

Transgression and disruption as aesthetic ideology, from Marinetti to experimental art, counterculture, neoliberalism, and Trump

By Florian Cramer, with Nienke Terpsma

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Freeing oneself from rules and constraints has been an important aspect of the arts in their emancipation from authorities and regimes – such as the emancipation of Renaissance painting from the medieval church and aristocracy, the break with conservative bourgeois culture in the visual arts and countercultures of the 20th century, and liberation from white supremacy in free jazz. But transgression and disruption can also easily become means to dubious ends. The deregulation of neoliberalism, the outside-the-box thinking of management culture, the revolutionary “everything must change” rhetoric of the extreme right?

A simple, hypothetical proposition: the arts and countercultures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries had transgression and disruption as their main theme and *modus operandi*. This program was already under pressure from the disruptions of neoliberalism and is now finally bankrupt from the total disruptions and transgressions of the extreme right – from Trump, Wilders, Milei, and others. Contemporary art is desperately searching for a new counter-program with other narratives, values, methods and themes such as: community, collectivity, care and ecology.

But reality is less simple, because all of these concepts can exist in ideological gray areas. Like a meme, which spreads and makes everything a part of itself, fascism can be said to be something that can creep into any set of ideas and turn them into fascism. This is precisely what makes fascism so hard to pin down; one could, for example, call it an ideology of the extremist center, just as well as an ideology of the extreme right.

1930s Italian and German fascism has often been characterized as a unity of politics and aesthetics, with its cult of uniformity, mass choreography, and propaganda. The program of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, particularly that of Friedrich Schiller, to form a new democratic society through the aesthetic education and refinement of citizens, was turned into a grotesque perversion. In place of the aesthetically autonomous, educated citizen (“Bildungsbürger”) came the decorative fascist masses. Critics such as the Flemish-American literary theorist Paul de Man, who was himself entangled in 1940s fascism, therefore denounced any form of “aesthetic ideology,” including Schiller’s, as problematic in itself.

At first glance, Trump, Wilders, and other contemporary extreme-right leaders do not appear to be classic fascists because their movements do not exhibit a uniform aesthetic ideology. On the contrary, they spread chaos and demonstrative ugliness with their meme-like low-brow trash visual culture spread via social media. But in addition to this well-known form of populism, there is also an elitist tendency within contemporary extreme-right politics. This tendency seems determined to breathe new life into an aesthetic ideology that only a few years ago was considered outdated-modernist: an ideology of heroic disruption and visionary anticipation of the future, as described in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s 1909 Futurist Manifesto. For the insiders, artists, critics, theorists, and curators of contemporary art, the paradigm of art as practiced futurism was sidelined after early 20th century modernism. It survived only in niches: in popular culture, among art collectors, in techno-affirmative media art, or in radical reinterpretations such as Afrofuturism.

What did survive for a long time was the idea of the artist as *poète maudit*, as a disruptive individual with a transgressive art practice. This concept existed for centuries before Romanticism, but reached its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It then persisted in various forms such as body art, performance art, expressive painting and street art, and also in part in institutional critique, political-activist art and digital hacker art.

Even several neofuturist movements have emerged, such as accelerationism in the 2010s, which emerged from schools such as Goldsmiths and the ‘New Centre for Research & Practice,’ along with the closely related Post-Internet art movement (as discussed in the *Metropolis M* debate The Technological Future and Art during Art Rotterdam 2016). In philosophy, accelerationism began as a radical left vision of a future non-capitalist society using AI and automation, drawing heavily on the ideas of British philosopher Nick Land from the 1990s. By the time his former students proclaimed accelerationism, Land had already taken a radical right turn. Together with the American Curtis Yarvin, he developed what is known as the ‘neoreactionary’ Dark Enlightenment, which promotes an autocratic vision of technology and society modeled on, among others, Deng Xiao-Ping’s China. ‘Neoreaction’ subsequently became an elitist offshoot of the extreme-right ‘Alt-Right’ movement during the 2016 US presidential election.

At that time, this version of accelerationism remained largely confined to the US and Silicon Valley. It was closely linked to debates about the future societal impact of AI, including the potential destruction of humanity, on the influential internet forum LessWrong. Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, both co-founders of PayPal in 2001, have often implicitly referenced debates on LessWrong in public statements. By now, it has become abundantly clear that Musk has fused the roles of techno futurist, transgressive performance artist, visionary CEO, and right-wing internet troll in his public persona and actions. His affinity for techno-speculative art is also evident in his relationship with

electronic musician Grimes and their three children, X Æ A-Xii, Exa Dark Sideræl and Techno Mechanicus. This recently culminated in his leading the ‘Department of Government Efficiency,’ founded by Trump and named after the internet meme DOGE. Thiel showed an affinity for neoreactionary ideas early on in his public statements, funding Curtis Yarvin as early as 2013. Around the same time, he was also the mentor of JD Vance, whom he introduced to Trump in 2021.

Another central figure in the second Trump administration hailing from Silicon Valley is Marc Andreessen, who founded the browser company Netscape in the 1990s and later Andreessen Horowitz, one of the most important venture capitalist financiers of Silicon Valley start-ups. Andreessen says he spends ‘half’ of his time at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago residence as an advisor to the new administration. In 2023, he published the *Techno-Optimist Manifesto* on the Andreessen Horowitz website. Some quotes from it: ‘Technology is the glory of human ambition and achievement, the spearhead of progress, and the realization of our potential. [...] We can advance to a far superior way of living, and of being. [...] We believe everything good is downstream of growth. [...] And so the only perpetual source of growth is technology. [...] Give us a real world problem, and we can invent technology that will solve it. [...] We believe the techno-capital machine of markets and innovation never ends, but instead spirals continuously upward.’ And finally: ‘We believe in accelerationism – the conscious and deliberate propulsion of technological development – to ensure the fulfillment of the Law of Accelerating Returns.’ The overlap with the 2010s accelerationism is no coincidence. The manifesto ends with a list of ‘Patron Saints of Techno-Optimism.’ In addition to economic liberal and neoliberal thinkers such as Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig Mises, this list also includes Nick Land, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Buckminster Fuller.

In this way, an originally artistic program of heroism and transgression reemerges in the marriage between techno-libertarianism and the extreme right. Politicians and entrepreneurs, such as Milei with his chainsaw performances in Argentina and Musk with his raised-arm salutes, appear and act as transgressive activist performance artists.

Disruptive cultures

In retrospect, transgression played a role in both romanticist and libertarian programs. Libertarian has a double and in this context somewhat confusing meaning: historically, the word stems from nineteenth-century political anarchism and was meant to clarify the difference between anti-authoritarian and authoritarian socialism. Libertarian socialism essentially strives for a free and equal society. But in the 1960s and 1970s, the term libertarianism was appropriated in the US by supporters of the neoliberal economist Friedrich Hayek and the right-wing writer Ayn Rand, as a radical neoliberal ideology: maximally deregulated capitalism with maximum individual freedom.

In retrospect, one could say that in counterculture since the 1960s, left-wing and right-wing libertarian ideas and methods have frequently overlapped while left-wing methods and proposals were twisted for the benefit of neoliberal, right-wing or autocratic agendas.

This also applies, to some extent, to the founder of Dutch right-wing populism in the late 1990s and early 2000s Pim Fortuyn, who anticipated current American culture by calling himself a “an

aesthete and grass roots democrat, a desperado, a Dadaist with a skull of a gladiator”,¹ or Dutch right-wing populist politician Geert Wilders, who is a fan of the radical left-wing punk band Dead Kennedys.

What does it mean when programs of transgression and rhizomatic chaos emerge as something that can also be fascist, and not just since the 21st century? In her much-read essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986), Ursula K. Le Guin wrote about what she saw as an unjustified general preference for heroic stories with conflict and drama: hunting over picking berries. This preference now seems grotesquely exaggerated and exploited in the right-wing accelerationism around Trump and the associated pop culture such as the *manosphere* that originally emerged from the 4chan Alt-Right and is now fueled by influencers such as Andrew Tate.

Today, the extreme right defines itself through its ideological enemy, thereby bridging its own internal ideological contradictions, such as those between techno-accelerationism and anti-technological ecofascism (which already existed in the Third Reich; Heidegger, as an ecofascist, therefore gradually distanced himself from the German National Socialists). This enemy of the extreme right is currently ‘woke’ and thus implicitly includes art and socio-cultural practices of ‘care’, ‘community’ and ‘equity, diversity and inclusion.’ But even “care” and “community” – albeit for members of the in-group – are already appropriated into fascist culture and politics, for example in eco-fascist village communities, right-wing “sovereign citizen” groups that reject the government, and the “tradwife” subculture with its propagation of a feminine domestic sphere. In these subcultures, the extreme right offers niches for those who want to escape techno-accelerationism.

Today’s fascism could be called postmodern, as it no longer follows or tells a “grand narrative,” to use the definition of the philosopher Jean François Lyotard. Even its apparent heroism is just second-hand: ‘Make America Great *Again*’ refers to a deliberately undefined past and is, in the language of 1980s poststructuralism, a ‘floating signifier.’ The floating signifier is simultaneously disruptive and open-ended. Disruption and chaos are not fixed principles in postmodern fascism either. As floating signifiers themselves, they can be turned into their opposite at any moment.

For the time being, disruption and chaos seem to be stylistic devices with which postmodern fascism distinguishes itself from the militaristic-authoritarian fascism of the twentieth century, thereby pretending to be something other than fascism. It no longer looks as if it was sculpted by Arno Breker, but like Dada-punk-futurist trolling, parole in libertà: a tactic to seize and stay in power by creating confusion. In this way, contemporary fascism functions as resistance to a world without friction: the ostentatiously apolitical or post-political Western technocratic politics that began in the nineties, the service design world in which everything is easy, painless, comfortable, carefree, devoid of materiality, denying what is dirty, difficult, painful, or hard, as well as the disruptions that are actually underway – from the transfer of power to oligarchies to climate change. Postmodern fascism, with its grotesque physicality and embrace of transgression, responds as a counter-program. In positioning itself as a simultaneous antidote to *and* libertarian radicalizer of neoliberalism, postmodern fascism repeats the stance of twentieth-century modernist fascism, which positioned itself as an antidote to classical liberalism.

¹Source: Nikolai Endres, *Fortuyn, Pim (1948-2002)*, GLBT Archive, 2009

“We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice,” according to Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto*. Trump, Musk, Milei and Wilders operate along the same lines. Their difference from most transgressive art forms is that their brand of disruption, transgression and chaos is not open-ended, but deterministic. Yet insisting on this difference does not solve the problem: because open-endedness and indeterminism can conversely be used to create a ‘tyranny of structurelessness,’ according to the analysis of feminist activist Jo Freeman in the 1970s. Aesthetic ideologies that advocate disruption, transgression and indeterminism as ends in themselves can easily be co-opted for whatever form of power politics is the goal of the day. Conversely, *criticism* of the ‘tyranny of structurelessness,’ for example in community projects, can be a means of destroying well-functioning non-hierarchical systems and installing authoritarian or narcissistic structures.

Artistic, intellectual and political work that cannot be made fascist, or co-opted or used for authoritarian power politics – if that is even possible – requires more complex concepts than a simple binarity of ‘regulation’ and ‘transgression;’ it requires permanent (self-) critical work.

Florian Cramer works as a professor for Artistic Research and Emerging Forms of Cultural Production at the Willem de Kooning Academy, Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. Nienke Terpsma is a visual artist, book designer and co-editor of Fucking Good Art.

Reading suggestions

Umberto Eco, *Ur-Fascism*, originally published in New York Review of Books, 1995, republished in The Anarchist Library, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/umberto-eco-ur-fascism>

Robert van Raffe, *Gesamtkunstwerk Nederland, Het politico-esthetische project van Pim Fortuyn*, https://www.academia.edu/33751127/Gesamtkunstwerk_Nederland_Het_politico_esthetische_project_van_Pim_Fortuyn

Mike Brock, *The Plot Against America: How a Dangerous Ideology Born From the Libertarian Movement Stands Ready to Seize America*, <https://www.notesfromthecircus.com/p/the-plot-against-america>

Carole Cadwalladr, *How to Survive the Broligarchy*, podcast & article series, <https://broligarchy.su.bstack.com>