STEVE BANNON

A PROPAGANDA RETROSPECTIVE

BY JONAS STAAL

Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective
By Jonas Staal

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Preface:

PROPAGANDA AT THE MUSEUM

By Marina Otero Verzier

The third floor of Het Nieuwe Instituut has been transformed into a convoluted space where visitors wander through storms, predatory animals, crisis graphs, collapsing buildings, evaporating banknotes, seemingly familiar yet unsettling meme wars, and 1:1 TV sets. It is the latest work by artist and researcher Jonas Staal.

One year ago, Staal and I discussed the possibility of a collaboration through which to dissect and reflect upon the spaces and mechanisms of contemporary propaganda art. The project would build upon his then ongoing PhD research, titled "Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century." Yet, the particular focus that Staal proposed for what he coined as an 'exhibition-project' would hit at the core of our current and polarized political milieu. He envisioned the first retrospective of the cultural and political work of Steve Bannon.

By bringing the work of Steve Bannon to an institution devoted to architecture, design, and digital culture, Staal and Het Nieuwe Instituut would acknowledge the role that these fields have in the construction and circulation of political ideas. Given that Staal's previous work had largely demonstrated his political stance and commitment, this new endeavor would inevitably situate the institution at the center of a public discussion on the appropriateness of this initiative. An outcome that would subsequently put pressure on the mechanisms inherent to museological spaces and their ability to address pressing societal questions.

Het Nieuwe Instituut's position is firm: cultural spaces have to take part in this conversation. Established institutions have the responsibility to operate beyond politically minded bubbles, to address contemporary challenges such as the spread of the alt-right, and to critically discuss its cultural practices. Staal reminds us that the alt-right is not simply a political movement but, above all, a cultural one that permeates the larger realm of media and popular discourse. As many would claim, we are in the midst of a culture war.

Through its multiple programs, Het Nieuwe Instituut has engaged with this informational and political paradigm shift. Projects such as *Algorithmic Culture* critically investigate the nature and effects of the entanglement of culture and algorithmic processes. Exhibitions like *Munich 1972. The Design of a Democratic Body Architecture* address the issue of propaganda from a historical perspective, looking at how design and architecture were integrated into a total environment intent on crafting the image of a modern, democratic, and culturally aware nation. And with this project conceived by Staal, the aim is to constitute a resource for present and future debates on the role of art in inspiring and disseminating political ideologies, as well as the part it can play in imagining and shaping new realities. The exhibition has also inspired a new research initiative titled *For the Record*, which focuses on forms of representation in contemporary video culture, and on how video clips operate as public spaces for consumerism, activism, and emancipation.

Staal's project has been a trigger for a series of distinctly relevant questions, all of which are at the core of current and future initiatives. These include:

1. Authorship
The first retrospective of the work by Steve Bannon is an exhibition-project by Jonas Staal. This is not an exhibition by Steve Bannon, nor a celebratory compilation. Rather, the film productions of Bannon are a lens through which to unveil the effects of the visual and ideological architecture of the alt-right to a broad audience in order to open alternative spaces and opportunities for action.

In fact, having committed to look beyond the classic notions of authorship and signature in the production of spaces, objects, and virtual media, this is probably the first retrospective exhibition ever shown at Het Nieuwe Instituut. As such, the notion of a retrospective is not taken for granted, and rather treated as an opportunity to question the relation between artist, curator, researcher, and content in the formation of an exhibition.

2. Art Work
By addressing the work of Bannon as art, Staal invites reflection on what constitutes artistic and cultural practices today, as well as on our dominant understanding of contemporary art and contemporary institutions as belonging to a liberal, if not progressive, realm.

3. Value
The space of the museum allows for particular forms of engagement and viewership. In the exhibition, visitors could relate to contemporary propaganda with a kind of critical distance and attention not necessarily possible in our daily experiences of media spaces—a sphere ultimately permeated by systems of mass persuasion. Yet, what is at stake here is also the status of these documents when they enter the space of the institution. And more importantly, how we might include them without treating them as pieces of museological value or without giving them a platform to further propagate their ideology.

The representational techniques conceived by Jonas Staal and his frequent collaborators, designer Remco van Bladel and architect Paul Kuipers, thus advocate for a sobering language that counters the spectacular nature of the images and discourses it supports, and which rather captures them in particular theoretical and critical environments.

4. Design
The world around us is changing at an increasingly fast rate, and architecture, design, and digital culture are a framework through which we can read and participate in it. Shaped by the volume and speed at which information circulates and by which dominant narratives are construed, this deceiving territory demands a visual literacy; a competence in reading images, spaces, and objects. Cultural institutions are principal actors in these processes, and have the responsibility to debate forms of representation and reality construction. The exhibition proposes to unpack the design of images, the formation of visual vocabularies, the establishment of virtual environments, and the construction of scenographies through which Trumpism has conveyed messages of hate and polarization.

5. Exhibition as a Critical Model
Het Nieuwe Instituut understands exhibitions not as mere presentations, but rather as hosts for research, public debate, and knowledge production. They also stand as testing grounds for emergent models of social and political agency. Exhibitions are a call to action—spaces primed

for discussing the future as designed by the alt-right and the technological regimes that make it plausible. They therefore enhance our capacity to counter it.

That is one of the key aims of this long-term project. As a state institution we have a privileged position and responsibility in advancing cultural conversations as well as architectural and urban projects that could lead to particular policy changes. Staal's notion of an exhibition-project acknowledges this ambition and encompasses a series of programs through which the conversation that this exhibition triggers can expand its limits and legacy.

Relevant essays, interviews, and articles are accessible on the website of Het Nieuwe Instituut. Organized prior to and following the opening of the exhibition, lectures, presentations, and debates served to discuss the implications of propaganda as well as of this particular project. An international conference titled *Propaganda Art Today* brought together artists, activists, theorists, writers, journalists, and politicians to map the multitude of propagandas that shape our world today. The research presented within the scope of the exhibition will also have multiple afterlives, both at Het Nieuwe Instituut and beyond.

Similarly, this publication allows for a different form of engagement with the theme, and subsequently enters its outcomes into alternative forms of circulation and exchange. My sincere gratitude goes to Jonas Staal, his team, and to my colleagues at Het Nieuwe Instituut for envisaging this conversation and making the political aspirations of this project possible.

INTRO-
DUCTION

By Jonas Staal

This publication documents the work of prop-agandist and propaganda artist Steve Bannon. Simultaneously, it describes the various political movements that Bannon has helped to shape and which, in turn, have shaped him. Tracing Bannon's career means tracing the development of the paleoconservative factions of the Republican Party in the early 2000s, the rise of the Tea Party after the election of Obama, Trumpism, and the international alternative-right. Through Bannon's work as a propaganda artist, we can come to understand that these various formations are not only political but also cultural in nature.

Propaganda demands infrastructure and narra-tive. The former insists that one needs to gain control over the means through which society is organized, ranging from the field of politics, the economy, the military-industrial complex, educa-tion, and culture. Propaganda is not concerned with merely communicating a message through a single poster or film—propaganda aims to construct reality itself. And in order to construct reality a particular narrative, a set of values and ideas, has to be repeated via as many channels as possible so as to generate its acceptance as the "new normal." Propaganda works best when we no longer consider it propaganda, but rather as a mere fact of life.

Bannon is a propagandist and a propaganda artist because he has proven capable of both organizing infrastructure and shaping a dominant narra-tive. His experience as a Goldman Sachs venture capitalist proved crucial in him seizing control of infrastructure. In the nineties he was employed as a producer of Hollywood films and as the CEO of the Biosphere 2 project, and from the noughties onward as a financer of the Tea Party movement and head of the Trump presidential campaign. Bannon secured funding for his various projects through, amongst others, the hyper-conservative Mercer family and also managed to gain editorial control over his own media outlet Breitbart News.

To construct reality one needs to govern the means of production of reality. But one also needs a narrative to structure this reality effectively. This is where Bannon's work as a propaganda artist comes in, particularly in the form of his various pamphletic documentary films, but also in the realm of architecture through his

involvement in Biosphere 2 and as the choreographer of the Trump campaign. Societies, Bannon argues through his films, rise and fall in cyclical processes: they arise out of the ashes of epic struggles between good and evil and end in generation-defining war in order to be majestically reborn. To lead these wars of societal rebirth, strong leaders are necessary to confront the reincarnation of what Bannon considers evil in all its endless forms — from fascism to communism and Islamic terrorism.

For Bannon, the first of such strong leaders was Ronald Reagan, who he celebrated in his first film *In The Face of Evil* (2004). The second was Tea Party figurehead and former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, whose life story and anti-establishment struggles he narrated in *The Undefeated* (2012). Trump never got a Bannonist film of his own, however he is present in Bannon's work well before he even entered the political arena. Bannon's ideological vision of white Christian economic nationalism — the values from which he considers great societies to be born, and to which they must return to time and again — shows the ideology of Trumpism as a preeminent form of Bannonism.

In Bannon's words, Trump is the "imperfect vessel" needed for ultranationalist and alt-right forces to come into power. No wonder then, that Bannon's firing from the White House as Trump's chief advisor seemed to have little effect on him, as since then he has appeared alongside European ultranationalist and alt-right forces, ranging from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) to the National Rally (RN) in France, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the League in Italy. In his own words, Bannon's mission is to become "the infrastructure of the global populist movement."

In July 2018 Bannon announced the creation of a new organization called "The Movement," which has headquarters in Brussels. Modeled after George Soros' Open Society Foundation, its aim is not, like Soros, to support (neo)liberal regimes and culture, but to strengthen the rising "nationalist international" through transnational campaigns in order to occupy one third of the seats in the European parliament and dismantle it from within. Through Breitbart UK,

Bannon had already contributed to the Leave campaign's own media channel during the Brexit referendum, and now a European-exit from itself is his new objective.

Ultranationalism and the international alt-right are currently gaining power both politically and culturally. Established conservative liberal parties today speak like the extreme-right of the nineties, yet it is considered the new normal in comparison to the even more extreme standpoints of contemporaries on the extreme right of the extreme-right. This is how propaganda works: what is considered as the "norm" is reestablished. A new reality is constructed through a manufacturing of consent, where what was once unacceptable is now standard. Bannon and his dangerous alliance succeeded in this, so much so that the world we live in today was considered unimaginable two decades ago — a time when "Never Again" was a mantra no one thought would be trespassed so easily.

We should not underestimate the real-time costs of ultranationalist and alt-right propaganda, which range from the rise of systemic and institutional racism, the criminalization, lockdown and murder at sea of refugees, the lawless killing of those declared "terrorists," the separation of migrant children from their families, and the willingness to humiliate and bomb other countries. However much one might think of Trump, Bannon, and their fellow cronies as clowns, there is ultimately nothing funny about his coming to power for the hundreds of thousands of people in this world that live with the direct violent consequences of their regimes. TV pundits and comedians mocking Trump have become something of a problem here, as there is a moment in which humorous and ironic critique are no longer viable tools to stop violence. In fact, they might even contribute to its normalization.

The aim of the exhibition-project *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* and its accompanying publication is to understand the mechanisms of propaganda and propaganda art today, taking Bannon and his contribution to the rise of Trumpism as a case study. The project aims to show how infrastructure and narrative are crucial tools in the construction of a reality that aligns with the interests of dominant forms of

power, and which has terrible human costs as a result. Democracy was never free from propaganda and the post-truth era of alternative facts and fake news now makes this clear to us. Authoritarianism and forms of "democratic fascism" or "elected dictatorships" operate frighteningly easily within the makeup of our present societies.

So, what is to be done? It is here where I propose a two-track strategy.

The first is to revive propaganda studies, as Marina Otero Verzier and I try to do with this exhibition-project. We need to work to understand the infrastructures of power and the master narratives through which ultranationalists and the international alt-right are reconstructing reality according to their agendas—if we ever wish to stop them. In this analytical endeavor, Otero Verzier and I emphasize that the power of politics and the media are only two elements of a wider propaganda strategy, and that art and culture cannot be bypassed in the process. For in order to change the world, we need to be able to imagine that change first. Bannon's films provide the imaginative infrastructure for many of the political changes we are witnessing in our world today.

The second is a more difficult and controversial realm, and that is the development of new forms of emancipatory propaganda. Brexit and the election of Trump have shown us that answering ultranationalist and alt-right forces with facts does not change anything. Facts in and of themselves have no narrative power to become affective and thus effective. When we think of propaganda we tend to recall the worst of Nazi and Stalinist dictatorship, but there is also a long history of propaganda work in anti-colonial, liberational, and emancipatory political movements that tried to establish another normative reality—one of principled equality and egalitarianism. Wherever there is power there is also propaganda. We should stop turning a blind eye to that basic truth and begin to develop fact-based propaganda narratives of our own. New narratives about where we come from, who we are, and, most of all, who we can still become.
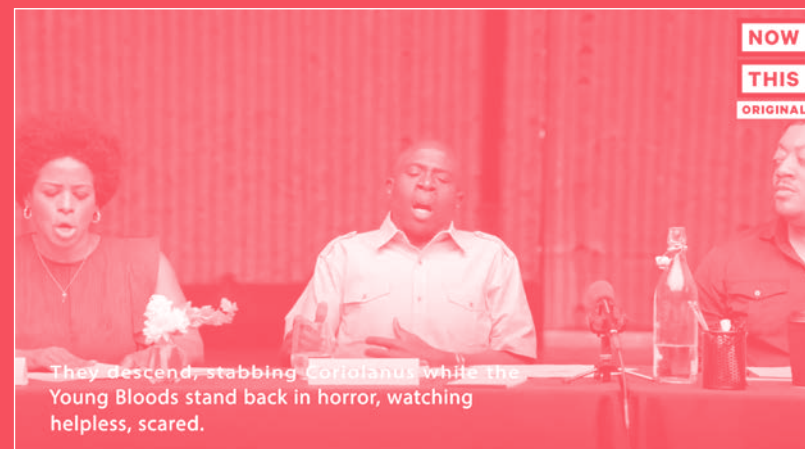
FROM HOLLYWOOD TO SEPTEMBER 11

"I'm a student of Michael Moore's films, of Eisenstein, Riefenstahl. Leave the politics aside, you have to learn from those past masters on how they were trying to communicate their ideas."
—Steve Bannon

ROOM 1

Bannon was born into an Irish Catholic working class family and managed to work himself up the ranks of the US Navy before joining the Goldman Sachs investment bank. In the early nineties he moved to Hollywood and produced films by progressively inclined directors and actors such as Sean Penn's *The Indian Runner* (1991) and the Shakespeare adaptation *Titus* (1999) featuring Anthony Hopkins.

Merging the culture of Goldman Sachs's venture capitalism with that of liberal Hollywood, Bannon further embarked on a wide variety of other cultural projects ranging from writing a "rap musical" with Julia Jones, directing the Arizona-based climate change research project Biosphere 2, and embarking on a venture in Hong Kong to sell digital assets to online gamers in *World of Warcraft.*

The attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a radical turning point and resulted in the creation of Bannon's first film, the biopic *In the Face of Evil*. This film is a glorified account of Ronald Reagan's fight against communism, which Bannon considered a contemporary parallel to the impending clash between his ideal of Christian free market nationalism in the West and what he regards as the "beast" of "Islamic terrorism" originating from the East.

Julia Jones and Steve Bannon, *The Thing I Am* (late 1990s)

They descend, stabbing Coriolanus while the Young Bloods stand back in horror, watching helpless, scared.

Bannon developed the first artistic productions of his company Bannon & Co (1990–1998) in collaboration with screenwriter Julia Jones, whom he met in 1991 and with whom he would continue to work for eighteen years. Most of their projects remained unrealized scripts, including a proposal for a movie adaptation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* set in outer space.

Most well-known is Jones and Bannon's rap adaptation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, set in South Central Los Angeles during the 1992 riots that followed a jury trial acquittal of four white LAPD officers for the beating of black taxi driver Rodney King. *The Thing I Am* was performed once by actor Robert Guillaume in South Central LA in 2006, and went on to be produced ten years later in 2016 as an online televised reading produced by Now This.

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* tells the story of the eponymous Roman general. After having defeated the Volscians he seeks a position of power in Roman politics. Unable to restrain his anger and desire for revenge against former enemies, he meets his downfall. Setting *Coriolanus* in the context of the LA riots suggests a parallel between the Rodney King riots and the battle between the Romans and Volscians. In this regard, *the Washington Post* noted that Jones and Bannon's rap adaptation—which depicts inner city African Americans as unable to stop the violence in their own communities— shows striking similarities to the racist tropes of the Trump administration.

Biosphere 2 (1993–95)

In late 1993, Bannon was approached to join the Biosphere 2 Earth System Science Research Facility in Oracle, Arizona, as CEO. The futuristic architecture spanned 1.27 hectares and was the largest closed ecological system ever created.

Biosphere 2's original aim was to test the survivability of people, animals, and plants in a closed environment, as might be created in the process of interplanetary space colonization. But engineering a closed ecological system had proved difficult. It was reported that most animals and insects were dying, and human test subjects were unable to maintain the biosphere without outside assistance. The financial losses accrued during this project registered in the millions of dollars.

Bannon sought financial backing from Columbia University, with whom he decided that rather than focusing on space colonization, Biosphere 2 would be used to test the effects of global warming. Later in 2017, Bannon's efforts as White House Chief Advisor to convince Trump to pull out of the Paris Climate Accord would stand in stark contrast to his pivotal role in transforming Biosphere 2 into a laboratory for mapping out the disastrous consequences of climate change.

Bannon would further pursue his fascination with closed-system technologies through the massive multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. Both Biosphere 2 and *World of Warcraft* are effective metaphors for the environments shaped by contemporary propaganda, which, rather than focusing on merely sending messages, are aimed at constructing completely new realities.
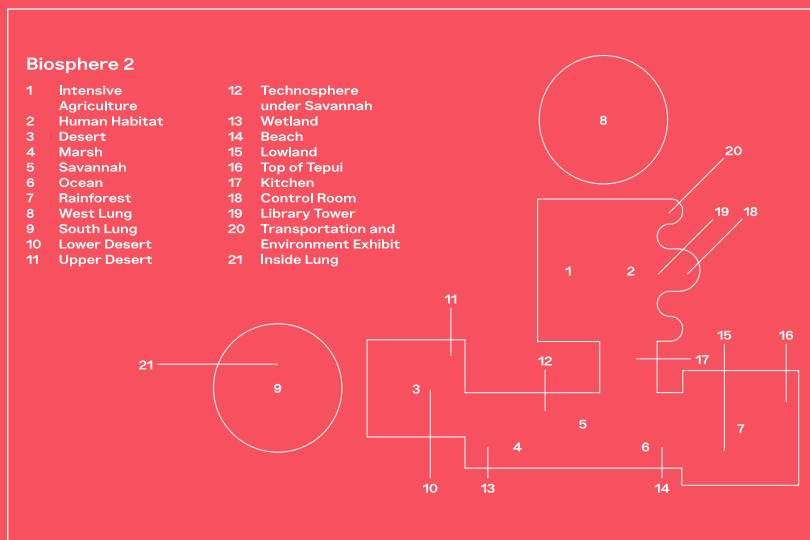
Internet Gaming Entertainment (2005–12)

In 2005 Bannon joined the Hong Kong-based company Internet Gaming Entertainment (IGE). Bannon's work for IGE focused on *World of Warcraft,* which had roughly ten million subscribers as of November 2014. The users of *World of Warcraft* compete against one another in a fictional world called Azeroth—of which a map was shown in the exhibition—populated by fantasy creatures including elves, dwarves, trolls, goblins, and dragons. Players can gather weapons, armor, and gold within the game, and although these are immaterial commodities, there is a secondary market beyond the confines of the game itself where players can purchase them directly without needing to spend time in the game world.

Bannon's job was to develop this secondary market and he did so with the financial backing of his former employer Goldman Sachs. He hired low-wage Chinese workers to play *World of Warcraft* for hours on end in continuous, rotating shifts—a process known as "goldfarming." Although the users of *World of Warcraft* and its developer Blizzard Entertainment eventually banned these secondary markets and thus undermined Bannon's endeavor, the experience nonetheless provided him with a major insight into the potential of the digital world.

Bannon later successfully exploited right-wing and misogynist sentiments in the gamer community, exemplified in the "Gamergate" harassment campaign against female game designers and critics. He managed to harness parts of this community as online troll armies for the 2016 Trump campaign, thus creating a "digital biosphere" for the alt-right. Bannon's political exploitation of the virtual sphere has since taken many different forms. This was most notoriously the case from 2014–2016 when he used his position as vice president of Cambridge Analytica to amass the personal data of millions of Facebook profiles to further create online support for Trump and the alt-right.

Biosphere 2

1	Intensive Agriculture	12	Technosphere under Savannah
2	Human Habitat	13	Wetland
3	Desert	14	Beach
4	Marsh	15	Lowland
5	Savannah	16	Top of Tepui
6	Ocean	17	Kitchen
7	Rainforest	18	Control Room
8	West Lung	19	Library Tower
9	South Lung	20	Transportation and Environment Exhibit
10	Lower Desert	21	Inside Lung
11	Upper Desert		

Stephen K. Bannon, dir., *In the Face of Evil: Reagan's War in Word and Deed* (Bannon Films, Leo McWatkins, Renegade Productions, 2004)

Bannon's first film *In the Face of Evil: Reagan's War in Word and Deed* is a biopic based on Peter Schweizer's book *Reagan's War* (2002). It depicts a glorified profile of the former Republican president as a lone but dedicated hero facing the evil of the Soviet Union. The film portrays the threat of communism as part of a multi-headed "beast," which could also appear in the guise of fascism or Nazism and which aims for total control over the state apparatus.

In the Face of Evil mocks international peace movements aiming to "appease" the beast. Reagan, by contrast, is framed as unshakably oriented by a straight moral compass. During his acting career he led the fight against the communist infiltration of Hollywood, while on the political stage he refused concessions to the Soviets. Instead of appeasement, he aimed to totally defeat the beast in order to save Western civilization. Of course, Bannon's fictional narrative obviously bypasses the manifold factors that led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The final part of the film shows the attacks on the Twin Towers and Osama Bin Laden's figure emerging out of the clouds of dust and smoke. The image emphasizes Bannon's view that, yet again, Western civilization faces an existential threat. This time it is not the beast of Cold War communism, but that of "Islamic terrorism." Bannon's message is clear: a new Reagan is needed to wage an unapologetic war in the face of this cyclical return of evil.

Styled as an epic and dark yet soberly paced historical documentary, *In the Face of Evil* differs from Bannon's later and more bombastically edited films. It is also a declaration of his ideal of a right-wing Hollywood, of which Reagan represents both the creative side (as an actor and anti-communist crusader) and the political side (as a president and opponent of the Soviets).

War had not been forced on us
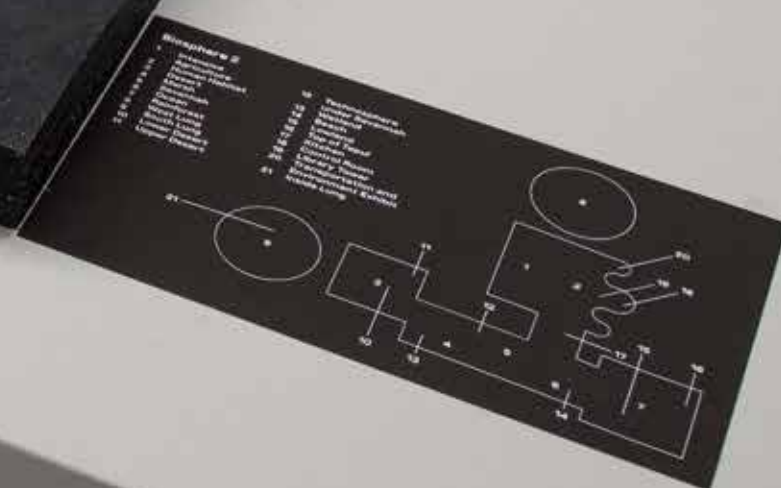
BANNON'S CYCLICAL TIME

"Kinetic cinema aims to overwhelm the audience."
—Steve Bannon

Six years after Bannon's directorial debut he realizes *Generation Zero*, a work that embodies all of the signature stylistic elements of his vision of "kinetic cinema." It is a documentary film-pamphlet that overwhelms its audience through aggressive editing, fast-paced musical scores that suggest approaching danger, and the bombardment of copious amounts of stock footage.

Generation Zero is also the most philosophical of Bannon's films, and was inspired by William Strauss and Neil Howe's book *The Fourth Turning*. The book is an example of fringe conservative, prophetically inclined "science," which argues that civilizations rise and fall while passing through four "turnings." According to the authors and Bannon, the "Fourth Turning" of the twenty-first century is approaching rapidly.

Alongside *Generation Zero* and the book *The Fourth Turning*, this room displayed twelve screens each depicting major reoccurring themes and imagery within Bannon's work. This "visual encyclopedia," ranging from looming storms to predatory animals and stock market crashes, makes visible the underlying structure of the master narrative in all of Bannon's films. It announces the clash of civilizations from which his vision of white Christian free market nationalism must arise victoriously.

Jonas Staal, *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (2018)

This thematically organized video installation by artist Jonas Staal displays the dominant visual metaphors from all nine films made between 2004–2016 by Steve Bannon.

STORMS

Throughout Bannon's work looming storms, hurricanes, avalanches, and floods are a constant backdrop. They represent his religious belief in cyclical time and the prophetic and "natural" inevitability of the Fourth Turning, which will eventually come in the form of a great clash of civilizations. These beliefs are in stark contrast to Bannon's work as CEO of Biosphere 2—a project that researched the impact of climate change—which taught him that from a scientific perspective there is of course nothing "inevitable" about the natural violence he features in his films.

PREDATORY ANIMALS

Animals are metaphors for specific human behaviours in Bannon's work. Lions circling around their prey represent organized attacks by the globalist liberal elite on right-wing political loners. Dinosaurs represent the then congressional majority of the Democratic Party elite. The eagle represents the determination of the American spirit. The bear is a metaphor for "Mama Grizzly," a favoured self-characterization of Tea Party conservative Sarah Palin. Sharks represent immaterial threats in the form of looming economic crises and the shadow government of what Bannon calls the "Party of Davos," which refers to the annual gathering of CEOs at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. A hypnotized snake represents the docility of the mainstream media.

CRISIS GRAPHS

Crisis graphs are used in Bannon's work to represent the downfall of society under the rule of globalist liberal elites. The culture of greed, secularism, and self-aggrandizement of the Party of Davos has led to the erosion of national and Christian values. Bannon warns that when humans declare themselves God the process toward civilizational decline—in this case economic crisis—becomes inevitable.

COLLAPSING BUILDINGS

Collapsing buildings appear in Bannon's films at the moment in which crisis has fully manifested itself. According to Bannon, the betrayal of the values of white Christian free market nationalism—through the greed of globalist liberal elites—leads to the collapse of not only the physical infrastructures of the sovereign state, but also of the spiritual infrastructure of faith in the higher ideals of God, nation, and family. The collapse of the former leads to the collapse of the latter.

CRASHING VEHICLES

Once the larger spiritual and material infrastructure of society is disintegrating, this inescapably impacts all that moves within it. In Bannon's films, crashing cars and planes signify a society without a compass, lost in its secular individualism and greed. When humans declare themselves God they aim to separate themselves from a "natural" order, which only accelerates the coming Fourth Turning in which divine law will prove victorious.

BANKNOTES

For Bannon, the declaration "In God We Trust" on American banknotes represents the ideal of a free market within national boundaries under God. When banknotes appear in his films they signify that money has become a law in and of itself. Their cult is that of "Mammon," the biblical description of the deity of personal wealth. Dollar bills flying, burning, being cut, and flushed in endless variations suggest that the decay of material and spiritual infrastructure indefinitely leads to the evaporation of value itself.

PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENTS

In Bannon's view, the coming Fourth Turning is the heritage of the post-war generation. The emergence of the hippie, progressive, and feminist movements brought about a process of political, economic, and cultural decline. In his reading, it is their self-proclaimed "progressive" desire for individual gratification, secularism, and to elicit challenge to family and national values that produced the rule of a godless globalist liberal elite. The progressive left and the Party of Davos are thus considered to be two sides of the same coin.

GAMBLING AND DECADENCE

For Bannon, what hippie, feminist, and secular progressive culture were in the sixties and seventies, is what the culture of celebrities, gambling, and sexual promiscuity is today. In his view, the 2008 worldwide economic crisis, caused by the globalist liberal elite of the Party of Davos, can only be understood as the outcome of this cult of transgression that deviated from natural divine law.

ENEMIES OUTSIDE / WITHIN

In Bannon's worldview, the coming Fourth Turning is steered by two main enemies. The "enemy within" is the globalist liberal elite, brought into power by leftists and progressives. The "enemy outside" is that of "Islamic terrorism," the reincarnation of what he considers the twentieth century beast of communism, fascism, and Nazism. In his films, the two often get conflated. Images of the Mujahideen (funded by Reagan in the Soviet–Afghan war), Al-Qa'ida, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State seamlessly merge with images of Black Panther activists, and so-called Black Block anarchists, protestors, and looters.

WAR

In Bannon's prophecy, the most recent Fourth Turning culminated in the Great World Wars, from which white Christian free market nationalism emerged gloriously in the US. Now, the Fourth Turning of the twenty-first century is approaching. Bannon intercuts images from the wars of the twentieth century with those that could signal the wars of the twenty-first, from Chinese army parades to drug wars, and apocalyptic future landscapes of combat. For Bannon the question is not if, but when the great clash of civilizations will happen, and whether the patriots of white Christian free market nationalism are prepared to arise victoriously in its aftermath.

William Strauss and Neil Howe,
The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy (1997)
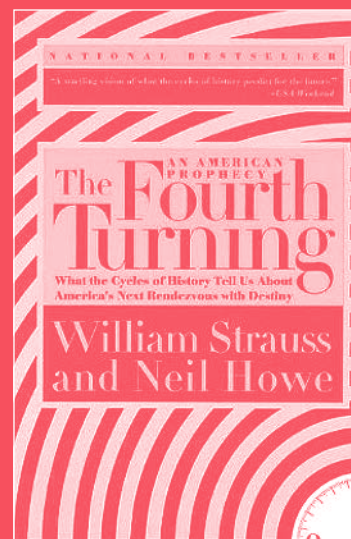
Bannon believes in the political power of theory. Among the books he cites most often are Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and René Guénon's *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta*. The latter proved particularly controversial, not because of Guénon's analysis of the Hindu concept of cyclical time per se, but because one of the followers of his Traditionalist school, Julius Evola, would later form an alliance with Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini.

The Fourth Turning, written by William Strauss and Neil Howe, fits the cyclical and determinist themes of these books. Its authors argue that history always develops through four natural phases, which they call "turnings." As they note, "turnings come in cycles of four. Each spans the length of a long human life, roughly eighty to a hundred years, a unit of time the ancient called the 'saeculum'. Together, the four turnings of the saeculum comprise history's seasonal rhythm of growth, maturation, entropy, and destruction."

Although the book has the appearance of a scientific study, its tone is nearly biblical and argues that the erosion of national, communal, and religious values from the sixties onward has set in motion a period of decline and crisis that will culminate in the Fourth Turning. Despite the deeply conservative tone through which the authors reflect on contemporary culture, their use of popular culture references is surprising. In the nineties TV series *Power Rangers*, for example, they see the embodiment of a possible spiritual rebirth for millennials which could steer society through the dangers and conflicts of the Fourth Turning.

Stephen K. Bannon, dir., *Generation Zero* (Citizens United Productions, 2010)
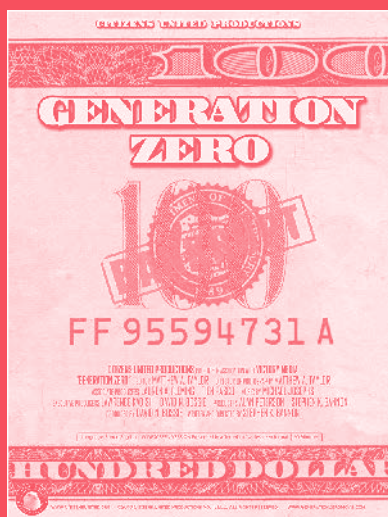
In *Generation Zero*, Bannon elaborates his deterministic, cyclical understanding of history, based on Strauss and Howe's book. As noted earlier, the most recent cycle of four turnings ended with the Second World War, inaugurating new heights of civilizational development.

In Bannon's perception, the US gained its greatness following the Second World War due to its homegrown free capitalist market, its religious and family values, military might, and proud national identity. But already the post-war generation, through the hippie and feminist movements, introduced a secular and individualist consumer culture that would bring about its decline. In *Generation Zero*, the fatal result of this decline is represented by the 2008 economic crisis, which Bannon considers to be the direct consequence of progressive culture of the sixties and seventies.

Paradoxically, while the film argues that the crisis wars of a fourth turning make populations vulnerable to demagogues and authoritarianism, it simultaneously calls upon strong leadership to reinstate the values of white Christian free market nationalism. The demagogue that Bannon warns about is Barack Obama, whose bailout of banks and companies during the economic crisis, combined with his aim of nationalizing healthcare and continuing warfare abroad, signifies the potential emergence of an authoritarian government.

Throughout *Generation Zero*, a bombardment of dubious "expert" opinions, historical film footage, and arousing music creates a sense of absolute powerlessness in the viewer, making them susceptible to the message of a need to return to a mythical white Christian free market nationalism in order to overcome the manifold dangers of economic crisis, authoritarian government, and terrorism.

STORMS

PREDATORY ANIMALS

Generation Zero (2010)
Fire from the Heartland (2010)
Battle for America (2010)
The Undefeated (2011)

William Strauss
and Neil Howe, *The
Fourth Turning: An
American Prophecy*
(1997)
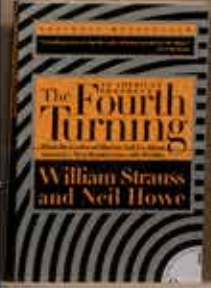
FROM TEA PARTY TO ALT-RIGHT

**"The beginning, really, of the Trump movement was Palin."
—Steve Bannon**

Bannon's films not only narrate civilizational crises but are also characterized by a quest for leadership. The rise of the anti-Obama Tea Party, which emerged from 2009 onwards, gave him the chance to address the leadership vacuum in his work. He did this by building his narratives around the figureheads of the new movement, focusing first and foremost on former Alaskan governor and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin.

In Bannon's eyes Palin was the "first Trump," in the sense that she was able to give voice to a movement that broke with the traditional divide between Republicans and Democrats, and instead allied disillusioned conservatives, libertarians, independents, white supremacists, and white nationalists in a discourse that resonated with Bannon's ideal of Christian free market nationalism.

The third room of the exhibition assembled cultural slogans and icons from on- and offline banners for the Tea Party movement and connected these to the infamous "Pepe" Internet memes of the online troll armies of the alt-right. It shows how the Tea Party initiated a new cultural narrative that combined nationalism, economic protectionism, and anti-Islamism, and as such opened the way for the alt-right to emerge. The umbrella of Trumpism would unite both.

TEA PARTY SIGNS AND MEMES

The Tea Party movement, named after the Boston Tea Party from 1773, during which American colonists defied the Tea Act of the British Empire, emerged in 2009 in the United States. This historical act of defiance was considered the inspiration of the contemporary Tea Party, which opposed what they perceived as the intolerable growing influence of the federal government. Sarah Palin and Libertarian Ron Paul were considered among its figureheads, and large-scale supportive media coverage was provided by the Fox News network.

Although active online, the Tea Party mainly organized through traditional protests with the help of conservative cable television. On display in the exhibition were banners and memes from various Tea Party protests and manifestations held between 2009–2013, representing some of the core political and cultural narratives propagated by the movement.

Screen I (Obamacare)

A key trigger for the Tea Party was the introduction of "Obamacare," which aspired to be a first step toward universal healthcare in the US. Tea Party slogans such as "Obamacare Obamafascism" (Washington DC, 2009) are exemplary of the threat that Tea Party members saw in the legislation. The Tea Party's claim to state self-determination is represented by slogans such as "Freedom Not Included" (Saint Paul, 2010), meaning that federal programs would inherently erode state independence. Sarah Palin's false claim that federally organized healthcare would lead to so-called "death panels," deciding who was worthy of healthcare and who was not, is represented in the slogan "You Lie She Dies" (Washington DC, 2009).

Screen II (Ideology)
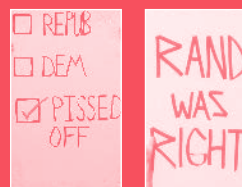
The ideology of the Tea Party combined conservative and libertarian, as well as white supremacist and

white nationalist ideas. Its break from the traditional Republican Party is represented in slogans such as "Repub Dem Pissed Off" (Washington DC, 2010), essentially declaring all party establishments defunct. Its self-declared constitutionalism was reflected in the slogan "I'll Keep My Freedom You Keep the Change" (Denver, 2009), which pitted the American constitution against the famous "Change" slogan of the 2008 Obama presidential campaign. Its dedication to libertarianism, which opposes all forms of government intervention, whether on a federal or state level, was embodied in the slogan "Rand was Right" (Santa Anta, 2009)—a reference to the novelist Ayn Rand, whose theory of "objectivism" promoted radical individualism through "rational self-interest."

Screen III (Racism)
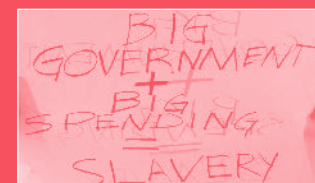
The racist undercurrents of the Tea Party are best exemplified by the "birther" theory. This idea was represented in the slogan "Obama Where's Your Papers" (2010). The Tea Party also glorified symbols and slogans of the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), such as the image of a rattlesnake with

the slogan "Don't Tread on Me" (Saint Paul, 2011), originally designed by Christopher Gadsden of the South Carolina Patriot movement. When pitted against the first black president of the US it insinuated a parallel with the independence struggle of the American colonists against the British. The white supremacist undercurrents present in the use of such symbols resulted in slogans such as "Big Government + Big Spending = Slavery" (Denver, 2009), suggesting that it was a predominantly white class that was faced with "slavery" in the face of Obama authoritarianism, instead of his presidency being a major reckoning of the white crimes of past and present.

added the word "socialism." The image not only suggests that Obama, just like the Joker, is an agent of anarchy, but also the use of whiteface (similar to the racist tradition of blackface in countries like the US and the Netherlands) implies that Obama is somehow hiding his "true" black origins and socialist political agenda. This resonates with the popular Tea Party and alt-right conspiracy theories of "cultural Marxism," a secret undercurrent in government and education that attempts to collectivize the US from within. The claim that Obama is an agent of cultural Marxism is also dominant in memes such as "Communist" (undated) and "Obama Central Planning We Can Believe In" (undated).

fundamental the resistance against taxation is to the Tea Party, as it is declared as the very essence of the movement's acronym "T.E.A." Yet the resistance against government authority is not a rejection of authority altogether,

hence the success of various authoritarian figures in the Tea Party movement and its overarching dedication to religious authority, as represented by the slogan "Limited Govt. Under God" (Perrysburg, 2009).

ALT-RIGHT MEMES

The alt-right is a predominantly online phenomenon that operates through forums such as Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan. Although the American neo-Nazi Richard Spencer originally coined the term in 2008, the alt-right does not abide by any official political program aside from generally following a white nationalist agenda. It is explicitly anti-feminist, anti-Semitic, non-interventionist, and anti-globalist in nature, and strategically appropriates notions of subversion and counterculture. Although there are some overlaps with the Tea Party movement—mostly through their shared support for Trump—the atheist alt-right is uninterested in many traditional conservative values like those of constitutionalism, Christianity, and the family.

Alt-right influence is mainly achieved through techniques known as "trolling" (online harassment) and "doxxing" (publishing the private information of opponents), as well as "meme" campaigns. The meme is an Internet phenomenon in which a specific photo or short video is reposted on a mass scale. The most famous alt-right meme is "Pepe," an anthropomorphic cartoon frog originally conceived by Matt Fury. Alt-right appropriations of Pepe often have him make anti-Semitic and racist claims despite his humorous appearance. This nihilistic and ironic posturing is a crucial feature of the alt-right. Cartoonist Matt Fury officially "buried" Pepe in 2017 to stop its white nationalist appropriation. Yet this didn't end its continuous use.

Although Bannon famously declared his Breitbart News the "home of the alt-right," he is generally considered closer to the Tea Party and what has been termed the "alt-light." Proponents of the alt-light are equally opposed to immigration, foreign interventions, and loath "political correctness," but do not aim to establish a white ethno-state per se. In that sense, the alt-light shows more overlap with European far-right anti-immigration and anti-Muslim parties. However, the term has been criticized because of its suggestion of a "lighter" more "acceptable" form of right-wing extremism.

Differently to the Tea Party, the alt-right rarely organizes through public protests and bypasses traditional media such as television altogether, instead focusing almost solely on online platforms. On display in the exhibition were memes from the period 2015–18 that emerged on websites such as Reddit, representing political figures considered as leaders or beacons of the alt-right and alt-light

Screen Ⅳ (Cultural Marxism)

socialism

COMMUNIST

Tea Party slogans interpret Obama's federal policies as a first step toward authoritarianism, sometimes comparing his movement of "change" to that of Nazism, but mostly to socialism or communism. The portrait of Obama combined with the figure of the Joker had, according to its creator, no racist intentions. But the image was quickly adopted by Tea Party activists, who

Screen Ⅴ (Government overreach)

IRS = KGB

The issue of (federal) taxation unites various dominant Tea Party narratives. The slogan "IRS = KGB" (Washington DC, 2013), for example, conflates the US Internal Revenue Service with the Committee for State Security in the Soviet Union, implying that federal taxation is motivated by totalitarian tendencies. The slogan "Taxed Enough Already" (Hartford, 2009) shows how

Tablet I
Can't Stump the Trump (2015), @realDonaldTrump

One of the characteristics of a meme is that its original creator is often anonymous, turning the one who shares or adjusts the image into its effective co-author. This is possibly one of the reasons why a retweet by Trump of himself portrayed as Pepe gained huge traction. Not only did his retweet legitimate an icon of the alt-right under the umbrella of Trumpism, but the gesture made him also something of a supreme alt-right troll himself.

Tablet II
Nigel Farage Pepe (2018), Elreaganator

Nigel Farage is the former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and was a prominent force in the Leave campaign during the 2016 Brexit referendum. By campaigning with false promises, such as the refunding of the National Health Service (NHS) with the £350 million the UK would retrieve from the EU, as well as aggressive anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric, he became a figurehead for the international alt-right. As a staunch Trump supporter — and Trump's personal pick for UK ambassador to the US — Farage spoke at several of his events both during and after the campaign.

Tablet III
I bring you Pepe Le Pen. (2017), globalism_sux

Marine Le Pen, leader of the French National Rally (RN), is a figurehead of the alt-right due to the party's history of anti-Semitism, and for the alt-light due to it being seen as an example of a new European "patriotic spring." Where "Can't Stump the Trump" remains close to the cartoonish origins of the Pepe meme, Le Pen is portrayed here with a certain depth and stature.

Tablet IV
Make the Netherlands Great Again (2017), stevenson779

Geert Wilders, leader of the ultranationalist Freedom Party (PVV) in the Netherlands, currently the second largest party in Parliament, has long been known for his attempts to build an international coalition of anti-Islamic, anti-EU, pro-Zionist, and ultranationalist political parties and figures. After having started this endeavour in the US through extreme-right figures such as David Horowitz, who is a major financial donor to his party, he and Le Pen established a European faction in the European Parliament named Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF).

Tablet V
Pepe voor democratie (2017), bobby2286

The Dutch Forum for Democracy (FvD), led by Thierry Baudet, is currently represented in Dutch parliament with two seats (compared to Wilders's twenty). However, the party has surged in the polls ever since the previous parliamentary elections and has effectively become the national voice of the alt-right. Baudet's warning that political elites are aiming for the "homeopathic dilution of the Dutch population with peoples from all over the world," as well as his stated aim to maintain Europe as "dominantly white," overlap effectively with the alt-right's fear of "white genocide." Controversies regarding former FvD municipal representative Yernaz Ramautarsing, who claimed that black people have a lower IQ than white people, are further "dog whistles" aimed at seeking support and affirming alliances as part of the international alt-right.

Stephen K. Bannon, dir., *The Undefeated* (Victory Film Group, 2011)

Bannon's *The Undefeated* is a biopic about Sarah Palin. Based on her book *Going Rogue: An American Life* (2009), it also references a 1969 film by the same name, directed by and featuring John Wayne.

Starting with an avalanche of TV pundits and politicians harshly criticizing Palin, Bannon pits her as the ultimate outsider and anti-establishment figure who could lead the Tea Party to replace the Republican Party in the 2012 elections, therefore eventually toppling then sitting president Obama. Intertwined with images of Reagan, Bannon presents Palin as a people's hero. She is framed as an icon of Western civilization, a fighter for free market economic nationalism, and simultaneously a dedicated mother—a self-declared "Mama Grizzly"—who upholds the values of family and acts fearlessly as a defender of Christian doctrine in the face of increasing terrorist threats.

The nearly two-hour film aims to testify to Palin's legislative successes against vested interests in the Alaskan state, before going on to introduce her as a figure on the national stage—a controversial vice-presidential and Tea Party icon on her way to becoming the presidential nominee. Yet, Palin eventually decided not to pursue the presidency, and instead endorsed Trump's candidacy in 2016.

The Undefeated is an example of Bannon's strategic use of cultural appropriation in the form of a "reversed feminism." He argues that the Democrats have tried to monopolize the women's vote by adopting feminist ideas and a critique of patriarchy, but concludes that it is currently the right-wing that leads with "strong-willed independent women that are at the vanguard of a populist-conservative movement against the political class and against the financial class."

CULTURAL MARXISM

"I am a Leninist."
—Steve Bannon

ROOM 4

The term "cultural Marxism" was originally attributed to a model used to culturally critique mass standardization and commodification and was developed in the context of the philosophy and sociology of the Frankfurter Schule. In movements assembled under Trumpism, the term has come to signify a conspiracy theory that claims that the radical left, or sometimes a Jewish/left alliance, is using popular culture to plan a government takeover.

The term resonates with the Nazi campaign against "cultural Bolshevism" and surfaced in far-right movements in the US from the early nineties onward. Norwegian right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik claimed that his murder of youth members of the Labor Party in 2011 was aimed at stopping the spread of cultural Marxism. In the Netherlands, academic and Forum for Democracy representative Paul Cliteur has warned of the infiltration of cultural Marxism in universities.

The fact that the protagonists of the Frankfurter Schule were Jewish has made this conspiracy theory particularly popular in alt-right circles, as it encompasses both anti-Semitic and anti-left tropes. Also, several of Bannon's films claim a cultural Marxist conspiracy. The main target is the Jewish-American writer and community organizer Saul Alinsky (1909–72) and his book *Rules for Radicals* (1971), which was distributed for free in the exhibition.

Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (1971)

Bannon is not the first to claim that Saul Alinsky's last book, titled *Rules for Radicals*, has operated as a handbook for a radical left-wing takeover by the Obama administration and the Occupy movement. It was during Bill Clinton's presidency that this conspiracy theory first emerged, because then First Lady Hillary Clinton had written her 1969 college thesis on Alinsky's work. Conservatives speculated about Alinsky's radical influence on the Clintons and its possible impact on policy.

Rules for Radicals describes the rules and strategies of community organizing, which are, from a European perspective, not as "radical" as Bannon claims them to be. Although firmly anchored in the left, Alinksy comes closest to a committed social democrat in his propagation of non-violent strategies of mobilization and his pragmatic use of existing institutional bodies to bring about change. His agenda was nevertheless most certainly a progressive one, defending social housing, universal healthcare, local democracy, and the importance of alliances between disenfranchised communities.

The main misreading of his work results from a citation at the beginning of the book, in which the fallen angel Lucifer is described as "the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom." For his critics, this indicates the godless Marxist framework within which Alinksy plots a government takeover.

Alinksy's strategic claim that "community organization is community disorganization" because "[a]ll change means disorganization of the old and the organization of the new" radically goes against the core of conservative philosophy. His aim for broad coalitions comprising "local organizations, churches, service groups, labor unions, [and] corner gangs" further allows for paranoid projections of a revolutionary agenda.

Bannon, who once declared himself a "Leninist" of the right, is just as much a student of Alinksy as he is his greatest critic. The following quote from the author, if torn from its embeddedness in left-wing discourse, could very well apply to Bannon's strategic objectives: "When those prominent in the status quo turn and label you an "agitator" they are completely correct, for that is, in one word, your function — to agitate to the point of conflict."

Tactics

We will either find a way or make one.
— HANNIBAL.

TACTICS MEANS doing what you can with what you have. Tactics are those consciously deliberate acts by which human beings live with each other and deal with the world around them. In the world of give and take, tactics is the art of how to take and how to give. Here our concern is with the tactic of taking, how the Have-Nots can take power away from the Haves.

For an elementary illustration of tactics, take parts of your face as the point of reference; your eyes, your ears, and your nose. First the eyes; if you have developed a vast, mass-based people's organization, you can parade it visibly before the enemy and openly show your power. Second the ears; if your organization is small in numbers, then do what Gideon did: conceal the members in the dark but raise a din and clamor that will make the listener believe that your organization numbers many more than it does. Third, the nose; if your organization is too tiny even for noise, stink up the place.

Always remember the first rule of power tactics:

Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.*

The second rule is: *Never go outside the experience of your people.* When an action or tactic is outside the experience of the people, the result is confusion, fear, and retreat. It also means a collapse of communication, as we have noted.

The third rule is: *Wherever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy.* Here you want to cause confusion, fear, and retreat.

General William T. Sherman, whose name still causes a frenzied reaction throughout the South, provided a classic example of going outside the enemy's experience. Until Sherman, military tactics and strategies were based on standard patterns. All armies had fronts, rears, flanks, lines of communication, and lines of supply. Military campaigns were aimed at such standard objectives as rolling up the flanks of the enemy army or cutting the lines of supply or lines of communications, or moving around to attack from the rear. When Sherman cut loose on his famous March to the Sea, he had no front or rear lines of supplies or any other lines. He was on the loose and living on the land. The South, confronted with this new form of military invasion, reacted with confusion, panic, terror, and collapse. Sherman swept on to inevitable vic-

* Power has always derived from two main sources, money and people. Lacking money, the Have-Nots must build power from their own flesh and blood. A power movement expresses itself with mass tactics. Against the finesse and sophistication of the status quo, the Have-Nots have always had to club their way. In early Renaissance Italy the playing cards showed swords for the nobility (the word spada is a corruption of the Italian word for sword), chalices (which become hearts) for the clergy, diamonds for the merchants, and clubs as the symbol of the peasants.

tory. It was the same tactic that, years later in the early days of World War II, the Nazi Panzer tank divisions emulated in their far-flung sweeps into enemy territory, as did our own General Patton with the American Third Armored Division.

The fourth rule is: *Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.* You can kill them with this, for they can no more obey their own rules than the Christian church can live up to Christianity.

The fourth rule carries within it the fifth rule: *Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.* It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule. Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage.

The sixth rule is: *A good tactic is one that your people enjoy.** If your people are not having a ball doing it, there is something very wrong with the tactic.

The seventh rule: *A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.* Man can sustain militant interest in any issue for only a limited time, after which it becomes a ritualistic commitment, like going to church on Sunday mornings. New issues and crises are always developing, and one's reaction becomes, "Well, my heart bleeds for those people and I'm all for the boycott, but after all there are other important things in life"—and there it goes.

The eighth rule: *Keep the pressure on*, with different tactics and actions, and utilize all events of the period for your purpose.

* Alinsky takes the iconoclast's pleasure in kicking the biggest behinds in town and the sport is not unrequiring . . ."—William F. Buckley, Jr. *Chicago Daily News*, October 19, 1966.

The ninth rule: *The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.*

The tenth rule: *The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition.* It is this unceasing pressure that results in the reactions from the opposition that are essential for the success of the campaign. It should be remembered not only that the action is in the reaction but that action is itself the consequence of reaction and of reaction to the reaction, ad infinitum. The pressure produces the reaction, and constant pressure sustains action.

The eleventh rule is: *If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counterside;* this is based on the principle that every positive has its negative. We have already seen the conversion of the negative into the positive, in Mahatma Gandhi's development of the tactic of passive resistance.

One corporation we organized against responded to the continuous application of pressure by burglarizing my home, and then using the keys taken in the burglary to burglarize the offices of the Industrial Areas Foundation where I work. The panic in this corporation was clear from the nature of the burglaries, for nothing was taken in either burglary to make it seem that the thieves were interested in ordinary loot—they took only the records that applied to the corporation. Even the most amateurish burglar would have had more sense than to do what the private detective agency hired by that corporation did. The police departments in California and Chicago agreed that "the corporation might just as well have left its fingerprints all over the place."

In a fight almost anything goes. It almost reaches the

point where you stop to apologize if a chance blow lands above the belt. When a corporation bungles like the one that burglarized my home and office, my visible public reaction is shock, horror, and moral outrage. This I use, we let it be known that sooner or later it would be confronted with this crime as well as with a whole series of other derelictions, before a United States Senate Subcommittee Investigation. Once sworn in, with congressional immunity, we would make these actions public. This threat, plus the fact that an attempt on my life had been made in Southern California, had the corporation on a spot where it would be publicly suspect in the event of assassination. At one point I found myself in a thirty-room motel in which every other room was occupied by their security men. This became another devil in the closet to haunt this corporation and to keep the pressure on.

The twelfth rule: *The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.* You cannot risk being trapped by the enemy in his sudden agreement with your demand and saying "You're right—we don't know what to do about this issue. Now you tell us."

The thirteenth rule: *Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.*

In conflict tactics there are certain rules that the organizer should regard as universalities. One is that the opposition must be singled out as the target and "frozen." By this I mean that in a complex, interrelated, urban society, it becomes increasingly difficult to single out who is to blame for any particular evil. There is a constant, and somewhat legitimate, passing of the buck. In these times of urbanization, complex metropolitan government, the complexities of major interlocked corporations, and the interlocking of political life between cities and

counties and metropolitan authorities, the problem that threatens to loom more and more is that of identifying the enemy. Obviously there is no point to tactics unless one has a target upon which to center the attacks. One big problem is a constant shifting of responsibility from one jurisdiction to another—individuals and bureaus one after another disclaim responsibility for particular conditions, attributing the authority for any change to some other force. In a corporation one gets the situation where the president of the corporation says that he does not have the responsibility, it is up to the board of trustees or the board of directors, the board of directors can shift it over to the stockholders, etc., etc. And the same thing goes, for example, in the Board of Education appointments in the city of Chicago, where an extra-legal committee is empowered to make selections of nominees for the board and the mayor then uses his legal powers to select names from that list. When the mayor is attacked for not having any blacks on the list, he shifts the responsibility over to the committee, pointing out that he has to select those names from a list submitted by the committee, and if the list is all white, then he has no responsibility. The committee can shift the responsibility back by pointing out that it is the mayor who has the authority to select the names, and so it goes in a comic (if it were not so tragic) routine of "who's on first" or "under which shell is the pea hidden?"

The same evasion of responsibility is to be found in all areas of life and other areas of City Hall Urban Renewal departments, who say the responsibility is over there, and somebody else says the responsibility is over there, the city says it is a state responsibility, and the state says it is a federal responsibility, and the federal government passes it back to the local community, and on ad infinitum.

It should be borne in mind that the target is always trying to shift responsibility to get out of being the target. There is a constant squirming and moving and strategy—purposeful, and malicious at times, other times just for straight self-survival—on the part of the designated target. The forces for change must keep this in mind and pin the target down securely. If an organization permits responsibility to be diffused and distributed in a number of areas, attack becomes impossible.

I remember specifically that when the Woodlawn Organization started the campaign against public school segregation, both the superintendent of schools and the chairman of the Board of Education vehemently denied any racist segregationist practices in the Chicago Public School System. They took the position that they did not even have any racial-identification data in their files, so they did not know which of their students were black and which were white. As for the fact that we had all-white schools and all-black schools, well, that's just the way it was.

If we had been confronted with a politically sophisticated school superintendent he could have very well replied, "Look, when I came to Chicago the city and school system was following, as it is now, a neighborhood school policy. Chicago's neighborhoods are segregated. There are white neighborhoods and black neighborhoods and therefore you have white schools and black schools. Why attack me? Why not attack the segregated neighborhoods and change them?" He would have had a valid point, of sorts; I still shiver when I think of this possibility, but the segregated neighborhoods would have passed the buck to someone else and so it would have gone into a dog-chasing-his-tail pattern—and it would have been a fifteen-year

job to try to break down the segregated residential pattern of Chicago. We did not have the power to start that kind of a conflict. One of the criteria in picking your target is the target's vulnerability—where do you have the power to start? Furthermore, any target can always say, "Why do you center on me when there are others to blame as well?" When you "freeze the target," you disregard these arguments and, for the moment, all the others to blame.

Then, as you zero in and freeze your target and carry out your attack, all of the "others" come out of the woodwork very soon. They become visible by their support of the target.

The other important point in the choosing of a target is that it must be a personification, not something general and abstract such as a community's segregated practices or a major corporation or City Hall. It is not possible to develop the necessary hostility against, say, City Hall, which after all is a concrete, physical, inanimate structure, or against a corporation, which has no soul or identity, or a public school administration, which again is an inanimate system.

John L. Lewis, the leader of the radical C.I.O. labor organization in the 1930s, was fully aware of this, and as a consequence the C.I.O. never attacked General Motors, they always attacked its president, Alfred "Icewater-In-His-Veins" Sloan; they never attacked the Republic Steel Corporation but always its president, "Bloodied Hands" Tom Girdler, and so with us when we attacked the then superintendent of the Chicago public school system, Benjamin Willis. Let nothing get you off your target.

With this focus comes a polarization. As we have indicated before, all issues must be polarized if action is to follow. The classic statement on polarization comes from

Christ: "He that is not with me is against me" (Luke 11:23). He allowed no middle ground to the money-changers in the Temple. One acts decisively only in the conviction that all the angels are on one side and all the devils on the other. A leader may struggle toward a decision and weigh the merits and demerits of a situation which is 52 per cent positive and 48 per cent negative, but once the decision is reached he must assume that his cause is 100 per cent positive and the opposition 100 per cent negative. He can't toss forever in limbo, and avoid decision. He can't weigh arguments or reflect endlessly—he must decide and act. Otherwise there are Hamlet's words:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

Many liberals, during our attack on the then-school superintendent, were pointing out that after all he wasn't a 100 per cent devil, he was a regular churchgoer, he was a good family man, and he was generous in his contributions to charity. You imagine in the arena of conflict charging that so-and-so is a racist bastard and then diluting the impact of the attack with qualifying remarks such as "He is a good churchgoing man, generous to charity, and a good husband"? This becomes political idiocy.

An excellent illustration of the importance of polarization here was cited by Ruth McKenney in *Industrial Valley*, her classical study of the beginning of organization of the rubber workers in Akron, Ohio:

[John L.] Lewis faced the mountaineer workers of Akron calmly. He had taken the trouble to pre-

pare himself with exact information about the rubber industry and The Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. He made no vague, general speech, the kind the rubberworkers were used to hearing from Green [then president of the A.F. of L.] Lewis named names and quoted figures. His audience was startled and pleased when he called Cliff Slusser by name, described him, and finally denounced him. The A.F. of L. leaders who used to come into Akron in the old days were generally doing well if they remembered who Paul Litchfield was.

The Lewis speech was a battle cry, a challenge. He started off by recalling the vast profits the rubber companies had always made, even during the deepest days of the Depression. He mentioned the Goodyear labor policy, and quoted Mr. Litchfield's pious opinions about the partnership of labor and capital.

"What," he said in his deep, passionate voice, "have Goodyear workers gotten out of the growth of the company?" His audience squirmed in its seats, listening with almost painful fervor.

"Partnership!" he sneered. "Well, labor and capital may be partners in theory, *but they are enemies in fact.*"

. . . The rubberworkers listened to this with surprise and great excitement. William Green used to tell them about the partnership of labor and capital nearly as eloquently as Paul Litchfield. Here was a man who put into words—what eloquent and educated and even elegant words—facts they knew to be true from their own experience. Here was a man who said things that made real sense to a guy who worked on a tire machine at Goodyear.

"Organize!" Lewis shouted, and his voice echoed from the beams of the armory. "Organ-

ize!" he said, pounding the speaking pulpit until it jumped. "Organize! Go to Goodyear and tell them you want some of those stock dividends. Say, So we're supposed to be partners, are we? Well, we're not. We're enemies."

● *The real action is in the enemy's reaction.*
● *The enemy properly goaded and guided in his reaction will be your major strength.*
● *Tactics, like organization, like life, require that you move with the action.*

The scene is Rochester, New York, the home of Eastman Kodak—or rather Eastman Kodak, the home of Rochester, New York. Rochester is literally dominated by this industrial giant. For anyone to fight or publicly challenge Kodak is in itself completely outside of Rochester's experience. Even to this day this company does not have a labor union. Its attitudes toward the general public make paternalistic feudalism look like participatory democracy.

Rochester prides itself on being one of America's cultural crown jewels; it has its libraries, school systems, university, museums, and its well-known symphony. As previously mentioned we were coming in on the invitation of the black ghetto to organize them (they literally organized to invite us in). The city was in a state of hysteria and fear at the very mention of my name. Whatever I did was news. Even my old friend and tutor, John L. Lewis, called me and affectionately growled, "I resent the fact that you are more hated in Rochester than I was." This was the setting.

One of the first times I arrived at the airport I was surrounded by reporters from the media. The first question was what I thought about Rochester as a city and I replied,

"It is a huge southern plantation transplanted north." To the question why was I "meddling" in the black ghetto after "everything" that Eastman Kodak had done for the blacks (there had been a bloody riot, National Guard, etc., the previous summer), I looked blank and replied, "Maybe I am innocent and uninformed of what has been happening here, but as far as I know the only thing Eastman Kodak has done on the race issue in America has been to introduce color film." The reaction was shock, anger, and resentment from Kodak. They were being attacked or insulted—they were being laughed at, and this was insufferable. It was the first dart tossed at the big bull. Soon Eastman would become so angry that it would make the kind of charges that finally led to its own downfall.

The next question was about my response to a bitter personal denunciation of me from W. Allen Wallis, the president of the University of Rochester and a present director of Eastman Kodak. He had been the head of the Department of Business Administration, formerly, at the University of Chicago. He was at the university when it was locked in bitter warfare with the black organization in Woodlawn. "Wallis?" I replied. "Which one are you talking about—Wallace of Alabama, or Wallis of Rochester? I guess there isn't any difference, so what was your question?" This reply (1) introduced an element of ridicule and (2) it ended any further attacks from the president of the University of Rochester, who began to suspect that he was going to be shafted with razors, and that an encounter with me or with my associates was not going to be an academic dialogue.

It should be remembered that you can threaten the enemy and get away with it. You can insult and annoy

STEVE BANNON: A PROPAGANDA RETROSPECTIVE

CULTURAL MARXISM

Stephen K. Bannon, dir., *Occupy Unmasked* (Citizens United Productions, 2012)

Throughout his work, Bannon claims that the enemy does not only come from outside in the form of "Islamic terrorism" or the growing global prominence of China, but also from within in the form of a globalist liberal elite and its cultural Marxist agenda. In Bannon's eyes, the rise of the 2011 Occupy movement is exemplary of the threat that the US faces within its borders.

The Occupy movement, which emerged as a protest against the 2008 financial crisis, Wall Street corruption, and mass home foreclosures, and which resulted in, among others, the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York, plays a central role in Bannon's *Occupy Unmasked*. In the film, the movement is accused on various accounts. It is labeled as the ultimate consequence of the societal decay that set in from the 1960s and 70s onward, led by Alinsky loyalists, and as a staged protest—orchestrated by members of the Obama administration, leftist unions, and the online hacker group Anonymous—with the aim of government takeover and state collectivization.

Occupy Unmasked is again an example of Bannon's attempt to turn opposition narratives against themselves. It was in fact the Tea Party movement that was criticized for being less of a social movement than it was an orchestrated campaign sponsored by continuous Fox News coverage and corporately funded organizations, such as Freedom Works and Americans for Prosperity. While there is no substantial evidence of such support in the case of Occupy, Bannon connects speculative dots to suggest a larger plot or coup in the making.
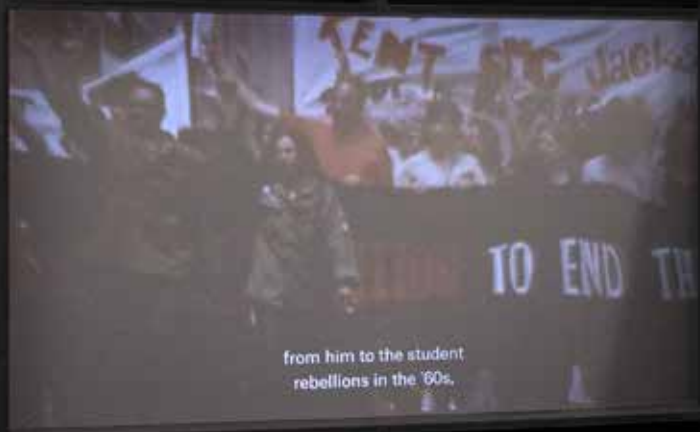
Occupy Unmasked also features the last appearance of Andrew Breitbart, who had famously declared Bannon the "Riefenstahl of the Tea Party." Breitbart would die of heart failure in the year the film was released, leaving Bannon to take over Breitbart News—the "home of the alt-right"—as a result.

PERFORMING TRUMPISM

**"All I'm trying to be is the infrastructure for the global populist movement."
—Steve Bannon**

In his propaganda art, Bannon developed the core narratives, aesthetics, and ideologies for Christian free market nationalism, fuelling movements as different as the Tea Party and the alt-right—both of which would become united under the umbrella of Trumpism. Bannon's political and organizational work is aimed at turning this artistic and cultural imagination into political reality.

This transformative character of Bannon's work embeds it firmly within the domain of propaganda and propaganda art. Propaganda is not just aimed at sending a message, but at transforming reality itself. Bannon's propaganda work, from Biosphere 2 to his films, does not aim at merely influencing the world; he wants to create a world.

The final room of the exhibition focused on the year following the election of Trump, the influence of Bannon on the new administration's rhetoric, and his departure from the White House and Breitbart News. It illustrates how Bannon's artistic and political vision scripted the performance of Trumpism, but ended up being consumed by it also.

Press Conference (January 12, 2017)

During his period as president-elect, Trump and his lawyer Sheri Dillon organized a press conference on January 12, 2017, to announce that he would officially hand over his business empire to his sons Donald Jr and Eric. The press conference followed mounting criticism of Trump's refusal to make his tax returns public, and the possible conflicts of interest between the Trump administration and his business empire.

Although Trump claimed to hand over "complete and total" control of his business empire, the director of the Office of Government Ethics, Walter Shaub, argued that Trump's handing over of his business to his sons did not meet the standards of previous administrations. Since 1978, all presidents had either established a blind trust run by independent trustees or limited their investments to non-conflicting assets. Trump had done neither.

The UK newspaper *The Independent* further noted that the files, allegedly containing Trump's business administration, were actually completely empty and instead filled with blank papers. This use of a "prop" is characteristic of the performance of Trumpism, which relies on monumental and symbolic gestures—such as the building of a wall between Mexico and the US—that are not backed politically, legislatively, or financially. The performance of Trumpism essentially forms a new kind of meme, whereby Trump seeks to realize his aims by circulating and thus normalizing extreme versions of them in the mediascape first.

Under the strong influence of Bannon, who was then Chief White House Advisor, the press conference of January 12 became more of a filmset than a political event. From here onward, Bannon's scripting of Trumpism would have an increasingly devastating real-life impact, as is the case with the signing of Executive Order 13769 on January 27, 2017, better known as the "Muslim Ban."

Press Conference (August 15, 2017)

As president, Trump was criticized for his lack of condemnation of the "Unite the Right" rally, which took place on August 11 and 12, 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia. Organized by various far-right, white supremacist, and white nationalist organizations, the rally protested the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, a Confederate commander who fought in the American Civil War for the slaveholding South.

On the second day of the rally, neo-Nazi James Alex Fields ran his car into a group of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer, a civil rights activist. That same day Trump condemned the "hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides," without distinguishing the extremist right from those protesting against them. In a second reaction two days later, now under great pressure, Trump read a statement calling the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups "criminals and thugs."

But during a third statement on August 15, which was originally meant to address infrastructural issues, Trump returned to his original response by stating that there was "blame on both sides." He claimed that there were "good people" in the Unite the Right rally, and that the "alt-left" was just as much to blame for the violence, as they, in his words, came "charging at the alt-right." Bannon responded the next day by saying he was proud Trump had taken a stance against the "globalists" for "his people," thereby firmly linking the alt-right to the Trump presidency.

While the instant counternarrative introduced by Trump — that the alt-right was not the problem, but the alt-left—had Bannon's signature all over it, the press conference also signaled the end of Bannon's role in the White House. Mounting criticism demanding Trump to rid his administration of its most notorious alt-right element led to the firing of Bannon on August 18, 2017.

## Jonas Staal, *The Disappearance of Steve Bannon* (2018)

After his departure from the White House, Bannon vowed to continue to fight for the Trumpist agenda through his renewed position as the Breitbart editor-in-chief and by backing the extremist Republican candidate Roy Moore for the Alabama Senate primaries. Moore gained traction through his hard-line pro-Christian, anti-gay, and anti-Islamic agenda, but criticism intensified when substantial evidence pointed toward his previous relations with underage women. Even though the Alabama Senate seat had not been in Democratic hands for twenty-five years, Moore lost to Democratic candidate Doug Jones by a 1.5% margin.

Bannon's position and credibility as a Trumpist and alt-right propagandist was further undermined when, on January 5, 2018, Michael Wolff published his book *Fire and Fury*, an inside report of the chaos in Trump's White House. Bannon was prominently featured in the book, quoted as describing Trump's son Donald Jnr as "treasonous" for trying to obtain damaging information on Hillary Clinton through a Russian connection. Trump, who had long been frustrated by the strategic power attributed to Bannon, declared his former advisor "out of his mind." Bannon's financial supporters, the ultraconservative Mercer family, broke their ties with him as well, and on January 9, 2018, Bannon was forced to resign from his position at Breitbart.

A subsequent campaign waged by the Trump administration aimed at reducing or entirely removing Bannon's role from its history. Speaking on behalf of the White House, Bannon's former protégé, Stephen Miller, claimed that "his role has been greatly exaggerated." Trump, if speaking of Bannon at all, referred to him by the nickname "sloppy Steve." Similarly to how the Stalinist regime removed political opponents from official photographs, Trumpism also rewrote its own history. Just as art historian Boris Groys once spoke of "the total art of Stalinism," the total art of Trumpism consumes those that once created it.

Stephen K. Bannon, dir., *Torchbearer* (Citizens United in association with Glittering Steel, 2016)
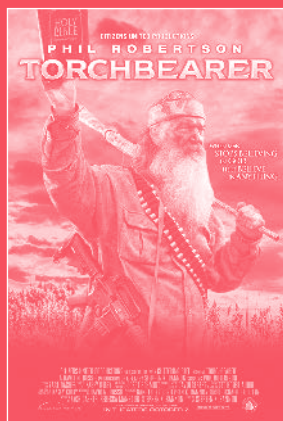

Torchbearer is Bannon's most apocalyptic and religious film, embodied by its narrator, Phil Robertson — an anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-abortion activist who gained fame through his role in the reality television series *Duck Dynasty.* Robertson argues that the great civilizations of the past collapsed due to the adoration of false gods (Athens) or the deification of human emperors (Rome). Devout Christians warned of such blasphemy, but were instead prosecuted, murdered, and forced to seek their homeland in the "new world."

The Christian pilgrims who fled Europe established a new civilization "anchored in God" that would become the foundation of the US — a reasoning that blatantly bypasses the violation and genocide of America's indigenous peoples. In Europe on the other hand, secular faith, from atheism to technology, continued to yield atrocities, which for Robertson ran straight from the "Great Terror" of the French Revolution to the Nazi deathcamps.

The film ends with a grim analysis of our present times, plagued by globalist greed, sexual deviance, consumer culture, and the rise of Islamist terrorism. Once again, humans declare themselves God, whether through the cult of secular celebrity culture or Islamic fundamentalism. Only a return to the Christian foundations of the US, Robertson argues, can help us topple the new "godless tyrants."

Torchbearer is a campaign film for the end times. Bannon's appearance in March 2018, after his departure from the White House and Breitbart News, on the side of the ultranationalist Lega in Italy and during a conference for the National Rally in France proves that his campaign is far from over. By warning of a coming clash with the axis of Turkey–Iran–China and propagating the use of digital currencies like Bitcoin to destabilize the central banks, Bannon aims to become the "torchbearer" of the international alt-right.

to decide who would be better off dead
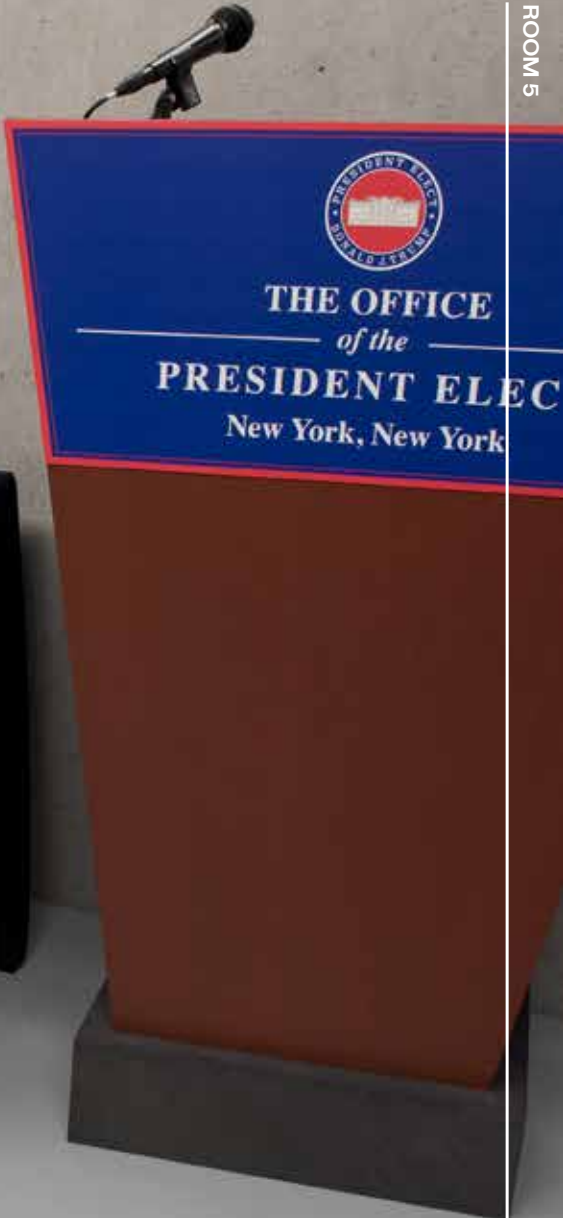
Het Nieuwe Instituut

A special thanks goes to those who contributed to the various public programs developed around the exhibition-project: Annelys de Vet (*Imagining Terror*, November 30, 2017); Nourdin el Ouali, Lauren Alexander, and Ghalia Elsrakbi (*Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective*, April 19, 2018); and Sven Lütticken, Angela Nagle, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Laura Raicovich, New Urban Collective (Jessica de Abreu and Mitchell Esajas), Szabolcs KissPál, Maria Hlavajova, Chris Keulemans, Julie de Lima, Charl Landvreugd, and Theo Prodromidis (*Propaganda Art Today*, June 2, 2018).

This publication—which accompanies the exhibition-project *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* by artist Jonas Staal, curated by Marina Otero Verzier — offers an overview of the artistic, cultural, and political work of Stephen K. Bannon (Norfolk, Virginia, 1953). Bannon is best known as the campaign manager and later as the senior White House advisor for US President Donald Trump, as well as former editor-in-chief of Breitbart News—the self-declared home of the so-called *alt-right*.

Less well known is Bannon's work as a filmmaker, which saw him direct nine documentary film-pamphlets between 2004 and 2016 in a style he has termed "kinetic cinema." His films sketch a grim profile of a world on the brink of disaster, beset by economic crisis, secular hedonism, and Islamic fundamentalism. In Bannon's films "strong" leaders such as Ronald Reagan, Sarah Palin, and Donald Trump emerge as the sole defenders of Christian faith, military might, family values, and economic nationalism.

This publication documents the exhibition-project and aims to show how Trumpism was actually decades in the making through Bannon's propaganda work. It therefore provides an example of the importance of propaganda art in the surge of the international *alt-right*. To illustrate this, the publication analyzes and deconstructs the mechanisms of propaganda and raises the question of how to create counter-narratives in the form of an "emancipatory propaganda art."

Jonas Staal is an artist, propaganda researcher, and founder of the artistic and political organizations New World Summit (2012–ongoing) and New Unions (2016–ongoing).

Marina Otero Verzier is an architect, curator, and director of research at Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam.

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