between Bolsonaro and his son Flávio performed here also works, in fact, to foster a sense of masculine brotherhood and camaraderie through parental bonding. The apparent spontaneity staged by this selfie gives the idea of a tender father-son moment that Bolsonaro decided to share with his audience. Virtually extending the emotional bond performed by the two, this strategy creates an illusion of exclusivity among Bolsonaro's supporters for becoming part of his family by being allowed to actively participate in Flávio's birthday celebrations.

A similar use of football iconography to foster male leadership based on a sense of shared sense of brotherhood and father-son bonding also emerges in Salvini's online self-representation. Football seems to be the main sports reference used by both Bolsonaro and Salvini for the construction of their masculine aesthetics, likely because in Brazil as much as in Italy, this sport is deeply connected with both countries' popular culture and representative of male identity and bonding. References to football emerge frequently on Salvini's social media profiles, with a particular focus on his favourite team, the Milan AC (Milan Football Association). Compared to Bolsonaro indeed, who appropriated the Brazilian national team shirt as a symbol of his nationalistic politics and ideology, Salvini uses football references more to convey a type of masculinity that fosters the image of man of the people and create the illusion of the leader being alike his followers: an ordinary man who enjoys going to the stadium, commenting on his favourite team's performance online, and share this passion with his son. Therefore, while still drawing connections with the captain figure, mentions to football in Salvini's case present a softer type of masculinity that prioritizes his portrayal as a leader close to the people. Figures 3 and 4 provide insightful examples of this representations.

Figure 3 shows a selfie shared by Salvini on his X account on 1 August 2020, in which he is portrayed while smiling at the camera and holding a cup of espresso in a setting that looks like a patio of a café. In this photo he is wearing a Milan AC shirt and his look, featuring messy hair and swollen eyes, suggests that he recently woke up. This photo re-

produces a series of stereotypical imageries of Italian popular culture in which Salvini's followers can easily identify. First, the cup of coffee in the foreground indicates that the leader shares the habit of enjoying espresso for breakfast like many Italians. This is further confirmed by the time of the tweet, 8:47 am. Furthermore, details such as the setting of the café paired with the date of the post, Saturday 1 August 2020, refers to the habit of having breakfast out, which is an activity shared among many Italians, especially on weekends and vacations. It is worth reminding here that August is indeed the month in which most Italians, especially working and middle-class, go on leave.

These elements add another layer to the aesthetics of the ordinary man impersonated by Salvini, which is further enhanced here by the selfie's location, Milano Marittima, as specified by the comment caption. Milano Marittima is indeed a popular summer holiday destination on the shores of the region of Emilia Romagna facing the Adriatic Sea. Especially in August, the town becomes crowded with young vacationers and families, Italian and foreigners, too. By showing himself in a very informal look and situation, Salvini strengthens an idea of intimacy with his supporters who, as seen in the case of Bolsonaro in Figure 2, might feel like they are allowed to peak and participate in the private life of the leader. Furthermore, given the appeal that football holds primarily among Italy's male population, by wearing the Milan AC shirt Salvini is addressing especially his male audience, potentially attracting the attention of other Milan supporters and opponents, too.

The comment caption of the post shows the ways text and semantics are used to consolidate the type of aesthetics analysed above in the audience's imaginary: "Happy Saturday, friends. Can I offer you a coffee? ☀️☕ P.S. I'll see you this evening in Milano Marittima if you're around".

By addressing his followers as "Friends" (*amici*), the leader reinforces the sense of bonding and belonging to the same community group emphasised by the visual. It is not by chance that the word "Friends" is capitalised according to a strategy to heighten and validate the importance of the community gathered around the leader, to which he is wishing a good Saturday and virtually offering a coffee. As seen with Bolsonaro, Salvini capitalizes on the participatory and performative culture promoted by social media platforms along with logics of celebrity-politics and online influencer communication. The virtual gesture of the leader offering a coffee to his supporters is visually conveyed and materialized through the act of raising the cup to his public and further reiterated through the cup of coffee emoji paired to the sun emoji (which implies a good day ahead) in his comment.

The aesthetics of the ordinary football-passionate man embodied by Salvini returns in his online communication boasting idealised imaginaries of fatherhood, as also seen in Bolsonaro's case. Figure 4 provides a meaningful example of this added element. The selfie embedded in this Facebook post shows the leader in an ordinary domestic context, likely the living room of his house (or flat, it is not due to know). Three main elements stand out from this visual composition: the pizza in a carton box, the toys scattered in the liv-

ing room, and the TV streaming a football game in the background. As seen for the selfie of Figure 3, here Salvini plays around stereotypical imaginary of Italian popular culture by showing a take-away pizza which evokes a humble and spontaneous dinner plan. It is not clear if in this photo he is wearing official merchandise of his favourite football club, the logo partially visible on the top right of Salvini's chest seems to read "Lube", which suggests that the jumper might refer to the homonymous professional male volleyball club based in the city of Trento. The red and black colours of his jumper, however, match those of Milan AC which is enough to contextualise his portrait in a football scenery. Furthermore, the detail of the Italian tricolour patch on the top right of his chest reinforces the sense of Italian-ness that this scene aims to awaken in nationalistic and community-building terms. The connection to football is also reiterated by the red and black striped pillow visible in the background, to the left.

Notably, the angle of the selfie creates a perspective according to which the edge of the pillow aligns with both the inclination of Salvini's head and the edges of the pizza carton to draw an imaginary trajectory that leads to the TV screen. The TV streaming the football game is therefore the focal point of this visual, which refers to an exclusive father-son night about to take place. This is confirmed by the post's comment caption where Salvini is cheerfully saying that he is going to have pizza and watch Milan's game with his son. The aesthetics of male bonding through fatherhood fostered by Salvini enhances his masculine performance, adding a strong emotional dimension to it. The father-son relationship staged by this scene is further emphasised by the presence of perceived girl-like toys in the background, and especially the pink house to the left, which serves to remind the public of Salvini's young daughter. At the same time, this setting also serves to tone down the male-dominated atmosphere of the scene by portraying the leader as loving father of (also) a young girl.

The emphasis on fatherhood is crucial for the construction of Salvini's masculine aesthetics as it provides an alternative image of the leader, one that is modern and apparently distant from those patriarchal schemes that he is used to promote in his propaganda, especially around heteronormative family rhetoric and gender norms. This is especially true given that he had his children from two different partners, both whom he separated. Therefore, through contents like these he conveys the image of a modern and caring single father which has a dual impact. First, the imaginary of the single father aims to awake a subtle sense of male victimhood capable to resonate with wider segments of both the Italian male and female electorate. Male supporters sharing similar life and romantic experiences might identify in the scenery created by Salvini while, on the other hand, portions of the female audience might be able to empathize with the leader from a perspective shaped by a conservative mentality that still frames women as primary caregivers. These two perspectives converge by shaping a perception according to which, by stepping in the role of primary caregiver, socially and culturally built around the maternal figure, Salvini (and by association all men who identify in this situation) is seen as making

a great effort by doing something interpretable as special or unusual for a man in a patriarchal society. In this sense, the leader manages to intercept and interpret the feelings shared by a part of the male population that might struggle to retain a sense of dominance due to the advancement of gender equality norms that liberate women, or at least partially, from the expectations dictated by 'traditional' social and cultural infrastructures.

Salvini uses frequently the imaginary of ordinary man and single father in his aestheticized propaganda online. Conversely to Bolsonaro, who rarely shows or talks about his young daughter in his communication, Salvini has frequently exploited the image of his young girl more than that of his son, to encourage emotional responses from his followers (and he has been often criticized in the Italian debate for the opportunistic use of his daughter's image on social media). Nevertheless, for both leaders, references to football remain evocative of an exclusive masculine realm. While Bolsonaro has especially exploited and appropriated the symbolism of the national Brazilian team to boost his nationalistic ideology and self-representation as popular idol, Salvini uses football references more to manufacture the image of the leader who is also an ordinary man. However, even in Bolsonaro's case is possible to encounter photos of the leader wearing the shirts of his favourite team(s) in a variety of occasions. Therefore, in this sense, both leaders share the imaginary of the 'man of the people' while at the same time locating themselves above the people by acting as their representatives in the role of 'captains'. The captain aesthetics, however, is not confined to the football context but has multiple levels of representation and interpretation. The next section explores the way masculine aesthetics and performances of the people's captains are imbued with references to military culture and memory of both countries' authoritarian pasts.

Military Aesthetics and Dictatorship Nostalgia

Beyond football, the Captain character impersonated by both Salvini and Bolsonaro works to build an imaginary of male leadership and camaraderie which draws consistently on idealisations of military culture and militarization of society. In the case of Salvini and the Italian context, the imaginary of the Captain figure in military terms draws on hierarchical aesthetic codes embedded in the visual memory of the Duce Benito Mussolini and the Fascist regime (1922-1943). The appellative Duce, which comes from the Latin ducere (to conduct), can be seen as a powerful tool used by the regime's propaganda machine to foster both a sense of fear and fascination around the virile and authoritarian dominance exerted by Mussolini's figure on the Italian people (see, for example, Falasca-Zamponi 1997; Gundle *et al.* 2015; Sontag 1975). It contributed to reframe his role and public image as a dictator within a more appealing imagery, drawing on aesthetics and myths of the Roman Empire appropriated by the regime's propaganda (see on this Gentile 1990; Mosse 1996; Nelis 2007, Nelis 2013).

The parallel with Fascist aesthetics and Mussolini's myth emerged in various occasions in the public representation of Matteo Salvini since the period of his rise in popularity,

from 2018 onwards. The examples of figures 5 and 6 show how the Captain imaginary constructed around Salvini has deliberately played with memories of Mussolini's aesthetics and portraits. Figure 5 is particularly interesting inasmuch it blends Salvini's Captain aesthetics and rhetoric with Mussolini's traditional iconography. This portrait was shared on the Facebook and Twitter channels of the leader during the campaigning period for Italy's 2018 general elections round. At that time, Salvini was aggressively pushing his anti-immigrant propaganda in the public debate using the slogan "close the ports" ("chiudiamo i porti"), which reads as a hashtag at the bottom of the photo in Figure 6.



6 | Matteo Salvini in a propaganda image promoting "closed-ports" policy. Facebook.

Differently from the football references analysed earlier, here Salvini's masculine aesthetics is performed through a sense of austerity which is expressed through the tight pose and severe facial expression of Salvini staring at his viewers. References to Mussolini and Fascist aesthetics emerge in various elements of the visual composition. Among this, the intense colour black of the background and Salvini's blouse. In Italy, the use of black clothing in political contexts can be sensitive insofar as it may evoke Fascism and especially memories of *camicie nere*, the squads of violent fascist thugs that the regime was sending to patrol the street, intimidate citizens, as well as beat, torture, and kill political opponents. For this reason, in Italy it is very uncommon to see bold uses of this colour in mainstream propaganda, except for deliberately neo-fascist groups. Therefore, the stylistic choice made in this portrait cannot be interpreted as casual and suggests the intention to draw a clear reference to Fascist memory. Furthermore, the tight pose of Salvini with crossed arms traces another direct connection with representations of the *Duce*.

Similarly to the use of the black background and clothing, the crossed arms pose is rare to encounter in Italian electoral posters due to the visual parallels with Mussolini's portraits. As Cheles (2023) reminds, since the post-war period Italian politicians have usually avoided to be represented in such a posture due to risks of awakening imaginaries connected to the regime's aesthetics. This taboo, however, was already crossed by those mainstream politicians who, before Salvini, have strategically adopted this imagery in an effort to rehabilitate both the image of Mussolini and the regime's ideological and cultural legacy (Cheles 2023).

In his online communication, Salvini made more allusions to Fascism, and especially to Mussolini, by exploiting other visual memories of the Fascist era imprinted in Italians' collective imaginary. Figure 7 brings another example of this tendency. It consists of a collage shared by Salvini on his X account in 2019, after a rally held in the town of Forlì, in the Emilia Romagna region. The image at the top is particularly important because it shows the leader in a peculiar situation, greeting a crowd of supporters from the balcony of the town hall building, Palazzo Saffi. The choice of this setting is significant because it is the same balcony from which Mussolini gave his first speeches as leader of the Partito Nazionale Fascista, before the establishment of the regime in 1922. In general, the balcony has a powerful symbolic meaning tied to male dominance as has historically served to establish and reinforce power hierarchies by affirming the role of the leader in positions of moral, social, and spiritual superiority.



7 | Footage of Matteo Salvini greeting his supporters from the balcony of Palazzo Saffi in the town of Forlì, 4 May 2019. X.

When planning the setting of this public appearance, Salvini and his entourage were certainly aware of the historical, symbolic, and aesthetic parallel that this image would have awakened. This is confirmed by Salvini himself, who in his comment caption makes irony around this aspect by mentioning Laura Boldrini and implying that she will get mad after knowing that he gave a rally from this specific location. At the time of this post Boldrini was a prominent politician of the Partito Democratico and president of the Deputies House. On many occasions, Boldrini positioned as an antifascist, publicly denouncing Salvini's Far Right politics and ideologies. For this reason, she became a target of Salvini's online misogynistic comments and shaming campaigns.



8 | Jair Bolsonaro from the stage of a rally during the Marcha para Jesus in Balnéario Camburiú, in the state of Santa Catarina, 25 June 2022. Instagram.

Through the use of this iconic setting, the photo at the top traces another clear and intentional connection with the Duce's iconography by mimicking the perspective through which Mussolini was used to be photographed and filmed, using a side angle capable to capture both him and the crowd below. The memory of fascist rallies is further reiterated by the bottom image, which reproduces the perception of what the regime's propaganda used to address as *folle oceaniche* (literally translatable as 'ocean-like crowds') to

enhance the idea of people's enthusiastic participation. The clear reference to the *folle oceaniche* in Salvini's post strengthens the parallel with Fascist imaginary and enhances perceptions around the leader's popular authority and leadership by equating it to Mussolini's.



9 | Photomontage of Jair Bolsonaro with US actor Tom Cruise during a *motociata* promoting enrolment in the Brazilian Airforce, 16 June 2022. Instagram.

Emphasis on the imaginary of the *folle oceaniche* seems another trait shared by Salvini and Bolsonaro's aesthetics, as Figure 8 shows. The photo, taken from the stage of a rally attended by Bolsonaro during the Marcha para Jesus, in Balnéario Camboriú, in the southern Brazilian state of Santa Catarina, provides a suggestive representation of a highly participated and crowded event. The visual of the people stocked up in front of the stage where Bolsonaro is standing, conveys a strong sense of unity around the leader who is captured in the foreground while giving his shoulders to the camera. This viewpoint is frequently reproduced in the photos documenting Bolsonaro's public rallies, and it is not rare to find it also in Salvini's online footage. Providing the perspective of the leader, it invites viewers to identify with him and share the emotions elicited by that specific moment, standing on stage and looking at the cheering crowd. Furthermore, this perspective amplifies the perception of people's participation to the event, suggesting that a vast number of Brazilians stands united with their leader. These feelings are boasted by the presence of numerous Brazilian flags and Brazilian football shirts standing out from the crowd, which help fostering a sense of identity and belonging in an ethno-nationalistic meaning.

Another important detail in the photo of Figure 8 is the slogan "Brasil Acima de Tudo, Deus Acima de Todos" ("Brazil above everything, God above everyone") which characterized Bolsonaro's propaganda since the electoral campaigning for his first presidential mandate in 2018. This slogan is peculiar inasmuch the line 'Brasil Acima de Tudo' draws on the motto of the Brazilian Paratroopers, the army force in which Bolsonaro served as Captain. By recycling this motto, the leader consolidates his image as army Captain in the public perception asserts his masculine leadership through the lens of military culture. Furthermore, the slogan's first line creates another subtle connection with the memory of the Nazi regime by linking to the motto "Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles" ("Germany, Germany Above All"). Despite this phrase being part of the German national anthem before and after the rise and fall of Nazism, it was instrumentalized by the Nazi regime to emphasise the supremacist and Imperialistic goals of the German State. These references should not be underestimated nor interpreted as casual and disconnected but rather seen as the expression of a precise ideology and vision of society which conflates male domination with military aesthetics and authoritarian tendencies. Finally, the men-

tion of God in Bolsonaro's slogan dialogues particularly well with the most religious and conservative segments of his electorate, providing a sense of sacred validation to Bolsonaro's figure as a leader as well as to his vision and politics.



10 | Jair Bolsonaro greeting WWII Tenant veteran João Pereira da Silva surrounded by pupils of an alleged military school, presumably in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, 8 April 2022. Instagram.

The appeal to God emerges again in Bolsonaro's frequent use of the popular fascist slogan "Dio, patria e famiglia" ("God, homeland, and family") which conflates religion, the state, and patriarchal norms and is frequently adopted by Far Right activists in Italy and globally. The use of slogans mindful of both Fascist and Nazi ideology in Bolsonaro's performative repertoire further validates the parallels with Salvini's aesthetics and propaganda strategies, especially in terms of nostalgic remarks to a golden authoritarian age. This is expressed by Bolsonaro on his social media pages through imageries that show the leader wearing military uniforms or surrounded by militaries in solemn occasions. Besides evoking parallels with his past serving in the army, this type of aesthetics also draws on the memory of Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1982) as part of a strategy that, similarly to what seen with Salvini's example, seeks to rehabilitate that period of the country's history in the public debate, about which Bolsonaro has publicly denied crimes and atrocities: this included statements in which he denied the regime's crimes addressing the dictatorship as a "20 years period of order and progress" (Human Rights Watch), and defining the coup's anniversary "liberation day" (Braga 2021). Figures 9 and 10 show how this aesthetics unfolds in Bolsonaro's online communication.

Figure 9 refers to an Instagram post shared on Bolsonaro's profile on 26 June 2022 to promote and encourage enrolment in the Brazilian Airforce. This post is significant because it combines three key elements of Bolsonaro's propaganda which inform his masculine aesthetics and virile performances. Here, the Far Right leader is portrayed riding a motorbike at the forefront of a crowded group of bikers following him. This is a peculiar imagery of Bolsonaro's aesthetics. The leader is known for his passion for motorbikes, and, on his Instagram page, one can frequently encounter posts featuring footage of *motociatas* (motorbike tours) that he used to organise in different cities of Brazil as part of his campaigning and self-promotion strategy.

Videos and images of *motociatas* generally respond to the same scheme that features Bolsonaro leading a large group of bikers around the hosting cities, cheered up by supporters watching the show from the sides of the street. Among manifold occasions in which Bolsonaro has been represented among the people, these events have a particular aesthetic appeal which is made of two main elements: the first one concerns imaginar-

ies of bikers linked to a Hollywood-type of masculine aesthetics, reminiscent of the films of James Dean and Marlon Brando, in which the main character, usually dressed in black leather, is portrayed as a fearless and mysterious seductor. The second element consists of enhancing the representation of Bolsonaro as 'man of the people' through his physical presence among ordinary citizens.

Adding up to these two crucial components of Bolsonaro's *motociatas* iconography, there is a peculiar element that stands out from this image which consists of the photomontage of the actor Tom Cruise riding a motorbike next to Bolsonaro. This photomontage draws on a frame from the second Top Gun film (2022) in which Tom Cruise rides a black motorbike with the actress Jennifer Connelly on the backseat. Notably, the military-green uniform worn by the actor has been enriched here with context-specific symbols referring to Bolsonaro and Brazilian identity. On the uniform's sleeves it is possible to spot the Brazilian flag (right) and a patch with Bolsonaro's portrait (left), while on the chest there are two other patches, one of which reads the Fascist slogan "Deus, Patria e Familia" ("God, Homeland, and Family") while the other one, on the left, results unreadable. This choice shows an effort to repurpose and exploit *Top Gun*'s masculine imaginary for electoral purposes, conveying the message that being a (male) Bolsonaro supporter and sharing his values and ideas grants popularity and celebrity.

Another level of analysis of this post, which further enhances the virile performance enacted by Bolsonaro, unfolds in the message promoting the enrolment of Brazilian citizens in the Airforce. After clarifying that Tom Cruise is a photomontage, Bolsonaro praises the Airforce and writes: "Real-life Top Guns of our glorious Brazilian Airforce led by the Brigadier Baptista Júnior, always ready to protect our airspace and our Brazil. Join the [Brazilian Airforce]".

The reference to Top Gun therefore has a layered meaning that converges in the conflation of Bolsonaro's self-representation with a type of masculinity imbued with Hollywood and military aesthetics as a determinant of popularity and a higher social status. The message conveyed by this post defines virile men as leaders who ride motorbikes, join the army, and embrace values rooted in Christian and ethno-nationalistic identity. These values are summarised here by the patches with the slogan "Deus, Patria e Familia", the Brazilian flag, and the portrait of Bolsonaro placed on Tom Cruise's uniform. In this way, Captain Bolsonaro reiterates his role as representative of the Brazilian people and protector of the country's perceived foundational values. Next to the explicit reference to God in the slogan mentioned above, the religious tie is further reinforced by Bolsonaro's gesture of looking and pointing at the sky, which returns frequently in his public appearances and representations. In this post, however, the gesture also serves to strengthen his praise of the Airforce.

Figure 10 features another post shared by Bolsonaro on 8 April 2022 on his Instagram profile, and it is particularly interesting for its glorification of the military during an event

in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS) when the leader awarded the honours to Tenant João Pereira da Silva, a late WWII highly decorated veteran of the Força Expedicionaria Brasileira (Portal Uai 2022). In the centre of the image, a smiling Bolsonaro is portrayed while shaking hands with Pereira. The two are surrounded by children in uniforms, plausibly pupils of a military school in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, as suggested by the green, red, and yellow striped flag visible on some children's sleeves.

This image creates a highly emotional connection between past and present by juxtaposing the elderly veteran with the future generation of army servants. The cheerful expression of the children helps to promote military education as enjoyable and fun, but also respectable and prestigious, as exemplified by highly decorated veterans such as Pereira. The message conveyed by the visual is further reinforced by Bolsonaro's comment to the post:

> Those who forget their past are condemned to have no future. Our eternal homage to the heroes of Brazil. May the honour and love for the homeland forever inspire future generations!

The main role of this caption is to enhance the idealised scene staged in the photo by materialising feelings of nostalgia and imaginaries of heroism around perceptions of the army through celebrations of valorous WWII veterans. Nevertheless, by looking carefully at Bolsonaro's semantics, it is possible to notice a lack of specificity that makes the message deliberately vague and ambiguous. The accent posed on the importance of remembering the past and commemorating the 'heroes of Brazil' is a rhetorical exercise that, given its intentional lack of specificity, honours all militaries as heroes, without making distinctions with the violence and the repression perpetrated by the armed forces during the dictatorship period (1964-1982). Therefore, by generalising the celebration of the military, Bolsonaro is implicitly commemorating the memory of the dictatorship, too, and legitimising ideas of male dominance through brutal force and violence which characterised the regime period.

Bolsonaro's glorification of the armed forces also legitimises a specific choice to reinstate the military at the centre of Brazil's democracy and society (Hunter, Vega 2022), one of the focal points of his electoral program based on a patriarchal, white supremacist, and queerphobic project (Dalmaso-Junquera, Gomes de Lima 2024) which granted him support and consensus from the backbone of the country's elite (Winter 2020). Boasting excessive admiration for the military and the police is another element that draws significant parallels between the masculine aesthetics informing the online propaganda of Bolsonaro and Salvini, becoming a sort of electoral brand (Turner 2024) that transcends national borders. This linkage unfolds in online contents that portray the leaders wearing law-enforcement clothes while chatting, smiling, or even joking with officers in convivial situations, usually accompanied by comment-captions that celebrate their bravery and thank them for looking after citizens and keeping them safe.

As Mazzoni and Mincigrucci (2023) note, this aesthetics conveys very specific messages to manufacture consensus around policy agendas based on law-and-order rhetoric that prioritise both State's and leaders' personal commitment to security. The emphasis around the good heart of police and military officers serves to enhance a sense of trust which encourages those deemed as honest and hard-working citizens to accept State force and surveillance in the name of a fallacious idea of protection. This dynamic draws on an 'us vs. them' populist-type of discourse that divides society between in-groups and out-groups. The in-group is depicted as a blameless and morally good native community (Hameleers, Schmuck 2017), defined by civilized and respectable identity rooted in a white, Western, and Christian background. Constructed around deeply antagonistic views, the out-group instead is made by morally evil individuals (Hameleers, Schmuck 2017) indicated as enemies and outsiders, who are therefore excluded due to perceived negative qualities that naturally estrange them from the in-group.

Despite significant social and historical differences, the discourse of Bolsonaro and Salvini around the definition of the out-group converges in specific hostility and racism towards Black and Brown individuals, who are generally blamed for the country's social and economic grievances. In fact, while Salvini focuses on Black-African and Muslim people, and especially immigrants and refugees, Bolsonaro and his collaborators often frame the problem of organised crime in Brazil as inherent of marginalised and impoverished communities, and especially those living in *favelas* disseminated across the country.

In a scenario where the out-group is systematically criminalised and dehumanized, both leaders portray themselves as the only ones capable of rescuing their countries from imminent decay. This discourse is imbued with an apocalyptic aesthetics that provides both Captains with a redemptive and messianic role (Messias or Messiah is also Bolsonaro's second name) that contributes to manufacture moral justification for the enforcement of exclusionary and autocratic policies advocated by the leaders. The imaginary of masculine force and dominance associated with the idea of protecting the nation and its civilisation returns in messages that fetishise a righteous use of violence through displays of phallic fantasies of strength and aggression represented through public exhibition of weapons. This aesthetics defines the last meaningful cross-over analysed by this paper around the masculine aesthetics and virile performances enacted online by both Salvini and Bolsonaro, as discussed in the next section.

Fetishization of Phallic Dominance and Violence

Both Salvini and Bolsonaro disseminate a type of discourse that emphasises self-defence to legitimise policies around the liberalisation of arms detention and the use of State force, which they advocate through their online propaganda. The idea of defending the nation and its identity at all costs is part of that same law-and-order rhetoric seen earlier that justifies the criminalisation and the exclusion of individuals and communities estranged from what is perceived as the 'legitimate' in-group community. The 'us vs. them' rhetoric

underpinning this discourse draws on a specific type of affective politics of fear (Ahmed 2014) that exacerbates feelings of enmity to materialize scenarios of an imminent and visceral life-threat which creates a sense of urgency to act against perceived enemies.

This is something that Umberto Eco (1995) highlighted very well in his analysis of how fascist mentality and tendencies are re-adapted and re-interpreted by Far Right movements in the present day. Visually, the urgency to act in defence of the in-group community and the nation stressed by Far Right leaders unfolds in performances that fetishise male strength and violence through the public exhibition of weapons and references to destructive acts aimed at assert dominance including shooting, demolition, and eradication. Bolsonaro made of this symbolism his signature by adopting gestures from military culture which reinforce his representation as strongman and army Captain in the public imaginary as showed by the example of Figure 12.



11 | Bolsonaro doing the 'arms up' gesture during an electoral motorcade in the suburbs of Brasília on 5 September 2018. "The Intercept".

The image shows Bolsonaro doing an 'arms up' gesture after a rally in São Francisco do Sul, in the state of Santa Catarina, in February 2021. In this occasion, the former president stated that the people of Brazil where thrilled by the announcement of four new decrees proposed by his cabinet that would have made the acquisition and detention of guns more easily available (Phillips 2021). Besides supporting and promoting the liberalisation of arms, however, the 'arms up' gesture has become an inherent part of his masculine visual and symbolic repertoire since his rise as a political leader and presidential candidate.



12 | Bolsonaro in a post shared on X by his son Eduardo doing the 'arms up' gesture from a hospital room where he was recovering from a stabbing attack suffered during a rally in Rio de Janeiro.

It is notable, in this context, the way he displayed this gesture after an attack in which he was stabbed during a rally in Rio de Janeiro, in September 2018, as Figure 12 shows. From the hospital chair in which he is sitting in this post, which was shared on X by his son Eduardo, Bolsonaro's performance portrays two faces of his masculine character. On the one hand, he shows the arms up gesture to reassure his supporters about his toughness, framing himself as an invincible leader, or a superhero, who does not give up even in the most difficult of circumstances. Interestingly, this gesture was displayed before Bolsonaro by late Italian right-wing prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. During a joint press conference with Russian president Vladimir Putin in 2008,

the Italian leader directed the automatic rifle gesture towards a female journalist who asked Putin some uncomfortable questions around alleged scandals concerning his marital and romantic private life (Piscioneri 2008). Berlusconi became famous worldwide for his transgressive and inconvenient attitudes rooted in machismo and male dominant aesthetics. Scholars such as Foot (2016) have noted how Berlusconi can be rightfully considered the predecessor and symbolic mentor of political personalities like Donald Trump, and possibly other Far Right leaders like Bolsonaro, more than Mussolini and other authoritarian figures of the past. Furthermore, in this context, the gesture also evokes ideas of retaliation and punishment. On the other hand, however, he also shows his human dimension by letting his followers seeing the fragile side of an ordinary man recovering from a life-threatening attack. This aspect contributes to frame the leader in a context of victimhood that fosters a sense of empathy and compassion among his supporters.

Imaginaries around phallic fantasies of male domination are also evoked by Salvini, who made multiple public appearances showing off rifles. Figure 13 provides a meaningful example, among the many. This post was shared on X by Salvini's former spin doctor Luca Morisi, the manager of the leader's communication strategies and propaganda, who contributed to amplify exponentially the visibility and popularity of Salvini using social media platforms. It refers to an event in April 2019, a time in which Salvini was at the peak of his popularity and likeability in national polls and was campaigning for the elections for the European Parliament that were going to take place in May. The image captures Salvini while attentively checking an automatic rifle, probably introduced by the person standing next to him.



13 | Matteo Salvini carefully holding and showing an automatic rifle in a post shared on Facebook by Luca Morisi related to the 2019 European election campaign.

Morisi's comment caption adds multiple levels of interpretation to this image, making it sound and look like a threat towards opponents and perceived enemies of both the leader and his party: "Have you noticed that they do everything to defame the League? The European [elections] are getting closer, and they will invent anything to stop the Captain! We, however, are armed and have helmets! Full speed ahead, happy Easter! 😉".

Like Bolsonaro in the example of Figure 12, this post boasts a victimising rhetoric that depicts Salvini as a leader persecuted by his left-wing adversaries. Morisi's comment is preemptively warning Salvini's supporters of the strategies that the leader's enemies will implement to defame the party and prevent the Captain from succeeding in the upcoming European elections. However, Morisi adds that [they] are armed and have helmets, awakening a warfare scenery in which Salvini's community is addressed as an army ready to fight in

defence of their leader. This imaginary is further reinforced by the emphasis to Salvini's role as Captain, which enhances the sense of authoritative male leadership built around the leader's image. Paired with the photo embedded in the post, Morisi's comment conveys a powerful message that implicitly exhorts and legitimates violence against anyone committed to stop the Captain from taking power. Furthermore, the absence of women in the foreground scene strengthens the idea of male primacy expressed by the performance enacted by Salvini carefully holding the automatic rifle, which cements the fetishisation of phallic dominance in the public imaginary.

Fantasies of phallic dominance that permeate the masculine performances of leaders such as Salvini and Bolsonaro, often translate into openly sexist and misogynistic attitudes that legitimise gender discrimination and abuse in the public discourse. Both leaders have repeatedly resorted to sexually-based insults and humiliation rooted in rape culture, especially when addressing political female opponents. Aimed at re-affirming male hegemony, this attitude is exemplified particularly well by a comment that Bolsonaro expressed in 2022 during the celebrations of Brazil's independence day, at the end of a parade that featured pompous displays of military strength and the celebration of farming culture rooted in expropriation and displacement of natives' land. In that occasion, Bolsonaro addressed the crowd from the presidential stage starting a chant that repeated "imbrochável", a term with a strong phallic and sexual meaning as "unscrewable" or "inflexible" (CNN Brasil 2022). The video of this episode is particularly suggestive as it represents a moment of entertainment that shows Bolsonaro's wife smiling at his husband's performance and the crowd chanting with him in what becomes collective trivialization of machoism and male supremacist ideology.

It was not the first time that Bolsonaro expressed publicly this concept. In March 2021, in response to a nationwide protest that was about to take place against his detrimental management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, he held up a sign reading "immorivel, imbrochável, e incomivel" which translates as "invincible, inflexible, and indigestible" (Royster 2021). This type of speech embedded in imaginaries of sexual dominance, sublimates the overt exhibition of virile strength performed by the leader, materializing an aesthetics capable to shape political consciousness around the exaltation of patriarchal hegemony as an inherent social and cultural asset.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the masculine aesthetics informing the online performances of Italy's Far Right leader Matteo Salvini and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. While a lot of research and public commentaries have drawn parallels and comparisons based on the example provided by US President-elect Donald Trump, a very limited number of studies outlined the connections between Salvini and Bolsonaro which, I argue, make an interesting case deserving more attention from researchers engaged with multi-disciplinary perspectives. The analysis examined selected examples from the social media profiles of the two lead-

ers and online news media related to specific public events and interventions. Based on a multimodal aesthetic analysis method, the discussion highlighted significant parallels in the construction of the public image and identity of the two leaders. Looking at the interplay between image, text, and discourse facilitated by the communication logics of social media platforms, the analysis dissected central elements of Salvini and Bolsonaro's online representation, which reinforce ideas of leadership rooted in patriarchal imaginaries of male dominance and strength.

Despite context-specific differences determined by the history, culture, and socio-political background of Italy and Brazil, the investigation shed light on common aesthetic patterns that emerge from the virile performances enacted by the two leaders for their propaganda online. One of the most outstanding parallels highlighted by the analysis consisted of the role as captains built around Salvini and Bolsonaro's public personas which, despite drawing on different references, the military past of Bolsonaro and the closed-ports policy advocated by Salvini, takes similar directions in defining a type of male identity based on the idealisation of force, authority, and dominance as inherent expressions of virility.

The choice of the appellative Captain (*Capitão* in Portuguese and *Capitano* in Italian) to designate the leaders is peculiar of an intention to consolidate their leadership and pastoral role as representatives of the voice and will of the people. The Captain theme returns in visual and symbolic representations of Salvini and Bolsonaro, drawing on multidirectional references that oscillate between apparently innocuous football imaginaries, idealisations of military culture, memories and nostalgia of the authoritarian pasts of both countries, and of male dominance through the fetishisation of phallic violence. Modelled around accepted socio-cultural standards of heteronormative masculinity, the investigation showed how the Captain figure takes multiple forms depending on the message to convey in specific circumstances. In this context, Salvini and Bolsonaro's masculine performances frame them either as ordinary men, football icons, loving fathers, or strong and invincible leaders.

The masculine imaginaries underpinning the self-representation of the two leaders foster identification with their (male) followers, enhancing feelings of male bonding that reinforce the idea of belonging to the same in-group community in an ethno-nationalistic sense. A strong ethno-nationalism emerges indeed from the appropriation of the traditional green and yellow Brazilian football shirt, which became a primary ideological and cultural symbol associated with Bolsonarismo, and contributed to cement the myth of Bolsonaro as the people's captain to the eyes of his supporters.

The investigation undertaken in section two demonstrated how Salvini's performative masculinity awakens fascist memory to assert his male authority, particularly through the visual imaginary of the Duce Benito Mussolini, by staging visual representations that consolidate the hegemonic and hierarchical relationship between the people and the leader. Visual and textual references to Italian fascism were also outlined in Bolsonaro's online

representation, including the use of slogans such as Deus, Patria e Familia (God, Homeland, and Family) and the iconography of the folle oceaniche (literally ocean-like crowds). The visual motif of the folle oceaniche reminds imageries of mass participation to Fascist and Nazi rallies mixed with pop-cultural aesthetics and celebrity culture, as seen in the case of the photomontage of Tom Cruise riding a motorbike next to Bolsonaro.

Finally, the last section has further elaborated on the military and authoritarian aesthetics promoted by the two leaders, showing how this converges into a fetishisation of phallic dominance through public exhibition of arms and display of hand gestures referred to the act of shooting with a rifle. This tendency responds to a law-and-order rhetoric that manufactures warfare imaginaries to mobilise electoral support around policies of self-defence through the liberalisation of acquisition and detention of weapons, as well as legitimise uses of State force and violence. At the same time, however, it is also expression of an aesthetics designed to cement in the public imaginary an idea of masculinity that asserts its identity through virile force and substantiates in representations of male power rooted in fantasies of sexual domination.

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Abstract

This article analyses the masculine aesthetics of Italian and Brazilian far-right leaders Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro, exploring the performative dimension of their virile self-representation online. It advances a multimodal aesthetic analysis that centres visual and iconographic investigations of digital contents, supported by critical discourse, social semiotic, and historiographic methods. The investigation examines how the image of the two leaders has been shaped through specific aesthetic strategies to consolidate their representation as strongmen in public perception. Central to this construction is the figure of the captain (capitão/capitano), an aesthetic that blends representations of authority with imageries of ordinariness and imperfection, exploiting the logics of celebrity

politics and online influencer culture. Building on selected examples drawn from the social media profiles of Salvini and Bolsonaro from the period of their respective electoral victories in 2018, the analysis dissects three central themes enabling parallels between Italian and Brazilian far-right politics and discourse: the link with football popular culture, the praise of the military, the rehabilitation of the memory of both countries' authoritarian pasts, and the fetishisation of phallic dominance and violence through the public exhibition of weaponry. This article demonstrates how the virile performances of the two leaders foster a shared identity and a sense of belonging in an ethno-nationalistic sense, cementing perceptions of male dominance and patriarchal hegemony. Ultimately, it underscores the centrality of visual and historiographic investigations to better understand the social and cultural conditions that fostered the rise of far-right politics in positions of global power.

keywords | Far Right politics; masculine aesthetics; Matteo Salvini; Jair Bolsonaro; digital propaganda.

Right-Wing Communication Guerilla

Nationalist Détournements of Feminist Protest Performances

Kathrin Fahlenbrach

Introduction

For some time now, appropriating left-wing protest symbols has been one of the key strategies of far-right movements, especially when it comes to representing their goals and ideologies to the outside world. Initially, this tactic was mainly used to circumvent censorship of right-wing extremist symbols in public (cf. Miller-Idriss 2018). At the same time, their communication guerrilla warfare has been marked by an open cultural battle against a supposedly left-wing mainstream (see, for example, Terizakis, Knopp 2025; Meiering 2022). Situational forms of protest such as sit-ins, flash mobs, or occupations of symbolic locations, which have been invented by emancipatory social movements, were prominently hijacked by European Identitarian activists and used for their own purposes. With the possibilities offered by online platforms, the potential for communication guerrilla warfare by the right wing has increased exponentially (Terizakis, Knopp 2025; Steinwender 2025; Fielitz, Thurston 2019).

This article uses the example of femonationalist activists in Germany to examine memetic reversal of left-wing emancipatory forms of protest on the streets and online. Exploring online videos of the German activist group Lukreta, it will be shown how nationalists appropriate fundamental claims of the women's movement and their forms of protest and how they combine them with right-wing narratives and rhetoric. The paper will analyse different strategies of such semiological *détournement*, which are intended not only to symbolically incapacitate their opponents, but also to disguise and normalize right-wing narratives under the mask of liberal activist forms.

The analysis will place particular emphasis on visual and pictorial tactics of assimilation, alienation, and the reversal of aesthetic codes, tracing their lineage to Situationism, the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s, and anti-corporate adbusting activism, among other traditions. The aim of this paper is to show how femonationalist activists use the cultural grammar of left-wing movements – especially feminism – for supporting the right-wing project of cultural warfare against the left-wing mainstream, and promoting a broader cultural backlash.

Femonationalism

Right-wing populist parties in Europe and in the US have been benefiting for quite some time from having women at their helm. Figures such as Marine Le Pen in France, Sarah Palin in the US, Alice Weidel in Germany, and Georgia Meloni in Italy (Marcora 2024) have established themselves as powerful political leaders who have gained unprecedented support for their parties, even beyond radical minorities. In doing so, they exploit traditional gender stereotypes, according to which women tend to be perceived as both more altruistic and less radical than men. The added value of women as mediators of right-wing politics to the bourgeois middle class is apparently so highly regarded by these parties that they are even willing to accept ideological contradictions for this purpose. This is the case, for example, with Alice Weidel, who is a homosexual woman in a relationship with a migrant partner, living with her in a foreign country (Switzerland). Her own lifestyle thus stands in stark contrast to the anti-liberal and patriotic values she herself propagates (see Jacopo Galimberti's contribution in this issue).

However, the Weidel case reveals another current trend among right-wing parties and movements: They deliberately appropriate left-wing emancipatory habitus, and related forms of expression, imbuing them with their own worldviews and ideologemes. This fits in with a general strategy among right-wing politicians, which Sasse describes as a "reversal into the opposite" (Sasse 2023). The gesture of subversion is used here as a technique of power, as "subversion from above", analyzed by Sasse in the context of authoritarian, anti-democratic politicians. They spread their anti-liberal and authoritarian agendas by presenting themselves as true advocates of freedom of expression and liberalism. Democratic opponents, on the other hand, are branded as censors and fascists.

This broader tendency towards *détournement* and subversion as a power technique (Sasse 2023) is supported by another recent agenda of right-wing actors, conveyed as "subversion from below" (Steinwender 2025). As is well-known, key figures of the so-called New Right, as Alain de Benoist in France and Thor von Waldstein in Germany have appropriated the idea of "Meta-Politics" from the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (Flügel 2022). It is above all Gramsci's idea of meta-politics, the spreading of revolutionary worldviews, values, and ideologies throughout society that has now become the 'Holy Grail' of right-wing movements in Europe (Lindemann 2022, 255; Meiering 2022). As Terizakis and Knopp put it: the New Right "pursues a 'metapolitical' strategy, i.e., one aimed at the pre-political sphere, in order to achieve 'cultural hegemony'" (Terizakis, Knopp 2025, 126, translation by the author).

The appropriation of left-wing theories for their meta-political agenda is symptomatic of the widespread adoption of left-wing concepts and symbolic forms. Benoist, von Waldstein, but also Identitarian activists such as Martin Sellner or the German publisher Götz Kubitschek propagate the imitation of left-wing ideas and ideological reversal (Meiering

2022). On their now banned website, the German Identitarians describe their tactics as follows:

> We believe that political change is not only possible in parliaments and party politics, but also takes place in the cultural sector, public debates, the media, and on the streets. We therefore operate in a kind of 'pre-political space' that shapes discourse and thus serves as the basis for direct and concrete political decisions (Identitarians Germany, cited in Flügel 2022, 92, translation by the author).

This strategy seeks to dismantle what is portrayed as the entrenched liberal "cultural hegemony" and "opinion dominance" of left-leaning media, while simultaneously appropriating and exploiting their cultural capital.

Accordingly, they have extended their culture battle to values and forms of expression that originally emerged in left-wing alternative circles since the 1960s, but which have long since spread throughout Western societies. It is primarily the values associated with individual autonomy and self-realisation that have been promoted by social movements since then and now represent a basic social consensus (Kasimov 2025).

This battle is first of all taking place in the pre-political space, in online-spheres: In right-wing activism, among influencers and other online actors in interconnected online spheres (Terizakis, Knopp 2025). In this pre-political arena, women have long since become "cultural entrepreneurs" of right-wing meta-politics (Krug 2025b, 3). In her study on right-wing nano-influencers, de Haan *et al.* (2025) identify as two of their main strategies: "dog whistling" and "red pilling". Dog whistling refers to packaging controversial political messages in an innocuous and entertaining form, for example by mixing them with popular music, video snippets from films and series on TikTok, or framing them with commonly used emojis and filters. These common signs imply specific codes that address in-group meanings which only right-wing users can decode (e.g. the juice-emoji for 'jews'). "Red pilling", on the other hand, picks up on a *topos* that goes back to the film *The Matrix* and has become popular mainly in conspiracy online-discourses. "Red pilling" strategies used by right-wing actors on the web who aim to make the white population of Europe and the US aware of the dangers of their own alleged annihilation by migrant cultures and of the manipulation of public opinion operated by left-wing media.

Femonationalist activism significantly feeds into this overall cultural battle. Calderaro defines femonationalism as "a novel form of anti-feminism characterised by the appropriation of selective aspects of feminism, which are adapted to far-right political agendas and primarily rely on the racialisation of sexism" (Calderaro 2025, 93). In terms of Meta-Politics, they are exploiting feminism as an influential emancipatory discourse. Throughout all its ramifications and historical variations, feminism has essentially advocated gender equality and the self-realisation of women since the nineteenth century. Right-wing activists, do not reject these principles outright; rather, they present themselves as their genuine defenders, albeit advancing divergent interpretations of what

those principles concretely entail. They paint a dramatic picture of a threat to white (heterosexual) women in European countries, whose autonomy, freedom, and self-realisation are allegedly threatened by the increasing presence of migrant men in public spaces. Propagating 'remigration' as the only solution to this indicted problem, they convey their nationalist messages in a feminist guise.

Calderaro (2025) has examined the feminist framing strategies in femonationalist activism that accompany this concealment tactic. In doing so, she has identified three key collective action frames that lie behind their messages and actions. The first is "opposition to intersectional feminism" (Calderaro 2025, 948) which extends its demand for gender justice to non-binary people and other minorities. Femonationalists denounce this expansion not only as a betrayal of women's needs and interests, but also as a manifest threat to them. They argue that by advocating diversity, intersectional feminism has become blind to the dangers that patriarchal norms within certain migrant communities pose to women. The second frame is "the use of post-feminist frames", and, according to Calderaro (2025, 933) this concerns the aforementioned claim in femonationalism that, thanks to earlier women's movements, gender equality has already been established and constitutionally enshrined in the Western world. However, they argue that there is a fundamental threat to these achievements by migrants, which left-wing feminists were unwilling to see. The third key frame, which underlies the other two, is "racialisation of sexism" (Calderaro 2025, 933). This frame attributes sexualised violence against women primarily to migrant men, while sexual abuse by white and 'native' men is downplayed or concealed. The third frame serves primarily to stir up collective feelings of fear and aggression against 'foreigners' and to mobilize political support and protest. It manifests the actual and key message of femonationalist activists, namely the demand for the deportation of people with a migrant background. The other two supposedly feminist frames, in turn, serve strategically only to package this message in terms of dog whistling and red pilling.

In the current and still nascent research on femonationalism, two dominant types of activists are being observed: On the one hand, there are combative activists who mobilize through protests on the streets and online. They belong to activist groups and networks that can be found in several European countries (e.g. Némésis in France, Lukreta in Germany. On the other hand, there are influencers who convey traditional female roles such as housewife and mother in an internet-savvy lifestyle aesthetic, making use of the affordances and codes of online platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (de Haan *et al.* 2025). Also in the broader public, they are often referred to as "tradwives" (Krug 2025a).

Both right-wing protesters and influencers essentially convey a nationalistic image of women, according to which women are seen as the 'natural' origin of family and race and must be protected in this role. Seeing this as their true destiny, both types of activists see

themselves as liberators of women from the constraints of left-wing, misguided emancipation and heteronomy.

Communication Guerilla Warfare as an Emancipatory Project

In their meta-political battle, right-wing and femonationalist online activism focuses on communicative tactics and strategies that have their roots in the communication guerrilla of left-wing emancipatory movements. To illustrate the implications of this strategic appropriation and political inversion by femonationalists, I will offer a brief overview of some main goals and tactics in the context of left-wing movements.

Umberto Eco was one of the first to introduce the term "semiological guerrilla" (Eco [1968] 1986). In 1967, he recognised the enormously increased importance of public communication as a powerful arena in the then emerging age of electronic mass media. Similar to other critical thinkers of the time (e.g. Marshall McLuhan or Theodor W. Adorno), he recognised the risk of individuals being deprived of their autonomy by the standardised conventions, signs and codes of mass media. To counter this, Eco called for the self-empowerment of recipients through their active appropriation of media messages and their codes in the form of an ongoing "semiological guerrilla warfare". While power over the technical channels and infrastructures in the mass media is hierarchically organised, according to Eco, the power of the audience lies in the individual, even resistant, appropriation of media codes and messages. Hence, he envisioned semiological guerilla as a continuous practice of critically decoding and appropriating media messages and their underlying codes. As he put it, semiological guerilla warfare could be:

> A constant correction of perspectives, the checking of codes, the ever-renewed interpretations of mass messages. The universe of Technological Communication would then be patrolled by groups of communications guerrillas, who would restore a critical dimension to passive reception (Eco [1968] 1986, 132).

Before Eco, it was Guy Debord and the artists around the Situationists International who paved the way for communication guerilla concepts and practices since the late 1950s. In his work *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord identified a strong standardisation of everyday life routines, culture and society at large (Debord [1967] 1995). Debord uses the metaphor of spectacle to characterize a culture and society shaped by capitalist rules, which is based on principles of distraction and entertaining performances, thereby turning people into seduced but passive consumers. Significantly, Debord saw subversive action as the only way out of this alienation and created the idea of the Situationist International. The target audience of the Situationist approach is citizens, who are to free themselves from passivity and ideological control through spontaneous actions (as the Situationist International in 1960). Subversive resistance is intended to create interventionist situations, such as happenings on the street, which temporarily suspend public order and enable new, self-empowering experiences. A typical example of this was *dériver* (aimless rambling) in urban areas, which disrupted the functional processes of

traffic, consumption and everyday working life of 'conformist' citizens in order to wake them up from their embeddedness in capitalist logics (this concept was realised more specifically in the 1960s by the anti-authoritarian movement in Germany, notably by the 'rambling hash rebels': see Kraushaar 2007).

Through the artistic movement of the Situationist International and its various national manifestations, Debord's ideas triggered a veritable paradigm shift in protest culture in the 1960s. Of crucial importance here was the extension of resistance against state institutions to the cultural field of lifestyles, values, and social roles – the original leftist account of Gramsci's Meta-Politics (cf. Kraushaar 2007; Fahlenbrach 2007). For instance, the anti-authoritarian group of the "Subversive Action" in Germany, several of whose members subsequently founded 'Kommune 1', aimed more at a 'revolutionary way of life' than at gaining political power. Similar to Gramsci's approach, anti-authoritarian groups and activists were concerned with a cultural change encompassing the whole of society, from which a broad spectrum of left-wing emancipatory movements emerged in the following decades. Significantly, visual protest performances and images took on an unprecedented importance in guerilla practices (Fahlenbrach 2007). Through subversive practices, mass media images became both the target and the means of protest: whether in the form of staged media events, such as the alleged 'pudding attack' on the US Vice president Hubert Humphrey visiting Germany in 1967, or through 'happening'-like street protests that explored the limits of civil disobedience and made them publicly visible – also by the media, covering these events.

Since these beginnings of communication guerrilla warfare, a continuous standardisation of its goals and tactics in liberal activism can be observed to this day (Steinwender 2025). The spectrum ranges from its use in emancipatory new social movements (e.g. ecology movements or human rights movements) and in extreme left-wing groups (e.g. Antifa) to consumer-critical cultural jamming and adbusting activism (see Kalle Lasn 2000; Völlinger 2010). Since the 1970s, subversive forms of protest have been increasingly used to draw the attention of the media and the broader public to their goals in a powerful symbolic way. This has been particularly evident with the development of professional PR strategies by movement organisations and NGOs like Greenpeace or ATTAC, who regularly are featuring symbolic happenings and actions as staged media, and image events (Delicath, de Luca 2003) to attract the attention of a broad audience (Baringhorst et al. 2009). The German handbook on communication guerrilla warfare (Blisset, Brünzels 2001) is characteristic of its standardisation in left-wing protest culture.

In the age of digital image and online media, the activist significance of subversive actions has once again increased (Steinwender 2025). Since then, it has been important not only to attract the attention of journalistic gatekeepers in the mass media, but also to take into account the algorithmic dynamics of global image flows on social online platforms (Fahlenbrach 2025). The anti-globalisation movement around 2000 and the North

African movements (the Arab Spring) were the first to powerfully demonstrate how the newly emerging infrastructures of online platforms can be used in a resistant and subversive manner to overcome censorship, but also to mobilize international public support.

To conclude, the project of communication guerrilla warfare which, in the spirit of Eco, still continues to critically examine power relations and hegemonic media discourses, focuses primarily on the socio-cultural dimension of worldviews, values, lifestyles, and discursive hegemonies in its practices of resistance. The basic understanding within liberal, emancipatory activism could be characterised as follows: Communication guerrilla warfare opposes dominant power structures primarily through the cultural understanding associated with them and the related forms of communication. To this end, the everyday routines, rules, signs, and media of dominant cultural practices and discourses are appropriated on their surface and subversively inverted (*détournement*), exposing the underlying cultural grammar for critical reflection. Communication guerrilla tactics always aim to link familiar signs and practices with implicit critical messages or new meanings in the process of revealing them, which ideally are evoked in the minds of the addressees themselves. In this context, key principles of communication guerrilla warfare are: faking, alienation, disruption, and, over-identification (Völlinger 2010; Blisset, Brünzels 2001).

In faking, the desired change is presented as already accomplished by feigning an alternative normality or facts that are generally considered desirable against the backdrop of commonly shared values and worldviews – for example, from a humanistic perspective. On the part of emancipatory activists, faking typically offers an ideal vision of a world in which civil society values are better preserved. Fake, then, often quickly provokes contradictions among actors who see their (political, economic, etc.) interests threatened by such an alternative, idealistic scenario. The adbusters group The Yes Men in particular ha

ve repeatedly applied this principle effectively by launching desired news items in established news media, such as the payment of damages to victims of the Dow Chemical accident in Bhopal (see Razorfoundation, *Bhopal Disaster – BBC – The Yes Men*). Dow Chemical's denial of this news blatantly demonstrated to the public its lack of any sense of guilt. The example demonstrates that producing fakes in a subversive and alienating sense can aim at a critical process of enlightenment that uncovers hidden truths. Accordingly, as emphasised in the *Handbook of Communication Guerrilla*, the evocation of denials is firmly planned. The exposure of fakes is a central component of subversive action; as the authors put it: "Fake = forgery & exposure/denial/confession" (Blisset, Brünzels 2001, 69). Without subsequent exposure, fakes become lies (see Paolucci 2023).

Furthermore, the principle of alienation aims to give new meanings to established places, routines and practices of everyday life. Such activist alienation occurs time and again, for example at award ceremonies at sporting events. A prominent example is the kneeling protest of the NFL-player Colin Kaepernick during the opening ceremony of a football

game in 2016, while the national anthem was played. His boycott of the ritual of standing straight, with his right hand on his breast, created an influential symbol of protest against racism for the Black Lives Matter-movement. Also, the change of advertising billboards in adbusting is a common practice of subversive alienation, in which the aesthetics and message of advertising are parasitically exploited and reversed to convey a consumer-critical attitude.

Closely related to alienation is the principle of disruption, in which familiar processes and public places are temporarily blocked and rendered ineffective. This includes the aforementioned happening-like forms of action such as sit-ins, teach-ins, or critical mass demonstrations. Another example comes most recently from Germany, in the blockade of urban traffic by climate activists who glued their hands to the street, triggering massive and striking counter-reactions among the population, revealing their narrow acceptance to adapt to the circumstances of climate change. Finally, the principle of over-identification is characterised by an overly affirmative confirmation of well-established signs, rules, and routines, which, by their very exaggeration, make the underlying patterns of thought and behaviour tangible. A recent example is a prominent campaign by the German 'Centre for Political Beauty' an actionist art group that uses guerrilla communication tactics to raise public awareness for human rights. In their latest prominent campaign, they erected a monument to CDU politician Walter Lübcke in front of the CDU party headquarters in Berlin (see Zentrum für Politische Schönheit, *Bau das Walter Lübcke Memorial direkt vor die Parteizentrale der CDU*). During his lifetime, Lübcke was a staunch opponent of right-wing extremism and was murdered for it in 2019 by an AfD supporter. While the conservative CDU party regularly struggles with its position in relation to the AfD party, the memorial is intended to remind its representatives of the fatal consequences of an alliance with the far-right. In an overly affirmative manner, CDU member Lübcke is being honoured here by a civil-rights group by answering in detail the aesthetic codes related to memorial culture. As a result, many passersby take it as an official memorial. The elaborately produced bronze statue of Lübcke, next to which an information stele explains Lübcke's commitment to fighting right-wing extremism and his murder, has quickly become a serious memorial site where people pause and lay flowers and candles. In stark contrast to this sympathy, the CDU has distanced itself from this action, criticizing it as unworthy and disrespectful. Accordingly, in terms of guerrilla communication warfare, the group has triggered revealing reactions from the party, ones which draw public attention towards its problem of distancing itself from the AfD.

Communication Guerilla Warfare as a Default Mode in Net-Cultures

Beyond political activism and art, such subversive techniques of communication guerilla warfare have long been used in commercial contexts as well. This can be exemplified by guerrilla marketing, which has recognised the attention-grabbing potential of disrupting traditional advertising codes and semiotic surprises (Völlinger 2010). Even more, internet culture, with its memetic image practices, has long been permeated by these techniques

and aesthetic strategies. Digital technologies, with their affordance structures, already promote the ongoing de- and recontextualisation of images, videos, and texts (e.g. by offering corporate meme-generators on platforms). The formerly subversive techniques of communication guerrilla have thus not only become inflationary, but have even solidified into standardised forms of expression in online communication within platforms such as TikTok or Instagram as image editing tools. Accordingly, Steinwender recognizes "a problematic state of coexistence" (Steinwender 2025, 18) "between subverted norms on the one hand and, on the other hand, subversion that has become the norm" (Gerber, Hausladen 2017, 12, translation by the author).

The very principle of subversive *détournement* and alienation of commonly known semiotic material and codes has broadly become a gesture in its own right, largely emptied of activist intention and incorporated into profit-oriented platform economies. As Paolucci observes, semiological guerrilla warfare has become a default mode of social media – albeit in a way that Eco did not intend. It has promoted the spread of fake news and a primacy of subjective interpretation and experience over knowledge in social-media-communication. In his words:

> We now live in a world where a deviant version of the semiological guerrilla has won and has become, paradoxically, the default mechanism of many contemporary forms of communication, presenting aberrant decoding, misleading interpretations, and contents aimed at deconstructing knowledge, since everyone now knows that knowledge is always connected to some form of power (Paolucci 2023, 103).

Communication Guerilla Warfare Shifting to the Far-Right

The standardization of guerilla techniques in the realm of platform-economics and online-communication significantly paved the way for their appropriation by right-wing actors in their meta-political battles for cultural hegemony. As such, two trends can be observed: On the one hand, a New Right-oriented form of communication guerrilla warfare has emerged in many Western countries (Meiering 2022a), appropriating the ideas and strategies of the anti-authoritarian New Left of the 1960s and 1970s, and redirecting them against their original authors.

In explicitly using the concepts of alienation and reverse mimesis against its initial creators, communication guerilla tactics are used in order to reverse emancipatory achievements in Western societies (Flügel 2022). The French author of the *nouvelle droite* in France, Alain de Benoist, or the German publisher Götz Kubitschek, for example, openly propagate the exploitation of leftist ideas and their symbolic arsenal (Meiering 2022b). It was Benoist who was the first to exploit Gramsci's concept of a battle for cultural hegemony and meta-politics, inspiring other right-wing movements throughout Europe. For example, Götz Kubitschek sees the project of a New Right directly in the tradition of the leftist anti-authoritarian movement, whose forms of protest, concepts, and symbols he exploits: for example, by calling his own network Conservative Subversive Action, a

direct allusion to the situationist group Subversive Aktion of the New Left in Germany in the 1960s (Speit 2018; Lindemann 2022). In fact, this development was also supported by former members of the New Left who had joined the right wing, such as Frank Bökelmann, who was even a member of Kommune 1.

The activist realisation of subversive guerilla actions happens most prominently by the Identitarian Movements in Europe (Gensing 2018). In a campaign video ("When are you joining us?", YouTube, 4 June 2018) on their now-banned YouTube channel from January 2018, they openly formulate their guerrilla tactical program, including: Media work, building identitarian counter-public spheres, and influencing. The occupation of symbolic locations such as the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin (2016), a memorial vigil for 'Merkel's dead' – referring to the 'victims' of 'mass migration' to Germany since 2015 – or the Defend Europe campaign taking place in several locations across Europe make use of the familiar symbolic arsenal of civil society protest. In the context of the Defend Europe actions in 2017, for example, a ship carrying Identitarians circulated in the Mediterranean. At once over-identifying and alienating, these actions imitated refugee rescue ships in the Mediterranean, but under the opposite motto. The action was performed for the online-distribution of videos and photos, also adapting the principles of well-known PR-strategies by civil-rights movements (e.g. Greenpeace).

On the other hand of the right-wing cultural battle, there is a broader digital media guerrilla warfare on the net that aggressively exploits popular and memetic net structures and practices, while rather implicitly referring to the leftist heritage. The focus here is on massive memetic warfare that exploits the algorithmic dynamics of online platforms such as X or TikTok (Rafael 2018). The social web is programmatically instrumentalised as a key arena for the right-wing culture war (Bogert, Fielitz 2019; Gerbaudo 2015). Authoritarian, anti-emancipatory, and nationalist views are disseminated en masse, but at the same time target specific user profiles.

A notable example of this is the prominent German online manifesto entitled *Handbuch für Medienguerillas* ("Handbook for Media Guerrillas"). It somehow imitates the idea of the aforementioned handbook for left-wing activists – albeit significantly differing in its form and content. In an openly aggressive tone, it is rather a militant manifesto. It suggests a multi-stage strategy for the far-right conquest of online public spheres, propagating four interlocking tactics: 'shitposting', 'open-source memetic warfare', 'social networking', and 'attacking of filter bubbles'. On the one hand, the focus is on aggressive attacks on leftist and liberal 'enemies' through shitposts, fake slander, trolling, etc. This involves the use of the formerly subversive principles of faking, alienation, and reversal, but also over-identification. For example, accounts and posts are faked in the form of 'reverse mimesis' (Casarino, Nardelli 2021) and provided with discrediting content. In contrast to emancipatory communication guerrilla, these tactics are to be used in a decidedly manipulative and denunciatory manner. There is no intention of subsequently unmasking and

exposing the fakes – on the contrary, the aim is to anchor the wrong impression in the minds of internet users. In addition, guerrilla tactics aim to enforce a right-wing climate on online platforms, as such increasing acceptance of fundamental systemic upheavals under the 'netizens'. The target audience here is not so much the 'enemies' but the average users who are to be won over to right-wing ideas and attitudes (cf. Gerbaudo 2015). For example, the manifesto mentions the dissemination of alternative scientific papers and information, or the systematic generation of digital 'swarm intelligence', this also via fake accounts, which suggest right-wing majorities on the web.

Casarino and Nardelli (2021), and Kasimov (2025) argue that the social web, with its decentralised structures, effectively conceals the authoritarian and anti-emancipatory goals of right-wing extremist actors on the internet. This is because the interactive and personalizing mechanisms of the internet still offer users an impression of agency and self-efficiency. The framing of right-wing posts in a personal, but also collectively shared, platform context can thus contribute significantly to the normalisation of right-wing discourses. As Karimov (2025) also demonstrates, actionist forms of propaganda which call for quick reaction from many individual users on the net, e.g. shitposting and trolling, but also happening-like actions on the street, should allow sympathizers to experience their commitment as fully self-controlled and autonomous. Accordingly, it is the combination of decentralised web-infrastructures, the corporate idea of egalitarian, autonomous user-communities on the web (Gerbaudo 2015), and the use of standardized tool kits of communication guerilla, which offer right-wing activists an ideal milieu for their propaganda. Together, they evoke an ambience of individual freedom and creativity, while at the same time fighting against such libertarian values and struggling for the reinstatement of authoritarian ones.

Femonationalist Communication Guerilla Warfare: The Case of the German Group Lukreta

As mentioned above, women are playing an increasingly important role as cultural entrepreneurs (Krug 2025a) in the cultural struggle of the far-right. Of particular significance here are activist groups and networks associated with femonationalism. In France, Germany, and other European countries, they are closely linked to the far-right Identitarian Movement. Both the French group Collectif Némésis and the German group Lukreta directly emerged from the Identitarian networks. In 2019, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classified the Identitarians as an extremist, anti-constitutional group, female activists have played an increasingly important role in spreading right-wing opinions throughout society.

Lukreta has its origins in an activist project by the Identitarian movement, which operated under the name #120 db. It refers to the decibel level of emergency whistles that women can use on the street if they feel threatened by sexual violence. In a video entitled *#120 db – Der wahre Aufschrei* (The Real Outcry), and in a testimonial style of protest rhetoric, ac-

tivists look directly into the camera and identify themselves as victims of sexual violence by migrant men (The video is no longer online; the description is based on an analysis of an archived version in Drüecke, Klaus 2019). Hence, the video campaign imitated both the labelling, the rhetoric and aesthetics of the #MeToo movement, which at the time (2017) publicly denounced sexual harassment of women and structural gender inequality. In the form of subversive alienation, the Identitarians conveyed a completely different message, which targeted exclusively migrant men as perpetrators. This racist framing of sexism (Calderado 2025) was already evident in a much-noticed earlier action by the group, when they interrupted a #MeToo plenary session at the 2018 Berlinale film festival with their posters in a disruptive action. With a large protest banner bearing the slogan "The voice of forgotten women #120db", they obstructed the view of the discussion panel on the podium for the audience gathered there and stole the full attention of the local press cameras. At the same time, in a gesture of communication guerrilla warfare, they denounced the supposed blind spots of the #MeToo event, which they claimed neglected the female 'victims of migration'.

Since 2019, the group has been appearing in public under the name Lukreta, both on the streets and on relevant online platforms. Its key founding member is Reinhild Boßdorf, a member of the Identitarian movement and of the Junge Alternative (now renamed Generation Deutschland). As is common with other activist networks, Lukreta's street and online appearances are closely linked. Happenings, demonstrations, and other street actions are documented on video with smartphones and shared on their online feeds.

The following section examines five activist videos by Lukreta that the group distributed on its official Instagram account in 2025. Furthermore another video by a Lukreta activist is included, who first appeared on Instagram under the username @sia_lukreta and currently goes by the name @siavonriva. While the Lukreta account mainly presents collective actions, @siavonriva's posts are characterised by a more individualistic style coined by influencer aesthetics. An Instagram reel from 27 February 2025 documents the disruption of a rally, that is annually organised by feminist activists under the slogan "One Billion Rising", campaigning against sexual violence.

Shot on vertical smartphone format, the video first shows spokesperson Reinhild Boßdorf holding a poster with the slogan "Remigration protects women". While the registered rally is taking place in the background, Boßdorf speaks in the foreground in a tone of moral blaming, claiming (without evidence) that there were two gang rapes of women by migrant men every day in Germany and demanding remigration as the only adequate solution. The message of the original feminist event is at the same time exploited and disrupted. This equally applies to the continuation of the video action. It shows how the Lukreta activists approach the participants of the rally and deliberately provoke them with their posters and calls for remigration. The outraged reactions of the local participants are obviously desired and captured on camera. From off-camera a male Lukreta activist



1 | Lukreta, “One Billion Rising”, Instagram Reel, 27 February 2025.

can be heard, supposedly trying to engage in dialogue with the feminist demonstrators by offering to talk to them about statistics on violence against women by migrant men. The refusal by the other side in front of the running camera is recorded as evidence of the ideological blindness and moral inconsistency of left-wing feminists. The situationist principle of disrupting public proceedings through provocation is taken up here only in a superficial manner. The main goal is the video-activist documentation of the refusal by their opponents to engage in dialogue. The target audience are the sympathetic platform users, not the feminists demonstrating on site.

Other video campaigns also demonstrate Lukreta’s strategy of superficially confirming processes and forms of recurring events ritualised in civil society, but semantically inverting them through their xenophobic messages. For example, in 2025, the group



2 | Selected Captions from Lukreta, Instagram Reel on International Woman's Day, 8 March 2025.

symbolically appropriated International Women's Day (8 March) and the UN-established International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (24 November).

A video from 8 March 8 2025 (that has been removed from the Instagram-account), shows a collage of historical black-and-white images from the first women's movement in the nineteenth century, images of self-confident female workers and mothers, charismatic female artists and athletes of the 1920s, and women demonstrating for the acceptance of the miniskirt in the 1960s. Hence it is a heterogeneous mixture that only partially takes into account the actual feminist movements, omitting the influential anti-authoritarian and later ones. Overall, the rather apolitical *topos* of the 'self-confident woman', as well as of proud motherhood, dominates. Parallel to this series of images, a voice-over narrator places the Lukreta group in direct succession of such historical pioneers of female emancipation and self-empowerment. In an appealing gesture, the narrator calls on female viewers to continue this legacy together. After the words "Now it is our turn, of the women of the 21st century, to solve our problems", white text panels display statements such as: "Germany: Wave of rapes by migrants", "Islam expert warns of 'imported' propensity for violence: What the numbers say" (although no numbers or specific sources are cited), or "It doesn't get any more patriarchal than the women's quota" (all translations by

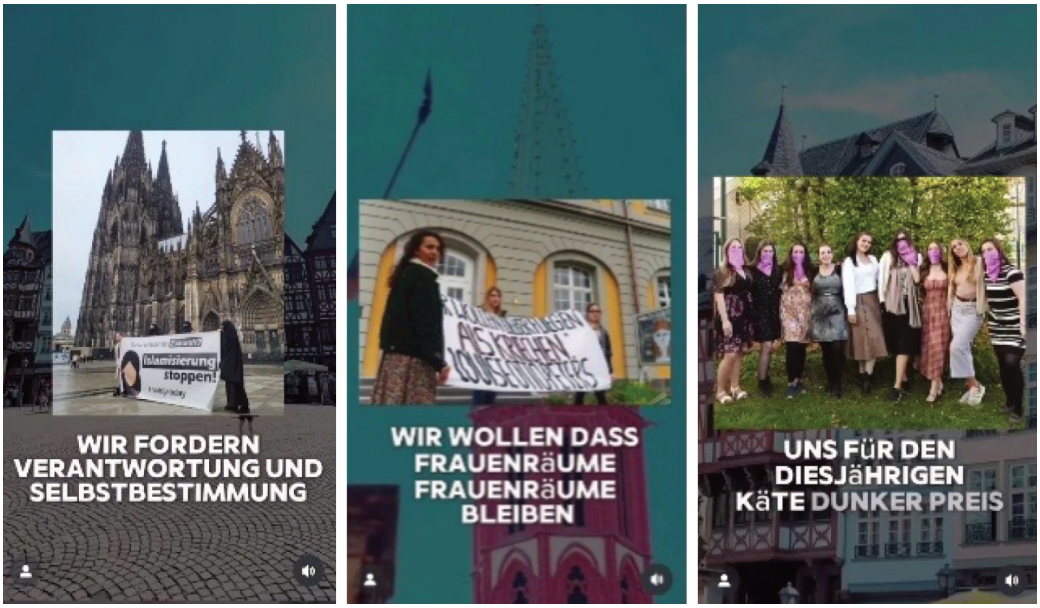


3 | Lukreta, Instagram Reel on International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25 November 2025.

the author). In between, supposedly apolitical problems are mentioned, such as TikTok addiction among young women, which is intended to relativize the far-right diagnosis of the times. Clearly the history of female emancipation is completely disconnected from its historical left-wing roots, with the allusive collage of images mixing poses and topoi of female self-confidence with traditional images of women. The associations evoked by these images are semantically anchored in the nationalist discourse by the voice-over commentary. This creates an alternative, distorted vision of feminist emancipation movements, which recontextualizes the early women's movement politically in right-wing discourse. In terms of camouflage, the right-wing extremist statements on the text panels, which are suggested as factual information, are framed by familiar, historic pictures and are also attributed with a heroic attitude.

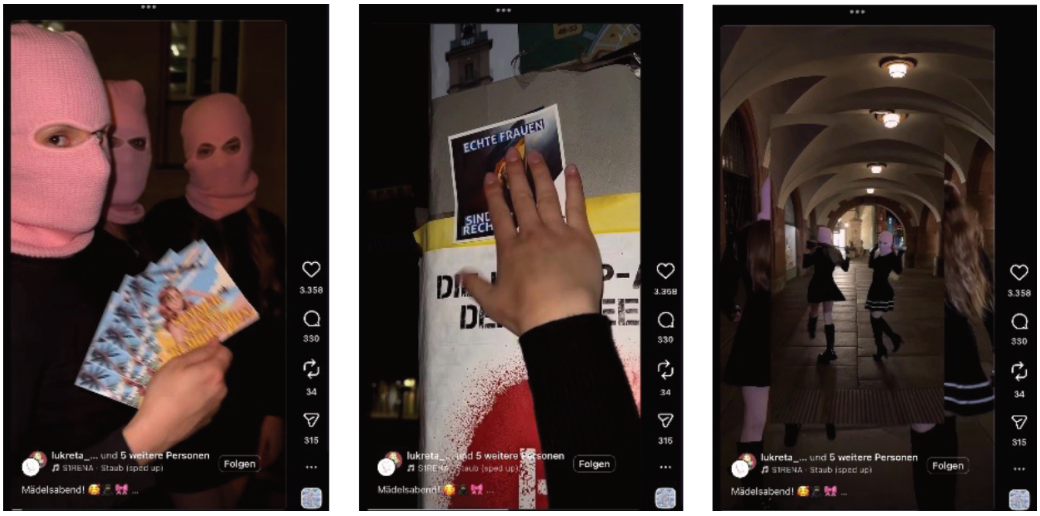
On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25 November 2025), Lukreta posted an Instagram reel (this video has been removed from the Instagram account but can still be viewed on the YouTube account of Lukreta) that explicitly uses internet-savvy codes to address a young audience on the net.

Presented in vertical format, it shows a collage of several layers of images, with the foreground almost entirely filled with quickly changing portraits of single activists speaking directly into the camera. In the form of a chain of sentences, which the speakers add to alternately, the impression of a collective speaker-subject is created. At the same time,



4 | Lukreta, Application for the Käte-Dunker Award, Instagram Reel, 8 May 2025.

the speakers address their demands to the state and society individually and by showing their faces. In a rhetoric of moral accusation and in adapting to the occasion of the ritualised day of remembrance, they deplore a decade of sexual violence against women by migrant men and crime on German streets as an expression of failed migration policy. Their statements are supplemented by textual tags that frame their faces at the top and bottom, alluding the form of emblems, as they are widely known from net memes. Their verbal statements are thus concisely reinforced by written words such as "rape", "murder", or "harassment" and aim for viral memetic effects in the further online circulation of the video. While the political message is thus doubly coded linguistically (verbally and in writing), the layered image collages in the background serve to quickly evoke affective connotations and reactions. The chosen motifs suggest a drastically charged conflict scenario between 'the state and politics', 'female victims', 'criminal conditions on German streets' and – as a reaction to this – 'activist resistance' against these grievances at the end. They show the heads of German politicians, black-and-white portraits of women (anonymous 'victims'), court hearings, police operations on dark streets, and, towards the end, the protesting activists. The fast-paced sequence of shots of the speakers, the use of jerky zooms on their faces, the rapid flow of image collages in the background, as well as the fading in of text tags and stickers create a mash-up aesthetic adapted to the platform. It packages the radical messages in a pop aesthetic. This camouflage not only contributes to the platform's algorithmically programmed attention principles. At the same time, it promotes the relativisation and normalisation of its racist messages. It is



5 | Lukreta, “Mädelsabend” (Girl’s Night), Instagram Reel, 6 August 2025.

by using the appeal of moral blaming, familiar from civil rights activism and by merging it with popular meme-, and mash-up-styles in online-spheres, the video fundamentally reverses liberal and feminist values in terms of communication guerilla.

In another video action, the group addresses feminists on the left in an even more provocative manner: In an Instagram-Reel from 8 May 2025, it applies for the Käte Dunker Award, which the Left Party awards annually to honour outstanding female personalities and feminist initiatives and associations.

In the style of a civil rights movement, the application video shows images of the activists in front of churches, traditional German house facades, or in summery outdoor shots, intended to evoke connotations of Christian and patriotic ‘engaged citizens’ from the mid of society. This impression merges with the evocation of more combative associations by photos of their symbolic street happenings. With their protest posters at public events such as participating in a demonstration for ‘remigration’, posing in full Muslim veils in front of a swimming pool or in front of Cologne Cathedral (at New Year Eve in 2015, many women have been sexually harassed by men around the Cologne Cathedral, many of them migrants. Since it occurred, this event has been excessively instrumentalised by far-right actors to support their pseudo-feminist and racist claims), they emphasize their combative commitment to women’s rights. Here the guerilla tactics of over-identification is invoked: The publicly proclaimed demand for recognition by the left-wing jury feigns their full identification with core values of feminism, whose liberal emancipatory worldviews are again ignored and replaced within the video by authoritarian and xenophobic claims.



6 | @siavonriva, "We are Counterculture", Instagram Reel, 7 July 2025.

Even more distinctively than the previous examples, the next two videos explore the aesthetics, practices, and codes popular and familiar on online platforms, in a way that is typical for online guerilla warfare. However, these examples also adopt emancipatory forms of protest in an openly provocative way.

In an Instagram reel by Lukreta, framed by the tag "Mädelsabend" ("Girl's night") a nocturnal street action is shown in which activists cover anti-fascist stickers in urban spaces with right-wing stickers. These display slogans such as: "Real women are right-wing!" or "Summer, sun, remigration". Under the slogan "Keep your streets clean!", they make the anti-fascist claims and images invisible and 'clean' the urban space of left-wing slogans against the right (e.g. "No Cops", "No Nazis", or "No soccer for fascists"). In this case, the guerrilla practice of street art is appropriated to pepper the infrastructure of public space with short messages that passersby notice even as they go rushing by. This traditionally left-wing practice of street art is not only used here to spread right-wing slogans on the streets. Using the call to 'clean up the streets' the activists radically invert the expressive gesture of street art in terms of a right-wing ideology prompting for authoritarian control and censorship in public spaces. This also applies to other forms of protest in the video action, especially its punk underground aesthetic. The activists, who are accompanied by

a shaky handheld mobile camera, mostly from behind and in close-up, often blurred shots, wear short skirts and pink Pussy Riot masks.

In some shots, they swing baseball bats over their shoulders, highlighted in slow motion. The left-wing feminist punk group Pussy Riot who are being alluded to had declared war on authoritarian and patriarchal images of women in Russia through situationist disruptive actions in churches and on political stages, but also through their music videos, conveying radical feminist attitudes. Through their presence in international media, especially during their arrests and court proceedings in Russia, they have also made the global public aware of the narrow limits of civil disobedience in their country. By appropriating the iconic Pussy Riot masks and the gesture of symbolically disrupting public space, the Lukreta activists evoke the codes of autonomous, spontaneous, and subversive resistance mentioned above with Kasimov (2025). While the masks originally served to protect against police persecution, when worn on the heads of the Lukreta activists they also suggest the risk of their action being criminalised by the state – which is obviously counter-factual and contrasts with the harmlessness of their sticker campaign. The baseball bats, however, break with left-wing punk aesthetics. They are a symbol of an openly violent neo-Nazi scene in eastern Germany after reunification. On the one hand, then, the video action evokes individualistic and emancipatory connotations in the form of Pussy Riot aesthetics, but also of Slut Walks, known from intersectional feminisms against sexual violence. On the other hand, these are ideologically counteracted by the symbolism of right-wing extremist Nazi violence and the racist slogans on their stickers. This obvious reversal is explicitly relativised in a disclaimer by the group in the comments section. Here, emphasis is placed on the satirical nature of the video, which is claimed not to be a call to violence or to property damage, while also pointing out that the stickers were removed afterwards to ensure the visibility of the left-wing stickers. This is a typical example of online guerrilla warfare by the far right, in which obvious racist and violence-glorifying messages are framed as satire and thus trivialised in the comments section of the posting. This effect is further enhanced by another internet-savvy practice: The video is accompanied by the atmospheric voice of singer S1RENA, who is currently popular on the internet. The fast, synthetic electro-pop rhythmically reinforces the quick cuts and the movements of the activists in the images. In the tradition of music videos and adapted to current video aesthetic trends on online platforms, a vivid mix of images and music is created here, which makes the political messages particularly easy to consume and also corresponds to the algorithmic principles of attention control on the online-platforms.

The combination of internet guerrilla warfare and the alienating appropriation of left-wing protest aesthetics also characterizes a video posted by on the Instagram account of @siavonriva under the tag “We are the counterculture. This is a petition for more right-wing alt-goth baddies”.

The caption already formulates the claim to provoke the general understanding of left-wing counterculture, also by ironically alluding to the activist form of petitions. In addition, the pop-cultural 'goth baddie'-trend is cited, in which young women confidently present their white-painted faces with dark eye makeup and black hair in gothic style on their online platforms. It seems obvious that the overemphasis on white skin is particularly suitable for the exploitation by right-wing users in order to expressively convey their racist worldview. The short video consists of a loop lasting only a few seconds and shows the creator in selfie format with gothic-style white-lit skin and a black cap. The video selfie is overlaid with a static text that responds to a supposedly left-wing quote at the beginning: "Right-wingers can't be punks/alternative". This is followed by a response: "Having the entire political-media complex on your side and demanding MORE state control […] is not 'anarchy'. Far-left ideologies are the currently accepted and publicly promoted narrative. You are conformist servants of the state. Leftists are normies, not rebels" (translation by the author).

The claiming of a hegemony of left-liberal views in the media and the state is provocatively exaggerated here by imitating the terms and linguistic jargon of the anti-fascist left and turning them against themselves. The provocation of a supposedly left-wing self-image is further intensified by the soundtrack. It uses the famous song *American Idiot* by the punk band Green Day and the line repeated in the video loop: "In television dreams of tomorrow, we're not the ones who're meant to follow". Through this selective appropriation of the song and its audiovisual blending with their nationalist performance, the video completely reverses the originally decisive anti-fascist message of the punk song into its opposite. The lyrics, which are omitted from the video, continue with "I'm not part of a redneck agenda. Now everybody do the propaganda". In the form of a semiotic appropriation, the rebellious punk attitude of the band is decontextualised and drastically alienated for the performance of its own subversive rebelliousness. This guerilla tactic characterizes the entire video, which copies the language, habitual gestures, and even the music of left-wing counterculture and instrumentalizes it for the propagandistic performance of a supposedly subversive minority counterculture on the far right.

Conclusion

It can be said that the guerrilla tactic of alienating imitation dominates in all of the videos which have been examined. On the one hand, and corresponding to right-wing online guerrilla warfare, the videos exploit popular codes and practices for their own purposes. On the other hand, they mimic and semantically reverse a relatively broad spectrum of left-wing protest symbols, rituals, and attitudes. In terms of femonationalism, the selected videos by Lukreta focus primarily on feminist forms of expression and practices: post-feminist attitudes such as gender equality or women's rights; public practices and rituals of feminist institutions and actors (such as commemorations and ritualized rallies, and award ceremonies), symbolic forms and practices of left-wing protest and subcultures

(such as situationist happenings on the street), selfie testimonials with moral appeals (such as the #MeToo movement), left-wing street art, and punk underground styles.

Apart from the mimetic alienation of this arsenal of left-wing protest- and countercultures, the only other frequently used principle that stands out is faking. However, as has already been emphasised above, this is not faking in the sense of emancipatory communication guerrilla warfare according to Eco. Instead, the group regularly spreads defamatory claims against migrants, which only superficially appear to be objective. None of the videos that speak of mass rapes by migrant men provide precise sources. Rather, Lukreta embraces the general tendency in social media described by Paolucci (2023), whereby subjectivity and personal feelings replace objectifiable knowledge. Therefore, the testimonial aesthetic plays an important rhetorical role in performing evidence: References to subjective fears and anecdotal experiences are affectively authenticated in the video selfie format. At the same time, these practices of self-authentication, borrowed from internet culture, represent a downplaying of the more serious act of lying and inflammatory insinuations. This is because in all of these videos the subjective testimonials are linked to generalizing racist insinuations against entire population groups.

While the implementation of principles of left-wing communication guerrilla in the videos of Lukreta is thus limited, the variance of the superficially imitated symbolic forms of left-wing subversion suggests creativity and variety. Accordingly, the redundantly conveyed, simplistic nationalist messages are not only trivialised and normalised by the appropriation of left-wing forms of protest, but also culturally enhanced. However, this effect is likely to wear off in the foreseeable future. The codes of subversion and anti-authoritarian self-empowerment associated with the symbolic arsenal of left-wing counterculture are being emptied of meaning through continuous reversal and re-semantisation with authoritarian and reactionary ideas – especially when they are standardised by the algorithmic dynamics of online platforms.

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Abstract

Fahlenbrach's article examines how femonationalist activists in Germany – specifically the group Lukreta – appropriate and reverse left-wing emancipatory forms of protest through communication guerrilla tactics. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of semiological *détournement* and femonationalism, the analysis of six Instagram reels published in 2025 reveals how Lukreta mimics feminist protest aesthetics, rituals, and symbols while semantically inverting their emancipatory content with xenophobic and nationalist messages. The paper argues that the standardisation of guerrilla communication techniques within platform economies has facilitated their appropriation by the far right, enabling the normalisation and trivialisation of racist discourse under the guise of feminist activism.

keywords | Femonationalism; Communication guerrilla warfare; Lukreta; Umberto Eco; Guy Debord.

Soldiers of Lights

Food, Self-optimization, and the Contemporary Far Right

Clio Nicastro

It is not surprising that Klaus Theweleit's two-volume *Männerphantasien* (*Male Fantasies*) has recently been recirculating – especially after a new German edition was published in 2019 – given both the innovative methodology it introduced at the time and its continued relevance today. First issued between 1977 and 1978, *Male Fantasies* not only provides one of the first multilayered approaches for structurally analyzing male violence and its deeply misogynistic roots, but it also remains sadly relevant today for understanding the ongoing proliferation of femicides as well as the ways in which masculine bodies are performed and staged by contemporary far-right movements. In a moment when feminists from various fields – including Diana E.H. Russell (Russell 1975), Susan Brownmiller (Brownmiller 1975), and Lea Melandri (Melandri 1977; Melandri 1988) – were already denouncing the systemic nature of male violence against women, Theweleit developed a cultural, philosophical, and psychoanalytical investigation of the writings produced by the Freikorps: the armed paramilitary groups active in early Weimar Germany, whose members later became part of the social base of National Socialism. For Theweleit and his generation, this research had significance beyond historical analysis: it involved confronting the violence of a close past, which still weighed on their generation, and demanded excavation in its unconscious dimension. At the same time, because Theweleit did not shy away from reading the Freikorps' brutal acts within the framework of patriarchy, his methods were valid when *Male Fantasies* was first published and continue to offer valuable analytical tools today.

Theweleit shows how these paramilitary soldiers experience their bodies as fragile and unstable, shaping fantasies and behaviors around the need to defend against perceived disintegration and fragmentation, which they would project on female bodies. He emphasizes that these fantasies are not merely ideological abstractions but are rooted in embodied experience and psychic formation. The Freikorps's texts express an obsessive aversion to disorder, fluidity, and what is coded as feminine, accompanied by a hypervigilant machismo that constructs the male self as a hard, armored body defined against what it fears will disintegrate it. The Freikorp soldier is a figure whose identity is constituted through the drive to withstand perceived fragmentation or dissolution, often by means of violence and control – a form of self-definition that privileges rigid boundaries

around self, gender, and nation. With Theweleit, we could say that fascism is not only a set of ideas to which certain people adhere, but also a state of the body: fascist subjectivity emerges from somatic states shaped by fear of fragmentation and boundary loss. This "fragmented body", perceived as internally unstable and vulnerable to dissolution, responds to anxiety with fantasies of violence, purity, and containment. If, as Theweleit suggests, fascist subjectivity is rooted in anxieties about bodily fragmentation and the need to secure rigid boundaries, these dynamics can also emerge in less spectacular, more intimate domains.

Contemporary practices surrounding food, health, and bodily discipline become especially revealing in this regard. Eating, after all, is one of the most literal negotiations of inside and outside, purity and contamination, strength and weakness. It is at this level – where the management of the body appears as self-care, optimization, or healing – that contemporary configurations of far-right ideology can circulate in subtler, pervasive forms. The recent documentary *Soldiers of Light* (2025) by artist Johannes Büttner and filmmaker Julian Vogel offers a compelling case through which to observe these transformations as well as the non-self-evident connection between eating disorders and far-right ideologies. *Soldiers of Light* unveils this relationship within the contemporary entanglement of conspiracy theories, far-right ideology, self-optimization, toxic masculinity, alternative medical practices and new age spirituality. Historically fascist ideologies often insisted on fantasies surrounding food, the body, and its discipline – areas where personal and collective desires become instruments through which far-right ideas are encoded and reproduced. In Italian fascism (see Garvin 2022; Helstosky 2004; Laforgia 2025) and German National Socialism (see Gerhard 2015) food was strategically mobilized as a tool to regulate citizens' daily lives, shape eating habits and national identity, and reinforce gendered expectations within the household. The fascist dictatorships of the twentieth century – e.g., Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, and Salazar in Portugal (see Saraiva 2016) – actively promoted the expansion of agriculture and animal breeding, as well as their technological advancements, in order to increase the control both over food production and the lives of the citizens. Food thus became a tangible expression of power and assumed a biopolitical function. Fabio Parasecoli in his recent book *Al Dente: A History of Food in Italy* (Parasecoli 2014) refers to the famous campaign to increase wheat production where Mussolini staged his participation in the harvest for a propaganda documentary, appearing shirtless in the fields.

Already in 1924, the fascist government produced numerous documentaries focusing on the life and labor of rural workers, portraying them as the backbone of the nation. Italian fascism leveraged the symbolic power of food in various propagandistic forms (the so called *battaglia del grano*, the Battle for Grain): bread, for instance, became central to fascist propaganda, with citizens encouraged to limit their consumption as part of broader messaging about discipline, sacrifice, and national identity. The consumption of wholemeal bread was especially (Parasecoli 2014, 69) promoted, not only by Mus-

solini but also in Nazi Germany as part of official food and health policy: from 1939, a *Reichsvollkornbrotausschuss* (Reich Wholemeal Bread Committee) established quality standards and propaganda campaigns to increase wholemeal bread consumption as a symbol of health and national strength, disseminated through posters, educational materials, and branding that linked whole grain bread to "people's health". As *Soldiers of Light* shows, these dynamics have taken on more duplicitous and hybrid forms today, entangling neoliberal market logics, social media influencers, and wellness ideologies that intersect with right-wing movements.

Beyond – or perhaps more precisely, within – its material and vital functions, food possesses an undeniable symbolic and political dimension; the weaponization of starvation in contemporary contexts such as Gaza and Sudan is an emblematic example of how food continues to operate as a mechanism of power. Neither fully subject nor fully object, to borrow Julia Kristeva's formulation from *Powers of Horror* (1980), food is instead abject: a liminal substance that enters and transforms the body, dissolving the boundaries between inside and outside. This liminality also accounts for its foundational role in identity, where food practices are deployed to reinforce social and territorial boundaries. Food is at once "natural" – a key term in ideological constructions – and culturally mediated, shaped by social structures, religious rituals, and of course politically determined within the global food market.

Soldiers of Light presents a case that stirred considerable public debate in Germany: the Königreich Deutschland (KRD, Kingdom of Germany), a para-state movement entangled with conspiracy theories, far-right ideology, alternative health practices, and New Age spirituality. The group was officially banned in May 2025, accused of attempting to establish a "counter-state" within Germany by undermining the constitutional order, creating pseudo-state institutions – including a bank, an insurance system, fictitious identity documents, and a currency – and disseminating antisemitic conspiracy narratives to legitimize its claims to authority. The movement's origins trace back to 2009, when Peter Fitzek, a former cook and karate instructor, unsuccessfully ran for local office in Wittenberg. After blaming the democratic system for his defeat, he publicly founded the Kingdom of Germany in 2012 and declared himself King or Supreme Sovereign. From that point, the group positioned itself as a parallel state, rejecting the legitimacy of German government institutions, taxes, and bureaucracy. Fitzek and his followers acquired properties – factories, hotels, and rural estates – to develop self-sufficient communities and offer alternative courses in health, education, and economic management, operating outside state regulation. Fitzek was convicted in 2017 for illegal financial operations, yet the Kingdom continued its activities until the 2025 ban.

Soldiers of Light did not become obsolete when the Königreich Deutschland at the centre of the film was banned – an event that more or less coincided with the film's release. This is the case for at least two reasons. First, as we read in the opening scene of the

film, it is estimated that there are around 23,000 so-called Reichsbürger and Sovereign Citizens in Germany who do not recognize the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) as a sovereign state, viewing it instead as occupied territory since 1945, and who continue to insist on narratives of "withdrawing from the state", "self-healing", "purified communities", and "alternative spirituality". But the more significant reason concerns the characters and themes the directors chose to foreground, as they illuminate phenomena that extend well beyond the specificity of this case. It is not the story of Peter Fitzek, "the King", that Vogel and Büttner chose to focus on to depict the structure and dynamics of the kingdom – I believe because Peter's figure is the most immediately recognizable in terms of historical connection. Especially in Germany, a country that famously has a historical tradition of entanglement of para-state far-right and libertarian-right ideologies with New Age spirituality, the myth of purity, and self-sufficient organic food production. While Peter remains an important figure, he is not as central as the documentary's main protagonists: Mr Raw (David Ekwe Ebobisse) and Timo – the two soldiers of light as David says to his Instagram followers in one of the scenes. These two characters, as we might interpret through Aby Warburg's lens, undergo an *energetic inversion* relative to historical precedents: they repurpose and transform the expressive weight of familiar symbols and practices, revealing how elements such as food, the body, wellness, and the chameleonic notion of healing can convey ideologies and narratives reminiscent of the past while being reconfigured by the economy, politics, and aesthetics of contemporary media. The directors position Mr Raw – the Kingdom's influencer, who runs a line of vegan food products and supplements – at the center of the film, as he is the linchpin of the group's material, ideological, and pseudo-spiritual economy, with his authority rooted both in communication and in the embodied performance demanded by social media platforms. His vegan food business operates through an online shop and through a café-bistro in Frankfurt called the Rohkosteria, whose workers are themselves members of the Kingdom and therefore do not receive a regular wage but instead "benefits" tied to their status within "the community". As a compensation for his work for David (which is in fact a form of enslavement through manipulation), Timo is offered accommodation in a communal house where the "community" lives, but, more crucially, he is granted free access to the so-called superfoods (as smoothies of varying consistency) and treatments that are presented as therapies capable of curing his psychosis (officially diagnosed as schizophrenia). Timo also suffers from a severe eating disorder – somewhere between orthorexia and anorexia – which appears to have developed during his earlier period as a bodybuilder.

Rather than ridiculing or flattening the "irrational" elements of these two stories, the directors approach them seriously – without thereby victimizing or glorifying David and Timo – by choosing to explore from the very first scenes two main themes that guide the documentary throughout: labor and body wellness in the form of the workout. The opening scene shows David and his collaborators performing cleaning labor, where they will shortly begin their daily exercise routine. Interestingly, the scene conveys more apathy than "fit



Still from *Soldiers of Light*, Johannes Büttner, Julian Vogel, Wood water Films and patatino, 2025. Courtesy of the artists.

masculinity," especially because the viewer's attention is drawn to Timo's emaciated body and vacant gaze. The unpaid labor required to sustain David's business within the Kingdom (operating outside formal taxation) is observed alongside – or rather, in relation to – the metabolic labor (the term is drawn from the field of animal studies. I thank Mikhail Lylov for suggesting it. See: Beldo 2017; Boyd 2001) of the body. Within the wellness ideology promoted by David's company, both offline and online, this bodily labor involves eating exclusively clean, organic food, practicing regular fasting, maintaining a strict exercise regimen, and undergoing para-scientific forms of healing – knowledge of which is kept secret by David. But also, as an influencer, David's labor not only break the borders between private and public space of work (something surely not new in neocapitalism) but it is completely embodied. And, considering the big trend of fitness and food influencers, it is worth to ask if this obsession with food are not new forms of eating disorders as an outcome of the metabolism created by the influencers body which is constantly at work in and on itself. Due to the chameleonic nature of eating disorders, food and fitness influencers (sadly, often women) are frequently seen as having hidden food obsession masked beneath the façade of a healthy lifestyle. Here, however, I suggest something more different: the labor of the influencer itself may generate a metabolic disorder.

In their essay, *Influencer Die Ideologie der Werbekörper* (2021), Ole Nymoen and Wolfgang M. Schmitt analyze the figure of the influencer as an emblem of contemporary digital capitalism, in which identity and aesthetics becomes a market force. The authors show how influencers represent a new form of advertising integrated into everyday life: their bodies, their narratives, and even their emotions are converted into vectors of commercial value. Content production thus becomes secondary to the ability to generate desire, imitation, and consumption; the influencer is less a creator and more a "living advertising medium".



Still from *Soldiers of Light*, Johannes Büttner, Julian Vogel, Wood water Films and patatino, 2025. Courtesy of the artists.

From this perspective, the phenomenon of influencers illuminates two central processes of the digital age: on the one hand, the aestheticization of labour and politics, and on the other, the marketization of aesthetics. Following Benjamin's famous insight that politics, once aestheticized, presents itself as spectacle and lifestyle, influencers embody a form of continuous self-representation that transforms choices, values, and attitudes into image-experience. Nymoen and Schmitt show how what appears spontaneous, authentic, or "personal" is in fact constructed in service of the monetization of attention. The images produced by influencers are already predisposed to sponsorship, turning the aesthetic into an embodied advertising vehicle. In this way, influencers become the intersection point of these two movements: they produce a politics reduced to the aesthetics of identity, and an aesthetics reduced to a commercial infrastructure, where value no longer derives from content but from its marketability.

In unveiling this contemporary phenomenon emerging also in the case of the Kingdom of Germany, the two filmmakers also bring to light also into the connection between this wellness business and contemporary right-wing movements. As a recent investigation by Al Jazeera showed segments of far-right wing activists have successfully infiltrated and co-opted the mainstream (Hay 2025; Kassam 2025) wellness movement, turning trends in organic food, holistic health, and "natural lifestyle" into vehicles for their ideology. What appears as harmless self-care or spiritual healing mask conspiratorial, xenophobic and supremacist beliefs. The investigation shows that this appropriation of wellness helps these groups evade scrutiny, presenting themselves as benign lifestyle even as they disseminate extremist content. Through this aesthetic, such groups construct an aura of innocence, authenticity, and apolitical detachment that enables the normalization of explicitly racist content. The semantics of wellness and nature thus become an affective



Still from *Soldiers of Light*, Johannes Büttner, Julian Vogel, Wood water Films and patatino, 2025. Courtesy of the artists.

platform capable of de-politicizing ideology, translating it into a familiar, domestic, "natural" imaginary. Linguistic anthropologist Catherine Tebaldi whose research focuses on digital traditionalism and coined the term "Granola Nazis" (Tebaldi 2023), has shown how healing rhetorics can attract subjects who are disillusioned or vulnerable in the face of contemporary crises – ecological, sanitary, economic – by offering an alternative horizon of meaning that promises protection, rootedness, order, and purity.

Mr Raw and Timo are two profoundly different figures, yet both construct their reality through a specific relationship with food, physical exercise routine, and healing. In Mr Raw's case, it is hard to tell where his business – both economic and manipulative – ends and his personal conviction begins. He appears to be a convinced supporter not only of the Kingdom – as a separate reality that protects him from the falsehoods and perversions of the outside world – but also of a wide constellation of conspiracy theories, ranging from flat-earth beliefs to the idea that the world is controlled by secret satanic sects, similar to some QAnon convictions held by Trump supporters who believe he alone can defeat them. Throughout the film he repeatedly asserts that he is the creator of his own reality, a narrative reinforced by the self-styled spiritual guide Sananda, whom Mr Raw interviews and promotes on his channels. Their conversations revolve around the imperative of self-optimization and the need to differentiate oneself from the majority of humans. The mantra that prevails in Mr Raw's discourse is the insistence on working on oneself regardless of the world around – since the world, he claims, is impossible to change. This logic of radical interiorization, of salvation through self-purification through fasting that he does on a regular basis, aligns with a broader neoliberal-spiritual grammar that individualizes both suffering and responsibility. It also resonates with the Kingdom's ethos, where personal transformation is posited as the only meaningful



Still from *Soldiers of Light*, Johannes Büttner, Julian Vogel, Wood water Films and patatino, 2025. Courtesy of the artists.

horizon, and where geopolitical, social, or historical structures are dismissed as irrelevant illusions. *Soldiers of Light* preserves this ambiguity of the neo-fascist wellness businnes, only gradually revealing political orientations within the Kingdom; it is only around the midpoint that one of its most committed AfD supporters. Josh, a muscular garage owner, initially presents himself as politically centrist – an interesting detail regarding AfD supporters' self-perception, who often do not see continuity with the Nazi past – before quickly deploying a repertoire of familiar statements: racist remarks, Holocaust denial, anti-immigration positions, toxic masculinity, and denigration of antifascist and leftist movements. David/Mr Raw, by contrast, never openly declares any affiliation with the AfD, consistent with the soft-politics logic of the online wellness business. However, a brief online search quickly reveals his smiling face in an of the YouTube program *Welt der Gesundheit*, hosted by Jana Witschetzky, a city councilor for the AfD in Meissen. Between January 2022 and November 2023, the channel produced over 60 episodes of *Bewusst Kochen!*. The program regularly covers topics related to esotericism, healing promises, and, notably, anti-vaccine and para-scientific content, with David appearing as an expert on various subjects.

Timo, on the other hand, is the primary victim of the Kingdom, at least as far as the film reveals: he passed away six months after filming ended due to severe malnutrition. By that time, he had left Mr Raw's community but had internalized some of their core convictions, particularly regarding food, prayers, and supposed alternative remedies for his mental health. His personal trajectory took a significant turn during the COVID-19 pandemic, as his mother explains to the filmmakers. Already struggling with psychotic episodes and intensely focused on bodybuilding and protein intake, Timo only encountered someone aligned with the Kingdom's ideology during an anti-vaccine protest in the lockdown pe-

riod. In this sense, Timo represents those who approach these ideologies with the hope of healing and who, paradoxically, may initially experience some sense of benefit from the calm provided by communal labor and a structured routine – similar, for instance, to therapeutic residential communities for drugs-dependent individuals, art therapy programs, or certain behavioral therapies. Yet the framework and the individuals in whose hands Timo finds himself operate in bad faith. Timo's story, while deeply personal and specific, also points to a broader issue: the ways in which the term healing circulates today in a pervasive manner. As Dana L. Cloud suggested already in 1997 in *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: Rhetoric of Therapy*, framing societal and political problems in terms of personal healing can encourage inward focus on coping and self-improvement rather than engagement with structural or collective challenges. In Timo's case, the promise of healing and well-being masks manipulative forces, illustrating the broader risks of therapeutic rhetoric when deployed in ideological contexts. His experience serves as a stark reminder of how appeals to personal wellness can conceal coercion and exploitation, even under the guise of care. If Theweleit's analysis centers on the brutal violence of the Freikorps, in *Soldiers of Light* violence does not appear in spectacular or militant forms but emerges instead as care, discipline, and purification. In Timo's case, what is presented as healing – strict dietary control, fasting, metabolic regulation, and unpaid labor within the community – functions as a regime of control that progressively isolates and weakens him. The promise of therapy conceals a coercive structure: Timo's labor sustains Mr Raw's business, and his body becomes a site of experimentation for a para-scientific ideology; a form of psychological and economic violence that ultimately contributes to his death through severe malnutrition.

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Abstract

Nicastro's contribution explores how contemporary wellness culture – focused on food, fitness, and self-optimization – intersects with far-right ideologies. Drawing on Klaus Theweleit, it argues that bodily practices become sites where anxieties about purity, control, and identity are embodied. Through the case of the movie *Soldiers of Lights* (2025), it shows how influencer culture and alternative health movements can subtly normalize extremist worldviews within everyday regimes of self-care.

keywords | Soldiers of Light; Granola Nazis; Klaus Theweleit; Klaus Theweleit; Male Fantasies.

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Hillibilly Split

A critical viewing of: Hillbilly Elegy (Netflix 2020)

Nicole Coffineau



Hillbilly Elegy, a dramatic film based upon the 2016 memoir by J.D. Vance, was released by Netflix in 2020. When the book was published, Vance was 32 years old. The book and film give an account of the young politician's poor, rural background and transplantation into the milieux of the socially and politically powerful. The story follows Vance from childhood to Law School across impenetrably superficial settings, demonstrating the potency of the in-born characteristics that distinguish him. While the film's narrative is, naturally, less robust and detailed than the novel's, its inconsistent structure as much as its pandering content contribute to a mode of politicization that has underwritten an important strand of recent right-wing strategy. It has been widely commented that *Hillbilly Elegy* (which) re-appropriates and adapts a form of identity politics for the white working

class, and that it played a significant role in attracting these groups to right and extreme-right parties. Indeed, the film tosses around plenty of stereotypes about the white, rural poor in America and traffics in tropes of survival and overcoming in order to cast Vance as a heroic protagonist. This essay will bolster these criticisms by discussing how the sequence and structure of the narrative contribute to what is ultimately a politically effective lack of depth that masks a void in which certain ideologies may be nurtured.

Overall, the presentation of Vance (character) as intact from the beginning of his journey belies several storytelling devices that substitute changes in setting and tone for introspection, creating a flimsy outline of the main character's journey of self-discovery that ultimately does not exist. Inconsistent and reductive portrayals of social and class environments and personal values amount to a confoundingly productive ambiguity, or rather, haziness, creating narrative voids. It is these voids that carry political impact in the real world. In other words, *Hillbilly Elegy*'s cinematic failures generate discursive openings for the cultivation of certain far-right messaging. Understanding this tactic may help illuminate the American right's recent success in gaining the support of the working class and the rural poor.

A review in The Guardian, published the day before the film's release, could manage to be only this laudatory: "This is a well-meant story of someone pulling himself up by his bootstraps, with some help from his grandma. But it feels contrived and self-conscious" (Bradshaw 2020). What this reviewer clocks as self-consciousness is an overabundance of agency on the authorial voice of the film. Although the adult, retrospective voiceover narrating the coming-of-age American boyhood tale is a well-used standard, this voice is generating rather than guiding the viewer's understanding. At the same time, the extremely superficial *mise en scene*, including supporting and peripheral characters, functions as a barrier. At many moments, the telling greatly overpowers the showing. And yet, this didacticism is obfuscated by the familiarity of the stereotyped settings and *cliché* dialogue, which disable critical reflection on the level of the narrative.

In the film, Vance moves across class boundaries, rather than develops or transforms as a person, to become what he is by the end of the film. This is not to say that the main character does not learn lessons on his epic journey from rural poverty to righteous power, but that there is a shiftiness, or a splitting, of focus and perspective, and an inconsistency of imagery of class and social conflict, that create the discursive space into which rhetoric or ideology may be planted. A major device in the story is Yale University. The way Vance presents his admission to Yale as the ultimate accomplishment, and his presence there the ultimate juxtaposition, suggests that these two phenomena legitimize his capacity to speak for the working class. But his relationship to Yale is contradictory and problematic. Vance's time at Yale serves as the parentheses within which the story of his childhood unfolds. We see him there for the first time just eleven minutes into the running time, and his climactic choice to return occurs one hour and forty-three minutes in, or fourteen min-

utes before the film's end. This use of Yale as a framing device for the memoir serves to stabilize the former as the present from which Vance's diegesis takes place, closing it off from the relative subjectivity of recounted memory.

Within the parentheses of Yale, Vance's biography is episodically presented in a way that is roughly chronological. A collection of personal memories is cinematically re-enacted and described retrospectively from the narrator's perspective. This generates a situation in which the viewer must trust the narrator to illuminate the meaning of particular artifacts from the past. The problem, though, is that these artifacts appear as heavily fabricated approximations of stock *clichés* about rural life, distancing Vance's authorial voice from reality, while at the same time providing coherence to individual episodes for the viewer. The result is that the viewer is not rendered critical of the narration, but has the space to participate in an undetailed and un-imaginative imaginary, either identifying with Vance's voice or projecting themselves into the scene. Vance's deployment of relatable hillbilly *clichés* glosses over contradictory images of him as both regular folk and superhuman exception. The question of his perceived reliability as a narrator is important for understanding this slippage as a tactic to politicize viewers.

In a study opposing memory and history, Pierre Nora argues that during the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of "real memory" – what he calls embodied "life […] social and unviolated […] taking refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unbroken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes" – was usurped by the archival impulse. While it might be a stretch to call Sevaistre's albums archives, Nora's use of the term refers to archival modes of perception and valuation. This is at the heart of my inquiry into the album's documentary functions, their capacity to convey history as a base for identity, and in their construction of the subjectivity of the viewer via certain relations with time and narrative (Nora 1989, 8, 13).

The topics of Nora's inquiry are the mechanisms by which social and cultural knowledge are constituted, protected, transmitted, and enacted. He identifies a shift during modernity whereby perception and intuition became less powerful tools for understanding the history of one's own identity and community, and the material trace or object gained traction as the arbiter of historical truth. What he seems to be grieving is the loss of direct access to personal and societal knowledge through experience to the need to record and externalize, and to preserve history in visual and material form, relying "entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. The less memory is experienced from the inside", he writes, "The more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs" (Nora 1989, 13).

Nora is writing of the period in which the nation-state was being constructed across Europe, focusing upon the institutionalization of the public collection and archive in order to stake out national identity. He is also writing about modes of perception that shaped collective understandings of nationalism and identity. The stakes are in the degree to which

social, political, and cultural knowledge are a matter of individual, internal, direct recording by the individual, versus the degree to which it relies upon what he calls "prosthesis", the external image or object that mediates history, obscuring its contours and distancing it in time. Said another way, narrative and time undergo shifts within the representation of history as it pertains to identity because of a lack of direct experience and the reciprocal rise of the archival impulse (Nora 1989, 17). Nora identifies the temporal dimension of his argument thusly: "Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past" (Nora 1989, 8). The problematization of perception around the status of the subject, the proximity of narrative, and the quality of time underwrite Nora's opposition of memory and history, and the particular loss or complication associated with modern history that he laments. It is interesting that Nora locates this problem in the conflict between modernization and nostalgia for "primitive societies" in light of the political and cultural frameworks in which Vance (which) and the far right currently traffic. Ultimately, the confusion between self-awareness, temporal proximity, and cultural-historical accuracy generates the void in which viewers may be politicized without the explicit insertion of ideology. The remainder of this essay will look specifically at some of the film's contradictions.

The gendering of the question of whether Vance (which) is self-made shifts drastically from the book to the movie. While the latter emphasizes the role of his grandmother to the exclusion of all others, there are several male figures in the memoir version that shape Vance (1:49:10). He says in voiceover towards the end of the film, "The first time, it was Mamaw who saved me. The second, it was what she taught me […]". Other than his grandmother, whom he calls Mamaw, those that imparted lessons to Vance seem to do so unwittingly. In the worlds of repressed rednecks and out-of-touch elites that he goes between, he is the only figure that seems to see the whole picture. He claims several different "belongings" or "roots", creating an all-American composite meant to represent the white working class. The *cliché* presentation, however, encourages viewers to imaginatively inhabit a generalized, conglomerate discourse surrounding historical and political identity in the US.

Broadly, the low-pitched writing style of both the book, and the film, which was adapted by Vanessa Taylor, a quite flexible screenwriter who is also responsible for Guillermo del Toro's *Shape of Water* and around twenty episodes of *Game of Thrones*, amounts to an almost impenetrably superficial and trite narrative. The simplified backdrop upon which Vance elaborates his origin story is partly created to put his own agency and strength of character into high relief, but it also serves to represent an American demographic in a pandering and catastrophic way. It has been noted recently in the Los Angeles Times:

> Vance portrayed [the working class] – 35% of Americans – as tragic victims of alcoholism, drug abuse, laziness, and their own self-destructive moral failings. Journalists ran with that, bringing their own stereotypes to depict the working class as angry, uneducated white men

> driven by economic insecurity and racist nostalgia to support Trump's retrogressive campaign. This distortion widened a real divide by alienating many Americans (Berry 2025).

But there are additional aesthetic and rhetorical layers that do more than generate or exacerbate stereotypes that were deployed to the benefit of the Trump campaign. Slippages and shifts across certain polarities within the film hold open a space in which it is possible for new right politics to be articulated and, more importantly, take hold.

The opening sequence introduces the young Vance in his primal setting. The viewer sees kid stuff from a kid's point of view, bugs and frogs and other things from a low camera angle, then riding on a bike through the holler, until the swimming hole is reached. When women are shown hanging laundry, the camera doesn't move, suggesting the stability of this this work, which is always done by others, possibly only women. There is a cut to Vance bursting out the front door to jump on his bike, and his voiceover begins. The first dialogue displays Vance's qualities in contrast with a representative hillbilly kid. Vance is automatically caring towards a wounded turtle he finds, knowledgeable about anatomical terms and physiological processes, and compassionate towards the turtle's life. There is a jump cut, briefly returning to the scene he's just left, where we meet the supporting characters and are charmed by their tough but tight-knit hillbilly ways. Then, cut back to Vance seen from directly above, on his back in the river, floating into the center of the frame, which he shares only with reflections of the trees and the sun. Three boys attack him for apparently no reason.

The scene delivers an incredibly simple dichotomy between good and bad in which three fit, slightly older boys attack Vance without apparent provocation. This dichotomy is reinforced when the three boys are just as pointlessly venomous towards Vance's male elders that come to his rescue in the knick of time. This dramatic scene is also the vehicle to lay out the platitudes that serve as Vance's core values, such as, "Never start a fight, but always finish it", and "Family or maternal pride above all else". Indeed, he attacks the generic, mean hillbilly only when he tells Vance that he'll "visit his mom later". This split between the inherently good and the inherently bad within the hillbilly class is reinforced throughout the film, by both adults and children. Mamaw, for example, refers to a, "No good mama behind the curtains. I wouldn't spit on her ass if her guts were on fire". As she offers leftover food to her "little buddy", presumably the no-good mama's son, who lives next door. Later, young Vance becomes friends with boys who, in Mamaw's words, "Will be on food stamps or in jail in ten years' time". Vance is saved when Mamaw makes the boys leave. He protests, "Those are my friends. Who am I going to talk to?" And Mamaw replies, "You can talk to yourself. It works for me", implying that the moral distance between her and the no-good kind of hillbilly is unbridgeable. The pejorative reference to social welfare programs, and their valuation alongside jail, draws a moral distinction, setting up implications that state and government benefits are both dysfunctional and corruptive, which is reinforced and contradicted later in the film. Mamaw herself relies upon a national food

assistance program called Meals on Wheels, but it lets her down by failing to bring J.D.'s meal after he comes to live with her.

The duality between good and bad is embedded in the family fabric throughout the film, and may reflect the fact that Vance did not actually grow up poor, but middle class. The family had three homes, for example – Mamaw's, Pawpa's, and Bev, his mother's, although she moved quite often to live with different men, according to the memoir. On the other hand, a scene involving young Vance at school shows him, and only him, unable to afford the $84 graphing calculator required to do his algebra assignments. He goes and steals the calculator, which Mamaw buys for him when he is caught by a store owner, who calls her instead of the police.

In this and other moments, we see the familiar collapse of sex and gender in service of the argument that the natural role of women is as scaffolding for men to live their lives. This notion is a well-known conservative staple. The complexity, however, given to Bev's character, performed movingly by Amy Adams, may deflect attention from the natural limits of her horizons. Bev did well in school and was the salutatorian, or second ranking student over all in her high school class, but nonetheless succumbed to drugs and hillbilly misery. The catalyst of this downfall, interestingly, was not the environment, but accidental pregnancy at age eighteen. As Bev explains to Lindsay, her daughter and the result of this pregnancy, "That's just what happens to girls". To which Lindsay replies, "Not stupid ones", initiating a physically violent fight.

Another important slippage relating to family and motherhood occurs in a traumatic scene when Bev becomes enraged with her son J.D. while she is driving, threatens to crash the car and kill them both, then pulls over and starts beating him. Her anger was insighted when she learned that an acquaintance of Vance had said something insulting about her, calling her many boyfriends "Flavors of the month". Bev flies off the handle, saying, "You let that little shit talk about your mom like that?" and quickly explodes. Young Vance, before becoming terrified, has a moment of confusion. He doesn't see the problem, pointing out that he didn't let the kid say it; "He just said it". This attitude is notable because, while it adds drama to the scene, it betrays the "code" we saw equally dramatically rehearsed in the first scene, when Vance resorted to violence in defense of his mother. The book explains *ad nauseum* that the hillbilly code essentially consists of defending your family with zero tolerance for outsiders even making negative or judgmental comments. Mamaw, played by Glen Close, delivers the intentionally iconic line, "Family is the only thing that means a goddamn", in a scene in which Bev asks J.D. for is his urine so that she can pass a drug screening. It is ambiguous, however, the extent to which the immediate "hillbilly" community may be considered "family", and where and how to draw the lines of inclusion and identity in a political or social sense.

A scene dramatizing one of Bev's relapses brings forth a major ambiguity or slippage regarding family as a value. In a public humiliation in which Bev runs into the neighborhood

street, apparently in great crisis, she expresses that her apparent relapse was triggered by the death of her father. She screams at Lindsay, when she says to her mother "We all miss him", "He was my daddy! Quit pretending like he was yours, he was mine!" While this heart wrenching attachment can be analyzed in several ways, there is certainly an argument that Bev suffered and relapsed because her family bond was too strong. This happens again after Mamaw, her mother's, death, when she begins injecting heroin. Indeed ,the dramatically performed, sheer panic comes across as a distillation of unadulterated attachment to the nuclear family, undermining the simplicity of the film's "family first" moral lesson. These contradictions, however, do not interrupt the affective experience of the film, partly because the extremity of the *clichéd* scenes and motifs creates an impenetrable surface over the entire film.

So, quickly back to Vance's obsession with Yale. He consistently relies upon it to make the point that he is remarkable for being there. Indeed, the way he pauses after saying the word "Yale" in many interviews over the last decade reveals the weight he gives to it. He is, of course, not the only person who identifies as poor or working class to have ever attended Yale. Bell hooks, in a personal reflection upon class and her own life, discusses her professorship at Yale with decidedly more depth and reflection. The most tired *cliché* in the entire film, centered around silverware and dinner etiquette, takes place when Vance attends a recruitment dinner at Yale law after his first year, about fifteen minutes into the running time. The scene is hard to watch, not least for the dialogue that is lazy, unconvincing, and contrived. The trope of the provincial wannabe calling a friend to help navigate a sophisticated place setting is fully elaborated. Arguably, this trope is so familiar, it could easily have been abbreviated, rather than fully fleshed out. The reference is well-known and crystal clear. This rare moment of commitment in the script serves to enforce Vance's feeling of alienation from the environment and social milieu. The use of close-up photography and the drawn-out rehearsal of "just-move-from-the-outside-in" advice that Vance receives from Usha, his then girlfriend, now wife, over the phone creates a moment in the film in which the viewer stays close to Vance. This invitation to identify with him as a character is, again, diffused by the familiarity of the cinematic situation, creating a narrative void for the viewer. A kind of passive ambiguity between memory and presence beckons the viewer to partially project themselves via participation, while accepting the image of Vance within the empty vessel of the *clichéd* scene.

In the final scene, Vance makes the symbolically loaded choice to drive back to Yale in the middle of the night for a big interview. After having returned home because Bev had overdosed and refused to go to rehab, Vance reflects upon his entire life in montage, releases his mother's hand, and delivers the line, "I can't stay. I'm not saving anyone here". He walks to his car to drive back to Yale, and to jump back across that class boundary, into that world. In the silverware scene, Usha directly tells the viewer why they should trust J.D. Vance: because he "isn't a douchebag and doesn't know how to use silverware". In another scene, when Vance remarks that his sister, Lindsay, has become a soccer mom,

she responds by calling herself a fake. “I think I got you outfaked by a mile”, is Vance’s reply. Between all these identities and across all these class lines, Vance amounts, in the film, as a shifter that refuses to commit. He’s not blank, but he is a canvas.

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Abstract

Coffineau’s contribution examines how *Hillbilly Elegy* (Netflix, 2020) transforms J.D. Vance’s memoir into a politically productive narrative of upward mobility. Rather than offering a coherent account of personal development, the film relies on *clichés*, shallow class imagery, and structural inconsistencies that produce narrative gaps and ideological ambiguity. The story presents him as both representative of and exceptional within the white rural working class, while never fully resolving these contradictions. The essay presents the film’s lack of psychological and social depth is as a condition of its political efficacy: by substituting stereotypes and familiar tropes for reflection, Hillbilly Elegy opens a discursive space in which right-wing and far-right messages can take hold. In this sense, the film’s cinematic failures help explain its wider political usefulness.

keywords | Hillbilly Elegy; J.D. Vance; Netflix; Yale; Republican party.

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