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Fashwave and the False Paradox of Ironic Nazism

Marc Tuters

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Abstract

This essay looks at the use of vernacular web culture by the new right. Specifically it focuses on how, in recent years, the new right appropriated a genre of web aesthetics known as ‘vapourwave’ to create the sub-genre of ‘fashwave’. Like vapourwave before it, fashwave taps into web cultural imaginary that is nostalgic for an imagined ‘cyberpunk’ past future — but while the former has been the subject of a monograph (Tanner 2016), very little has yet been written on the latter. Largely ignored within mainstream popular culture, these ‘—wave’ aesthetics flourish on the ‘deep vernacular web’ (de Zeeuw & Tuters 2019) of imageboards and web fora. As trivial as many fashwave memes may appear, this paper argues that they can be understood as the aesthetic manifestations of a contemporary renaissance in esoteric “traditionalism” — a discourse that posits an alternative theory of western culture, and which was influential on 20th century ideologues. The essay argues that fashwave transposes traditionalism’s fantasy of imagined past glories into an imagined future — one that is informed by the vapourwave’s distinctly vernacular nostalgia for masculine cyberpunk aesthetics.

Keywords

4chan, Vaporwave, Deep vernacular web, Alt-right, Traditionalism, Esotericism.

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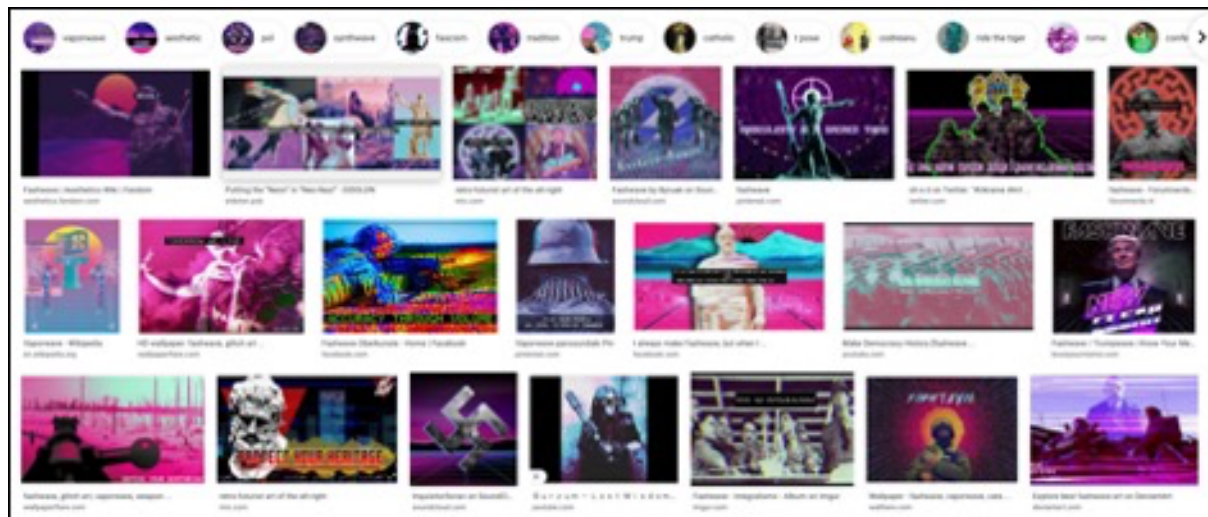
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Marc Tuters

Introduction

Type the phrase "fashwave" into a Google image search and you will be met with an endless scroll of fascist fan art expressed in the retro sci-fi pop idiom of "vaporwave". A typical image might include some heroic Western statuary juxtaposed against the backdrop of a computer-generated landscape in pastel hues, often rendered in 'lo-fi' with analog video noise artifacts, and emblazoned with anti-democratic slogans such as "make democracy history" and fascist iconography. What are we to make of this seeming "renaissance of esoteric fascism online"? (see also: [Tuters & Ollab 2020](#)). It can be understood as example of a strategic effort by a group of actors to design a catchy meme that creates the illusion of an insurgent political movement where none existed, an "alt-right" attention hacking techniques that this article briefly discusses in context of this special issue theme of a "new right wave".



Screenshot of "fashwave" Google image search (June 7 2020)

In a recent net art piece entitled [Breitbart Red](#) the Swiss design collective Ubermorgen provocatively argue for the dynamism of a new kind of rightwing avant-garde wave. Interweaving

vaporwave imagery with a textual manifesto, the piece is named after the U.S. media outlet formerly run by Trump's chief strategist Steve Bannon, who referred to Breitbart as a "platform for the alt-right" and has often openly expressed his admiration for the radical right thinker Julius Evola (Posner 2016, Horowitz 2017). Quoting, without attribution, the words of the neo-Nazi editor of the Daily Stormer Andrew Anglin, *Ubermorgen's* manifesto describes vaporwave as the "whitest" aesthetic of all time, intended "to support young men constructing their identity" by "enable[ing] transgression into realms" of "holistic libertarian transcendence". Whilst perhaps intended as a provocation, *Ubermorgen's* strategy of ironic provocation is, in fact, not that far from the media tactics of the so-called "alt-right". Although relatively small in number, the alt-right managed to capture a substantial share of Anglo-American media attention at the time of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. While the alt-right's use of memes for the purposes of circulating hateful ideas have been discussed already (see: oilab.eu), the most recent comprehensive work on the subject positions claims they have been "far more influential to public discourse than scholars have begun to grasp" (Woods and Hahner 2020, 2).

Beyond their use of memes, the alt-right are also known for co-opting aspects of subcultural sensibilities in order to present them as inventions of their own. The success of these appropriation techniques depend in part on tricking journalists into writing exposés intended to inform the public about their lurking menace. As such exposés tend to extend the reach of their message they are inevitably celebrated as successful exploits. Exemplary of these techniques have been their periodically successful campaigns to convince the public that the acts of drinking milk, of using the conventional hand sign for "ok", and of wearing New Balance sneakers are in fact symbols of "white power" (Wolf 2017; Harmon 2018; Noor 2019). A crucial element of these alt-right media exploits is their very preposterousness. Since from a certain perspective they are manifestly ridiculous, when they succeed they can be laughed-off by some as hoaxes, in line with long-standing and well-documented subcultural trolling practices. At the same time, however, they can also be understood as hacking exploits that seek to metaphorically "inject" radical ideas into everyday political discourse. To this end, they often attempt to use the youth-cultural posturing as a technique by which to *dissimulate* their true (political) intentions. The most telling example of this approach is when the American neo-

Nazi Andrew Anglin once referred to his politics as "Non-ironic Nazism masquerading as ironic Nazism" (OBrien 2017).

As discussed by Gabriella Coleman (2014) and Whitney Phillips (2015), hacking exploits against gullible media organizations had been coordinated and perpetrated on the notorious 4chan imageboard long before the rise of the alt-right. Whether or not these exploits were as progressive as commentators had often tended to imagine at the time, with the rise of the alt-right came "4chan's reactionary turn" in which such tactics would go from "punching up" at corporations to the taking aim at "non-whites" (Tuters & Hagen 2019). Although only one of the seventy boards on the site, it was 4chan's political discussion forum "/pol/" that has served a crucial role in creating the alt-right ironic Nazi style that Andrew Anglin would go on to promote via his website Daily Stormer, which used fashwave imagery to brand itself as edgy and "post-modern" (Anglin 2016). Featuring vernacular imageboard culture and written in a faux-satirical tone, The Daily Stormer thus tried to use humor in order to differentiate its extreme-right agenda from prior and long-standing neo-Nazi web forums. This technique was indeed explicitly outlined in a leaked style-guide for contributors to The Daily Stormer, in which Anglin instructed: "when using racial slurs, it should come across as half-joking — like a racist joke that everyone laughs at because it's true." (Feinberg 2017). While Anglin is a neo-Nazi, this technique of presenting reactionary views as ordinary is also characteristic of the radical populist right, as for example captured in the Vlaams Blok's slogan "say what you think" [zeggen wat u denkt]. Specific to the alt-right, however, is how reactionary politics are buried in layer upon layer of irony, thereby making it practically impossible to determine who is a "true believer" and who is not. This technique of ironic distancing makes the alt-right function as the ultimate form of "enlightened false consciousness" in which the subject need not believe in order for ideology to actually work (Sloterdijk 1988).

Having thus sketched how alt-right ironic Nazis use outrage and ambivalence as a political instrument, we can now turn to the apparent paradox between fashwave's atavistic worldview and its futuristic feel. In order to unpack this seeming contradiction we need first to consider how much fashwave in fact differs from the once thriving subcultural genre whose form it has sought to appropriate: vaporwave. Although known primarily as a musical genre, the vaporwave aesthetic also features striking graphical components, invoking the imaginary mid-90s

past future of "cyberpunk". Grafton Tanner (2016) offers an intriguing reading of the genre's ironic nostalgia for an imagined past future of the web as a meditation on the "uncanny" relationship between ourselves and our tools. What Tanner refers to as the "uncanny" and "haunted" vaporwave sensibility is built out of repeating fragments of the detritus of earlier digital culture. In Tanner's reading, vaporwave's endless haunted loops foreground the mechanical processes underway in the formation of contemporary subjectivity online. Grafton's argument is essentially that vaporwave brings one *closer to the machine*, opening human being onto the alterity of *techne* — a theme much discussed in contemporary media theory (see: Peters 2015). Here we can establish that, in spite of the apparent resemblance between vaporwave and fashwave as suggested by Ubermorgen, their philosophical outlooks are fundamentally antithetical. Whilst vaporwave exposes the machinic elements of human consciousness leading us away from the human form, fashwave seeks to construct a "new man" by awakening a "proto-fascist consciousness" (Theweleit 1987).



Image from Daily Stormer's *A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right* (Anglin, August 31, 2016)

The template for fashwave's esoteric fascism is to be found in the ideas of Steve Bannon's favorite author Julius Evola, a minor figure of the Italian avant-garde whose concepts "[men](#)

[among the ruins](#)", "[ride the tiger](#)" and "[kali yuga](#)" appear again and again in fashwave imagery. Considered one of the foremost figures in the canon of esoteric *Traditionalism* (Sedgewick 2004), Evola's writings develop an extremely bizarre cosmology based on fantasy themes, including the idea that the original inhabitants of Europe are descended from the primordial hordes of a pure Aryan race (Evola 2011, 65). This fantastical imagery resonates with the role-playing fantasies of contemporary videogame "lore" — which, it has been argued, naturalize the notion that "races" have innate qualities and skills (Galloway 2013, 130). While resolutely anti-modern in his outlook, Evola's ideas have been given a futuristic gloss by the French neo-fascist thinker Guillaume Faye. Faye thus combines Julius Evola's *Traditionalism* with Filippo Marinetti's *Futurism* to create the template for fashwave in what he refers to as *archeofuturism*, which he describes as a "future society that combines techno-scientific progress with a return to the traditional answers that stretch back into the mists of time" (Faye 2010, 45).

Contra *Übermorgen* then, the fashwave aesthetic of white male transgression is nothing new. Rather, it is the end-product of the "metapoliticization" of fascist ideas and practices that have been underway in Europe since the end of the second world war (Griffin 1985). What we *can* say about the alt-right is that they are extremely skilled at tricking those who are not aware of this history into propagating their memes. There are strong arguments for countering the new-right wave by simply ignoring their attempts at metapolitics, and focussing instead on the real harm that they inflict on others (Phillips & Milner 2020). While fashwave represents a derivative aesthetic gloss on a reactionary political project, the normative argument here has been that, in order to decode the layers of irony that pervade the [multi-dimensional space](#) of twenty-first century post-centrist political ideology, we need general fluency in "deep vernacular web imaginaries" (de Zeeuw & Tutters 2020).

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Biography

Marc Tuters works as a UD in Media Studies at UvA, with a research group, OILab.eu, that studies political subcultures online.