

Jonas Staal
**Propaganda
(Art) Struggle**

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Our reality is defined, in part, by a propaganda struggle. “Propaganda” here should not be understood as a singular term, since this propaganda struggle results from various competing propagandas in the plural. Various performances of power each aim to construct reality according to their interests, resulting in overlapping claims that shape the arena of the contemporary.¹ What visual forms are taken by these manifold propagandas and the realities they aim to create? What kind of artistic morphologies and cultural narratives does the propaganda (art) struggle bring about?

1. A Specter Haunting Europe (and the World)

In late July 2018, Steve Bannon – former campaign manager and advisor to Donald Trump – announced the creation of a new Brussels-based foundation that will aim to become a right-wing “alternative” to George Soros’s Open Society Foundation.² The new foundation, which Bannon has ominously titled “The Movement,” will offer polling, messaging, and data-based targeting services to the ultranationalist and alt-right parties and platforms that are trying to dismantle the European Union from within: from Geert Wilders’s Freedom Party in the Netherlands and Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (formerly National Front) in France, to The League in Italy and Alternative for Germany. Once again, a specter is haunting Europe – but this time, it’s the specter of what DiEM25 has termed the “Nationalist International.”³

Bannon’s new organization can tell us a lot about the meaning of “propaganda” today. Essentially, propaganda can be defined as a performance of power, meaning that propaganda aims to enact infrastructures – political, economic, mass-media, and military – that shape reality according to a specific set of interests. Thus propaganda does not just aim to send a message; it aims to construct reality as such. This is what Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, in their analysis of propaganda from the late eighties, defined as “manufacturing of consent”: the process of establishing a normative reality that conforms to specific interests of elite power.⁴ In this light, we can say that the Nationalist International is currently manufacturing consent both politically and culturally. The established conservative liberal parties of today speak like the extreme right of the nineties, yet this is considered the “new normal” in comparison to the even more extreme standpoints of 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 manufacturing consent, where what was once unacceptable is

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Digital study with stills from Bannon's *Generation Zero* (2010). *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective, Study* (2018). Image: Jonas Staal and Remco van Bladel. Produced by Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam



Jonas Staal, Architectural model of *Biosphere 2*, 2018. Installation view of *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (2018), Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam. Photo: Nieuwe Beelden Makers.

now standard.

There are two crucial components to propaganda. The first is control over infrastructure; the means through which society is organized. Propaganda succeeds when the performance of power operates – from the micro to the macro scale – to construct reality in a systematic and sustained way. The second component is control over collective narratives about where we come from, who we are, and who we will become – or in the case of the Nationalist International, who we are to become *once more*. Their narratives tend to take the shape of strange retro science fictions, referring to an aspirational past “greatness” that never existed in the first place. This narrative dimension of propaganda, however obscene, cannot be underestimated, as it mobilizes a collective imagination that legitimizes the construction of a new reality. This narrative and imaginative power of art are directly visible in the domain of film.

2. Bannon’s Cyclical Time

Steve Bannon himself is an example not only of a propagandist, but also a propaganda artist.⁵ His work has focused on developing both the infrastructures of the Nationalist International – of which The Movement is the most recent example – and the narratives that provide purpose and unity to a growing alt-right alliance.⁶

Bannon’s work in the early nineties for Goldman Sachs was foundational for his organizational work as a propagandist, as it provided him with the tools to develop various venture-capitalist and political enterprises. His role as the CEO of the Biosphere 2 project in Arizona from 1993 to 1995 revealed his obsession with closed-system technologies.⁷ The largest ecosphere ever built on earth, Biosphere 2’s original remit was to explore the possibilities for interplanetary colonization, but under Bannon’s leadership it became a massive laboratory for researching the impacts of climate change (in sharp contrast to his later decisive role in convincing President Trump to pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement). In 2007, with funding from the ultraconservative Mercer family, Bannon cofounded Breitbart News – the self-declared “home of the alt-right” – and helped organize the anti-Obama Tea Party movement. Over time he has been instrumental in constructing, step by step, an expanding biosphere of the alt-right, with its own political, financial, and media wings – its own infrastructure.

A less discussed, albeit crucial, aspect of Bannon’s oeuvre is his work as a propaganda filmmaker – as an instigator of narratives intended to unite the right. Between 2004 and

2018 he made ten documentary-style films that can be described as cultural and ideological precursors to what would later be called “Trumpism.” Already in his first paleoconservative film, *In the Face of Evil: Reagan’s War in Word and Deed* (2004), Bannon’s obsession with strong national leadership is on display. Here, Reagan is portrayed as the sole defender of a Christian nation engaged in a battle to the death with communist evil.⁸ Bannon denounces the “appeasers” – diplomats and members of the peace movement – who strive for a negotiated resolution to the Cold War. The film ends with images of the attacks on the Twin Towers; out of the rising dust and smoke, the figure of Osama Bin Laden appears. Not only is Bannon’s first film a plea for a twenty-first-century Reagan-like figure to emerge and fight “Islamic Terrorism” with similar conviction; it also lays out his philosophy of the cyclical return of evil.

For Bannon, communism, Nazism, and Islamic terrorism are all successive reincarnations of what he terms “The Beast.” Inspired by the fringe writings of William Strauss and Neil Howe, especially their book *The Fourth Turning* (1997), Bannon believes that time develops cyclically through four “turnings,” and that every fourth generation – every fourth turning – an epic civilizational war against evil must be waged.⁹ This cyclical war provides the ground for a periodic rebirth of Bannon’s core ideological doctrine, which can best be summarized as “white Christian economic nationalism.”

Bannon uses this theory of the cyclical return of evil to explain social upheavals in the US over the past half-century. According to Bannon, the most recent fourth turning was the Second World War, out of which the United States emerged victorious and reborn, establishing a free market within its national borders and nurturing a devout and nuclear-family-centered culture. But this glorious new turning was quickly threatened by the next turning: the rise of flower power, feminism, and progressive social movements. This turning, says Bannon, introduced a godless individualism into American society and sowed the seeds for the culture of liberal-capitalist greed, with hippies growing up to become Wall Street sharks (this ahistorical blame game has been echoed by some leftists, such as Angela Nagle, who implies that left-wing discourse on transgression gave birth over time to the alt-right).¹⁰ In Bannon’s vision, “cultural Marxists,” who also emerged from the tumult of the sixties and seventies, are perpetually conspiring to take over the government and collectivize the state from within.¹¹

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Installation view of Steve Bannon: *A Propaganda Retrospective* (2018). Free copies of Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (1971) were gifted to visitors. Photo: Nieuwe Beelden Makers.



Film still from a flashback in the series *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1, Episode 5 (2017), directed by Bruce Miller et al.

In his film *Occupy Unmasked* (2012), Bannon maps out an alleged left-wing conspiracy inspired by the writings of Jewish-American community organizer Saul Alinsky, especially his book *Rules for Radicals* (1971).¹² This conspiracy involves dark alliances between the Occupy movement, unions, and the Obama Administration. In the face of this plot, the champions of white Christian economic nationalism – from Reagan to Tea Party favorite Sarah Palin (about whom Bannon made a biopic, 2011's *The Undefeated*) to Trump and the Nationalist International today – are tasked with defending civilization. They must crush the cultural Marxists plotting to take power at universities and in the streets, the wealthy global elites who make up the “Party of Davos,” and the manifold incarnations of Islamic Terrorism, from Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State.

Bannon has described his particular brand of pamphleteering filmmaking as “kinetic cinema.”¹³ He has also cited Leni Riefenstahl, Sergei Eisenstein, and Michael Moore as influences (the latter recently released the anti-Trump film *Fahrenheit 11/9*, around the same time that Bannon released his own pro-Trump film, *Trump@War* – both entering the propaganda fray in advance of the crucial midterm elections in the US).¹⁴ Bannon’s “kinetic” aesthetic vocabulary consists of fast-paced sequences and editing, with commentary from various “experts” providing structure to the narrative. Viewers are bombarded with thematically organized stock footage and rousing music. Images of predatory animals such as sharks represent subterranean economic forces that can rupture reality at any given moment, while burning and scattered banknotes – which appear in nearly every one of Bannon’s films – exemplify the evaporation of spiritual values in a society nearing its fourth turning. “What I’ve tried to do is weaponize film,” Bannon has claimed.¹⁵ His films construct a “master narrative” that legitimizes the authoritarian power of strong leaders who face down the never-ending threats of a multi-headed Beast.¹⁶ This master narrative also defines who, in Bannon’s terrifying worldview, belongs with “us” and who belongs with “them” – who fights The Beast and who appeases or sides with it.

3. The Truth About Post-Truth

In Trumpism we have seen how Bannon’s kinetic cinema transformed into a kinetic political campaign, twisting and turning historical narratives and symbols to the point that the very texture of what we once considered reality has been torn and reconfigured into something entirely different. When Trump was criticized for failing to denounce the alt-right in the wake of

the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Bannon pointed the finger at the real danger: the “alt-left.” In a similar vein, Geert Wilders’s ideologue Martin Bosma has highlighted the bad conscience of the left, which in his reading accused his party of Nazism only to erase their own socialist stake in *National-Socialism*. Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary and leader of the Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) party, has, like Bannon, perfected the “enemies outside/enemies within” narrative, warning through his state-owned media of a Muslim tsunami threatening his country’s borders from without, while the pro-refugee propaganda of Jewish-Hungarian George Soros and his foundation threatens it from within.

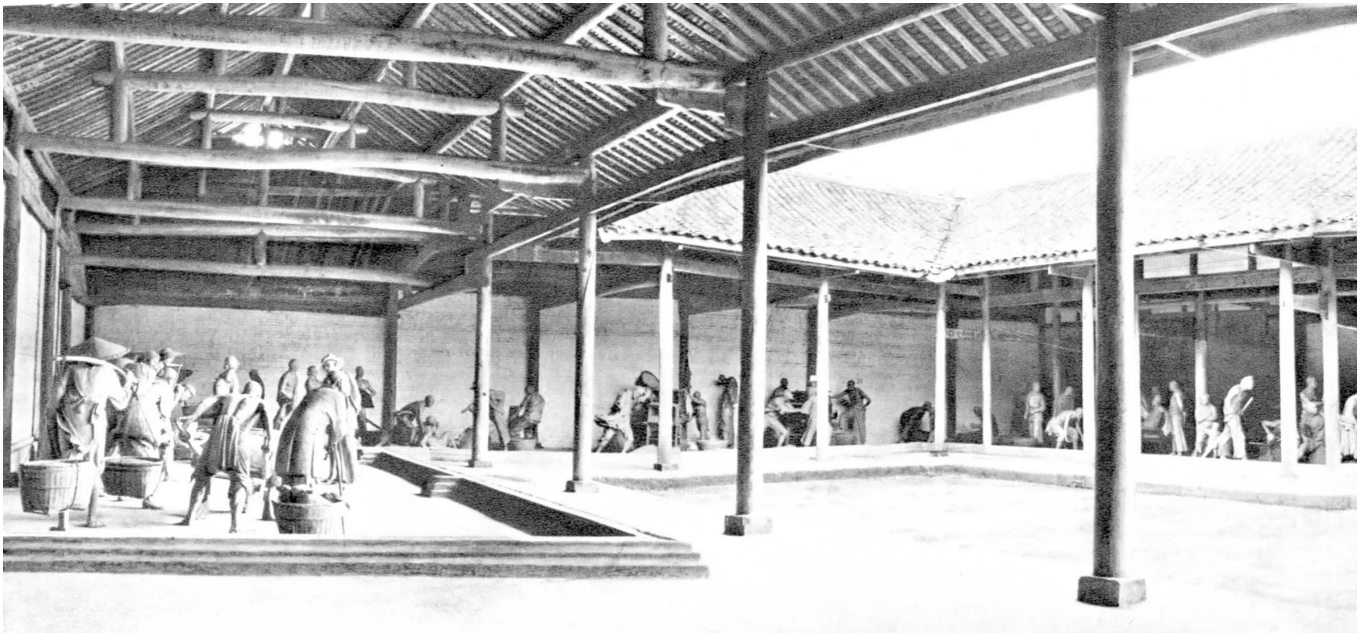
Such narrative strategies are currently discussed as “fake news” and “alternative facts” that circulate within what is called the “post-truth era” of politics. In propaganda studies, these terms have a longer history. “Fake news” is also known as “flak,” which has been defined as the covert dissemination of misinformation through proxy organizations in order to derail a dominant narrative and spread mistrust of mainstream institutions.¹⁷ “Post-truth” is a more complex term; on one hand, we should obviously fight against misinformation, but on the other, we should also question whose truth we are supposed to “return” to and who exactly this truth – the normative idea of a pre-Trump society – serves.

The propaganda campaign of the Nationalist International has moved far beyond the reach of any fact-checking machinery. Its project is a cultural one, consisting of its own pantheon of leaders, of climate-denying and cyclical-time-promoting scientists, and of propaganda artists – like Bannon – who are capable of turning alt-reality into our new normal. Angela Nagle has argued that the Gramscians of the twenty-first century – those who make the long march through our cultural institutions in order to change politics through culture – are today on the alt-right rather than the left.¹⁸ But by the time Nagle wrote this, the cultural long march might already have ended and turned into alt-governance. The costs of alt-right propaganda are already clear for us to see, ranging from the rise of systemic and institutional racism; the criminalization, incarceration, and murder at sea of refugees; the lawless killing of those declared to be “terrorists”; the separation of migrant children from their families; and the willingness on the part of these alt-governments to humiliate and bomb other countries.

Is there a reality that preexisted alt-reality which we would even want to return to in the first

WELCOME TO THE POST-TRUTH WORLD

Filmstill from Adam Curtis' documentary *HyperNormalisation* (2016).



Ye Yushan et al., *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1965), Dayi County, Sichuan. Image: Ed., *Rent Collection Courtyard: Sculptures of Oppression and Revolt* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1968).

place? Bruce Miller's television series *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, has recently been a hit among liberals, desperate for an end to the Trump era. The dystopian series takes place in the aftermath of a second American Civil War, when a new Christian-fundamentalist, hyper-patriarchal state called "Gilead" has risen to power. Women are not allowed to work, study, read, own property, or possess money. Instead, they are assigned to domestic work or, if declared "degenerates," sent off to brutal labor camps. The class of fertile "handmaids" plays a central role, as they are recruited to combat Gilead's infertility crises by breeding children for elite households through ritualized rape. The world of Gilead could be regarded as an example of Nationalist International retro science fiction, insofar as it imagines a mythological future-past in which modern technology goes hand in hand with symbols of traditionalist puritan culture.

A crucial component in the series are the flashbacks of its main characters, which recall the liberal-capitalist order that existed before the second American Civil War. The show's main protagonist, June, or "Offred" (read: "property of the house of Fred"), thinks back to jogging in a park, iPhone in hand, or stopping at Starbucks for a soy latte, or hanging out with her boyfriend at an über-gentrified hipster cafe. These flashbacks to a soulless consumerist world can be read as a warning to viewers: our political apathy could allow a Gileadian coup to take place. But in Miller's adaptation, which portrays Gilead's totalitarianism and its culture of rape, torture, and mutilation in brutal detail, these sepia-colored flashbacks to the capitalist-liberal order suddenly seem like the normal we long to return to.¹⁹ A criminal mortgage system, the rise of trillion-dollar companies, global austerity and precarity: all of these suddenly seem like rather desirable problems compared to the retro-futurist horror of Gilead. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we witness the propaganda cinema of the liberal-capitalist order staging a critique against growing authoritarianism, but only to reimpose its own normality and desirability – which, as we know, contributed substantially to the conditions that fueled the Nationalist International in the first place.²⁰

When we speak of "post-truth," it is thus crucial to emphasize that there is not a "norm" to return to: there are, rather, various competing realities, past and present, each trying to impose its own set of values, beliefs, and behaviors. This is the essence of the propaganda struggle. Between alt-right propaganda and liberal-capitalist propaganda, there is admittedly a world – a reality – of difference, *but we should reject both of them*. What we need is not a return

to some past reality, but a fundamental alternative to both the Nationalist International and the liberal-capitalist regime so that, in the words of Octavia Butler's character Lauren Olamina, "Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them."²¹

4. Totalitarian Historiographies

Filmmaker Adam Curtis – who has engaged in his own version of Nagle's blame-the-right-on-the-left game²² – has dedicated much of his work to examining the mechanisms of power and propaganda. In his most recent film, *HyperNormalisation* (2016), he traces the emergence of what he considers a "fake world" – or what Walter Lippmann in 1922 termed "pseudo-environments."²³ This "fake world," which Curtis claims has been under construction by "politicians, financiers, and technological utopians" since the 1980s, aims to bypass complex geopolitical processes and conflicts to instead construct a simple binary world that serves the interests of these powerful groups.²⁴ The key historical moment, in his view, was the rise of Reaganite and Thatcherite neoliberalism and the subsequent shifting of power from elected politicians to corporations and the public relations industry. This neoliberal paradigm went on to transform civic resistance into a culture of individual expression and critique: collective action was abandoned and real power was placed solely in the hands of a new managerial class, which engineers our post-political world. To ensure that resistance remains futile, a range of "global super-villains" are contrived, from Gaddafi to Saddam Hussein; these perpetual threats ensure that populations remain preoccupied with Us-vs.-Them binaries.

If Bannon is a propaganda artist of the alt-right, and Miller's *The Handmaid's Tale* embodies liberal-capitalist propaganda, then Curtis is a propagandist of the defeatist conservative left. This becomes clear when he declares that our present time has "no vision for the future."²⁵ Instead, he argues, the growth and popularization of cyberspace – the global technology environment – since the nineties has facilitated a cult of sovereign individualism: an online space of boundless post-political self-expression. These accumulated individual expressions, argues Curtis, do nothing but feed the algorithms of the Facebook State, strengthening the new global post-political managerialism.²⁶ For Curtis, the Occupy movement was a symptom of cyberspace culture: a leaderless "networked" movement that was more interested in self-expression and self-management than taking power.²⁷ Considering that a large portion of Occupy participants and sympathizers were people

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whose homes have been expropriated by the criminal mortgage system and whose shared precarity compelled them to gather in parks and public spaces to seek some form of desperate justice, the suggestion that it was not politicized people but algorithms that orchestrated the Occupy movement is deeply offensive.

Curtis's defeatism reaches its true cynical depths when he declares that the Tahrir uprising in Egypt was a Facebook-led revolution. In his account, corporate social media brought people into the streets to dethrone dictator Hosni Mubarak; two years later Facebook brought these same people into streets, this time to welcome back the military regime after it had deposed the democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi. Cyberspace, in Curtis's reasoning, has become a new realm of global managerialism: no matter how much we try to use it as a tool for our own ends, it is ultimately the new systems of algorithmic surveillance and management that benefit. But as Melissa Tandiwe Myambo has argued, this ideological practice of "misnaming the revolution" not only ignores the fact that in 2012 only about 8 percent of the Egyptian population was on Facebook; it also engages in the neocolonial practice of "virtual occupation."²⁸

Here defeatist conservative left propaganda shows its ugly face. Curtis's determination to understand and map systems of power becomes so obsessive that even when systems are not absolute – and they never really are – he will argue that they must be, in order to bolster his narration of an all-encompassing fake world. This echoes the method employed by art historian Igor Golomstock in his major work *Totalitarian Art* (1990), where he argues that the art made in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, fascist Italy, and Maoist China is all part of one and the same totalitarian machinery.²⁹ While we can indeed witness glorified images of grand dictators, heroic soldiers, and militant peasants throughout the art produced under these regimes, major differences are present just the same, both ideologically and aesthetically.

For example, Mao Zedong's art theory, as laid out in his "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art" (1942), promoted cooperative artistic practice between art professionals and peasant communities, with the aim of their mutual education.³⁰ The famous group of sculptures *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1965) resulted from such a process of co-creation and revolutionized various aspects of traditional sculpture. It rejected the pedestal as well as durable materials such as marble. Instead, the figures were created from clay and placed directly on the ground so that villagers could walk by them and scorn and spit on the

sculptural representations of the landlords that used to rule over them.³¹ These specific characteristics of art production and presentation – co-creation, removal of the pedestal, and theatrical usage – were absent in Stalinist socialist realist sculpture; in the latter, monumental pedestal-facilitated figures made of solid materials, towering far above the crowd, sought to embody a sense of near eternity. So rather than describing totalitarian art, Golomstock's work represents a form of *totalizing historiography* that overlooks difference in order to find comfort and a sense of desperate control in a closed-system theory.

In the case of Curtis, his totalizing narrations are even more tragic: the Occupy movement and the uprisings gathered under the problematic term "Arab Spring," along with the manifold popular movements that have emerged around the world since, are not inventions of social media but rather the living embodied truth that there are visions and practices of alternative futures and world-making in our present. Hundreds of thousands of people did not take Tahrir Square because Facebook told them to. They put their bodies on the line not because they were controlled by a post-political managerial elite, but because they collectively reclaimed power in the face of violence, fear, pain, and death. In these rare moments of "performative assembly," as philosopher Judith Butler has termed it, in these gatherings of extremely precarious peoples, the possibility of another kind of power is enacted.³² We might also say that in these assemblist events, the possibility of another kind of propaganda is enacted as well – another way of telling stories and proposing narratives of where we come from, who we are, and who we can *still become*.³³

5. Towards an Emancipatory Propaganda Art

Our contemporary propaganda struggle is shaped by various performances of power, each with its own infrastructures and cultural narratives that attempt to construct reality according to its own interests. In the examples that I have discussed – the propaganda art of the Nationalist International, of liberal capitalism, and of the defeatist left – we can see that each particular structure of power performs differently as art. In other words, we can see that there is a specific, changing relationship between power and form.

Recent years have demonstrated that propaganda can set into motion vast geopolitical processes, from the Brexit vote and the election of Trump – both of which took place amidst a haze of misinformation – to more brutish examples, like the rise of the authoritarian

regimes of Erdoğan, Modi, and Duterte. These events have shown that responding to the propaganda of the Nationalist International with mere “facts” is no solution, because facts need narratives to make them effective and affective. While it is crucial to develop a collective “propaganda literacy,” understanding propaganda does not stop propaganda.

To oppose the various propagandas discussed above, we will need infrastructures and narratives that mobilize the imagination to construct a different world. To achieve this, we will need an emancipatory propaganda and an emancipatory propaganda art. There is no prior reality to which we should strive to return; there will only be the realities that we will author collectively ourselves.

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This text resulted from two lectures, one presented as the introduction to the conference Propaganda Art Today at Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, on June 2, 2018, and one titled “Art and Propaganda” for Impakt Festival, Utrecht, on September 1, 2018. I want to thank architect Marina Otero Verzier, with whom I developed the exhibition-project *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective*, for being a comrade in the process of making new propagandas a reality.

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Jonas Staal is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization *New World Summit* (2012–ongoing) and the campaign *New Unions* (2016–ongoing). With BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, he co-founded the *New World Academy* (2013–16), and with Florian Malzacher he is currently directing the utopian training camp *Training for the Future* (2018–ongoing) at the Ruhrtriennale in Germany. Exhibition-projects include *Art of the Stateless State* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2015), *After Europe* (State of Concept, Athens, 2016) and *Museum as Parliament* (with the Democratic Federation of North Syria, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2018). Recent publications and catalogs include *Nosso Lar, Brasilia* (Jap Sam Books, 2014), *Stateless Democracy* (With co-editors Dilar Dirik and Renée In der Maur, BAK, 2015) and *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2018). His book *To Make a World: Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* is forthcoming from the MIT Press in 2019. Staal completed his PhD research *Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century* (2012–2018) at the PhDArts program of Leiden University, the Netherlands.

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1 In the words of Sven Lütticken, "The contemporary should be seen as a contested terrain, as asynchronous coexistence of different contemporalities, ideologies, and social realities." Sven Lütticken, *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (Sternberg Press, 2013), 25.

2 Jamie Doward, "Steve Bannon plans foundation to fuel far right in Europe," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/21/steve-bannon-plans-foundation-to-fue-far-right-in-europe>.

3 The term "Nationalist International" comes from an economic policy paper released by the Democracy in Europe 2025 movement. See DiEM25, *DiEM25's European New Deal: A Summary*, 2017 https://diem25.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/170209_DiEM25_END_Summary_EN.pdf.

4 Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (Pantheon Books, 1988), named after the chapter "The Manufacture of Consent" in Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922).

5 See further: Jonas Staal, *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2018) http://jonasstaal.nl/site/assets/files/1850/stevebannon_def.pdf.

6 The Movement is part of the second, "international" phase of Bannon's propaganda project. The first phase was the building of a powerful alt-right coalition in the United States; as David Neiwert writes, "the gradual coalescence of the alternative-universe worldviews of conspiracists, Patriots, white supremacists, Tea Partiers, and nativists occurred after the election of the first black president, in 2008. Fueled in no small part by racial animus toward Obama, the Internet and social media became the grounds on which this 'lethal union' could finally occur." David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (Verso, 2017), 231.

7 Ten years later Bannon would work on another type of biosphere, this time online. In 2005 he became involved in the Hong Kong-based company Internet Gaming Entertainment (IGE), which sold digital assets to players of the massive multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. These digital goods in the form of gold and weaponry, were obtained by paying Chinese workers extremely low wages to play the

game in ongoing rotating shifts. This experience, according to Joshua Green, was critical to Bannon's later online mobilization of the alt-right during the Trump campaign. See Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency* (Penguin Press, 2017), 81–83.

8 The film also embodies Bannon's ideal of a right-wing Hollywood, with Reagan representing both the creative side (as an actor) and the political side (as president and an anti-communist crusader).

9 In the words of Strauss and Howe: "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 ancients called the *saeculum*. Together, the four turnings of the *saeculum* comprise history's seasonal rhythm of growth, maturation, entropy, and destruction." *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* (Broadway Books, 1997), 3.

10 Nagle's main target is what she calls "Tumblr-liberalism," which is preoccupied with "gender fluidity and providing a safe space to explore other concerns like mental ill-health, physical disability, race, cultural identity and 'intersectionality'" (69). Nagle argues that these concerns have resulted in a doctrine of self-flagellation in which "the culture of suffering, weakness, and vulnerability has become central to contemporary liberal identity politics" (73). In Nagle's view, Tumblr-liberalism not only gave rise to the alt-right; it also alienated the traditional working class. Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Zero Books, 2017).

11 The term "cultural Marxism" was originally associated with the Frankfurt School and described the radical critique of standardized and commodified mass culture. The term resonates with Nazi campaign against "cultural Bolshevism" and surfaced in far-right movements in the US from the early nineties onward. The fact that the protagonists of the Frankfurt School were Jewish has made this conspiracy theory particularly popular in alt-right circles, as it encompasses both anti-Semitic and anti-left tropes. See also Sven Lütticken, "Cultural Marxists Like Us," *Afterall* 46 (Autumn-Winter): 67–75.

12 Bannon is not the first to claim that Alinsky's work serves as a handbook for the radical left-wing takeover of government and society. This conspiracy

theory first emerged during Bill Clinton's presidency, as First Lady Hillary Clinton had written her 1969 college thesis on Alinsky's work. The theory rests in part on an epigraph in the book the describes the fallen angel Lucifer 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 right-wingers, this reveals not only the godless Marxist framework of Alinsky's book, but its ambition to seize control of the government. See Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (Vintage Books, 1989).

13 John Patterson, "For haters only: watching Steve Bannon's documentary films," *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/29/steve-bannon-documentary-films-donald-trump>.

14 Adam Wren, "What I Learned Binge-Watching Steve Bannon's Documentaries," *Politico*, December 2, 2016 <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/steve-bannon-films-movies-documentaries-trump-hollywood-214495>.

15 Keith Koffler, *Bannon: Always the Rebel* (Regnery Publishing, 2017), 48.

16 Terence McSweeney, *The "War on Terror" and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 10.

17 Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, 26–28.

18 Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 40–53.

19 Of course, this does not mean that *The Handmaid's Tale's* potent symbolism and original narrative cannot simultaneously operate to enable emancipatory politics. In fact, the red cloak and white hood worn by the handmaids in the book and TV series have shown up at protests in defense of women's reproductive autonomy and gender equality the world over.

20 See also Mihnea Mircan and Jonas Staal, "Let's Take Back Control! Of Our Imagination," *Stedelijk Studies* 6 (Spring 2018) <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/lets-take-back-control-of-our-imagination/>.

21 Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 358.

22 In his four-part documentary series *Century of the Self* (2002),

Curtis suggested that an obsession with individualist "self-actualization" on the part of political progressives paved the way for the resurgence of the right.

23 "In order to conduct a propaganda there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited, before anyone can create a pseudo-environment that he thinks wise or desirable." Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Transaction Publishers, 1998), 43.

24 Transcript from *HyperNormalisation*.

25 Transcript from *HyperNormalisation*.

26 A term borrowed from the work *Facebook State* (2016), developed by artist Manuel Beltrán and his students.

27 A partially overlapping critique, but with more depth and greater fidelity to the potentialities of the Occupy movement, is Not an Alternative, "Counter-Power as Common Power: Beyond Horizontalism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 9 (Summer 2014) <https://www.joaap.org/issue9/notanalternative.htm>.

28 Melissa Tandiwe Myambo, "(Mis)naming the Revolution," *Montréal Review*, January 2012 <http://www.themontrealreview.com/2009/Misnaming-the-Revolution.php>.

29 Golomstock goes so far as to credit totalitarianism as an author in and of itself: "Totalitarianism itself carried out the historian's task of sifting through sources, using the scalpel of the concept of two cultures (*Lenin's thesis calling for revolutionaries to take from each national culture only its democratic and socialist elements* –J), of the struggle between racial and class elements, in order to split apart the living body of national tradition." Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art* (Overlook Press, 1990), 155.

30 "Prior to the task of educating the workers, peasants, and soldiers, there is the task of learning from them." Mao Tse-Tung, "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art," in *New World Academy Reader #1: Towards a People's Culture*, eds. Jose Maria Sison and Jonas Staal (BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2013), 51.

31 The claim that this particular case of Maoist art production

can be conflated with Stalinist art production is strongly refuted by art historian Christof Büttner, who argues that “it is a work of art that is so convincing that many interpret it to be the simple, unimaginative depiction of a real event and held it in disdain for exactly that reason. That was all the more true when Western art historians labeled it Socialist Realism and, even worse, stigmatized it as propaganda art for the Cultural Revolution.” Christof Büttner, “The Transformations of a Work of Art – Rent Collection Courtyard, 1965–2009,” in *Art for the Millions*, eds. Esther Schlicht and Max Hollein (Hirmer Verlag, 2009), 38.

32

Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2018). See also Jonas Staal, “Assemblism,” *e-flux journal* 80 (March 2017) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/>.

33

This is fundamentally different from the propaganda of the Nationalist International discussed earlier, which tells us who we will become *once more*.

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