Overview of in-progress Research: The Aesthetics of the Alt-Right

***CW: Misogyny, rape, racism, nudity, anti-semitism.***

I. Context and Terminology

For the greater part of the past year I’ve been surveying the aesthetic sensibilities of nationalist internet hubs such as the news publication Breitbart, 4chan’s /pol/ imageboard, the subreddit r/the_donald, and similarly affiliated Facebook pages.¹ These communities constitute what journalists and theorists have come to refer to as the alt-right—online neo-fascist groups whose growth mirrors and informs the growing nationalist, nativist sentiment as it is represented in the recent electoral success of the UK Independence Party, the Trump campaign, Austria’s Freedom Party, the French National Front, and Germany’s Alternative for Germany Party.

Briefly, before I begin thematizing the aesthetics of the alt-right, it is necessary to outline the two definitions of fascism that I am using in this essay. Fascism is an amorphous term with a multitude of definitions; one useful definition I have encountered comes from semiotician Umberto Eco, who was himself a child during Mussolini’s fascist regime. In his essay Ur-Fascism, Eco identifies themes and rhetorical habits that underpin fascism (although his interrogation is limited to describing what fascism looks and sounds like, as opposed to the

¹ In terms of content creation, 4chan’s /pol/ or “Politically Incorrect” board is the engine behind the alt right; although there is no way to fully trace each image contained in this essay, in general, they probably came from /pol/. Other sites and pages tend to aggregate, curate, and circulate more than they create; they are critical for reaching what the 4chan community calls “normies”—normal people who are unlikely to frequent 4chan or to be aware of its status as the engine of internet culture.
mechanism by which it emerges). ² Some of the characteristics that I will refer to in my aesthetic
survey include:

1. the cult of tradition which idealizes a primordial past (think Make America Great Again,
or Mussolini’s call to build a new Rome, a call recently echoed by White Nationalist
Richard Spencer³).

2. fear of difference, whether difference be sexual, gendered, religious, or racial.

3. a cult of masculinity that, tends to manifest itself in an obsession with sexual politics
(refer to online pick-up artistry and the heteronormative gender roles embodied in the
nuclear family.)

4. a hostility towards parliamentary politics, criticality, and reason.

5. a belief in permanent warfare and a corresponding cult of action for action’s sake.

6. a worship of technology, not in the manner of an Enlightenment worship of reason, but
faith in technology to conquer and reaffirm inegalitarianism.

However, Eco’s highly legible, clear-cut categorical definition is problematized when we
consider Robert Paxton’s more nuanced definition; in his essay Five Stages of Fascism, Paxton
argues that it is only possible to identify a fascist state in considering the actions and functions of
a state—to Paxton, aesthetics are simply not enough. Paxton’s “functional definition of fascism”
is the following: “a system of political authority and social order intended to reinforce the unity,

³ Sam Kestenbaum, “Who is Alt-Right Figurehead Richard Spencer”
energy, and purity of communities in which liberal democracy stands accused of producing division and decline." In other words, fascism is a reaction to the perceived shortcomings of liberal democracy; it is a fundamentally negative project and can be identified insofar as its actions operate antagonistically against the egalitarian standards prescribed by liberal democracy. Paxton’s suspicion towards any attempt to define fascism based on aesthetics may put the task of this essay—to categorize the alt-right by way of aesthetic thematization—in jeopardy. However; I believe that Paxton fails to understand that the mobilization of the image is itself a function of the state and thus, within his methodology of looking at actions rather than pictures. Boris Groys’ stipulation regarding the activity of the image is useful here—in his text In The Flow, Groys reminds us that “the digital image is an effect of the visualization … of the invisible digital data” and thus is rarely exhibited, rather it is “always only staged or performed.” Groys’ definition of the digital image as a happening as opposed to an object aligns with the recurring theme of the meme-as-artillery within the alt-right; notions of “meme warfare” (fig. b) or the 2016 campaign as the great “meme war” (fig. a) approach the contemporary phenomenon of fake news as not so much a crisis as an opportunity.

---

Where the mainstream media is concerned that the Russian state, using online reposting bots, deliberately push misinformation, online alt-right constituents indulge in the dissemination of misinformation and propaganda. Thus, we see that images are not simply decorative supplements to a fascist regime’s actions, as Paxton implies—rather, their very existence is synonymous with *political or military action*.

The alt-right consists of a number of different groups, although certain ideological tenets are consistent throughout these communities in some form or fashion—a preference for authoritarianism over democracy, inegalitarianism over egalitarianism, and a general suspicion or conspiratorial attitude towards what they perceive to be the cultural hegemony of the Left—a hegemony exemplified in perceived liberal leanings of the mainstream media, the entertainment industry, and academia. Their economic views are difficult to discern, with protectionism, accelerated free market global capitalism, and anarcho-capitalism all being advocated in different communities. That said, economic issues are rarely discussed among the alt-right. This lack of coherence or even discussion at all regarding economics is critical to understanding the alt-right; their ideology relies heavily on cultural arguments, which are essentially codified racial arguments.

The one exception to this lack of interest in economics is the technocratic intellectual portion of the alt-right, which argues that free market capitalism (oftentimes under an authoritarian leader) reaffirms these cultural arguments and lays the groundwork for a post-democratic authoritarian politics. This faith in markets to “naturally” allow winners and losers to emerge is an evolved form of the ideology espoused in Milton Friedman’s famous

---

quotation that “the great virtue of a free market system is that it does not care what color people are; it does not care what their religion is; it only cares whether they can produce something you want to buy.” This sentiment, which seems to advocate for an egalitarian society lays the groundwork for a coherence between hypercapitalist sentiment and biological or cultural racism. An alt-right constituent might argue using Friedman’s logic that, since the free market system cannot discriminate, if black people are caught in a poverty trap under capitalism it cannot be the fault of institutions and must be the fault of either culture or genetics. Furthermore, the natural tendency for capital to forge interdependent networks through communications technologies and the division of labor is, as Deleuze and Guattari describe in the chapter “Micropolitics and Segmentarity” within *1000 Plateaus*, a tendency that presupposes autocracy. Deleuze and Guattari draw from French anarcho-communist philosopher Daniel Guérin as they postulate that “if Hitler took power … it was because from the beginning he had at his disposal microorganizations giving him ‘an unequaled, irreplaceable ability to penetrate every cell of society,’ in other words, a molecular and supple segmentarity, flows capable of suffusing every kind of cell.” Here, Deleuze and Guattari imply a correlation between networked flows of communication/capital and autocracy; the alt-right intelligentsia responds by simply nodding and remarking that this is exactly what they wanted the whole time.

---

Indexing these movements across a two axis chart (fig. c) is productive for the intents and purposes of this paper; however, what is most interesting to observe are instances in which these communities convene in internet “public spaces”\(^9\), most notably reddit and 4chan. Their creative propagandic images are disseminated throughout social media and oftentimes circulate all the way up to the Twitter accounts of political leaders (fig. d), activists, entertainers, and of course, into our national consciousness.\(^{11}\) As I will refer to this chart throughout this essay, I would like

\(^9\) This chart is a modified version of one presented by new media theoretician Florian Cramer in this lecture: https://www.pzmediadesign.nl/av/FlorianCramer-AltRight-2016_11_28.mp4

\(^{10}\) Which are not public at all; later on in this paper I will describe how the replacement of authentic public space by the pseudo-public privately owned digital is critical to understanding neo-fascism as inherently corporate.

\(^{11}\) One particularly egregious example is Donald Trump retweeting anti-semitic images from accounts that spread awareness of the ongoing “white genocide.” Refer to: Talk Kopan, “Donald Trump retweets ‘White Genocide’ Twitter user” http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/22/politics/donald-trump-retweet-white-genocide/ January 2016 and Anthony Smith, “Donald Trump's Star of David Hillary Clinton Meme Was Created by White Supremacists” https://mic.com/articles/147711/donald-trump-s-star-of-david-hillary-clinton-meme-was-created-by-white-supremacists#.JdeAjkiBy (July 2016)
to clarify its organizational logic. Groups, terms, and individuals are plotted according to their variations on the central tenets of the alt-right’s ideological disposition, namely in regards to Nationalism and Faith.

(fig. d)
Nationalism in general is a defining characteristic of the alt-right; however, within the nationalist ideology there are degrees of variation, particularly in regard to the status of Jewish people and Israel. Groups that more closely embody economic nationalism can still be considered mainstream figures since their rhetoric skirts around social issues such as race and religion. On the opposite side, the groups share a nationalist ideology, but the rhetoric takes on a distinctly racialized, anti-Semitic, tone—a stark contrast to the staunchly pro-Israel economic nationalist groups that cohere with the Trump Administration itself. It is worth noting, however, that the general cultural arguments against “political correctness” can be understood to be anti-semitic in origin; these arguments find their origin in the writings of paleoconservative figures such as Pat Buchanan and Heritage Foundation founder Paul Weyrich. In his 1999 letter to Amy Ridenour, Weyrich describes how what he perceives to be the rise of “political correctness” is actually a coordinated effort, initialized by the Frankfurt School to reform national discourse for Marxist ends. This conspiracy theory is generally referred to as “cultural Marxism,” and it has been endorsed by Pat Buchanan and Ron Paul and more recently has been a rallying cry for the alt-right; the term can be understood to be dog-whistle antisemitism insofar as the Frankfurt School theorists, all of whom (besides Jürgen Habermas) were Jewish, take the form of critical puppet masters dictating the degeneration of socio-moral fabric for their own gain. (fig. e)

---

Towards the bottom of the chart (fig. c), I’ve contrasted the religio-philosophical underpinnings of the alt-right. On the left side of the chart are the individuals and movements that place their faith in inegalitarian readings of traditionally recognized religion. Perhaps echoing Julius Evola’s spiritual racism, various communities re-read Christian mysticism, Zen Buddhism, and Hindu polytheism, ultimately drawing White Supremacist conclusions. On the bottom-right, we see a more technocratic, hypercapitalist neo-fascism that places its faith in markets, accelerated capitalism with so-called “Asian Values”, and “empirical” genetic research.
to reveal the truly inegalitarian hierarchy of racial classification. This hypercapitalist faction essentially submits to, and actually advocates for, the magnification of the consequences of neoliberalism on social institutions and individual subjectivity. There is a loose historical allegory to be found here: the spiritual quadrant of the alt-right finds coherence in Julius Evola’s spiritual justification for fascism (a concept that was quite appealing to Mussolini\(^\text{13}\)), while the techno-determinist quadrant draws influence from Nazist racism, which uses biological arguments for racism.\(^\text{14}\) Thus, opposite axes should not be understood as antithetical; the axes are constitutive and relational, accounting for variations in nationalism and faith.

II. “Economic Nationalism” and the “alt-light”

\(^{13}\) Paul Furlong, *The Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola* (New York: Routledge, 2011) pg. 40

\(^{14}\) Both philosophical factions of the alt-right take the task of providing a vision of futurity for the movement; these visions of futurity are distinctly Orientalist. For the spiritual faction, Asia is useful as a mythical, homogenous, esoteric site, while for the accelerationist faction, Asia functions as a caricature of a hypercapitalist future.
The faction of the alt-right that I’ve labeled “economic nationalists” (fig. f) are the most recognizable aspect of the alt-right; it can be argued that now they occupy the executive branch of the United States government. At the very least, they (via the appointment of Breitbart News executive chair Steve Bannon as Trump’s new strategist) occupy the position of the President-Elect’s National Security advisor and key confidante. Beyond Bannon and Trump, self-identified major contributors of the public alt-right include Breitbart and its tech editor Milo Yiannopolous. Rhetorically, these movements cohere with the European far-right movements insofar as they absolve themselves of anti-semitism and make largely cultural arguments against immigration. These movements, figures, and publications have found a receptive audience in a number of online communities that are defined by gamer culture and what has been

---
15 Absolved of overt forms of antisemitism, that is; codified forms such as the term globalist still remain.
in the past referred to as the *Manosphere*. Almost exactly as it sounds, the *Manosphere* refers to a loose affiliation of anti-feminist men’s rights groups across the internet, including the subreddits *r/theredpill, r/mgtow*[^6] and forums such as bodybuilding.com and a variety of smaller blogs.[^17] The *Manosphere* also focuses on pickup artistry (PUA) or seduction training, which attempts to pathologize female personality types and empirically develop strategies to seduce them. One popular figure in the *Manosphere* is social media personality Mike Cernovich who was recently profiled in a *New Yorker* article titled *Trolls for Trump*[^18] Cernovich is the author of *The Gorilla Mentality*, which epitomizes the interests of “the mansphere,” including gender essentialism, pickup artistry, “alpha-male” culture, rape apologetics, anti-feminism, and being *redpilled*[^9].

This rag-tag network of anti-feminists, internet gamers, and 4chan trolls evolved to have a more consistent, intentional political identity during the 2014 GamerGate controversy. This controversial online flame war arose when Zoe Quinn, a video game developer and gaming journalist was attacked by a vindictive ex-boyfriend in a blog post. This polemical diatribe accused Quinn of having relationships with multiple men in the gaming community, including one writer for the gaming-specific Gawker affiliate site Kotaku. Reddit and 4chan users “spun this material into a story about how Quinn allegedly slept with multiple gaming journalists in

[^6]: the acronym MGTOW stands for “Men Going Their Own Way,” away from mainstream discourses of gender egalitarianism.
[^17]: for a list of manosphere-type websites, refer to https://www.trp.red/blogs/
[^9]: this is the first of many references to the “dose of reality” as it is metaphorized in the Wachowskis’ 1999 film *The Matrix*. The term has varied utility but in general refers to the process by which an individual becomes indoctrinated into the ideology of the alt-right although, the image of the red pill asserts itself as emancipatory.
return for [positive] coverage, though the allegations did not support such a claim.” The targets of this witch-hunt extended beyond Quinn to journalist and theorist Anita Sarkeesian; Sarkeesian defended Quinn against the anonymous users that were leaking personal information, including Quinn’s social security number, and issuing rape and death threats. Ultimately, Sarkeesian, whose application of “basic feminist theory to video-games had already made her a target” became an avatar for feminist critique and “PC-culture” in general. Thus, via Sarkeesian, the GamerGate controversy became an online ideological assault against anyone who levied feminist criticism against video-games or gamer culture, all under the purported goal of achieving “ethical standards in games journalism.”

One figure who used the GamerGate controversy as a springboard for his own personal career was, again, Breitbart tech editor Milo Yiannopoulos. Yiannopoulos looked at the angry mobs of young disaffected anti-feminist gamers and saw a community ripe for political mobilization. Matt Lees notes in his Guardian op-ed, *What Gamergate should have taught us about the 'alt-right'* during GamerGate, Breitbart, largely through Yiannopoulos, “seized the opportunity to harness the pre-existing ignorance and anger among disaffected young white dudes … games were simply the tip of the iceberg - progressive values, went the argument, were destroying everything.” Understanding the GamerGate controversy as a catalyzing event, in which large swaths of online users were shocked into awareness of their newfound political purpose (to combat the perceived rising tide of political correctness) is critical to understanding

---


21 Matt Lees, “What Gamergate should have taught us about the 'alt-right'” *The Guardian*. December 1, 2016. [https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump)

22 Ibid.
the demography and the strategies of the alt-right; GamerGate represents an inaugural instance of
large-scale doxxing (referring to the public release of personal information on the internet) and
harassment campaigns as a weaponized political tool. GamerGate is also useful in
understanding Breitbart’s model of engagement—as Lees notes, Breitbart’s “trick” is to
“strongly represent a single issue in order to earn trust, and then gradually indoctrinate to suit
wider purposes.”

The “economic nationalist” or “cultural nationalist” faction of the alt-right that reared its
ugly head during GamerGate and exponentially gained political power through the rise of
Breitbart and its synergistic relationship with the Trump Campaign (referred to in fig. g as the
“alt-light”) is known to have a contentious relationship with the overtly white Nationalist faction
of the alt-right. However, although they might regard each other as antithetical, and do hold
opposing opinions on certain issues (homosexuality and the status of Israel, for instance), from a
scholarly perspective, they are two sides of the same coin; as I will point out throughout this
paper, the more mainstream “alt-light” (fig. g) is simply a stepping stone on the path of full
radicalization. In fact, another major architect of the GamerGate hate-campaign was Andrew
Aurnheimer, more commonly known as “weev.” Today, weev is known for his anti-semitic
op-ed contributions in neo-Nazi forums; on his own personal blog he wrote in late 2015 that
GamerGate was “the biggest siren bringing people into the folds of white nationalism.”

---

23 Matthew N. Lyons, “Ctrl-alt-delete: The Origins and Ideology of the Alternative Right” Political Research

24 Matt Lees, “What Gamergate should have taught us about the ‘alt-right’”

Each memetic image that I will analyze in this essay is necessarily an iteration of an initial formula or logical system. Memes cannot be subject to formal analysis because their visual language of memes is highly iterative; signs are not self-contained in their signification but deliberately referential to a past lineage of meaning. Each image refers to an initial genre, and then iterates upon it. The image either adheres to the initial logical system or subverts it. The lifespan of the meme can be determined by how thoroughly it can be subverted and transformed while still maintaining some resemblance to the initial system. Thus, in each image, we must be careful to pay attention to what is different and what is the same. Memes become political not in their entirety but in their select specificity—some symbols are simply there to let the viewer know which game is being played.
(fig. h)

(fig. i)
In this case (fig. h), the genre is that of the “Simulator Meme”, in which the viewer is positioned as the player of an absurdist pared-down video game oftentimes offering limited functionality\textsuperscript{26}. Prototypical, banal, apolitical examples of the “Simulator Meme” include a goat simulator in which the user simply roams around as a goat\textsuperscript{27} (fig. i), and a vacuum simulator where you can vacuum up garbage. Thus, the meme can be given a generic form: the word \textit{simulator}, in that specific typeface overlaying a screenshot of a roaming video game instills in the viewer an expectation that whatever is being simulated will be reduced to a few essential functions. Up until that point, the meme is close to functioning as an empty container for ideology. After that, each decision is idiosyncratic and political.

This image (fig. h) is pulled from the Facebook meme page \textit{Edgy Memes and Fashy Dreams}. In it, we see a number of racist and fascist tropes—the depiction of the animalistic black male figure (rendered as a re-skin of a Skyrim “red guard”\textsuperscript{28}) pursuing a white woman epitomizes the invocation of embedded feminism as a justification for xenophobia. The \textit{other} is presented as both a subhuman degenerate and an existential threat; in Eco’s words, he is “at the same time too strong and too weak.”\textsuperscript{29} In considering the relationship between the title of the game and the actual content, we encounter a subversion of the expectations laid out by the simulator meme’s generic form; the “protagonist” (in this case, the immigrant \textit{other}) is supposed to be what is simulated. However, the game is not titled \textit{Immigrant Simulator}, rather it is titled \textit{Europe Simulator}. Thus, the reduced narrative of an immigrant sexually assaulting a white

\textsuperscript{26} KnowYourMeme, “Simulator Game Parodies” http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/simulator-game-parodies
\textsuperscript{27} Goat Simulator, http://www.goat-simulator.com/
\textsuperscript{29} Umberto Eco, “Ur Fascism”
woman is presented as synonymous with the European condition in general. We are left with nobody to identify with in this depiction; we are cannot be the foreigner and, since we are entering from a fundamentally male space, we cannot be the victim. What’s left is to identify as the simulation itself. This is a motif that, as I will describe throughout this essay, is highly desirable for the alt-right; they consistently exhibit a religious faith in science and technology to undermine what they perceive to be the false ideology of racial egalitarianism.30

The overtly sexual-political fantasy here cannot be ignored of course; after all, a key rhetorical strategy against immigration has been to pigeonhole the immigrant as a rapist, drawing from admittedly real and troubling events such as the New Years 2016 Cologne sexual assaults. Trump’s comments that labeled Mexicans as rapists during his campaign serve a similar role as these fear-mongering tactics. However, we find a contradiction in the perceived threat of rape, since the Manosphere tends to engage in rape-apologetics31 and victim-blaming. Thus, we can postulate that in this image, the alt-right and its Manosphere constituency do not take issue with rape itself (which is not to say, of course, that rape and its depictions are not of great concern). Thoedor Adorno’s essay on anti-semitic propaganda in his anthology of essays The Stars Down to Earth is prophetic; Adorno reminds us how within fascist discourses, “scandal stories, mostly fictitious, particularly of sexual excesses and atrocities are constantly told; the indignation at filth and cruelty is but a very thin, purposely transparent rationalization of the pleasure these stories convey to the listener.”32 Here, Adorno’s contribution helps thematize alt-right’s adulation of Donald Trump grabbing women by their genitals and the alt-right’s slaeandering of refugees as

30 Alt-right constituents commonly refer to Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein’s text The Bell Curve as an exemplary instance of science justifying racism.
31 Refer especially to the writings of rape-advocate Roosh V, such as Roosh V, “How to Stop Rape” http://www.rooshv.com/how-to-stop-rape (2015)
“rapefugees” within a single system; both sex and sexual assault are simply tools to collectively indulge in a previously formed opinion.

Thus, the conflict here is unmistakably racial—rape is not an issue, but miscegeny certainly is. This fear and revulsion at the prospect of a black man having sex with a white woman has been analyzed by a number of prominent figures that precede my discussion, most notoriously by Frantz Fanon, and in a more autobiographical manner by Malcolm X. It is not difficult to associate this image with the full-page ad taken out by Donald Trump calling for the death penalty for the Central Park Five, a group of black and latino youths that were accused of sexually assaulting a white female runner. Years later, DNA evidence revealed that the youths were not in fact guilty; however, Trump adamantly refused to change his stance.

33 refer to Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1967)
The alt-right’s perception of the black-male as a sexual threat is further reinforced by the alt-right’s insult of choice, *cuck*, used in a manner similar to the word *faggot*—a weak, “beta,” or emasculated man *(fig. j)*. This word has matriculated into mainstream political discourse, with the term *cuckservative* referring to a conservative who is willing to work across the aisle or moderate his position on a hardline issue, nominally immigration.  

Returning to the racial question, it is imperative to note that the term *cuck* has a distinctly racial dimension—the word

---

36 Jeb Bush is arguably the most genre-defining *cuckservative*; the term refers as much to a certain manner of affect as it does actual political beliefs. In an interesting subversive gesture, since Jeb inadvertently operated as a sort of anti-Trump in the initial days of the Republican primaries, anarcho-communist groups have been rehabilitating his likeness into a Leftist revolutionary icon.
refers to cuckoldry, a genre of porn in which white men with white wives invite black men over to have sex with their wives while they watch (*fig. k*).

However, we encounter a contradiction here insofar as the typical alt-right poster necessarily identifies more with the “beta” trope than the hypermasculine “alpha” trope. In her recent Baffler essay pathologizing the “New Man of 4Chan,” Angela Nagle describes the emergence of a cult of personality around school shooters, especially the Oregon shooter Chris Harper-Mercer and the Isla Vista shooter Elliot Rodger, on 4chan’s /r9k/ and /pol/ boards. Nagle describes how both Harper-Mercer and Rodger epitomize 4chan’s “beta” trope—Harper-Mercer was introverted, played video games, and lived with his parents while Rodger, who frequented *Manosphere* hubs such as PUAHate and r/TheRedPill was tortured by the fact that he was still a virgin at twenty-two. In fact, one of Rodger’s YouTube vlogs cited by Nagle could describe both the immigrant subject in the *Europe Simulator* image and Trump himself; Nagle writes how “[Rodger] announced his desire to punish women for rejecting him and railed against sexually active, macho, dominant men, whom he called ‘brutes’ and ‘animals’.”

Mass shootings carried out by “betas” are celebrated as inaugural events to what 4chan refers to as the “beta uprising”—a violent, dystopian interpretation of a commonly-repeated colloquial bastardization of Matthew 5:5: “the [geeks] … shall inherit the earth.” Nagle continues to outline an incongruence between what the alt-right espouses—heteronormativity, hypermasculinity, transphobia, and homophobia—and what its constituents actually enjoy: “gender-bending pornography, discussions about bisexual curiosity, and male My Little Pony

---

37 An acronym for “Robot 9000”
fandom.”39 In his essay on “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” Theodor Adorno notes how “Hitler … was well aware of the libidinal source of mass formation through surrender when he attributed specifically female, passive features to the participants of his meetings, and thus also hinted at the role of unconscious homosexuality in mass psychology.”40 Adorno’s conflation of the female with submissiveness is problematic in its essentialism. However, his observation of how Hitler “feminized his followers” in order to provoke their submission to his authority (which he conflated with rape) provides a useful parallel; the self-loathing, non-heteronormative sexual indulgences enjoyed by the alt-right betas on 4chan operate as a rehearsal for submission to, in Adorno’s words, an “entirely negative [non-traditional father] of threatening authority.”41 The ideal fascist leader for a member of the alt-right would not be Trump or Mussolini but Italian director Roberto Rossellini’s character Ingrid (fig. 1), played by Giovanna Galletti in the film Roma città aperta (translated title is Rome, Open City). Ingrid is androgynous, reptilian, and manipulative; she orchestrates the capture of the Leftist hero Giorgio Manfredi by exploiting his girlfriend Marina’s opiate addiction. It is implied that Ingrid has sexual relationships with both Marina and the German Nazi general. To Ingrid, sexuality is completely detached from humanity. Sex is only useful insofar as it cultivates power; Ingrid does not discriminate based on gender but on exploitability.

39 Ibid.
The terms *beta* and *cuck* are defining features of the alt-right’s *ressentiment*. The archetypal *beta* features that Nagle describes—“less dominant, withdrawn, obsessional … curatorial in their habits”—become assimilated and reframed as positive attributes—cunning, subversive, and esoteric. Whiteness becomes the most optimal criterion of value because it is inalienable to the extent that even a *beta* with few other redeeming qualities can take pride in it. As the negative form—*cuck*—gets projected onto the opposition, it becomes evident that the label of pride (*beta*) and the pejorative epithet (*cuck*) have all the same attributes except for two: the *beta* has a deep knowledge of internet culture while the *cuck* is plagued by

---

42 Angela Nagle, “The New Man of 4chan”
43 4chan prides itself on its incomprehensibility and its dense subculture—the value of a memetic concept is not related directly related to its obscurity but to its ability to remain incomprehensible while gaining notoriety.
normalcy, and the \textit{beta} has white pride where the \textit{cuck} repudiates his own whiteness through cuckoldry.

The reactionary vision of futurity that the \textit{Europe Simulator} image (fig. h) describes is depicted as what will happen if immigration policy is dictated by the conservative technocratic democratic center—exemplified by the German Christian Democrats iconography and the EU flag at the bottom of the packaging. Although the visual language of this image is defined by European geopolitics, anti-immigrant rhetoric tends to evoke the same visual tropes. Thus, it is unsurprising when the \textit{God-Emperor}, a term derived from the role-playing game franchise “Warhammer,” Donald Trump (fig. m), is presented as the protector of the sanctity of idealized
white women against the primal hordes of ethnic Others. Depictions of Trump evoke a sun-swept Manichaean battlefield; the gilded Greco-Roman architecture in the distance evokes Mussolini’s promise of a New Roman Empire or the taste of Hitler’s “Great German Art Exhibition,” which showcased imitations of Greco-roman figurative sculpture. It is not difficult to make the leap to these classical fascist aesthetics from Trump’s own personal taste, which is similarly gilded but much more gaudy; where Mussolini had the wealth of antiquity, Trump simply has wealth. The cult of masculinity in the images is self-evident (even in the images in which Marie Le-Pen is the protagonist, she is deliberately rendered androgynous). The aesthetics of war and technology have been updated for the youthful tastes of the alt-right—we see references to the role-playing game “Warhammer,” the Pepe the Frog meme, transhuman aesthetics via films such as The Matrix and Blade Runner, Dragonball Z, and videogames such as Counter Strike, all of which reflect newer notions of futuristic warfare. Again, the overtly racial narratives are hard to miss with certain memes appropriating images of the first Crusade. “Deus Vult”—the rallying cry of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre—is copied-and-pasted into the comments incessantly (fig. n).44

Previously, I mentioned how a rhetorical strategy previously employed by Neoconservatives—that of embedded feminism or feminism as a justification for imperialism45—again found its utility in the task of xenophobic fear-mongering. Here again, it is difficult to ignore how the overt desire to conduct futuristic crusades across the Muslim world is not a radical break with mainstream discourse, but rather the logical evolution of Neoconservative rhetoric during the 1990s and 2000s. While the rhetoric of the alt-right feels shocking, egregious, and unlike anything American politics has encountered in the modern era, the pieces were all

44 Deus Vult, “God wills it,” signifies again the underlying framework of faith and commitment to a supposed “highest order” that drives these ideologies.
there. On September 11th, 2001, then-president George W. Bush remarked “this crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.” Defenders rushed to argue that Bush was speaking metaphorically⁴⁶ as opposed to historically, but as Alexander Cockburn argued repeatedly, he may as well have been.⁴⁷ Today, as the New Right is replaced by the alt-right as the vanguard of conservatism in the new millennium, the only real transformation is the loss of the metaphorical euphemizing of the Neoconservatives.

(fig. n)


The futuristic gilded war-machine will presumably be mobilized abroad to conquer the Middle East and, domestically, to defend against the black rapist, the secret Syrian terrorist, the Chinese bureaucrat, and the Jewish cultural Marxist. However, just as investments into technological development during the Cold War resulted in innovation outside the realm of defense, to the alt-right, the same mechanism that produces this gilded war-machine will also take us to the moon and beyond. The image of astronauts wearing red “Make America Great Again” Trump hats with Newt Gingrich (also wearing a Trump hat) in the distance is a direct reference to Gingrich’s 2012 campaign promise to colonize the moon (fig. o). There is an

48 Police State USA, “Newt Gingrich wants permanent Moon base, manned mission to Mars - 1/23/2012 GOP NBC Debate” YouTube video. Posted [January 2012] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2wkBucLej8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2wkBucLej8)
emphasis on the infinite in these images as well, perhaps as a proposal that global expansionism requires the corporate logic of unlimited growth. This reflects Trump’s own business history of course; in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt describes how “expansion, as a permanent and supreme aim of politics is the central political idea of imperialism … this concept is not really political at all, but has its origin in the realm of business speculation.” Here, Arendt’s association of expansionism and imperialism with the private sector clarifies how Trump’s experience as a business magnate (or at least, a symbol of a business magnate) allows the neo-fascist imagination to run wild with expansionist fantasies. Furthermore, this association between expansionism and corporate logic might simply be Arendt referring to the subsumption of politics to the encroaching parasitic behaviors of capital itself. In terms of an aesthetic reading, it might not be an egregious error to hold capital and Trump in rough equivalence; as media theorist Ian Alan Paul has recently argued, Trump is an “avatar” for capital. Paul surveys the shared characteristics between Trump and capital itself, citing how “for both Trump and capital, limits are only there to be overcome, success means success at any cost, and everything that exists only exists for the taking by those with the courage and ingenuity to dare to.”

In his lecture on the “Aesthetics of Post-Capitalism,” the late Mark Fisher describes how as public space is eroded it is replaced with deprecated pseudo-public space. Fisher uses Starbucks coffee as an example; however, the internet forums on which members of the alt-right

---

50 The consequences of this trend have been surveyed in a recent Op-Ed by philosopher Achille Mbembe. Refer to Achille Mbembe, “The age of humanism is ending” *Mail&Guardian*. December 22 2016 [https://mg.co.za/article/2016-12-22-00-the-age-of-humanism-is-ending](https://mg.co.za/article/2016-12-22-00-the-age-of-humanism-is-ending).
congregate are also examples of what replaces the authentic public sphere. In what can ultimately be understood as a caricature of the status-quo, this image describes a colonization of psychic space that accompanies the erosion public park, public school, and public community forum by the will of private capital. The moon is the ultimate public—everyone can look up at it but nobody can claim it. The moon’s status as the sine qua non public space also holds an important metaphorical function; idiomatic expressions such as “shoot for the moon” reflect the moon as a site for dreams and the unlimited potential of human imagination. Thus, although I’m sure that its premonitory implications were unintended by its creator, the vision of futurity presented in this image is a vision in which our ability to imagine a different, better world is eroded entirely by the embodiment of capital.
The extent of mechanization goes even further than the colonization of outer space. The aesthetics of the alt-right betray an expectation that the subject himself will transcend his human form thereby liberating himself from sexual agony and ambiguity. Repeated signifiers of automated female sex-dolls, or “fem-bots” (fig. p) are evidence that this liberation is highly desired. In images like these, the alt-right constituent becomes akin to the mythical figure of Pygmalion who, agonized by the female and everything she connotes (ambiguity, empathy, fear, the physical limits of bodies) decides to sculpt his own ideal female. With a single kiss, he brings this ideal “female” to life; however, as Isabel Loring Wallace reminds us, Pygmalion is undeniably a tragic figure.53

(fig. q)

The repeated signifier of the female as something to be repudiated (fig. q)—whether in favor of the fascist leader, state, or technology—also coheres with Susan Sontag’s thematicization of German fascism. Responding to Leni Riefenstahl’s photographic documentations of the Sudanese Nuba tribe, Sontag remarks on how, within fascist aesthetics, “the erotic (that is, women) is always present as a temptation, with the most admirable response being a heroic repression of the sexual impulse.”

Sontag’s criterion allows us to situate the the alt-right’s repeated motif of the repudiation of the female within a longer history of fascist aesthetics. This connection might seem tenuous; however, it is conveniently supported by the former Breitbart Senior tech editor and alt-right figurehead Milo Yiannopoulos who, in a 2016 talk discussing young male millennials and feminism, described how “the rise of feminism has fatally coincided with the rise of video games, internet porn, and, sometime in the near future, sex robots. With all these options available, and the growing perils of real-world relationships, men are simply walking away.” Furthermore, it is not difficult to associate Sontag’s notion of “heroic repression” with the sexual frustration that ended up being the catalyzing agent for Elliot Rodger’s mass shooting—in that instance, once heroic repression proved unsustainable, it gave way to misogynistic martyrdom.

The images that include mechanization certainly have violent implications—one image (fig. r) in which the viewer looks upon Trump through Microsoft’s Emotion API\textsuperscript{56} and can comprehend emotions only as numbers, parodies a violence of self that occurs as the subject attempts to transcend his human state. The reasons for this mechanized suicide are manifold—for instance, one could point to a normalization of high suicide rates of white males in middle America or a latent self-awareness of the consequences of a Trump presidency on the environment. Theodor Adorno notes that “whereas [fascist regimes] warn of impending danger, they and their listeners get a thrill out of the idea of inevitable doom, without even making a

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{56} Microsoft Cognitive Services, “Emotion API” https://www.microsoft.com/cognitive-services/en-us/emotion-api}
clear-cut distinction between the destruction of their foes and of themselves." What Adorno regards as the fascist supporter’s inability to discern between violence directed internally versus violence directed externally provides a useful framework to conceive both the alt-right and Trumpism as suicidal in general. Consider how small towns in Appalachia inflicted violence on themselves by voting to lose their own health insurance; in a more egregious example, if the alt-right were to actually get what they wanted—massive deportation of all people of color out of the US, its economy and US hegemony would surely collapse. The dissipation of American “greatness,” if it can be said to exist, is the direct consequence of attempting to Make America Great Again. Sontag describes fascism as creating a cult of “courage and … death”; the aesthetics of neo-fascism reaffirm that claim.

III. Ethno-nationalism and neo-Nazism

---


There is, of course an explicitly fascistic portion of the alt-right (fig. s): the literal neo-Nazis, white supremacists, who will readily admit to identifying as such. Most of the images that I will survey come from the digital publication The Daily Stormer, which is a contemporaneous reboot of the Nazi publication The Stormer. On the front page of one issue of The Stormer (fig. t), we see the headline “die juden sind unser unglück”—the Jews are our misfortune. Additional content comes from the now defunct alt-right subreddit and the web publication The Right Stuff, which hosts two podcasts, one titled Fash the Nation and another called The Daily Shoah (shoah refers to the Hebrew word for the Holocaust). The Trump campaign corresponded with immense amount of journalistic attention devoted towards the alt-right; it was in this context that The Daily Stormer gained newfound notoriety. Prior to this interest in the alt-right, however, journalists knew about the Daily Stormer in terms of its purported connection to the Charleston shooter, Dylann Roof. In a 2015 LA Times article, reporter Kurtis Lee traces how comments by a user going by AryanBlood1488 on the Daily Stormer forums are reproduced almost verbatim in Roof’s manifesto; the overlap was so striking that the Southern Poverty Law Center ultimately declared that AryanBlood1488 was in fact Roof’s account.

---


60 The numbers “1488” are actually a codified term white nationalists use to identify themselves. 14 refers to the white nationalist duty to uphold a fourteen word dictum originally espoused by white supremacist David Lane: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” The 8 refers to the H, which is the eighth letter of the alphabet. 88 becomes HH which is code for Heil Hitler.

Also considered within this overtly white nationalist category (although there is less of a visual culture to these organizations) are two institutions that have received significant media attention recently: the National Policy Institute, headed by Richard Spencer, whose recent DC rally was documented by the Atlantic, and American Renaissance, a magazine founded and edited by Jared Taylor, a former Harvard University Japanese professor turned white nationalist. It is through these figures—Taylor and Spencer—that we encounter a common ideological forefather between the economic nationalist, Trumpian alt-right and the overtly white nationalist alt-right. In his extended genealogy of contemporary conservatism, Timothy Shenk identifies James Burnham, a Trotskyite philosophy professor turned Machiavellian reactionary, who was at one point a close confidante to William F. Buckley Jr, as an intellectual godfather to the alt-right in general. Shenk describes how Burnham’s writings were reconsidered by Washington Times editor Samuel Francis in 1995. Francis saw the white working class as a lumpen lower middle class, threatened by the technocratic managerial state foretold in Burnham’s seminal 1941 text The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World, but above the lower hierarchical rungs of the reformers. Francis identified the latent political power of this white working class and argued that its political mobilization would occur through cultural means. Shenk notes how in one speech, Francis asserts that “what we as whites must do … is reassert our identity and our solidarity, and we must do so in explicitly racial terms through the articulation of a racial consciousness as whites.” As he was theorizing white identity politics as a political strategy, Francis was cultivating friendships with two prototypical alt-right figureheads: paleoconservative

Pat Buchanan (an idolized figure by the alt-right, hailed by Milo Yiannopoulos as the predecessor to Trumpism insofar as he was the previous “cultural candidate for president” and Jared Taylor. Ultimately, the influence of the Machiavellian political thought of James Burnham through Samuel Francis on Taylor and Buchanan reveals that the bifurcation between overt ethno-nationalism of the self-proclaimed authentic alt-right and covert cultural or “economic” nationalism of the “alt-light” is relatively recent; they are built on the same ideological foundation and largely use the same arguments.

65 Despite this common ideological ancestor, however, there is a contentious relationship between the alt-right and the alt-light; in general, the alt-right regards the alt-light as a Jewish plot to undermine the authentic goals of the alt-right from within. On the other hand, the alt-light, as expressed by far-Right comedian RamZPaul regards the alt-right as an NAACP strategy to associate “cultural nationalists” with neo-Nazis.
Most of the imagery circulated within these communities consists of direct allusions to Nazi propaganda (and is thus less creative and less interesting); however, since German fascism did include a sort of technocratic idealism\(^\text{66}\), these newer images have been updated. One thread on the Daily Stormer is particularly illustrative of the aesthetic taste of these neo-Nazi communities (fig. u): 80s comics and sci-fi content offer normative gender roles, hyper-masculine futurist heroes, hypersexualized women, and a variety of visions of humans transcending their bodily limits via technological innovation. Cyberpunk aligns with the taste of the Daily Stormer’s target audience—just as I described with the relationship between GamerGate and Breitbart, that same gamer audience is catered to by the Daily Stormer. In fact, one architect of GamerGate, the notorious hacker/troll “weev” is a contributor at the Daily Stormer. While it is difficult to concretize a pathology of taste, Wendy Hui Kyun Chun offers her opinion on the utility of cyberpunk by positioning it as an alternative to 80s’ heteronormative masculinity. Chun writes, “this call to *enjoy* one’s emasculation … offers an alternative ‘nerd-cool’ form of masculinity that contrasts sharply with the Arnold Schwarzenegger type also popular in the 1980s.”\(^\text{67}\) Here, we are reminded of Angela Nagle’s profile of the “New Man of 4chan;” in the same way that “ladyboy” pornography and My Little Pony fetishism represented assimilated emasculation, the Daily Stormer’s sci-fi moodboard itself becomes a technology of *ressentiment*—an inversion of the negative emasculation into the positive “nerd-cool.”

Furthermore, I believe that for the Daily Stormer, the 80s might be an idyllic decade for neo-Nazis insofar as reverse-white-flight had not really occurred yet; thus there were, to an

\(^{66}\) Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism”

extent, separate racial spheres. The white sphere identified with and found pride in Reagan’s traditionalist “family values” conservatism, while urban centers were faced with a crack-cocaine epidemic, a crime wave, and the AIDS crisis. Consequently, the Manichaean master-race/degenerate dogma pushed by the alt-right may have had more immediate examples in the 80s.

(fig. v)

In this animated gif, pulled from the Daily Stormer forums (fig. v), the viewer is situated in the audience of the Nazi Red Skull from the second Captain America film. The Nazi soldiers themselves resemble mechanical automatons. Insofar as the viewer identifies with the soldier, the militant cyborgs archetype tends to betray a self-awareness that the members of the alt-right themselves might be harmed, or might lose their humanity, under the political conditions they seek to realize. This image is notable for its use of the “echo brackets”—triple parentheses which
are used by many sections of the alt-right in order to designate someone of Jewish descent in larger paragraphs of text—that act as a digital gold star *(fig. w)*. One member actually created a browser extension for the web-browser Google Chrome that inserts echo brackets around any individual of Jewish descent.  

The goal of echo brackets is to bring attention to the omnipotence of Jewish people within different media organizations, affirming the conspiracy theory of the cultural hegemony of Jewish people.

---

68 Mathew Ingram, “Google Removes a Chrome Extension that Identified and Tracked Jews” *Fortune Magazine.* (June 3 2016. [http://fortune.com/2016/06/03/google-chrome-Jews/](http://fortune.com/2016/06/03/google-chrome-Jews/).
interesting here, however, is that while they regard the linguistic meta-narrative of identity politics as propagandist “cultural Marxism” and political correctness as oppressive doublespeak, the alt-right builds its arguments using these same strategies; the alt-right strengthens its intellectual foundation by appropriating theoretical paradigms developed by the Left. One ideological predecessor to this contemporaneous appropriation of the Left’s strategies and arguments was the 1960s French political movement Nouvelle Droite, lead by another philosopher frequently cited by alt-right commenters, Alain de Benoist. The Nouvelle Droite considered themselves “Gramscians of the Right” because they drew heavily from Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. Members of the Nouvelle Droite found useful the notion that a new hegemonic order could be imposed through cultural subversion; obviously, they stripped Gramsci’s theory of its Marxist aspirations, and instead used it as model for praxis. As Benoist remarked in a 1994 interview in The Journal of Historical Review, the affiliates of the Nouvelle Droite would remark “it's not ‘The New Right’ but, ‘A New Culture.’” This quotation epitomizes the appropriation of Gramscian praxis; the Nouvelle Droite foreshadows the alt-right’s turn away from an overtly political programme to a more totalizing cultural project.

When fascism went digital, it continued to appropriate the arguments of the Left. British sociologist Les Back’s 2002 essay Aryans Reading Adorno identifies this tendency within online white nationalist communities that sprung up in the early days of Web surfing. Back notes how one user under the mononym “Siegfried” “struggles to situate Adorno’s writing on the culture industry within a white nationalism [sic] worldview. For ‘Siegfried’ Adorno’s puzzling since he

---

is critical of an industry in which some of the proponents happen to be Jews … Adorno’s work is … organized into a conspiratorial anti-Semitic view.”

Today, the repurposing of Leftist discursive strategies takes the form of an overtly white identity politics. Certain examples are particularly exemplary, egregious, and a little eerie after reading Back—for instance, for his Master’s thesis, White Nationalist Richard Spencer chose to conduct an anti-Semitic rereading of Theodor Adorno’s writings on Richard Wagner. In a similar vein, Mike Cernovich once remarked “I read postmodernist theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative … I don’t seem like a guy who reads Lacan, do I?”

This reconfiguring of Leftist political causes for proto-fascist goals is not exclusive to digital neo-Fascism; it has a counterpart in mainstream politics. One might look again to European politics and see how, as Sasha Polakow-Suransky notes, far-Right Eurosceptic parties “have sought to outflank the Left when it comes to defending a strong welfare state and protecting social benefits that they claim are threatened by an influx of freeloading immigrants.”

These instances of repurposing are oftentimes shocking due to their absurdity; on the other hand, throughout history, fascism has been anything but an ex-nihilo ideology, but rather, as Paxton describes, a system of bricolage that relies on “mimicry.” Paxton’s conception of

73 Andrew Marantz, “Trolls for Trump”
fascism as temporally and aesthetically contingent is useful in understanding neo-fascism as a remix-culture willing to adorn whatever flimsy ideological framework (in this case, popular Tumblr-style identity politics) it can get its hands on in order to advance its cultivation of power and its perpetual expansion.

(fig. x)

This image, pulled from the now-defunct r/altright subreddit (fig. x) references popular circulated images of the electoral map which circulated after the Trump victory, highlighting how the Electoral College was split along race and gender lines. This image takes that logic of identity politics and uses it to reinscribe the notion that both democratic politics and its associated logic of multiculturalism are holding the human race back from achieving its
scientific potential. The notion that democratic politics and the determined scientific fate of our species are fundamentally incompatible is virtually axiomatic to the intellectual faction of the alt-right, but can also be identified as the opinion of more mainstream cultural figures (particularly in Silicon Valley) such as 21 CEO Balaji Srinivasan76 (Srinavasan was also rumored to be a Trump cabinet pick to lead the FDA77), and Paypal founder Peter Thiel78 (who was a member of the transition team and is now rumored to be serving as an advisor to Trump79). This image describes how quickly that logic can lead to white supremacy. Here again, we see the expansionist, imperialist rhetoric of neo-Fascism; just as science will liberate us from political correctness, it will also take us beyond our earthly confines. This notion of space colonialism is reflected in the music of one alt-right tastemaker, CYBERNAZI. CYBERNAZI, who himself claims to a contemporaneous inheritor of the Italian Futurist tradition, fuses vaporwave and fascist aesthetics, and provides a soundtrack for the future digital space reich (fig. y).80

Moving towards another aesthetic vocabulary of the ethno-nationalist faction of the alt-right, we see an appropriation of a popular category of internet meme (fig. z). These images are presented in a format that would be familiar to a netizen—this meme-category is defined by a) a poorly-drawn stereotypical depiction of an individual of an opposing political persuasion and b) a textual caricature of that individual’s beliefs that serve the function of exposing that belief as contradictory and absurd. This format is used by many different political communities across the political spectrum (fig. 1.a).
heh, all these bigots can't see the complexity of the terrorism problem, if they could see the real issues in a deeper context like me they'd resign themselves to saying it's complex and never come to a conclusion

Not all men? Wow! How fragile does your ego have to be to think I'm talking about ALL MEN when I say all men are rapists? I'm merely saying rape is a male problem. Also did you hear Trump thinks all Mexicans are rapists and that terrorism is an Islamic problem? Doesn't he know it's only a small minority? #NotAllMuslims #NotAllMexicans

my body my choice
your religion is a scam
flush your melatadether you redneck bigot

In the current year

Nationalism doesn't make sense, how can you take credit for the accomplishments of your ancestors? Also you should apologize for slavery.

(fig. z)

heh so you think valid criticisms of capitalism exist?
tell me
friend
do you own things ??

(fig. 1.a)
These parodic images (fig. z) are from a Facebook page called “Counter-Signal Memes for Fashy Goys,” with “goys” being short for goyem, the term for a man who is of non-Jewish descent, and fashy being internet slang for both fascism and fashionable, perhaps unintentionally evoking Mussolini’s 1919 Naples speech in which he remarked on how “fascism brings back ‘style’ in people’s lives.” Here we see caricatures of Leftists; their “hashtag activism” is ridiculed and their identity politics are exposed as both hollow and convoluted. Given the connotation of identity politics with “cultural marxism” among the alt-right, it is unsurprising that aesthetic strategies used by fascists to caricature Jews (most notably exaggeratedly crooked teeth and large noses) are projected and conflated with stereotypes of the Left in general—the figures have dyed hair, piercings, buzzed haircuts, don’t wear bras, etc. This smug liberal trope is an exaggerated version of a stereotype invoked by conservatives quite often—it was certainly levied against Kerry, Gore, and Clinton. This conflation is also useful in partially concealing the anti-semitic aspects of the image; since the meme format itself expects that the opposition will be caricatured, the anti-semitism only becomes apparent once you look at the specific decisions that were made—what was caricatured and in what way. It is hard to know where the anti-semitic caricature ends and the liberal-trope begins; because of this, this image can be understood as aimed at a more moderate audience with the intention of radicalization. After all, the vast Jewish conspiracy and its somewhat more palatable cousin of “the cathedral” (as articulated by alt-right

---

81 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, “The Aesthetics of Politics: Symbol, Power and Narrative in Mussolini's Fascist Italy” Theory, Culture & Society vol. 9 no. 4 (November 1992) pp. 75-91
intellectual Mencius Moldbug)\(^{82}\) is not dissimilar from mainstream Trumpian rhetoric that brands the “Washington Establishment” as “the swamp.”

Here we see a direct opposition to critical thought itself, to any gestures that create questions instead of answering them, that complicate instead of reduce. Again, the mythical allegory of Pygmalion is useful; an alt-right follower can be understood as turning away from what Freud might call the dark continent\(^{83}\) (both the racial and gendered uses of the term are relevant here). The fact that he can never know or comprehend the experience of the Other renders her an ontological void whose unknowability is too agonizing, thus he finds refuge in representation and, as this image describes, parody.

Furthermore, this hostility towards criticality coupled with a will towards irrationality can be situated first in historical models of fascist aesthetics and in the general phenomenon of internet troll culture. Susan Sontag discusses how “a principal accusation against the Jews within Nazi Germany was that they were … bearers of a destructive corrupting ‘critical spirit.’ … when [Joseph] Goebbels officially forbade art criticism … it was for having typically ‘Jewish traits of character’: putting the head over the heart, the individual over the community, intellect over feeling.”\(^{84}\) Here, Sontag articulates how the Nazi articulation of a “Jewish character,” through which the Jewish individual is associated with criticality also allows the fascist to define him/herself in the negative; if Jewish people are cognitive, individualizing, and rational, then the fascist by necessity is intuitive, a “mass individual,”\(^{85}\) and, most significantly, irrational. There are echoes of Italian Futurism within Sontag’s characterization as well—it is not difficult to see a

---

\(^{82}\) This is a term used by proto-alt-right intellectual Mencius Moldbug to refer to the cultural hegemony of the media, academic institutions, and the state department. 

\(^{83}\) Sigmund Freud, The Question of the Lay Analysis. 1928. [http://www.yorku.ca/dcarveth/LayAnalysis.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/dcarveth/LayAnalysis.pdf)


\(^{85}\) Using Deleuze and Guattari’s term.
commonality between the Nazi hostility towards criticality and Marinetti’s inflammatory promise to “destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind.”\textsuperscript{86} This generic fascist typology is further clarified through Adorno’s critique of anti-semitic propaganda; Adorno stipulates that fascist irrationality is “applied rather than spontaneous irrationality.”\textsuperscript{87} Via Sontag and Adorno, we encounter a fascist whose irrationality is not spasmodic or volcanic in its expression; rather, this irrationality has a deliberate function and is thus more akin to a tool or a weapon. Once removed from the temporal context of the mid-20th century and brought into the present, this fascist typology begins to resemble the prototypical internet troll.

In his essay \textit{Schadenfreude with Bite}, Richard Seymour outlines how “the trolls’ innovation has been to add a delight in nonsense and detritus: calculated illogicality, deliberate misspellings, an ironic recycling of cultural nostalgia, sedimented layers of opaque references and in-jokes.”\textsuperscript{88} Note how Seymour’s stipulation that the troll’s illogicality is calculated, just as Adorno was careful to define fascist irrationality as applied, possessing a sort of vector of intention. Here we are reminded again of the behavior of anonymous users in the GamerGate controversy, whose preferred method of political activism was weaponized irony and hyperbole. After recognizing the similarities between an irrational fascist and an internet troll, it becomes evident that, although it would be inaccurate to define all trolls as fascist (insofar as trolling is a more general strategy), it is, in a sense, unsurprising that the troll’s methodologies cohere so seamlessly with a fascist project. What feels particularly contemporary about the troll-fascist is how self-driven and autonomous he is; although he does submit to fascist ideology, he is not

\textsuperscript{87} Theodor Adorno, \textit{The Stars Down to Earth} (London: Routledge, 2002)
under the command of any sort of centralized general or commander. In a sense, the rigid, orderly restraint depicted in Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* feels like a deprecated model for the neo-fascist crowd. Instead, we must turn to Deleuze and Guattari’s viremic allegory for fascist irrationality; in *Micropolitics and Segmentarity*, they write “instead of the great paranoid fear, we are trapped in a thousand little monomanias, self-evident truths, and clarities that gush from every black hole and no longer form a system”\(^89\).

### IV. The Intellectual Alt-Right and its Cultural Narratives

---

An aesthetic analysis of the alt-right becomes more challenging when we attempt to approach its intellectual underpinnings, represented in the bottom two quadrants in the indexing chart (fig. 1.b). Although they obviously use visuals to supplement their blog posts, manifestos, e-books, etc., these intellectual factions do not use memes as their chief propaganda tool; rather, they write texts that aim to direct, discern, and laud the chaotic accumulation of the images that I have been referring to. However, this does not mean that the texts cannot be interrogated or thematized in a similar manner, but rather that more context and specificity is necessary, since these intellectual movements are not rooted in visual culture and do not have defining visual lexicons.

Because both the accelerationist and the spiritual factions of the alt-right have their own sprawling associative canons, I would like to first frame a contrast between these two intellectual factions using a framework outlined by the Italian proto-fascist philosopher Julius Evola. After that, I would like to focus on a mutual fascination for East and South Asia among these intellectual factions, ultimately characterizing how they articulate different inegalitarian visions of futurity using Asia as both a historical inspiration and an empty container onto which this vision can be projected.

Evola can be considered an ideological predecessor to the spiritual faction of the alt-right. Just as he was read and admired by Mussolini and printed in Nazi publications, alt-right blogs write about Evola admiringly. Additionally, Steve Bannon has presented at least a tertiary

90 a philosophy that advocates for the active reproduction of capitalism’s consequences within the domain of the social—either to move beyond capitalism or to optimize its creative potential.
knowledge of Evola’s thought. A thorough interrogation of Evola’s thought would be too significant a vagary from the general task of this paper; I am simply interested in invoking Evola’s distinction between two different kinds of racial inegalitarian philosophy in order to provide a helpful allegory for the difference between the spiritual and the accelerationist factions of the alt-right. In his text, *The Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola*, Cardiff historian Paul Furlong describes how, to Evola, “race is an expression of [a supernatural] hierarchy. It is therefore seen as a vector of the divine impulse, a form of human commonality that combines both biological and spiritual characteristics … Evola seemed not to deny biological racism but to seek to relegate it to a minor explanatory role.” Furlong emphasizes that Evola does not base his racism in a belief in an empirical biological hierarchy in order to contrast Evola’s racism with that of Nazism, which relied immensely on scientific justifications. Ultimately, these two different justifications for racism between Evola and the Nazis serve as a potent allegory (although admittedly imperfect when we consider the work of the Nazi occultists) for the difference between the spiritual and the accelerationist factions of the alt-right intelligentsia; the former relies on religious, emotive, mythical tropes (both sourced from the past or created organically) while the latter relies on machines, logic, and science. I will begin by examining the aesthetics of the spiritual faction; I regard the spiritual faction as having more rhetorical coherence with the Trump campaign since Trump is more of a neo-Luddite who grounds his racism in cultural arguments, as opposed to scientific ones.

---

Consider the image (fig. 1.c) from an article titled “Esoteric Kekism, or Kek as a Bodhisattva of Racial Enlightenment” on the alt-right blog *Atlantic Centurion*.  

*Atlantic Centurion* is the blog of Lawrence Murray. In jargon-filled posts with eclectic titles including *Proverbs of a Xenoskeptic Ethno-Nationalist*, Murray blends political philosophy, a didactic narrative of the present, new media theory, and religious mythology into a bizarre brand of

---

cultural criticism. In this article, Murray takes the alt-right’s favorite activity of rapidly accumulating political memes and drafts an understanding of that activity as a sort of religious ritual that can be concretized in images and text. Referring to the already notorious Pepe the Frog meme, Murray asserts that the alt-right has a central deity god, Kek, whose name is derived from the World of Warcraft community. The term comes from a feature in the game in which, if an opposing player on the other team—the Horde—were to type “lol” into the public chat-box, it would appear to the player on the Alliance team as the word kek. Kek is a chaos god whose magical abilities, referred to as meme magic, can be invoked through distributing memes.

Through Kek, whatever desire is expressed in the meme—for Trump to be elected, for the UK to vote leave, for WikiLeaks to release more emails, etc.—becomes reality. The alt-right meme warrior praises his/her god with the ubiquitous phrase “Praise Kek.” A number of theorists have written about Kek, with the most effective piece being Tara Isabella Burton’s essay “Apocalypse Whatever,” in which Burton remarks “it doesn’t matter whether Kek is ‘really’ a chaos god. He might as well be. Likewise, meme magic, to the extent that that it serves as a record of cultural engagement, is real too.”

Thus, debating whether or not esoteric kekism should be regarded as a legitimate religion is beside the point; in my aesthetic analysis, I am more interested in why Murray invokes Buddhism as the model for his creative endeavor.

In the images Murray uses to outline his pseudo-religious doctrine (fig. 1.c), we see the repeated motif of Pepe the Frog operating as monks in a Nazi/Buddhist temple. An undead or cyborg-esque SS general is seen in the seated lotus position, in front of three different Buddhist figures, who are in turn situated in front of a giant shrine to Hitler. The image is notably devoid

---

of color in order to aid the assimilation of the Eastern imagery with its white supremacist implications; color constitutes difference, the desaturation operates as a visual reflection of Murray’s opening assertion that the Buddha was, in fact, white. This kind of historical re-reading is not a new invention; Murray’s whitewashing of Buddhism has historical parallels in the philosophical projects of two figures in particular: the Nazi occultist Maximine Portaz (pseudonymously known as Savitri Devi), who sought to synthesize National Socialism with Hinduism\(^97\) and in Evola’s fascism which drew from Hindu notions of temporality, sexual meditation, and caste.\(^98\) Portaz in particular is a figure of intrigue for the alt-right; in one bizarre image from the Twitter account “alt-right fanfic,” the far-right Rebel Media commentator Lauren Southern is reimagined as Portaz’s contemporary reincarnation (fig 1.d).

\(^97\) Murray also begins his essay with a reference to Portaz.
The whitewashing and appropriation of Buddhist imagery allows the alt-right to reconcile cultural accomplishments by racial Others with its own ethno-nationalist conviction. Again, neo-fascism takes the form of a totalizing project that functions through remixing and appropriation; just as Portaz reimagined Hitler as “the reincarnation of the god Vishnu,” and the swastika itself was appropriated from South Asian theology, Buddhism becomes a tool to imbue the pseudo-religious activities of trolling and disseminating memes a sense of theological weight. Asian aesthetics give the alt-right a transgressive, exhilarating, unknown

quality—something that, as Yiannopoulos wrote in his *Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right*, the alt-right prides itself on. 100

Of course, on a more rudimentary level, East Asian aesthetics appeal to the tastes of the demography of the alt-right—internet culture and its large constituency of young white male millennials have been fascinated with anime and cyberpunk long before the alt-right existed in its

current form. In another image pulled from Atlantic Centurion’s Twitter account, we see an image of a younger Trump flanked by light-skinned anime girls wearing Make America Great Again caps. Here (fig. 1.e), just as rereading the Buddha as an Aryan religious icon became a rhetorical strategy to contextualise reblogging and reposting memes as a religious activity, a sign that lay audiences might associate with Asian (in this case, Japanese) culture actually functions as an endorsement of white supremacy. One attribute of the girls in this image that might not strike the viewer as unorthodox is the figures’ large eyes, which are obviously cartoonishly exaggerated and frankly made to look more European. This is not how anime eyes always looked, as explained in media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s text Control and Freedom. Chun cites Mary Grigsby, who recounts how “before the Japanese came into contact with Westerners they drew themselves with Asian features. After contact with the West, particularly after World War II and the subsequent reconstruction of Japan under the domination of the United States, they began to depict characteristics that are supposed to be Japanese with Western idealized physical characteristics: round eyes, blonde, red or brown hair, long legs and thin bodies.”101 On a surface reading, this might allow us to regard the presence of the anime figures as a Eurocentric statement; the Westernization of the anime girl could be appealing to the alt-right viewer because it represents the perceived successes of Imperial domination, to the extent that a foreign adversary ends up taking care of the whitewashing itself. This is, however, an incomplete reading. While Grigsby might regard these anime girls as appearing Western, in reality, as Chun points out, they don’t really look like White people either. Rather, Chun argues

that these postwar anime girls “[parody] the difference between so-called Westerners and
Japanese, producing new images that would defy racial categorization.”\textsuperscript{102} Thus, the anime
figures do not function as caricatures of any race, but of \textit{racial difference itself}. It is still
understandable that this representation of racial difference would be an object of admiration for a
member of the alt-right; parodic, exaggerated racial difference is, of course, a key organizing
principle for the ideology of the alt-right.

A degree of specificity might also be helpful here. The anime characters in the image in
question are not generic figures, but from a particular series called Idolm@ster or Im@s for
short. The genre of the game is called a “raising sim”—the player in question is thrust into the
role of a managerial position (in this case, a producer) that simply conducts a professional
relationship with a cast of characters—in this case, young pre-teen aspiring pop stars.\textsuperscript{103} In this
situation, we see that the graphic can function as a direct allegory for the relationship between
the online alt-right meme-creator and the fascist leader himself; the viewer identifies with the
girls in MAGA hats and ultimately finds enjoyment in being ordered around by an omnipotent
autocratic show-biz figure. Thus, a more direct reading of this image can be situated within the
4chan penchant for gender-bending imagery and androgyny.

\textsuperscript{102} Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, \textit{Control and Freedom Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics} (Cambridge:
MIT Press, 2006) pp. 214
\textsuperscript{103} This information was provided by an anonymous contributor under the name Mal Scott.
There may also be a relation between the metaphorical function of the anime character and the fascist irrationality that is alluded to in the past by Sontag and Adorno and embodied in the hateful internet troll today. The irrationality of the internet troll often takes the form of a wide network of associative fallacies, as exemplified in the post-GamerGate “accountability” site DeepFreeze (fig. 1.f) which indexes gaming journalists and attempts to link them into an associative network of corruption. Again, we are reminded of Adorno’s identification of how within fascist rhetoric, “the relation between premisses [sic] and inferences is replaced by a linking-up of ideas resting on mere similarity, often through association by employing the same characteristic word in two propositions which are logically quite unrelated.” Here, Adorno outlines how the preferred method of argument for the irrational neo-fascist would necessarily be associative and conspiratorial. This method necessitates, in my opinion, a certain kind of surface-level reading that is alluded to by anime. As Wendy Chun notes, “anime’s relation to cyberspace is not simply thematic: as Thomas Lamarre has observed, anime’s use of limited

animation makes it analogous to scanning information—to the experience of informatization.”

Thus, we see here how anime structurally implies a sort of digital logic of mere association similar that of the irrational troll. I regard this logic as particularly digital or internet-specific insofar as the constitutive element of the internet—the hyperlink—is literally an associative vehicle.

[Fig. 1.g]

---

Within online subcultures, anime is also associated with social alienation. This is the association articulated by the alt-right intellectual himself, Lawrence Murray on his blog Atlantic Centurion. In his article *Anomie, Anime, and the Alt-Right*, Murray characterizes anime simultaneously as a codified sign of globalization (insofar as it is a cultural import) and as a panacea for globalization’s cultural logic of multiculturalism. Murray elaborates, citing how globalization renders media outlets as peddlers for propagandic identity politics; anime is the only place to still find “heroes’ journeys or tradition” and is thus an escape from *anomie*; a Durkheimian term for alienation which Murray accuses multiculturalism of instilling in the demography of the alt-right. This connotation between anime and late-capitalist alienation is not exclusive to the esoteric intellectuals of the alt-right, however. Consider, for instance, the video collage piece *Still Life (Betamale)* by New Media artist Jon Rafman, in which images of derelict computer setups (*fig. 1.g*) are juxtaposed with pixelated anime girls and anthropomorphized anime animals also known as *furries* (*fig. 1.h*). Rafman depicts bodies and housing units decaying in front of the monitor; rings of trash radiate outwards from the glowing screen. Much of Rafman’s imagery is sourced from 4chan; however, the piece is from 2013—pre GamerGate and thus prior to the political awakening of 4chan and its metastasization into the alt-right. Since Rafman’s piece, the *furries* in the video collage shown acting out sexual fantasies in dingy apartment units have been replaced by *furries* adorning SS armbands and attempting to recruit at anime conventions (*fig. 1.i*).

Lastly, anime as a simple sign of Japanese cultural production might speak to an admiration for Japan itself. Within the alt-right, Japan’s low-crime rates and its economic

---

106 https://atlanticcenturion.wordpress.com/2016/12/03/anomie-anime-and-the-alt-right/
success are held as evidence that ethno-states are an optimal model for social organization. For instance, Jared Taylor, himself a former Harvard professor of Japanese once commented, “[Japan is] an ethnostate and it’s deeply nationalist … And they have resisted the pressure to admit refugees. I say: ‘God bless them!’” Other particularly prescient examples include a small cult of personality around Japanese nationalist writer and right-wing militant Yukio Mishima, and a section on East Asians in the Charleston shooter Dylan Roof’s manifesto. Roof writes, “I have great respet [sic] for the East Asian races. Even if we were to go extinct they could carry something on. They are by nature very racist and could be great allies of the White race. I am not opposed at all to allies [sic] with the Northeast Asian races.” This comment has historical precedent in Hitler’s classification of the entire Japanese race as “Honorary Aryans” in _The Political Testament of Adolf Hitler_.

Ultimately, the alt-right’s penchant for anime is a dense and multi-layered phenomenon—it is possible that for the alt-right member, the anime figure can function simultaneously as an object of sexual desire, a submissive follower to identify with, a reflection of one’s own alienation, and a sign of an admired country or people. The invocation of the aesthetics of Asia transcends both intellectual factions; the spiritual faction of the alt-right finds utility, as I have shown, in historical and pop culture imagery while the transhumanist

108 Sanjiv Bhattacharya, “‘Call me a racist, but don’t say I’m a Buddhist’: meet America’s alt right” _The Guardian_ 9 October 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/09/call-me-a-racist-but-dont-say-im-a-buddhist-meet-the-alt-right
The spiritual faction of the alt-right engages in practices of religious appropriation and the construction of new kind of spirituality based in the language and activity of the digital. On the other hand, the technological-determinist faction of the alt-right intelligentsia embodied in what can be understood as an ideological predecessor to the right, the Neoreactionaries instead place their faith in accelerated capitalism, technological innovation, and transhumanism (fig. 1.j).
Pseudonymous cultural critic Josephine Armistead has outlined key tenets of Neoreactionism in her essay *The Silicon Ideology*; many of these tenets cohere with images I’ve already shown, including a faith in transhumanism, a preference for authoritarianism under a tech CEO or a super-intelligent AI, and essentialist inegalitarian attitudes towards race and gender under the more palatable term “human biodiversity.” Today, Neoreactionism has a contentious relationship with the rapidly radicalizing alt-right. Key differences arise with regard to anti-semitism and white supremacy—there tends not to be a hostility towards Jewish people within Neoreactionism; one of the founders of the movement, Mencius Moldbug, is himself Jewish. Additionally, although they believe in racial inegalitarianism and adhere to a biologically determined hierarchy of racial intelligence, they do not necessarily endorse white supremacy.

On the other hand, the extreme white Nationalist faction of the alt-right claims no ideological indebtedness to Neoreactionism; this disavowal is epitomized in the neo-Nazi blog *Tha Right Stuff’s* glossary of slang, in which the term Neoreactionism is simply defined as “jews.” Ultimately, while its well-known voices have distanced themselves from the alt-right, the ideas that Neoreactionism espouses are pervasive across the alt-right and in popular political discourse in certain parts of the country, most notably Silicon Valley.

In fact, it is impossible to fully conceptualize Neoreactionism without considering strains of libertarian techno-determinism that emerged out of Silicon Valley during the late 80s and 90s. These ideological threads are generally referred to as the *Californian Ideology*, after a critique of the same name published by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in 1995. Barbrook and

---

112 Josephine Armistead, *The Silicon Ideology*  

http://www.xenosystems.net/whats-in-a-word/

114 The Right Stuff, “The TRS Lexicon”  
http://therightstuff.biz/trs-lexicon/
Cameron conceive of the *Californian Ideology* as a seemingly hypocritical synthesis of anti-democratic, pro-corporate technocratic notions of statehood with the local counter-cultural legacy of the Bay Area. Barbrook and Cameron take on an unmistakably baffled and lamenting tone, proclaiming “who would have predicted that, in less than 30 years after the battle for People's Park, squares and hippies would together create the Californian Ideology?” Barbrook and Cameron describe how this new ideology, which offers a promise of a “digital utopia” in which “everybody will be both hip and rich,” is quickly accepted by “computer nerds, slacker students, innovative capitalists, social activists, trendy academics, futurist bureaucrats and opportunistic politicians across the USA.”

Neoreactionism can be considered as the contemporary child of the Californian Ideology, and the appropriative mechanism of neo-fascism is strong here as well; just as the Californian Ideology marked a bifurcation between emancipatory politics and the transgression of the hippies, Neoreactionism promotes a bifurcation between democracy and capital. Again, we are reminded of Arendt’s explanation of how the corporate logic of the private sector, when politicized, can take the form of totalitarian expansionism.

Given this historical context, it is unsurprising that a key intellectual leader within Neoreactionism is himself a Silicon Valley CEO. Between 2007 and 2014, Curtis Yarvin, under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug, laid the groundwork for Neoreactionism on his blog, “Unqualified Reservations.” Yarvin takes aim at democracy and egalitarianism, but his most enduring contribution has been defining and repeatedly levying verbal indictments at what he

---


116 Ibid.

117 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1958)
refers to as the Cathedral—the combination of the University system, mainstream media outlets, and state legislatures which Yarvin regards as oppressive, stultifying, and indoctrinating.\textsuperscript{118} Yarvin is connected to Trump via Peter Thiel, founder of PayPal and Palantir whose political disposition, although he probably wouldn’t identify himself as such, could be described as Neoreactionary. Thiel funds Yarvin’s company Tlon, which developed the Urbit computer operating system.

A more recognizable name in Neoreactionism is Nick Land, a media theorist, philosopher, and aesthetician previously affiliated with the University of Warwick. Nick Land is typically recognized for his advocacy for “the acceleration, rather than the critique of capitalism’s disintegration of society.”\textsuperscript{119} Accelerationism has advocates across the political spectrum; for the Left, accelerationism is appealing so that we can reveal the flaws of capitalism and bring about its end; for the Right, accelerationism is appealing to the extent that we can further reap the financial and lifestyle benefits of capitalism’s innovative capacities. Landian accelerationism is defined by an awareness that capitalism atomizes bodies, subjugates certain populations, and ultimately dissolves the domain of the social. For Nick Land, however, this is not a negative; he perceives within capitalism a creative capacity that is more valuable than bodies. Land believes that we should accelerate capitalism as we know it in order to unleash “thanatropic machinism” (here we again encounter the cult of death) which he defines as a collective productive engine that will emerge once man liberates himself from correlationalist (or anthropocentric) egalitarian models of society and subjectivity. To Land, we will, ultimately submit to the authority of Number which is not simply a quantitative unit or arithmetical concept.

\textsuperscript{118} Mencius Moldbug, “OL8: Reset is Not Revolution”\textsuperscript{119} Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, \textit{Introduction to Fanged Noumena} (New York: Sequence Press, 2011) pg. 3.
but rather a dynamic scalable architecture that is alluded to by object-oriented programming languages, artificial intelligence, electronic music, and video games.

While the spiritual faction of the alt-right appropriates East Asian texts (either religio-historical in the Buddha-as-white-nationalist-Avatar or pop cultural as with the Anime Trump meme) for the accelerationist Neoreactionaries, East Asia has a different function. Instead of serving as a site for historical excavation and reconsideration, Neoreactionism regards East Asia as a site of futurity—either an actual model to be emulated, or a sort of field onto which hypercapitalist totalitarian fantasies can be imposed.
This image of former Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew (fig. 1.k) is not juxtaposition of picture and text like the previous images that I've been showing, however I do believe it epitomizes some key tenets of Neoreactionist thought. This image comes from obituary post on Nick Land’s blog Outside In after Lee Kuan Yew died in 2015.\textsuperscript{120} The post is titled “Greatness”, and it praises Lee Kuan Yew for being a Neoreactionary before anybody knew what that term actually was. Land chooses to highlight how Kuan Yew refashioned the Singaporean state based on a model of widespread privatization. Land’s assertion that Kuan Yew is the most influential leader of the 20th century echoes a sentiment expressed by Slavoj Žižek in his text First as Tragedy, Then as Farce. Žižek quotes philosopher Peter Sloterdijk who also makes the assertion that Kuan Yew will be remembered as the most influential figure of the 20th century. Žižek continues to elaborate on Kuan Yew’s influence, attributing to him a living, compelling example that capitalism and liberal democracy do not necessarily require each other but might actually be antagonistic toward each other, and that capitalism might function better under authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{121}

I choose to link Žižek’s pairing of Capitalism to “Asian Values” with Land’s admiration for Lee Kuan Yew because they both embody a kind of techno-Orientalist idealization of the Far East as a testing ground or prototypical society where we can observe what transpires when the embodiment of capital itself becomes the organizing mechanism of state power. Land’s affinity for another East-Asian nation—China— is pronounced within his writings. Land himself now lives in Shanghai; he hails its glistening skyline as a “fabulously beautiful city.”\textsuperscript{122} For Land, China provides a model not in terms of its pairing of a one-party state with a deregulated

\textsuperscript{120} Nick Land, “Greatness” Outside In. March 23 2015.  \url{http://www.xenosystems.net/greatness/}.
\textsuperscript{121} Slavoj Žižek, First as Tragedy then as Farce. (New York: Verso Books 2011) pp. 131–139
\textsuperscript{122} Nick Land, “Shanghai Tower” Outside In. May 6 2016. \url{http://www.xenosystems.net/shanghai-tower/}
free-market economy, but for engaging with a taboo expression of state power—eugenics. In a sense, Land’s predisposition towards eugenics is a philosophical elaboration on a faith in capital insofar as capital tends to choose winners and losers based on gender, intellectual ability, able-bodiedness, etc. To Land, there is no reason to supplement these behaviors of capital with more proactive measures. In a May 2014 blog post titled *Chinese Eugenics*, Land quotes an interview with author and human rights advocate Leta Hong Fincher. In it, Fincher details how in response to fears that China’s future would be compromised with an overpopulation of “low-quality” constituents, China’s State Council created a new agency called the Women’s Federation. The task of the Women’s Federation was to essentially create propaganda that presented “urban, educated, successful, professional women” as “too picky, … too focused on their careers, … overly ambitious,” with the goal of guilting these women into getting married and having children earlier.123 Where Fincher’s tone implies that she finds these measures quite dystopian, Land finds these measures “inspiring” and an example of “elementary common sense.” Other eugenic policies endorsed by Land include “High-IQ immigration” (which itself has precedent in the United States, of course, in the special skills provision of the 1965 Immigration Act124) and “assortative mating” (which already occurs instinctively in humans, but could be accelerated and manipulated through, say, state-controlled dating site algorithms). Land regards “Social Darwinism” not as an antiquated pseudo-scientific justification for imperialism but as a “theoretical default” whose inalienability is akin to that of the laws of thermodynamics.125 In a sense, Land’s opinions on eugenics prove that ideologically, he “walks-the-walk” of his

124 Vijay Prashad, “The Karma of Brown Folk” (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001)
own accelerationist thinking; since Landian thought advocates for both “the acceleration of the existing relations of production,”126 and the “the technologisation [sic] of critique,”127 it would make sense that his ideal state body would employ population-controlling behaviors that are essentially an exaggerated form of current behaviors of capital.

Land’s simultaneous admiration and awe of the Chinese model of authoritarian capitalism again has a parallel in the mainstream politics of the Trump campaign. One might refer to Steve Bannon’s perturbation at the number of Asian CEOs in Silicon Valley128 as an expression of an insecurity that, because Chinese bureaucracy is unrestrained by the slow pace of the American vetocracy, Chinese people are able to achieve higher intellectual thresholds than America and thus threaten to render white American innovation obsolete. Alternatively, one might refer to Trump’s rhetoric regarding China, in which China is consistently taking advantage of America through unequal trade deals, currency manipulation, etc., as a similar expression of awe and fear towards the Chinese bureaucratic state.129 Furthermore, the capitalist eugenics that Land regards as “inspiring” also lurks within the legislative endeavors of the Trump presidency as detailed in Sarah Jones’ recent *New Republic* article, in which Jones compiles quotations from Trump, Bannon, Michael Anton, Jeff Sessions, Paul Ryan, Tom Price, and Betsy Devos, all of which allude to, or outwardly express notions of genetic superiority and eugenics.130 Jones’

---


article is valuable in recognizing how Neoreactionist thought, in addition to being prevalent in Silicon Valley and among other factions of the alt-right, is also an intellectual elaboration of the Trump administration’s implicit eugenicist political project and its predisposition towards authoritarian capitalism.

Now that I have described the multifaceted relationship between alt-right intellectualism and East/South Asian aesthetics, I would describe how the two quadrants—spiritual and accelerationist—are synthesized in the religious practice of the alt-right. As I described in the introduction to this paper, there is a high degree of intermingling within the different factions of the alt-right on 4chan, reddit, Facebook, and Twitter. It is in these spaces, which are both discursive spaces and spaces for political activism, that the accelerationist-esotericist divide collapses, yielding a hybrid-religion. A common interest in East/South Asian aesthetics allows the hypercapitalist vision of the accelerationist quadrant to interact synergistically with the religio-political activity of reposting, shitposting, and disseminating memes; these ideas are synergistic insofar as the behavior of meme propagation is more similar to the behavior of capital than it is any recognizable religious ritual. In this interaction, Neoreactionism’s logical positivism dissolves as the discourse becomes necessarily religious; as Boris Groys reminds us, “religious discourse operates not in opposition between truth and error … but in the opposition between devotion and blasphemy.”

The result is an online fundamentalist religion whose rituals emulate the unhinged, irrational behaviors of capital—repetition, accumulation, expansionism, acceleration, and the

---

erosion of humanistic thought. This religious framework is devotedly nihilistic; this nihilism is betrayed visually in the implications of suicide in the aesthetics of the alt-right. I would like to argue that by understanding the activity of the alt-right as based in a religion of capital, the nihilism of the alt-right, and of Trump himself can be understood as the psychological expression of capitalism’s death-drive.

In order to characterize the alt-right’s religious persuasion as a form of capitalist nihilism, an initial task is to understand the meme as an incarnation of the destructive behavior of capital. Each individual meme is a unit of fixed political ideology. Baudrillard’s pessimistic notion of how images “fragment perception into successive sequences, into stimuli toward which there can be only instantaneous [yes or no] response” is helpful here. In a sense, the meme is a visual argumentative format of Nick Land’s notion of “critique as escalation … as a cultural sketch of the eradication of law, or humanity,” a critical model which he believes will emerge through a switch to “nomos (numbering)” rather than “gramme (writing).” In other words, the meme, insofar as it can only elicit a binary response, is a tool of critical destruction—this destruction occurs because the meme does not operate on the terms of language or rationality but on the terms of number. Indeed, a meme’s value and its political potency is not determined through its eloquence or its persuasiveness but through its accumulation; ultimately, this model of value-judgement based on accumulative capacity is a model borrowed from capitalism. Thus, we see how the political praxis of the alt-right finds its formal methodology and its criteria for

---

132 In my previous work on the alt-right, The Trumpian sublime, I referred to this religious tendency as *epistemic chiliasm* because it includes the deliberate erosion of the foundations of discursive possibility through gaslighting and shitposting.

133 Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, (New York City, N.Y., U.S.A. : Semiotext(e), Inc., c1983.) pp. 128

134 Although a more thorough interrogation of a memetic image is possible (as I have shown in this essay), this is not the kind of reading that the medium instills in its viewers.

success in the logic of capital. It is also through its formal behaviors—repetition, accumulation, 
acceleration, and destruction that it achieves its religious dimension.

After defining the alt-right meme-disseminator as aspiring to emulate the behaviors of 
capital, a further interrogation of those behaviors illuminates how a critical model might take on 
a religious dimension. In his essay “Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” Boris Groys 
also attempts to parse the relationship between numerical, mechanical, capitalist logic and 
internet-driven fundamentalist religions. Borrowing from Deleuze’s text *Difference and 
Repetition*, Groys characterizes “literal repetition as being radically artificial and, in this sense, as 
being in conflict with everything natural, living, changing, and developing, including natural law 
and moral law.”

Here, Groys describes how due to its artificiality, we interpret true repetition 
as incompatible with the realm of the profane; thus, it is elevated to the sacred. Although he uses 
slightly different terminology (repetition instead of number, law instead of language), Groys 
echoes Land’s assertion that a critique grounded in the logic of capital is an act of violence 
against “life itself.” In a certain sense, Groys goes further than Land here; where Land conceives 
of a model of critique based on the behaviors of capital, Groys conceives of a religion. Groys 
concludes that “precisely because mechanical reproduction may be understood as the lifeless 
repetition of the dead image, it can also be interpreted as a source of the truly religious 
experience.”

Here we see how, using Groys’ criteria, the lifelessness of sharing memes (itself a 
destructive activity) is the factor that determines its religiousness; furthermore, due to this mode 
of emergence, this religion must be one of death. Thus, when we inquire as to what this religion 
orient itself towards, the writing is already on the wall: the engine of the vigorous repetitive

---

136 Boris Groys, “Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction” e-flux journal #4 
137 Ibid.
religious activity of the alt-right is, in fact, the death drive. The death drive, in this case, should be conceived as it is by Vassilis S. Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos—as “not towards death; rather … [as] the tendency to immerse oneself in a repetition that paradoxically brings its own destruction.” Tsianos and Papadopoulos conceive of capitalism (particularly in its relation to immigration) as the death drive incarnated in a social order, thus it would make sense that a religio-political ritual modeled after the behavior of capital would also exhibit the same will-to-repeat-until-destruction as capitalism. Ultimately, evidence of the suicidal consequences of this ritual are already apparent. For instance, the repeated bifurcation and infighting between the alt-right constitutes a small-scale destruction. On a larger scale, if the mobilization of political memes constitutes an endorsement of fascist policies, their consequences can be felt with regard to climate change and in the fascist use of war as means of unification, economic progress, and as the logical conclusion of its inflammatory rhetoric which requires a looming threatening Other. Ultimately, the self-destruction that is immanent in neo-fascist praxis is consistent with Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of fascism not as “a totalitarian organism,” which implies a cohesive, self-sufficient whole, but “a cancerous body” in which fascism is a cancer that, as it metastasizes across the host, kills it and thus kills itself.

Furthermore, The fatalistic capacity of memetic logic can only be perceived when memes are mobilized en masse. Deleuze and Guattari describe how “fascism is inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction, which skip from point to point, before beginning to resonate together in the national socialist state.” In other words, the energy of

---

140 Ibid. pg. 214.
fascism, embodied in the activity of disseminating memes, takes the form of small sparks before igniting an actual mass movement. This might correspond with the recent history of the alt-right, in which the political interest of the communities was limited to small mobilizations such as the 2008 one against the Church of Scientology. It is worth noting that Deleuze and Guattari’s model of molecular fascism relies on a sort of neoliberal network which, through its interconnectivity, becomes vulnerable to takeover by fascism; as Baudrillard writes in *The Spirit of Terror*, “the more concentrated the system becomes globally, ultimately forming one single network, the more it becomes vulnerable at a single point.”¹⁴¹ Baudrillard, Deleuze, and Guattari seem to regard networks as quite supple—a characterization that seems quite accurate when we consider how a single throwaway tweet by a mainstream politician or the Associated Press’ twitter getting hacked can cause markets to tremble and even plummet.¹⁴²

VI. Conclusion

In attempting to theorize German fascism, Walter Benjamin wrote that at the heart of fascism is a revolutionary impulse; however this impulse, when devoid of class consciousness becomes animalistic, libidinal, and suicidal; urges that lash-out without fundamentally targeting or changing the economic status quo.¹⁴³ In Marx’s words, as “the worker appears as superfluous

---
to the extent that his action is not determined by [capital’s] requirements,”
144 his agonizing superfluity requires someone to blame. Thus, with the new fascism we are currently witnessing, the revolt is redirected away from capitalism itself and towards capitalism's brand—namely globalism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. For the most extreme factions of the alt-right, the figure of the omnipotent, threatening Jewish mastermind is critical for the maintenance of capitalism’s innocence in the mind of the alt-right constituent; as Slavoj Žižek reminds us “the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew, this foreign intruder who disturbs and corrupts the harmony of the social order is … a stand-in for the immanent antagonism (‘class struggle’).”
145

Unable to liberate themselves from the fundamental religion of capitalism, neo-fascists actually double down on its perceived graces, namely that of technological innovation. The ultimate repudiation of what Žižek calls ethical capitalism 146 takes the form of a new penchant for imperialism, colonialism, and environmental destruction. Ultimately, this newfound (currently largely performative) indulgence ultimately coheres quite efficiently with the classic fascist fetishization of war and finds itself prescient in responding to the current migrant crisis that has brought Europe to its knees.

We also have something quite powerful in terms of critical paradigms insofar as these images betray their own delusion, insecurity, or ideological context. To decode them is the first step in fighting back, presumably; it is a far more effective option than simply generalizing or digging one’s head further into the sand. Furthermore, thematizing neo-fascism empowers the

146 Slavoj Žižek, First as Tragedy then as Farce. (New York: Verso Books 2011). Think of a Hillary Clinton campaign ad—capitalism with a multicultural face or environmentally conscious recyclable brown exterior.
individual to identify what Deleuze and Guattari might call microfascisms—a fascistic tendencies on a small scale which are pernicious throughout everyday life. This concept of a scalable fascism is echoed in Adorno’s notion of the authoritarian personality which, as Peter Gordon notes, is not a distinct personality type but an “intensified instance of trends that were increasingly visible across the whole of modern society.” Boris Buden, in his recent op-ed for e-flux “Contemporary Fascism and the Limits of Historical Analogy,” concludes by asserting that “drawing analogies between contemporary fascism and historical fascism is far from our worst analytic tool for confronting the dangers of today’s crisis-ridden global capitalism. So we might as well make productive use of it, but only insofar as we have another tool at hand—a knife.” Buden is not wrong that criticism, analogy, and metaphor are insufficient tools for combating neo-fascism. I would add to this list the contemporary art scene which, as Baudrillard remarked in light of the political mainstreaming of Jean-Marie Le Pen, stands “totally worthless.” However, although the capital-A Art-world is politically impotent, the aesthetic nature of contemporary fascism is an undeniable affirmation of the power of everyday propagandic images in today’s visual culture. The Right has outpaced the Left in terms of how deftly they have used these images and have thus made inroads with young, newly engaged netizens who are welcomed by larger nationalist movements in the United States and in Europe.

147 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Trans Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987)
Thus, the knife is probably not the best tool either; it would seem today that an optimal tool for combatting neo-fascism is the image, and the algorithmic sorting mechanism, which could be employed as a means of redirecting society from performances towards politics.

On the other hand, if, as I argued previously, a politics based around rapid image distribution and accumulation, is a model built on the behaviors of capital, then it would seem that the success that the Right has found using these strategies cannot not be replicable for the Left. Ultimately, this question of whether the digital strategies of the alt-right provide a useful model for the Left to emulate inherently becomes bound up in conversations about whether or not the structure of the network nips in the bud any emergence of a potentially emancipatory web-based politics. To thoroughly parse this debate would be outside the scope of this essay, however I would like to take the time to survey particularly incisive arguments on either side of this debate and the possibilities they offer in terms of conceptualizing further resistive action.

A more optimistic vision of the potential of the internet might envisage the network as simply a tool, a relatively empty container for political activity. Within this vision, networks might be employed for the purposes of the Right in the current political moment, but this current trend should be regarded as contingent on a larger rising tide of nationalism. In a sense, reports of human bias emerging in machine learning algorithms give credence to this notion of the network as simply a magnifier of human political will; as Florian Cramer writes in his essay “Crapularity Hermeneutics,” “data sets and algorithms, or the combination of both, can and do discriminate.”¹⁵¹ This is far from a pessimistic vision, due to the fact that the racism and sexism that emerge through these algorithms is undeniably human, thus, once we do away with

---

attempting to achieve of “impartiality” in algorithms (which can really just be understood to be algorithms that reproduce or magnifying the existing social order), we can begin to conceive of emancipatory algorithms, anticapitalist algorithms, etc. Another techno-optimistic vision for the Left might be found in a faith in the enduring potential for subversion; this vision is valuable insofar as it accounts for the notion that the corporate structure of the internet renders it inherently non-neutral. Deleuze and Guattari seem to allude to this subversive potential when they describe how “there is a whole bureaucratic segmentation, a supleness of communication between offices, a bureaucratic perversion, a permanent inventiveness or creativity practiced even against administrative regulations.”152 In other words, by the same mechanism that renders a network increasingly restrictive and privatized, an equal and opposite proliferation of subversive potential also emerges. This potential for subversion might eventually reach a fever pitch and ultimately dismantle the corporate structure of the network from within; thus the emancipatory politics within a network can be achieved by the acceleration of its privatization. This vision for “dismantling from within” can be summarized, as it is by Wu Yuan, in the character Furiosa in the post-capitalist dystopian film Mad Max, who offers us the maxim “the only way forward is through.”153

On the other hand, other theorists offer us compelling arguments that the structure of the network is itself is non-neutral to the extent that it can only operate as a structural incubator for reactionary ideology. This opinion was expressed most succinctly by Frankfurt School theorist Jürgen Habermas who, in a 2006 keynote address, argued that “the very mode of mediated

communication contributes independently to a diffuse alienation of citizens from politics.”¹⁵⁴ In other words, networked communications technologies are irredeemable insofar as they are anti-political in their very form. The alienation that Habermas describes is exploited by the alt-right. This process of alienation is aided by suggestion algorithms—as one anonymous Guardian contributor notes, his descent into a media hole of anti-Islamic alt-right videos was directly facilitated by YouTube’s suggested related videos.¹⁵⁵ Ultimately, Habermas’ words seem to be an elaboration of a prophetic assertion made in 1964 by Marshall McLuhan who argued that, “electric writing and speed pour upon [the viewing subject], instantaneously and continuously, the concerns of all other men. He becomes tribal once more.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, the medium-specific characteristics of electronic typography, namely speed, correspond with a re-tribalization of the population irrespective of the contents of the ideological narrative contained within that electronic text; McLuhan doubles down on this claim in his conclusion that “of the many unforeseen consequences of typography, the emergence of nationalism is, perhaps, the most familiar.”¹⁵⁷ McLuhan and Habermas portray the network as synonymous with anti-political Nationalism; in their vision, networked communications technologies are unable to be redeemed for egalitarian, emancipatory ends. They either reject or fail to recognize the subversive potential in its corporate structure that Deleuze and Guattari attempt to point out; they

¹⁵⁴ Jürgen Habermas via Terje Rasmussen, “The Internet and Differentiation in the Political Public Sphere” December 2014. http://jclass.umd.edu/classes/jour698m/rasmussen.pdf
¹⁵⁷ Ibid.
would find, as Hito Steyerl does, the fact that “the internet spawned Uber and Amazon, not the Paris Commune” invariably damning.\(^{158}\)

I do not believe that we can achieve an emancipatory politics using the very same political strategies as the alt-right. Their use of memes is too opposed to criticality, and thus, inevitably reactionary. I do believe, however, that attempting to reimagine the network as emancipatory should be a part of the political project of the left in general. Efforts such as the Slow Web\(^{159}\), which attempts to counteract the speed that McLuhan argues leads to nationalism, and communities such as reddit’s r/socialistprogrammers are useful as parts of a larger project. I also believe that a Leftist project of reimagination can have a larger scope than just the reconsideration of political discourse on the internet; aesthetics in general should be reconsidered. Luxury, transhumanism, transgression, and vulgarity are not inherently aesthetic property of the right—in fact, in some capacities, particularly in the case of vulgarity, which used to be a key asset for Leftist aesthetics\(^{160}\), they have only recently been taken away from the Left.

Consider, for instance, Donna Haraway’s vision of emancipatory feminism via transhumanism as it is outlined in the Cyborg Manifesto\(^{161}\), or McKenzie Wark’s futuristic “black accelerationism,” which attempts to conceive of a posthumanism motivated by a will to remedy humanism’s structural racism.\(^{162}\) Another prescient example might be environmental activists conducting social media campaigns to archive climate change data that might be threatened by a Trump


administration. With examples like these, I see no reason why a strategic use of networked communications technologies cannot be part of a larger Leftist project. Ultimately, the vision of futurity provided by the alt-right is bound up in its mode of distribution; the capitalist logic of sharing memes is reflected in the capitalist utopia/dystopia depicted within the images themselves. Thus, a Leftist vision of futurity, just as it must depict an alternative to capitalism, must also offer different mode of distribution, or a different mode of criteria for what can be considered successful distribution of a popular idea. As the alt-right is reactionary, accumulative, repetitive, and viral, perhaps the creative task at hand should conceiving of a totalizing, slower, heterogeneous model of distribution.

---