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Jonas Staal: Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective (2018) // image via Remco van Bladel and Jonas Staal
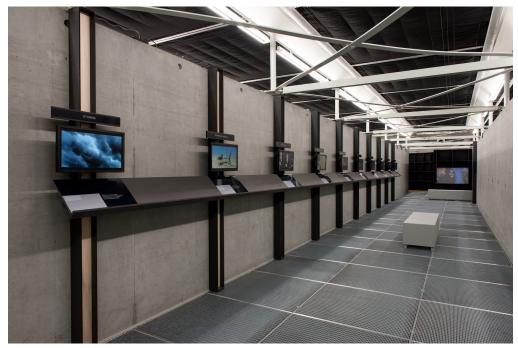
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Jonas Staal on Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective

Jonas Staal discusses *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective,* his show at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam.

Interview by James Elsey

Culture + Conflict: What first motivated you to choose Bannon's filmmaking as a subject?

Jonas Staal: A large part of my work is dedicated to propaganda research, focused on the role of art in dominant regimes of power. For example, the work of a prominent MP of the Dutch ultranationalist Freedom Party, who had developed an alternative prison model titled *Closed Architecture* before joining the party. My question was at what level the form of the prison, could be "read" as an ideological proposition, in the way it deals with notions of justice and punishment. Researching the cinematic work of Bannon, together with curator Marina Otero Verzier, started from a similar endeavor: can we read the nine films he directed between 2004 and 2016 as a cultural pre-enactment of what we later have come to known as Trumpism? The international alt-right, as Angela Nagle has argued, is extremely Gramscian in nature, in that it tries to change culture first in order to bring about political change second. The alt-right is making its long march through the institutions.

Room 2 titled "Bannon's Cyclical Time" in *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (2018) // image via Nieuwe Beelden Makers

C+C: We would be really interested to hear about your research process for the exhibition.

JS: I researched Bannon's work from the nineties onwards. His work as a producer of Hollywood film, script writer, CEO of the Biosphere 2 eco-sphere facility, entrepreneur for Internet Gaming Entertainment in Hong Kong, editor of Breitbart News, vice-chair of Cambridge Analytica, his own brand of documentary pamphletic film, his campaign work for the Tea Party and Trump as well as various lectures. In a way, the *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* is as much about the various political movements that have shaped Bannon, as it is about the way that he has shaped them. Propaganda, essentially, is about infrastructure on one hand, and narrative on the other. As a propagandist and a propaganda artist, he has been able to develop both.

With regards to *infrastructure*, his years at Goldman Sachs, his acquired sponsorship through the ultraconservative Mercer family and control over his own media platform in the form of Breitbart, allowed him to control channels of communication and organization. When it comes to *narrative*, his films are extremely important. It is there that he develops his ideological vision of what I would summarize as "white Christian economic nationalism." In his film *In The Face of Evil* (2004) he builds his narrative around Reagan, as the strong leader-figure needed to combat the communist threat. Ending his film with the attack on the Twin Towers, he essentially calls for a new 21st century Reagan to fight the "return of evil" in the form of what he calls "Islamic terrorism." These two elements are crucial: the cyclical return of evil, and the need of a leader-figure that leads the white Christian nation into battle. In *The Undefeated* (2011), his champion is Tea Party figurehead Sarah Palin, which Bannon would later refer to as "Trump before Trump." As far as Trumpism is an ideology, it was pre-enacted and shaped through Bannon's propaganda art work.

C+C: In the show, the stark concrete walls create a sense of inhospitality. Would you say something about the aesthetic and conceptual links of the exhibition's design?

JS: Het Nieuwe Instituut has a wonderful and impossible space on its third floor, that consists of five very long concrete hallways, one next to the other. When I saw the space, it fitted exactly into the framework I had in mind, as it allowed for a kind of spatial storyboard, a visual essay of some kind, through which I could develop, chapter by chapter, the development of Bannon and the various movements and organizations he worked with. Room by room, it allowed Otero Verzier and me to compare, systematically, the relation between his cultural and political work, the relation – essentially – between *power* and *form*. Propaganda is the performance of power, as it deals with the way infrastructures attempt to construct a reality based on a specific narrative. Propaganda art acts within that process and visualizes and shapes this desired new reality. The exhibition, in the end, was a long "tunnel", of which each part contained crucial documents and case-studies from Bannon's work, each turn ending with one of his films. It starts in the first room with his early work in Hollywood and ends with his choreography of the Trump campaign as well as his recent attempts to create a Brussels-based organization to fund alt-right parties called "The Movement."

Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and Studio Jonas Staal, *People's Parliament of Rojava* (2015-18) // image via Ruben Hamelink

C+C: The design of political engagement whether through social media, through civic space, or in the case of your New World Summit we're finding is heavily influencing its manifestation. Do you think we can 'design out' the potential for conflict? … there seems to be a turn at the moment in political consciousness about how infrastructure is not neutral… as Bannon puts it: 'all I am trying to be is the infrastructure, globally, for the global populist movement.'[1]

JS: Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in the late eighties defined the aim of propaganda as "manufacturing consent." Meaning: to create a reality which norms reflect the interest of dominant elites. To achieve this, propaganda can only work if it operates through as many infrastructures of power as possible: from a school class to a poster, from a film to a political manifestation, from a dinner table conversation to a mass media campaign. When propaganda achieves to operate on both a micro- and macro-performative scale, it can succeed in changing the norms of society, the consent based on which we define what is reality. And indeed, the infrastructure that results from this is far from neutral. But then, was there ever a neutral infrastructure in the first place? I defend the importance of manufacturing consent around basic principles of emancipatory politics: the equal access to education, to healthcare and economic participation, as well as the importance of a universal basic income, the earth-health and the transformation of the state into a cooperative. Meaning, that I, and the organizations I work with, wish to shape reality just the same.

What I'm trying to say is that reality is, in a way, the result of a propaganda struggle. Of various conflicting performances of power, each of which strives to create a new consensus, a hegemony. Since the ascent of Reagan and Thatcher, this was the neoliberal consensus. Today, we witness an authoritarian, alt-right consensus in the making. What I strive for is a consensus based on principles of egalitarian society, which is one that, for very short moments in time, has been established as a new "normativity" as well: in the early years of the Soviet revolution, in the communalist anarcho-libertarian free zones during the Spanish civil war, and most recently, in the autonomous Rojava region in West-Kurdistan where a new "stateless democracy" has been in the making since 2011. I do not wish to "design out" conflict. The parliaments I create through the *New World Summit* for example, are not devoid of conflict: sometimes they bring together stateless and blacklisted organizations that stand in strong antagonism with one another as well. But they do aim to create new assemblist alliances, new definitions of collectivity and transdemocratic solidarity. Alliances through which, hopefully, we can take part in the propaganda struggle to make sure a hegemony of emancipatory, transformative politics can be established before the alt-right creates its own.

C+C: Do you feel these 'platforms' are paradigmatic spaces for contemporary political struggle (for both users and creators)? So the artist/designer/developer might be setting the parameters, but the following actions within are not fully deterministic. Your work sometimes takes this form, but with a different set of aims to Bannon, whose platform-building has seen the creation of Breitbart.

JS: Yes, a lot of my assemblist and organizational work is aimed at conceiving spaces – from alternative parliaments, to embassies, schools, and political campaigns – where new alliances can be formulated. In this process, I co-conceive the conditions of an assemblist gathering, but I do not define its outcome. The transdemocratic organizations that joined my *New Unions* campaigns, or the stateless and blacklisted organizations that gather in the *New World Summit*, are obviously not my "artwork": they activate the artwork through their gathering and give it new meaning. They retool it to enable discourse and possible forms of unionization.

You could say, this is yet another form of propaganda art, as in many of my works – in collaboration with the autonomous government of Rojava or the Democracy in Europe 2025 Movement (DiEM25) – I partake directly in the performance of power, but through art. But not all forms of power are the same, and so we should speak of propaganda not as a singular term, but of *propagandas* in the plural. A manifold propagandas shape the propaganda struggle: but to be an art worker in a popular movement or within the alt-right, clearly are fundamentally different things, just as the realities they each try to construct are irreconcilable.

Yanis Varoufakis leads an assembly in the installation *New Unions: DiEM25, Athens by* Studio Jonas Staal and DiEM25 (2017) // image via Jonas Staal

C+C: I quote you "The propaganda against art has been very effective. This idea that 'art should be depoliticised', that 'only by maintaining a fictional neutrality can art call itself art', is actually a huge obstacle to understanding art's place and effect in the world – and the potential contribution that art could make in developing counter-narratives to the alt-right." So would it be correct to infer a message from this show as 'they're politicising aesthetics, so we should too'?

JS: Well, I would say the message in this case would be: aesthetics have always been politicized. In that sense, I see emancipatory forms of propaganda art, the way I and many of my colleagues try to develop it, as a continuation of institutional critique. That was also a movement, from Hans Haacke to Andrea Fraser, that mapped the relation between art and power, and investigated the way institutions act through the artist and the artwork to establish forms of elite consensus. Fraser famously wrote "we are all always already serving," meaning that we are all partaking in the performance of power in ways we might not even be aware of. From a perspective of emancipatory propaganda art, the questions changes into: "whom do we serve, and how can we serve differently?" Acting in the field of propaganda art we acknowledge that power, whether we want it or not, is always present, but also that not every form of power is the same. That we can collectively shape and perform power and turn propaganda from a covert to an overt practice: a means of communal world-making, instead of having worlds made and dictated for us by others.

C+C: The show focuses somewhat on the political memes that have become associated with the alt-right on sites like 4Chan and r/the_donald, and typified the visual language of online culture across the political spectrum. (Recent Wired article mentions their role in the Rohingya genocide[2]) Do you think that memes possess a latent incendiary power?

JS: Hmm, well. I don't think any image has any power in and of itself. One poster, or one film, or one painting, or one meme, is not propaganda. It is propaganda only when it operates on a grand variety of micro and macro-performative scales, and is able to bring about a new consensus, a new hegemony, on what reality is supposed to be – and most of all: who benefits from this particular process of world-making. But of course, considering that the alt-right is an online movement predominantly, the figure of the meme is a continuation of that relatively new kind of mobilization: the form of this cultural output follows the organizational model of the movement. Of course, you could say that the notion of the meme has become an alternative to governance in some perverse way. Most of what Trump proclaims – from the building of the wall on the Mexican border to arming school teachers – is not backed politically, financially or legislatively. It's a kind of "meme politics" in which the mediation of his provocations are just as important as their actual realization. In that sense, it was no surprise that he retweeted his own portrait as Pepe, considering that his idea of governance – if he even has one – is a form of global trolling. With his power and influence he changes our political culture, and with that change comes, step by step, the actual realization of his meme-politics into material reality.

C+C: Angela Nagle discusses the instrumentalisation of irony in these alt-right memes and message boards[3]. I found a short text you cowrote about 10 years ago denouncing irony, saying 'it is an attempt, a wish, not to be held accountable for what is said, written or done.' It's clear that it's been used to tenuously veil the intentions of masses of online trolls: so do you see any place for irony as an aesthetic or political device, or prefer a system of earnest communication?

JS: I stand by the manifesto *Against Irony* that I wrote with Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, although he recently confined to me that he does see a certain irony in a manifesto against irony. But of course, this is speaking from a position of privilege, in which I live and work in two countries, the Netherlands and Greece, where my capacity to express political positions directly is not threatened too substantially. There are regimes of powers, dictatorships, in which irony might be the only way to pass on a message, to hint at a resistance in subtexts and coded messaging. So, I would say that our manifesto is very context specific. In this case, a context in which it is possible to take a position directly and try to shape reality through emancipatory politics, but

where ideological precarity and a certain welfare nihilism has brought us to leave this task to neoliberal elites and alt-right forces, with devastating consequences as a result.

C+C: You say in a recent article: "Because from the propaganda perspective, there is a real cultural dimension to the alt-right. They are producing art: you could call their Pepe the Frog meme a contemporary version of a court portrait" this is an intriguing analogy, and I was wondering if you could elaborate on it a little?

JS: In the *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* exhibition, there are five different Pepe memes exhibited, that portray Trump, but also Farage, Le Pen, Wilders and Baudet – the latter two being ultranationalist and alt-right Dutch politicians. The Pepe meme employs irony as a way to defect responsibility. On one hand, Pepe operates as a dog whistle to racists, but once confronted with their own messaging, they will blame the left for being humorless: it was all meant *ironically*. Literally, the memes court alt-right constituents, but also its leaders. Not only Trump retweeted his Pepe portrait, Baudet in the Netherlands did the same: elevating these cultural forms into an ideologically state sanctioned form of art. Contemporary court portraits, indeed.

Jonas Staal, *The Disappearance of Steve Bannon* (2018) // image via the artist

C+C: It's clear Bannon takes some influence from leftist thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse or Saul Alinsky (*Rules for Radicals* is supplied in the exhibition), to reappropriate their ways of thinking and ultimately oppose their aims. Do you think there's valuable insight to be gained vice-versa from Bannon?

JS: In the exhibition we distributed several thousands of copies of Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* for free. The right considers him a cornerstone of cultural Marxism, partially due to the fact that Hillary Clinton wrote her thesis on his work. Ever since, paleoconservatives, Tea Party activists and alt-right trolls have claimed that Alinsky, a Jewish-American community organizer, is the secret orchestrator of social movements and even the Obama administration. A kind of "Protocols of Zion" conspiracy, that suggest a wide organized web of leftist radicals that are plotting to take over power from the university to the state over a period of decades: I wish it was true! Bannon's film *Occupy Unmasked* (2012) is entirely dedicated to Alinsky and this conspiracy.

In terms is there is something to learn from Bannon. Well, in the most unfortunate way possible, he showcases the importance and influence of art in the process of reality-construction. So as far as the artworld has confined art as a means to mirror and question the world, and made something of a taboo of art that aims to *change* it, Bannon makes a case for its constitutive role of the world we live in. Although obviously, the performance of power he partakes in, and the world he imagines to create is fundamentally opposite to mine. Secondly, what we can learn from Bannon is the importance to have a discourse on power. Not the authoritarian power he aims to achieve, but a vision of an egalitarian, cooperative society in which the means of reality-construction are collectively controlled and enacted.

Again, if we do not have a discourse and strategy, they will – and the consequences can already be seen the world over: 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.

C+C: Should the term propaganda be rehabilitated? Its semantic shift took place only in the twentieth century from a more neutral term towards having negative connotations. Before the Second World War, it wasn't just Axis countries with a 'Ministry of Propaganda', but places like Ireland, Brazil.

JS: The origins of propaganda trace back to the Vatican's *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* established in 1622 to propagate the Catholic faith against the rise of Protestantism. In the interwar period, when the huge influence of the British Wellington House propaganda bureau that operated during the First World War became clear, an extensive discussion manifested – especially in the US – on the compatibility of propaganda with democracy. Edward Bernays, that considered propaganda as a solution to what he considered the irrational dangers of democracy, is probably the most notorious participant to that debate. But indeed, after the dismantling of Nazi Germany the term for a long time – for good reasons – was beyond saving. When we say "propaganda" today, the association is immediately with 20th century totalitarianism. Instead we have chosen to use more neutral terms, like "public relations" and "advertisement." But of course, not using the term propaganda does not mean it has somehow disappeared. And the way it is presently used exclusively to describe dictatorships and authoritarian states, like Russia and North-Korea, is misleading, as it has made us blind for the way propaganda operates in contemporary democracies just the same. Bannon is a key example to understand that democracy and propaganda are not necessarily in contradiction to one another.

So yes, I think it's crucial to revitalize the field of propaganda studies, to understand that concepts such as fake news, alternative facts, and the notion of the post-truth era, have a longer history. But simultaneously, I also believe we have to revitalize the meaning of emancipatory forms of propaganda work. From the anticolonial "propaganda movement" in the late 19th and 20th century in the Philippines, to Lucy Lippard's call for a "feminist propaganda," there are alternative genealogies of popular and emancipatory forms of propaganda that have shown the profound importance of art and culture in the process of constructing new realities. To imagine, despite manifold forms of oppression and violence, the possibility of alternative forms of world-making through popular power, instead of elite rule. This repressed history of emancipatory propaganda and propaganda art is a key to positioning ourselves in the world today. Facts alone will not stop Trump from being elected or a Brexit under false premises. Facts need narratives to become affective and effective. So, artists, writers, filmmakers, architects, designers: we all occupy fields that can enable and visualize such narratives to make new forms of collective world-making a reality.

C+C: As an artist from the 'West', how do you build meaningful engagement through your art practice with those living in conflict zones?

JS: By acknowledging vastly inequal relations of power, while insisting at all time that this should never stop us from seeking forms of transdemocratic solidarity and unionization.

C+C: What projects are next/ in progress?

JS: The *New World Summit* currently co-organizes with the Kurdish Council of Eindhoven a parliament in the Van Abbemuseum in The Netherlands, that opened simultaneously to the parliament in Rojava. And the *New Unions* campaign just started a new chapter with the CCA in Glasgow, with the aim of building a new Scottish-European parliament on a decommissioned oil rig in the North-Sea. Apart from that, with Florian Malzacher, I'm launching a new utopian training camp in September, titled *Training for the Future*, where futurologists, extraterritorial activists and hackers train audiences in the means of production of alternate futures. It's all propaganda work of course. But propaganda work as a means to open up the means of production of alternative worlds to be shaped collectively, rather than to be dictated by minority elites. As Upton Sinclair said in 1925, the task of artists is not to work in the world as it is, but to "make a world."

1 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/world/europe/horowitz-europe-populism.html

2 www.wired.com/story/how-facebooks-rise-fueled-chaos-and-confusion-in-myanmar/

3 Angela Nagle (2017), 'Kill all Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan And Tumblr To Trump And The Alt-Right' Zero Books

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