

# Seeing is Obeying

## Authoritarian Aesthetics & the Afterlife of Fascism in Neoliberal Democracy

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Faces covered with white masks, carrying a banner reading “Reclaim America,” chanting re-worked Nazi slogans, and waving stylized U.S. flags, 150 members of the white nationalist Patriot Front marched through Washington D.C. in early February.



Antifascist protesters blocking white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and fascist sympathizers from entering Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12, 2017

And, nothing happened. The fascists got a police escort, a photo op, and a big, fat platform.

The result of a split inside Vanguard America, another fascist formation, Patriot Front formed after their parent organization’s implication in the murder of Heather Heyer during 2017’s “Unite the Right” Charlottesville rally. The march in D.C. was the latest in a series of attempts to make visible, and so to legitimize, their newest version of the same tired fascist politics.

Politics is a visual art. If you control what people can or can’t see, you control how they understand the world—and their ability to change it. Relatedly, if you repeat the same imagery often enough, its content becomes the new normal. Power-grabbing politicians know all this as do power-hungry fascists.

Anarchists know it, too. We’ve fought with art as readily as we’ve fought with sticks or fists. Authority demands we accept an artificially narrowed field of vision.

Anarchism asks us to challenge it. Tear down the walls. Bust the locks. Knock down the doors. Zoom out.

Existing beyond museums and art galleries, revolutionary aesthetic practices encompass sticker-slaps, banner-drops, building and defending barricades from riot cops, designing murals, posters, or throwing paint on a canvas.

All these efforts may challenge old ways of seeing. They also strive to present a radical alternative to them—new visions of a future that exists without fascism, and without the false promises of neoliberal democracy.

Fascism, however, has always relied on authoritarian tendencies already present in capitalist democracy in its route to power, and the present neoliberal context is no different. The recent fascist activity in the capital only confirms this fact.

Examining representational patterns common contemporary fascist aesthetic practice demonstrates that these pre-existing parallel tendencies within neoliberal democracy upon which fascism relies are what frame and inform fascist cultural production and its use in efforts to legitimize fascist politics.

Contemporary fascists and fellow travelers borrow the neoliberal conceit of co-opting liberal rhetoric to recruit members and normalize their politics. Hence, why Jared Taylor’s New Century Foundation claims it is a “white

advocacy organization,” or why American Guard’s 2017 call to action advocates “activism and service,” rather than employing more traditional and overtly incendiary fascist rhetoric.

The shadowy Detroit-based National Socialist Movement (NSM) goes even further in its transparent attempts to retrofit racist terror. Nixing the swastika from their official insignia, they opt instead for the Germanic Othala or Odal rune. It’s a rune that is less commonly associated with fascism, and that connotes protecting home and heritage although its design suggests the discarded emblem.

This emphasis on protection aligns nicely with the NSM’s self-identification as “America’s premiere white civil rights organization” to further normalize their politics by re-purposing race war as a civil rights struggle. In keeping with this facade, the NSM offers scholarships for college-bound white women.

They also often hide the demand for racially motivated genocide in the language of conservative policy reform.

Like neoliberalism, modern fascism appropriates a reformist liberal lexicon promising greater opportunities for prosperity contingent upon accepting its broader political platform—at least, for a select few.

To define who comprises this select few, neoliberal democracy and fascism often marshal nationalist rhetoric and iconography to deepen and extend pre-existing hierarchies and oppressions. While its infatuation with freer markets ostensibly makes neoliberalism the ideological enemy of nationalism, in practice, neoliberalism’s architects rely on nationalism to frame policy, foment market competition, and divide workers.

Such neoliberal logic informs the Trump administration’s claims that it acts to further deregulate energy and other economic sectors while also enhancing border enforcement and exiting global trade agreements to “put America first” and “to make America once again a shining city on a hill.”

Or, so the White House website informs visitors amidst photographs of U.S. flags and kneeling soldiers. Use of classically nationalist symbols and rhetoric with contemporary imagery clearly indicates nationalist myth-making is integral to framing and justifying the current U.S. neoliberal project.

Modern fascist formations likewise strategically manipulate pre-existing nationalist mythology. Because of recent successful anti-fascist organizing (and selective state repression) a number of contemporary fascist formations are relying even more heavily on nationalist iconography.

Take the shift in visual rhetoric visible in materials from The American Identity Movement (AIM), formerly Identity Evropa (IE).

Some of IE’s earliest propaganda efforts reveal its debt to historical fascism’s obsession with Greco-Roman civilization, and to Europe’s racist identitarian movements. Images of marble sculpture, ranging from Michelangelo’s *David* to the *Gaius Julius Caesar* of Nicolas Coustou, provide the backdrop to phrases like “Serve Your People” or—appropriating Trump-brand rhetoric—“Let’s Become Great Again.” The suggestion is that such artworks prove the white/European cultural superiority they insist requires defending.

AIM abandons IE’s European art fetish for more home-grown fare, re-purposing propaganda from past inter-imperialist conflicts in service of the racial war they hope to ignite in the present.

Slogans like “Be Patriotic” are replaced with imperatives to “Defend Your Race” or Embrace your Identity.” Patriot Front employs similar strategies in the headers for their online manifesto.

As if taking the German American Bund’s 1939 pro-Hitler rally at Madison Square Garden as inspiration, their logo—the thirteen stars taken from the original U.S. flag arrayed around the Roman fasces—overlays artist Emanuel Luetze’s obnoxiously familiar Washington Crossing the Delaware, all of which provides the backdrop for a quote from the slaver himself. Like AIM, Patriot Front fits its fascism into graphic depictions of nationalist mythology. And, the fit is disturbingly—but unsurprisingly—comfortable.

Violence-as-enforcement-mechanism is a key feature of neoliberalism and fascism. Because proponents of neoliberalism control the state, capitalist violence is often sanctioned. While fascists are unapologetic perpetrators of violence, state power’s relative inaccessibility to them means that much fascist cultural production encourages violence or imagines the unfettered brutality following a fascist rise to power.

The fascist incitement to violence takes many forms. A common strategy is the dictator dog-whistle: wearing shirts or crafting memes featuring the former Chilean torture-state dictator Pinochet and other authoritarian demagogues. Others sport clothes bearing the initials RWDS, standing for “right-wing death squad,” in another allusion to international fascist violence carried out with the U.S. government’s unwavering support such as in South and

Central American countries. Still others prefer apparel featuring slogans like Roof-Top Voter, suggesting they'll vote via a trigger-pull while lying in a sniper position.

The Atomwaffen Division (AWD) borrow even more directly from the genocidal fascist imagination. One flyer takes as inspiration "The Day of the Rope" that neo-Nazi National Alliance founder William Luther Pierce (writing as Andrew McDonald) vividly describes in the white nationalist classic *The Turner Diaries*. This is the day that Pierce's protagonist and his fascist brethren lynch any who are deemed "race traitors," leaving their corpses dangling from light posts and overpasses.

To realize their version of Pierce's vision, AWD utilizes collage, incorporating segments of actual lynching photographs with digitally created imagery. The message is clear: join, or die along with the other untermenschen, the Nazi term for "inferior people."

Horrific, yet AWD's seamless inclusion of documentary evidence highlighting America's longstanding tradition of white racist terror is proof that the racialized violence they advocate is just an extension and amplification of the overt and covert racialized violence that has always informed American politics. And, it is still present in the day-to-day activities of the contemporary neoliberal state.

Modern fascism's aesthetic patterns are not wholly distinct from classical fascism's, and this is not a full and complete catalog of those patterns.

Still, anarchists have long recognized, contrary to the orthodox Marxist position viewing it as a faint echo of economic realities, that cultural production can be socially and politically constitutive. But it is a force that may either be used to re-inscribe forms of domination and control, or to help us create a world free from tyranny, domination, and oppression.

Cultural production is a crucial site for antifascist struggle. We cannot let the fascists achieve any degree of visibility. We have to continue pushing them out of sight. Fascism must be left no place to hide—in any shape or form. And, we must also help others envision and build alternatives to the bankrupt and broken capitalist society that allows fascism to exist.

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