

## THE REGIME IS LIVE(-STREAMED) AND KICKING

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### Abstract

In this paper, I propose the concept of the live-streamed regime as a way to reflect on the new political dimension of the governance of emotions. This is carried out via the use of digital (audio-) visual elements, in order to stoke the fascination for violence and authoritarianism by means of the design of images and cultural material that are highly cosmetic. These kinds of images are used by the extreme digital right (the Alt-Right) to: 1) cosmeticise fascism and make it attractive again, 2) trivialise and justify the violence inflicted on communities that are disadvantaged and marginalised due to issues of gender, race, class, sexual diversity, disability or immigration status.

### Keywords

Fascism 2.0; psychopolitics; digital colonialism; images of violence; transfeminism; live-streamed regime.

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### The live-streamed regime and right-wing life

The West ponders: how can it be, given the atrocities that took place in the Second World War, that fascism is on the rise again? Why are the politics of hate and cynicism increasingly becoming positive values that rack up 'likes' on social media, and how have they come to be so characteristic of the leaders of the New World Order?

How have we reached this point? It has been a long journey, passing by technological landmarks like photography, cinema, television, the Internet and mobile telephones, all of which have accompanied the modern narratives of progress. But there are two elements in particular which have paved the way for the return of fanaticism: the erasure of memory and the cosmeticisation of violence. Both elements have played a crucial role in the rise of this new authoritarianism, despite the fact that it is presented in the media and on virtual social networks as something which has appeared out of thin air, with no previous explanation or context; it is presented as an exception to the democratic rule.

However, those of us who have been born in, brought up in and have inhabited formerly colonial spaces and/or spaces near borders, or those of us who are of racialised heritage, are sexual dissenters or who are gender non-conforming, or are so-called illegal immigrants or indeed any combination of these variables with others, we know that this rise of fundamentalism is not an exception to the democratic rule, but rather the mode of production of the exceptional which has kept the cogs of the largest economies turning, from colonial times right up to today.

The methods are different, and the technologies have been updated, but three elements have remained essential in the return of conservative/colonial thinking: the popularisation of white supremacy, the indiscriminate celebration of violent masculinity, and the glorification of the "heterosexual nation" (Curiel, 2013). All of these hide extractivist colonial imaginaries, and are in clear opposition to the feminist, anti-racist, sex-dissident, de-colonial and migrant movements.

With this in mind, what is the link between the rise of fascism 2.0 and the use of certain elements of digital folklore, as well as the spread of certain images for its dissemination? In this article I propose the concept of the Live-streamed Regime to outline this link, and theoretically bridge the gap between the biopolitical regime as proposed by Foucault, in which the central role of government was the administration of life and its processes (Foucault 2007 (1979)), and the digital psychopolitical regime (Han 2014) in which subjectivity is exploited and emotions are commoditised. The aim is to try to understand the movement away from forms of disciplinary governance over "what is live", towards the forms of governance over the psyche and subjectivity, by means of "live-streaming".

## 1. What is the live-streamed regime?

The live-streamed regime is a conceptualisation with which I seek to indicate the change in sensibility that produces a cognitive mutation (Berardi 2017), both in terms of content and perceptual devices. It has at least three characteristics: 1) the visual elimination of the public/private divide, 2) the reification of time as something without duration (pure adrenaline, instantaneity and amnesia) and 3) the extreme cosmeticisation of violent images and their critical depoliticisation.

This ruling over our emotions reprograms our frames of perception in order to keep us hyper-stimulated and locked in an eternal present, with no long-term memory. It is a kind of embodiment of the society of the spectacle (Debord 2000 [1967]), which uses simulation (Baudrillard 1991), but this version goes even further, because it is a digital psychopolitical order and it

is linked with the production of algorithms and information that can be commoditised in many different ways. For example, there is “platform capitalism” (Srnicsek 2018); there is the selling of personal information to companies understood as “data colonialism” (Mejías and Couldry, 2019); as well as the monetisation of emotions (Duportail 2019), among others. However, the most important factor for this form of administration is that “the gathered data also aids in the strategic aim of ensuring the continued propagation of the system itself” (Griziotti 2017: 87).

As such, the reality of the live-streamed regime merges the Internet and the Outernet (Fresneda, 2013), a sensorial rupture in the offline/online divide, which results in the spectralisation of the world. In turn, this affects the way in which we empathise or not with certain violent events, and how we prosume (as today’s prosumers) and accept certain imaginaries. An example of this are the images of people killed in “terrorist” attacks, images in which the victims are inhabitants of the third world and/or racialised. These images do not rouse the same degree of empathy or sorrow as those which feature white people from the economic superpowers.

Though this regime does indeed create wealthy industries and reinvent the devices and platforms for broadcasting, it also spreads “a neoliberal common sense” (Emmelheinz, 2016) which is combined with conservative agendas, and it spectralises the atrocious conditions of certain acts of violence committed against minority populations. Examples of this would be the denial of the crimes of the Francoist regime during the Spanish dictatorship, or the indifference shown by Donald Trump when questioned about the migrant children being held in detention centres on the Mexico-US border. This allows for the dissemination and popularisation of the conservative discourse, by means of highly cosmetic images such as racist, sexist and supremacist memes. These comical meme images, when mixed into digital folklore (Rowan 2015), do the rounds on virtual social networks indiscriminately, i.e. right alongside other images which may in fact be critical or defensive in nature.

In this sense, the live-streamed regime creates contradictory montages where political extremes appear side-by-side, using aesthetic logics that have been taken out of context, and this creates confusion in the spectators because it presents a system of equivalences where everything is equally valid. This trivialisation of the meaning of upsetting images reconfigures the visual regime: it challenges the truth value of facts, and it erases the historical memory of certain people, particularly those who begin to minority groups, i.e. people who are indigenous, racialised, poor, feminists, sexually dissident, disabled, migrants, etc.

It follows that “live-streamed, direct” governance is therefore based on the creation/replacement of reality in order to alter perception, and to nudge our sensibility towards the more restrictive framework of the offline world. This demands a mental architecture that is comfortable, contradictory and depoliticised, i.e. that is ripe to be captured and seduced by simplistic ideas that appeal to the emotions and individual desires, rather than pushing for social justice and collectivity.

## 2. Right-wing life

I take inspiration from the approach of the Argentinean philosopher Silvia Schwarzböck, who tells us that the general drift to the right has been the breeding ground so that certain kinds of thinking, be they nativist, racist, misogynist or fundamentalist, have been able to take hold again in today’s world. But what is right-wing life? “(...) It is the dream of a problem-free life (...) banal killings, out of carelessness or sheer boredom, out of neglect, as demanded by the image or its simulation” (Schwarzböck, 2015: 14-15).

Thus, right-wing life is the expropriation of all the values of “the good, the fair and the correct”<sup>1</sup> of the humanist project, on behalf of the conservative agendas in combination with neoliberalism. In this combination, extractivism is spread to the protocols of dissent and the projects of emancipation, as can be seen in the distorted and racist way that the Alt-Right<sup>2</sup> uses concepts forged within the tradition of Frankfurtian critical theory, or the contradictory way that hardline conservative movements twist feminist discourses in order to strip their demands of all meaning and demonise them, as is the case with the concept of “gender ideology”.

It follows, then, that the most up-to-date way of disseminating this right-wing life is through the live-streamed regime and its digital devices and platforms. At present, this technology is permitting the rise of fascism 2.0 and the establishment of a glotalitarian regime, i.e. a global government based on totalitarianism, and that uses social networks to produce an acritical social consensus, one which is short on ideas but brimming with passion.

In this sense, images, understood in the broader sense as a frame of perception, provide the elements to produce a visual consensus, a kind of silent consensus of the eye, or as Jean-Christophe Bailly puts it: “The gaze gazes, and the unformulated is, in it, the pathway of thought, or at least of a thinking that is not uttered, not articulated, but that takes place and sees itself, holds itself in this purely strange and strangely limitless place which is the surface of the eye” (Bailly 2014: 30).

I therefore call for us to reflect upon the ability that sight has to make affective consensuses, even with no discursive mediation. To achieve this, contemporary art is fundamental for thinking about the way in which our ways of seeing have been reconfigured. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, art has reprogrammed the political perception of the world, as Hito Steyerl states: "Maybe the art history of the twentieth century can be understood as an anticipatory tutorial to help humans decode images made by machines, for machines" (Steyerl 2018: 101).

As I see it, the subversive power of art is exactly what has been at stake since the early twentieth century with the European artistic vanguards, given that they challenged the form of representation and they dislodged the Greek moral/aesthetic/epistemic triad that equated the good with the fair and the fair with the correct. The vanguards break with the ocular-centric renaissance perspective (which had been imposed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and which symbolically strengthened the process of colonisation in the Americas<sup>3</sup>).

I return to the challenge of the vanguards in the sense of the production of disruptive works that were reappropriated by the conservative systems. For example, German fascism appropriated the aesthetic languages of the vanguards and their counter-offensive aesthetic in order to establish a new form of visuality linked with cosmetics and prosthetics, linked with fascism like a brand, like the design of a powerful and attractive subjectivity, linked with the visual taste and design that Susan Sontag called "fascinating fascism".

For me, it is so important to discuss the clear and direct relationship between art and the live-streamed regime because I work from the assumption that avant-garde and contemporary art allow us to read, deftly, all of the pop culture stimuli that flow through the new platforms of communication and virtual consumption. The art of the twentieth century constructed an ability and ways of seeing and understanding the world on a meta-representative level, given how it devised innovative languages, formulae and visualities, creating thus other abstractions and consensuses that otherwise would not exist. Art and its constant ruptures have redesigned us, on a perceptual level.

To that end, art is fundamental in the construction of a sensitive and critical memory, which has been attacked by the spectralisation of reality via the eternal-present of the live-streamed regime, by means of the destruction of the revolutionary memory.

I base this on the idea that design is an anaesthetic, i.e. that the appealing design of things affects our perception of them. I take inspiration here from

two important theoreticians of this century: Susan Buck-Morss and Beatriz Colomina.

I begin with Buck-Morss, who, reflecting on Walter Benjamin's theory of aesthetics, says that following the mass dissemination of images of violence and death after the First World War, there was a shift in the psyche which began to inhibit the production of empathy, as a result of the elimination of memory. Let me explain: Buck-Morss (like Benjamin) bases her theory on the importance of trauma in Freudian psychoanalytical theory as the possibility of generating memory. As has been investigated, traumatic experience generates a bodily memory, and so one of the most important tasks of the psyche is to produce traces/traumas in order to be able to produce memory, and create correlates of meaning that help in the recognition of these processes and help generate empathy.

Returning to Buck-Morss's argument, we can deduce that the overproduction and circulation of images of contemporary violence brings about an important change in the perception and reception of these images. This is because, upon their mass dissemination, the receiving body is subjected to a jolt of emotional stress which sets about deactivating the production of trauma in relation to those constant stimuli, and so the creation of memory and recall is inhibited, which are both fundamental to be able to produce empathy.

In this way, the acceleration in the production and perception of violent images is exacerbated in the way that it anaesthetises us instead of shocking us. This makes possible the deactivation of a revolutionary intergenerational consensus, due to a lack of meaningful memories and correlates.

The second theoretician who inspires me to consider the contemporary world as ultra-cosmetics (and no longer just aesthetics) is Beatriz Colomina, who has investigated the production of domestic technologies as a legacy of the Second World War. She tells us that, following this war, design, architecture and contemporary art go hand-in-hand, and they set the new standards for what is to be deemed humane. Above all, she highlights industrial design and how it saturated homes in the 1950s, to tell us that the design of pleasant, frictionless spaces is directly linked with the sense-based elimination of anxiety, i.e. the kind that might rear its head when remembering the horrors of war. Yet, building smooth spaces also eliminates, in terms of the senses, the possibility of any political association with dissent or friction. In her text, Colomina says: "the smooth surfaces of modern design eliminate friction, removing bodily and psychological sensation" (Colomina 2016:89). Design, therefore, after the 1950s, turned aesthetics into cosmetics.

In this sense, the live-streamed regime, based on sheer instantaneity, consumption and instant gratification, is the manifestation of a far-right, extractivist political project which has grasped that the redesigning of the social psyche is more valuable and potent than repression itself, and it is showing us that neoliberalism is a political form of economics and management, a legacy of fascism, which will not oppose the destruction of the democratic frameworks.

In this sense, the design of spaces, advertising and images that are extraordinarily striking and seductive on a visual and sensorial level, and that are distributed today on the Internet and its platforms, causes utter rapture (literally, and metaphorically). It may produce an unchallenged visual consensus that in turn constructs an apolitical taste that legitimises and accepts the construction of a necroscopic regime that normalises violence and makes it compelling (Valencia y Sepúlveda, 2016). This is the case with the distribution of harrowing images such as those depicting migrants who have drowned in the Mediterranean, or the thousands of children in cages in the detention centres on the Mexico-US border, which bring to mind the Nazi concentration camps.

This is exactly what I am referring to when I speak of design as an anaesthetic, and in some cases an analgesic: in other words, a painkiller, or at least something that numbs the pain.

Thus, with the erasure of memory and the proliferation of a time that is ever present and fragmented, the live-streamed regime manages to make the gravest of catastrophes seem less dense when we are surrounded, at least virtually or psychopolitically, by pretty objects, nice sensations and friendly spaces. As Colomina states, the ultimate aim of design is: "to create a thin line of aesthetic defence in which to take shelter when trauma cannot be expressed" (Colomina, 2016: 101).

Therefore, right-wing life is highly conscious of the fact that if something is unnamed, it does not exist, because naming something requires the creation of a community of intersubjective consensus, which implies a critical discussion, a reflection and a consented use of the meaning and context of a given terminology.

To achieve this, in a counter-strike against lexical consensus, well-debated and critical as it is, this explicit aesthetic is pieced together. It shows everything based on the overproduction of images and audiovisual stimuli, whose content, at times funny, at other times bloody, depends on those bio-/necro-/psychopolitics that hold up the neoliberal and authoritarian

discourses that popularise the discrediting of dissenting politics and demand the trivialisation of everything.

To conclude, it must be noted that the use of digital folklore is not exclusive to conservative agendas. Instead, it is mixed, in unpredictable ways, with regional cultures, and can also produce exercises in social condemnation, such as the feminist, queer, anti-racist, pro-migrant and pro-bodily diversity counter-movements that inundate the timelines of virtual social network. These movements have understood that the battlegrounds are not only to be found on physical terrain, as the old left would maintain, but that the construction of a critical and intergenerational memory also relies on the occupying of virtual spaces by means of the production of such images and contents, those that take into account the logics of aesthetic production as carried out by this new governance of the emotions, and that are able to create a meaningful correlate by means of the subversive usage of digital folklore.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As a decolonial transfeminist, I am critical of the humanist model imposed by the colonial West as a form of biopolitical subterfuge in order to keep pillaging the formerly colonial countries. However, in this

text I highlight these values in order to develop an argument that is coherent with a broader intersubjective community, one which is perhaps not socialised in the decolonial grammars.

<sup>2</sup> The Alt-Right is a collective of young, ultra-conservative people from the United States, who, by using digital folklore, sexist jokes and exhibiting racist attitudes, created the virtual foundations for the triumph of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

<sup>3</sup> We should remember that the Renaissance accompanied the project of colonial pillaging, dressing it up as scientific development as the devices for perception were transformed, and the world of colonial modernity was thus centred on ocular-centrism. I mention the Renaissance as an example of how art connects worlds not only of perception, but also of political and economic agendas which have been established in ways of seeing, having standardised and naturalised them.