

Fascism and the Trans Villain: Historically Recurring Transphobia in Far-Right Politics

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Abstract: This article builds a base of historical and theoretical context to understand the resurgence of transphobic propaganda and violence led by the American far-right through an examination of the connections between trans politics and global political economies of capitalism. Through a synthesis of established theories of fascism, a historical analysis of fascism, and a case study of propagandistic transphobia in two American films from the height of the Cold War, I argue that the proliferation of contemporary anti-trans sentiment reflects the state of crisis that the American empire is experiencing as domestic and international resistance threatens its global hegemony. Further I argue that a historical and theoretical examination of fascism and trans issues show the capacity for fascistic anti-trans violence not as a departure from the norm of liberal democratic nation-state systems that developed through the processes of capital, but rather as a constitutive part of that norm. Trans historians must mobilize historical knowledge and practice to disseminate public facing works that furnish a wide base of readers with the tools to understand and contextualize contemporary trans panic as it metastasizes.

Introduction: The Current Climate

To date, there have been approximately four decades of American neoliberal global dominance. This epoch began in the 1970s, and it came to prominence in the Reagan era. Factors such as the deindustrialization of the North Atlantic, the offshoring of manufacturing labour, the mass construction of carceral state apparatuses, the imposition of destructive sanctions and economic structural adjustment upon Global South countries, and the brokering of international free-trade deals have all reshaped the global political economy. These influences have decimated much of the progress of anti-colonial resistance made in the early years of the Cold War.¹ The sudden dissolution of the USSR and the rest of the Eastern Bloc ensured unipolar American dominance as Soviet economic support for newly independent post-colonial nations that counterbalanced Western neocolonial interests swiftly disappeared.

Now, in 2023, even Western economic publications have begun to acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the increased cooperation of the BRICS states² have accelerated the emergence of a more multipolar global system. Key to this change is the decline of the power of the US dollar in international markets that has been crucial to the maintenance of American economic hegemony.³ The stability and

¹ See Damien Cahill et al., eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism* (Los Angeles: SAGE Reference, 2018); Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and The Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

² BRICS stands for the increasingly formalized organization of international cooperation between Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.

³ Richard Wolff, "The Emerging New World Economy," *Economy for All*, April 19,

omnipresence of the American empire seems increasingly fragile and less effectively responsive to the changing world. As labour movements resurge in power and widespread anti-capitalist consciousness continues to grow, the “West” is a far cry from Francis Fukuyama’s post-Cold War declaration of the end of history and the eternal victory of Western liberal democracy. For a moment in the 2010s, it seemed that perhaps the unipolar American world order had the capacity to make greater space for trans forms of life. Since then, anti-trans backlash has gained steady ground in the early 2020s, and trans people are a long way away from the 2014 ‘transgender tipping point’ that promised progressive change. Though burgeoning trans culture is ultra-visible on the internet and in popular media, the rise of representation in the 2010s has not prevented the reactionary right’s fixation on trans people as public enemy number one. The trans optimism of the past decade has left trans people unprepared for the harsh reality that anti-trans violence has surged to the centre of contemporary politics. Though changes in the world economy and the rise of far-right anti-trans politics may seem tenuously connected, historical analysis compellingly demonstrates that they are inseparable.

As a means to contextualize the current climate, this paper establishes a starting point for examining what kinds of modern political and economic conditions have historically contributed to violent mobilizations of anti-trans hatred. It does so through an appraisal of the trans ‘enemy’ as a figure of fascist propaganda. To do

2023, https://www.rdwolff.com/the_emerging_new_world_economy;

S’thembele Cele and John Bowker, “BRICS Nations Say New Currency May Offer Shield From Sanctions,” Bloomberg, June 1, 2023,

[https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-01/brics-nations-say-new-currency-may-offer-shield-from-sanctions.](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-01/brics-nations-say-new-currency-may-offer-shield-from-sanctions)

so, this paper considers the historical and theoretical nature of fascism and its relationship to moral panics about gender. Two films exemplify this connection, and they are cogent historical case studies that we can utilize in consideration for our contemporary situation: the 1970 films *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and *Myra Breckinridge*.

The term trans panic comes from a trans specific adaptation of the gay panic defense. They refer to arguments used in court by perpetrators that the sexuality/gender of the victim was sufficient cause for violent actions to be ‘self-defence.’⁴ Often such cases have involved the direct accusation of seduction or advances by the victim towards the assailant. This rhetoric holds cultural currency beyond the judicial system as titles of anti-trans books such as the 2020 publication, “Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters,” demonstrate.⁵ This paper uses ‘trans panic’ to refer to the wide range of anti-trans rhetoric and political attacks that posit transness and trans people as inherent threats to the integrity of the moral and social order of the contemporary world. One of the articulations of this is the ‘contagion model’ of transness. This refers to the capacity of transness to spread through the social body, like a contagious disease, through the seduction and entrapment of the vulnerable.

Recently, the political currency of trans panic has gained significant ground. Far-right news outlet *The Daily Wire* recently

⁴ Alexandra Holden, “The Gay/Trans Panic Defense: What It Is, and How to End It,” American Bar Association, March 31, 2020, <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/member-features/gay-trans-panic-defense/>.

⁵ Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2020).

reported that ‘radical gender theory’ is a key wedge issue in the 2024 Republican primary race.⁶ *The Daily Wire* cited an NBC voter poll that suggested trans panic rhetoric and policy are key tools in the American far-right political establishment’s attempts to court public support. Conversely, the poll showed that cuts to state Medicare and Social Security spending are *very* unpopular with polled Republican voters.⁷ Notably but unsurprisingly, climate issues are not on the agenda. If seen as a test sample of the current temperature of right-wing American politics, these results reflect the difficult economic times that Americans have faced since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the knock-on effects from the Russia-Ukraine war. Americans who lean far-right seemingly do not want a state that abandons them as they face difficult circumstances – what they want is a state that will protect them from the people they perceive as their enemies: ‘threats’ - both internal and external to the nation - to their ways of life, security, and moral values.

In current circumstances, any trans person with a basic

⁶ The article cites a recent NBC poll that surveyed registered voters and Republican primary voters, and it found that the suppression of the perceived radical gender threat falls only behind border security as an issue of concern for Republican voters. Brandon Drey, “Radical Gender Theory Emerges As Key Wedge Issue In 2024 Presidential Election,” *The Daily Wire*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/radical-gender-theory-emerges-as-key-wedge-issue-in-2024-presidential-election>; Alexandra Marquez, “Poll: Sending Troops to U.S.-Mexico Border Is Popular. Other GOP Policy Planks Are Struggling.” *NBC News*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/poll-sending-troops-us-mexico-border-popular-gop-policy-planks-are-str-rcna91245>.

⁷ This same NBC poll noted that many Republican primary candidates have gone so far as to promise not to cut state funded social safety nets.

knowledge of twentieth-century history has begun to look backwards to the fascist regimes of the 1930s, and this includes Nazi Germany. The last decade's parallel emergence of a blooming visible trans social life and the violent rise of trans panic in state-centred politics undoubtedly resonate with the memorialization of queer social life in the Weimar Republic and its criminalization and persecution by the Nazi state. The historical parallels that exist must be thoroughly examined and contextualized. This pursuit enables us to better understand our contemporary political situation and the historical nature of fascism, along with why the persecution of gender and sexual variance has often been a key part of state-centric political movements to show that they are 'cleaning up society.'

Recent trans scholarship has responded to contemporary developments in trans life and trans panic, and the publication of works such as *Transgender Marxism* and the 2022 issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* on, "Trans-Exclusionary Feminisms and the Global New Right," are two salient examples.⁸ Recent work by C. Heike Schotten is of particular note, for it traces funding and rhetoric linkages between American TERFs and Zionists, and the Israeli occupation of Palestine.⁹ These works demonstrate the possibilities for the integration of trans life and theory with Marxist and anti-colonial theory. These collaborations between trans studies and

⁸ Joanne Jules Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, eds., *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021); Serena Bassi and Greata LaFleur, eds., "Trans-Exclusionary Feminisms and the Global New Right," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 9 no.3 (2022): 311–333, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836008>.

⁹ C. Heike Schotten, "TERFism, Zionism, and Right-Wing Annihilationism: Toward an Internationalist Genealogy of Extinction Phobia," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (August 1, 2022): 334–64, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836022>.

wider political traditions of analysis deepen our understanding of the place of gender in capitalist modes of economic production and social reproduction. To contribute to this contemporary project of situating trans lives in wider contexts, the question I seek to explore is: *why* are trans people being targeted *now*, and *why* are trans people *an effective target for reactionary political discourse*.

The Historical Task: Moving Beyond Structuralism

History as a study of the past has the capacity to explore and theorize the change and movement of life and socio-political formations over time. In the study of and resistance against capitalism, this has the crucial potential to contribute to the thinking of societal ‘machines’ rather than structures as elucidated by Deleuze and Guattari.¹⁰ As Michelle Koerner demonstrates in her study of the intellectual links between the works of Deleuze and George Jackson, the analysis of societies through the theoretical concept of machines rather than structures in a Deleuzian manner presents an alternative to the tendency for structuralist analyses to produce static images of social organizations of power. Machinic analysis hopes to explore power and social organization in motion – as it changes and evolves.¹¹ Historical study, as a practice that necessarily entails the definition of chronological and geographical scope, holds the capacity for the study of motion and change through time and space. This function enables the study of

¹⁰ Michelle Koerner, *Lines of Escape: Gilles Deleuze’s Encounter with George Jackson* (Ill Will Editions, 2011).

¹¹ The goal is to analyze capitalism in motion – as a set of machinic processes that change rapidly and have shown a historical tendency to successfully react to revolutionary movements through evolving processes of counterinsurgency.

capitalism as an evolving and machinic system of political-economic organization. The integration of histories of modern trans life and transphobic reaction with wider histories of political economy, society, and culture reveals how the conditions of queer and trans life move and change with wider political and economic shifts. The ability of the historian to analyze the political in motion can provide intellectual and strategic clarity on the nature of fascism and fascistic reactions to trans life.

Understanding the Historical Nature of Fascism: Liberalism and Counterinsurgency

Within a historical context, fascism is a nebulous concept. Though the term is often used to describe both contemporary and historical phenomena, the imprecise and changeable nature of fascism, and the debate about how to define and understand it lends it the capacity to be distorted and misused. The top result for a peer-reviewed database search of my university's library returns the 2018 book *Fascism: A Warning* by Liberal academic and politician Madeleine Albright. Her work is a Trump-era polemic aimed at the non-academic public. Her status as a widely respected, former top American state official and diplomat bestows her with a perceived authority on fascism, and especially to readers in the American imperial sphere of influence. Albright and I begin similarly as she acknowledges that fascism is a difficult concept to pin down. Her definition is that "fascism should be viewed less as a political ideology and more as a means for seizing and holding power."¹² This

¹² Madeleine Korbel Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 9.

is not necessarily an incorrect argument to make, but it is imprecise and her explanations falter. She characterizes twentieth-century socialist projects as, “Marx’s dream of a workers’ paradise [that] had degenerated into an Orwellian nightmare,” before she dismisses the United States’ complicated and violent past as she notes that, “Hitler fantasized that the United States so fully shared his racist views that it would ultimately side with the Third Reich... Still, the story of America’s birth... has always been powerful enough to overcome internal contradictions.”¹³ If not altogether limited, Albright’s account and understanding of fascism are rather simplified. But there is value to be found in her text for our analysis here, for her work provides an excellent example of a contemporary propagandistic caricature of fascism that can be dissected. Above all, Albright’s book underlines that mainstream voices on fascism in the contemporary context can be deeply misleading, and especially in Anglophone North America these perspectives can often further mystify and mythologize the real nature of modern political economy. Her book also shows that contemporary liberalism offers no real alternative or proper rebuttal to fascism. Beyond Madeleine Albright, other intellectuals offer rich theorizations and historiographic analyses as to how to understand fascism.

Fascism is often presented as an ‘other’ to liberal capitalism, and as an antithetical ideology to liberal electoral democracy. But it is a constituent part of liberal capitalism and of liberal electoral democracy. Ultimately, it is an expression of the counterinsurgent machines of capitalism. Fascism is contiguous with liberalism. It is entirely contained within its borders, it uses its tools, and it mobilizes its strategies, rhetoric, and methods of governance. When

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3, 208.

in the heart of the American empire in the Anglophone world, capitalism appears inescapable, and its machinic and libidinal nature seems to rapidly respond and adapt to any changes. This is only heightened by the incredibly diffusive nature of economic power as it is shared and wielded by individuals, multinational corporations, and states alike. It is no coincidence that the neoliberal era, with the systematic dismantling of many of the victories of proletarian and anti-colonial struggles has been described through the concept of 'capitalist realism,' explained by the late Mark Fisher as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."¹⁴ To understand the historical nature of fascism, it must be emphasized that capitalism is an unstable organization of political economy that by its very nature will experience economic crises that affect the majority of working people on a regular basis. To that end, economist Richard D. Wolff writes:

Wherever capitalism became a society's economic system over the last three centuries, business cycles recurred every four to seven years. Capitalism has mechanisms to survive its cycles, but they are painful, especially when employers fire employees. Widespread pain (unemployment, bankruptcies, disrupted public finances, etc.) brought the label 'crisis' to capitalism's cyclical downturns.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

¹⁵ Richard Wolff, "There's a Crisis in U.S. Capitalism," *Economy For All*, June 12, 2020, https://www.rdwolff.com/theres_a_crisis_in_us_capitalism.

The latest cyclical downturn of these market crises funnelled wealth upwards, and the masses have been left both more impoverished and facing a more uncertain and unstable future. Out of these latest crises, working people have grown more discontented with the status quo of their position under capitalism. It is in such periods that mobilizations of the far-right and fascistic counterinsurgency respond to mass unrest, and these constellations fortify class society to ensure capitalism's continued dominance.

In the twentieth century, fascism emerged as a counterinsurgent machine that responded to the proliferation of revolutionary movements which threatened class-stratified, European capitalist empires when they faced moments of economic crisis. As Black Marxist guerrilla intellectual George Jackson argued, "both Marxists and non-Marxists agree on at least two of [fascism's] general factors: its capitalist orientation and its anti-labor, anti-class nature... at its core, fascism is an economic rearrangement. It is international capitalism's response to the challenge of international scientific socialism."¹⁶ In Italy, fascism, as Mussolini laid out and codified it as an ideology, sought to centralize the process of anti-communist action through a strong and authoritarian state. Mussolini identified socialism as the primary ideological enemy of the fascist movement as he noted that, "Fascism [is] the precise negation of that doctrine which formed the basis of the so-called Scientific or Marxian Socialism."¹⁷ For Mussolini, liberal democracy was not the panacea to societal woes and he further argued that,

¹⁶ George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye: George L. Jackson* (London: J. Cape, 1972), 134-137.

¹⁷ Benito Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," in *Ideals and Ideologies: A Reader*, ed. Terence Ball, Richard Dagger, and Daniel I. O'Neill, 10th ed. (New York; London: Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group, 2017), 377.

“after Socialism, Fascism attacks the whole complex of democratic ideologies and rejects them both in their theoretical premises and in their applications or practical manifestations... In face of Liberal doctrines, Fascism takes up an attitude of absolute opposition both in the field of politics and in that of economics.”¹⁸ For Mussolini fascism was the only means to address the turmoil that rocked interwar Europe as he wrote in 1932 that, “From 1929 up to the present day [Fascism’s] doctrinal positions have been strengthened by the whole economic-political evolution of the world. It is the State alone that grows in size, in power. *It is the State alone that can solve the dramatic contradictions of capitalism.*”¹⁹ The modernization of capitalism and inter-imperial warfare stoked intense class contradictions and conflicts, and for Mussolini only fascism could maintain the bourgeois dominated, class-stratified order. Only a fascist state possessed a logistically primed governing capacity that could control counterinsurgency. For Mussolini, there was no alternative.

Though Mussolini’s words provide some clarity in understanding the origins of fascism, his conception of his movement must be read critically. The historical reality of Mussolini’s fascism contradicts many of its purported aspects, and none more so than his assertion that fascism is opposed to liberalism. Both Benito Mussolini and Madeline Albright emphasize that liberalism and fascism are diametrically opposed to each other. Critical historical and ideological analysis contradicts their viewpoints, for there is a rich body of scholarship that locates the origins and methodologies of fascism within liberalism. Unless one

¹⁸ Ibid., 378.

¹⁹ My italics for emphasis. Ibid., 380.

understands liberalism as the ideology and systematic organization of political economy that perpetrated the violence of modern imperialism and colonialism, one cannot grasp the connections between fascism and liberalism. In the fourth chapter of Lisa Lowe's book *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, she explores the relationship between liberalism and colonial violence. Lowe presents an overview of liberal politics in the British colonization of South and East Asia, and she traces the emergence of modern forms of state governance to these colonial contexts. She then turns to the words of John Stuart Mill to support her arguments on the undemocratic and violent nature of Liberalism. As part of her summarization of his work, she writes:

Mill's *On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government* make evident that liberal notions of education, trade, and government grew out of the conditions of colonial encounter and were themselves precisely philosophical attempts to grapple with and manage colonial difference within an expanding empire. While liberty would appear to eradicate or vanquish despotism, Mill discussed despotism, not as counter to liberty, but as the very condition out of which liberty arises and the condition to which it was integral and bound. He elaborated liberty as a principal of justice, which required the extent of power that state and society may exercise over members of society, and wrote of representative government and despotism as joined, as two parts of the same project of liberal political reason. In Mill's work, we see clearly that the

governing of those with liberty was not inconsistent with what he deemed the necessary constraints involved in governing those without it. He famously defined “the best government” as the one that may discern those who were “unfit for liberty” or not capable of self-determination; his ideas on liberal government combined the state’s necessary use of force to maintain “order and progress” with the civil education of people for self-government.²⁰

Racial and colonial hierarchies underpinned liberalism’s ontological formation. This context ideologically legitimized the rulership caste of imperial state powers to deny freedoms to those defined as not yet worthy of them. It was not just their right, for it was their responsibility. This ideological framework justified agents of the imperial state to plunder colonized territories and subjugate colonized peoples, and all for the enrichment of the enlightened imperial state and liberal citizens that it deemed worthy of freedoms. Sixty-five years before Lowe’s study, Aimé Césaire conducted a similar genealogical analysis of liberalism, race, and fascism in his seminal 1950 work on these topics, *Discours sur le colonialisme*. In it, he concluded that European fascism was an application of colonial methods of liberalism against European people as he noted that, “[Hitler] applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the [c*****s] of India and the [n*****s] of Africa.”²¹ Historian of African-American studies Robin G. Kelley

²⁰ Lisa Lowe, “The Ruses of Liberty,” in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015), 106.

²¹ Redaction of racist terminology mine. While it is important not to sanitize the

situates Césaire within the longer Black radical tradition as he draws attention to preeminent Black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois's point in 1947 that:

I knew that Hitler and Mussolini were fighting communism, and using race prejudice to make some white people rich and all colored people poor. But it was not until later that I realized that the colonialism of Great Britain and France had exactly the same object and methods as the fascists and the Nazis were trying clearly to use.²²

The Nazis used the political and economic crises of the interwar period to seize power, and they did so with the eventual goal to build a race-based empire to restore glory and prosperity to the German Reich. This would be achieved through the conquest of 'inferior races' and the elimination of internal enemies. The latter was partially realized through the attempted genocide of the Jewish people in the Shoah. This was the same kind of race-motivated mass violence as the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. While the application of the colonial mode of liberal governance and the power of the state to grant and revoke freedoms based on ideological grounds may have been most obvious within Europe during the Nazi period, its domestic use in the imperial metropolises

language that I am quoting, I do not wish to reproduce violent words in full as though they were mine to speak. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 36.

²² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 205-206, quoted in Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," introduction to *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 20.

of the North Atlantic West preceded the 1930s.

Though coined in the 1920s, Giorgio Agamben's 2005 book *State of Exception* reintroduced the term 'the state of exception' into contemporary political thought. It refers to a sovereign governing body's suspension and dismissal of constitutional limits that restrict the actions of state authority. Agamben's genealogy of the concept begins in ancient Greek and Roman texts on politics and governance that modern Western political theorists draw from. For Agamben Western 'democratic' states conceptualize and legitimize their authority through the state of exception which manifests in its frequent invocation by modern states. Though he wrote the work in response to the post-9/11 rise of Western regimes of illegal securitization and hyper-surveillance, Agamben traces the usage of 'states of exception' across the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This concept is critical to understand fascism and modern governance, for it demonstrates that European and American imperial powers have frequently suspended democratic laws in both colonies and metropolises. The authoritarianism many associate with a mythologized fascism is not antithetical to liberalism and modern democracy. It is a constituent feature of liberal democracy.²³

The question to ask now, is: why distinguish fascism from liberalism if they are on some level indistinguishable? Here is where

²³ Agamben cites Schmitt who wrote in 1925 - years before he joined the Nazi party - that, "no constitution on earth had so easily legalized a coup d'état as did the Weimar Constitution". Agamben, *State of Exception*, 15. He continues to explain that, "it is well known that the last years of the Weimar Republic passed entirely under a regime of the state of exception; it is less obvious to note that Hitler could probably not have taken power had the country not been under a regime of presidential dictatorship for nearly three years and had parliament been functioning." *Ibid.*, 15.

the shift from structuralism to the machinic is particularly useful. If we conceptualize fascism not as a structure of capitalism, but as a machine of capital then we can think about how to name and describe the functions of that machine. To do this, I suggest that fascism is a machine, and that it functions as an 'immune system' of capital and the state. In Marla Stone's analysis of the rhetorical structures of the internal and external enemies of Mussolini's Italy, she notes the frequent usage of, "disease or germ metaphor[s]," in fascist propaganda.²⁴ The use of these metaphors to conceptualize threats to a state are consistent with the concept of the 'body politic' that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines as, "an ancient metaphor by which a state, society, or church and its institutions are conceived of as a biological (usually human) body."²⁵ If the state is a body and threats to it are germs or diseases, the machine of the body that deals with these threats is the immune system. This fits with fascism's counterinsurgent nature.

If fascism is often conceptualized as the state turning against its own citizens, fascism can also be conceptualised as a bodily autoimmune response. Oftentimes fascist violence is also associated with the perceived 'improper' use of apparatuses and machines of the state. In these instances, the fascist machine is a mobilization of aspects of the pre-existing immune system of the state. If fascism reacts to capitalist crises, the full extent of fascist violence is a chemotherapy-like response to a metastasis of cancerous cells (i.e., those that attack the very body that they make up). Fascism, if it is

²⁴ Marla Stone, "The Changing Face of the Enemy in Fascist Italy," *Constellations* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 333, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2008.00495.x>.

²⁵ Joëlle Rollo-Koster, "body politic." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/body-politic>.

understood in a machinic manner, is the capacity of a capitalist state to unleash its immune system on a scale that might indiscriminately target its inhabitants. The state's current level of 'status quo' violence is not the full extent of violence that the state is capable of, or willing, to unleash. Though this capacity for intensified violence is a concern, anti-fascists must not get lost in the spectacle and hysteria of the fascist process. The locus of anti-fascist attention must be the machines of state authority and capitalist political economy that the counterinsurgent machine functions to protect.

The Aestheticization of Politics and the Trans Enemy in Film

While the daily political news cycle drives mass hysteria, fascist aesthetics are found across all art and communication media, and film as multi-sensory spectacle is an excellent medium to examine the ideological and rhetorical construction of the internal enemy to the fascist machine. Walter Benjamin wrote at length on the development of film as a mass medium of art and the transformations that it brought about in his essay on, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." In this he argues that fascism functions through the aestheticization of politics. Benjamin likened the political and economic conditions of film production in the interwar to fascism as he noted the mass-poverty of the era meant:

The film industry has an overriding interest in stimulating the involvement of the masses through illusionary displays and ambiguous speculations. To this end it has set in motion an immense publicity machine... All this in order to distort and corrupt the

original and justified interest of the masses in film - an interest in understanding themselves and therefore their class.²⁶

He concluded that, “the same is true of film capital in particular as of fascism in general: a compelling urge toward new social opportunities is being clandestinely exploited in the interests of a property-owning minority.”²⁷ In vivid spectacle film could deliver to mass audiences aestheticized renditions of politics that served the fascist state. Marla Stone focuses on several films in her analysis of Italian fascist cultural production. She notes that during the Second World War, the production of films in Italy increased, and she connects the two as, “making feature films, in genres from combat films to melodramas, [became] a primary means of wartime communication between the regime and the population.”²⁸ She outlines how the enemies of fascism were given visual forms as in the case of Augusto Genina’s 1940 film *L’assedio dell’Alcazar* - “a popular film that also served the regime’s desired political purposes,” - that, “visual markers, such as unkemptness, unshavenness, and tattered, soiled, and worn clothes announce[d] the enemy’s bodily opposition to normative social and ethical codes. Such visual cues lead the viewer toward the possibility that ideology is written, like race, on the body.”²⁹ Like other forms of visual art, film could

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 34.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Stone, “The Changing Face,” 345.

²⁹ Ibid., 339.

express the aestheticization of politics, and through its development into a mass, multi-sensory spectacle it became a compelling, entertaining, and effective means of the mass-dissemination of ideology.

A Case Study: Trans Villains and Cold War Counterinsurgency

In the same week in June 1970 20th Century-Fox released two perfect examples of the capacity of film to be fascist mass propaganda: *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Works of Hollywood cinema are often particularly rich for this kind of rhetorical and aesthetic analysis because the United States' military apparatus has been directly involved in the production of film since at least the Second World War.³⁰ In the death throes of the old Hollywood studio system, 20th Century-Fox attempted to court young audiences through sex and shock factor, and so these two X-rated studio films reproduced the mores of exploitation cinema.³¹ These texts emerged as part of a counterinsurgent reaction to the wider political and cultural upheavals at the start of the 1970s, and both works are fascist, Cold War American works that *both* feature a trans person as a perfect 'internal enemy' figure.

³⁰ Brandie Weikle, "How Hollywood Became the Unofficial Propaganda Arm of the U.S. Military," *CBC*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-hollywood-became-the-unofficial-propaganda-arm-of-the-u-s-military-1.5560575>; Haidee Wasson, and Lee Grieveson, eds., *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

³¹ Craig Fischer, "Horror and Exploitation: 'Beyond the Valley of the Dolls' and the Exploitation Genre," *Velvet Light Trap* 30 (Fall 1992): 18.

The end of the 1960s was a time of crisis for the American empire. While the period directly after the Second World War is often remembered as the peak of American prosperity and ease, the temporary alliance with the Soviet Union turned once again into open rivalry as Red Scare paranoia overtook the United States.³² The American ruling classes faced significant internal and external threats to political and economic stability. Mass student and worker movements, the American Indian Movement, Black power, revolutionary wars of decolonization like Vietnam, and even the sexual revolution, all seemingly demonstrated the pervasive growth of anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiment.³³

³² J. Michaels, *McCarthyism: The Realities, Delusions and Politics Behind the 1950s Red Scare*, Critical Moments in American History (New York: Routledge, 2017).; J.R. Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2003).

³³ By 1970 more than 15 years had passed since the Vietnamese communist guerrillas defeated the French at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ and soon after, in 1962, the French also lost the colony of Algeria. The American empire stepped in and went to war with Vietnam, but the 1968 Tet offensive launched by the communists, “made it clear that a U.S. victory in Vietnam was not imminent, and the American public's support began to wane.” Domestically, by 1970, after more than a decade of the civil rights movement radical movements towards decolonization and communism like the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party were gaining ground and support, representing a big enough threat to American establishment power to receive the full force of counterinsurgent violence in the form of the FBI-led COINTELPRO program. Katie Lange, “Highlighting History: How ‘Tet’ Began the End of Vietnam,” *U.S. Department of Defense News*, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/3291950/highlighting-history-how-tet-began-the-end-of-vietnam/>; Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002).

As films made in this period, *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* reflected the turmoil of the time, and they attempted to address younger audiences with different values and worldviews than their parents. As fascistic spectacles of the aesthetic machine of Hollywood cinema, the films simultaneously satirized and reinforced Cold War paranoias of the time. The trans villains of *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* served in both films as the internal enemy figure, and both exemplified the threats to a capitalist, suburban, and white American way of life.

Top studio executives originally intended *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (*BVD*) to be a serious sequel to the 1967 film *Valley of the Dolls*, but poor financial conditions in the film industry prompted Twentieth Century-Fox to instead make a low-budget satire. The studio hired exploitation director Russ Meyer and critic Roger Ebert to produce a sensational film that was to both titillate audiences, and amuse them through parodies of popular Hollywood tropes.³⁴ While the film itself is hard to take seriously, it perfectly exemplifies the fascistic tropes that it sought to play with. In *BVD*, three young women in a band and the lead singer's boyfriend go to Hollywood in search of fame and fortune, but they have their lives almost destroyed by the lurid and morally dubious world of show business. From the start, Cold War anxieties underpin *BVD* as the film opens with a performance by the girls' band at a high school prom where they sing about, "lunatic skies of red destruction," before one of the band members remarks that the prom chaperones, "were built like Khrushchev."³⁵ The film builds its characters and story on pre-existing racist, misogynistic, and homophobic

³⁴ Fischer, "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls."

³⁵ *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, directed by Russ Meyer (1970; Los Angeles, Twentieth Century-Fox), 35 mm film.

cinematic tropes, and with one critical caveat this includes the villain who we learn at the film's climax is Ronnie 'Z-Man' Barzell. He is a Jewish, queer show-businessman. As part of his villainous reveal, we learn one final aspect about Z-Man: that he is a 'woman cross-dressing as a man.' The film depicts Z-man as ambiguously sexed, perverted, manipulative, corrupt, and violent. He has power and influence in Hollywood, and he eventually becomes the manager of the young women's band. At the climax of the film Z-man hosts a private, costumed psychedelic-fueled orgy, that includes a butler dressed in a Nazi uniform, where Z-man galivants around and then brutally murders all of his guests. Z-man's rejection by a young, Aryan-looking man is the catalyst for his violent rage. After the man turns him down, Z-man tears open his costume to reveal a pair of breasts, and then he decapitates the young man with a sword before he hunts and kills the rest of his party guests in similarly gory fashion.³⁶ While Ebert stated that Z-Man is a woman in drag,³⁷ cis male actor John Lazar played him, and Lazar wears prosthetic breasts as part of his role. Z-man's body and gender presentation do not match that of a cisgender person, but the film obscures this fact from the audience prior to its bloody climax. As Z-man reveals his ambiguous body that the film portrays as 'foreign,' his murderous rampage further reveals his violent nature. Z-man's gender transgression and villainy are inseparable.

Z-man simultaneously embodies Jewish, queer, trans, and communist threats to American nationalism. The reveal of his transness shows him to be a villain who could hide his 'true' nature and be undetectable to the incautious American. The queer Jewish

³⁶ Meyer, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*.

³⁷ Roger Ebert, "Russ Meyer: Ten Years After the 'Beyond,'" *Film Comment* 16, no. 4 (August 1980): 43.

body as a threat to national order predates the American context of the 1960s. Z-man's character is representative of a trope that historian Helga Thorson describes in an early 20th-century German context:

The threat of the mixed-sexed body was used to heighten the fear of emancipation movements, whether in terms of the emancipation of women or of Jews within German society. The body of the virago (Mannweib), often associated with members of the bourgeois women's movement and educated middle-class women, as well as the body of the so-called "feminized" male Jew were constructed as contaminants within the metaphorical body politic of the nation since, it was argued, they represented a biological step backward.³⁸

Z-man's character also reflects long-running twentieth-century American antisemitic paranoia that there exists a cabal of Jewish immigrants who deviously disseminate anti-Christian, immoral, and communist propaganda through the Hollywood film industry.³⁹

³⁸ Helga Thorson, "Masking/Unmasking Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Germany: The Importance of N. O. Body," *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2009): 149–150. The characterization of sexual 'deviance' as a political threat can also be traced back to the work of 19th century psychiatrists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing. See: Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study.*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock, Authorized Translation of the Seventh Enlarged and Revised German Edition (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1892), 6.

³⁹ Harold Brackman, "The Attack on 'Jewish Hollywood': A Chapter in the History of Modern American Anti-Semitism," *Modern Judaism* 20, no. 1 (2000): 5-6.

Scholar Harrold Brackman describes how the Red-Scare environment of the 1950s and 1960s reignited the popularity of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that centred on Hollywood.⁴⁰ The various villainous archetypes that make up Z-man are all aestheticized depictions of the threat of domestic and global resistance to the American, capitalist way of life. Z-man is an identifiable villain with embodied, identifiable traits who encapsulates the historically recurring anti-semitism, anti-queerness, and anti-communism of twentieth-century fascism.

When examined alone *BVD* perfectly exemplifies the trans villain as a favourite figure of the fascist aestheticization of politics, the fact that it was released alongside a sister film with more or less the same themes further highlights film as a locus of Cold War era counterinsurgent propaganda. Alongside *BVD*, Twentieth Century-Fox produced *Myra Breckinridge* (*MB*) as a big-budget, blockbuster adaptation of Gore Vidal's 1968 novel by the same name. The film opens with Myron Breckinridge on an operating table somewhere in Europe. After he undergoes a sex-change, he becomes the gorgeous bombshell, Myra Breckinridge. She then goes to Hollywood to infiltrate her uncle's acting school, and her cover is as Myron's widow. Though Myra wants a share of her uncle's money, she also has a plan to destroy patriarchal American masculinity.⁴¹

Moments into the film, director Michael Sarne jump cuts away from a happily dancing Myra to the first of many shots of an atomic bomb explosion. It is terrifyingly loud and engulfs the screen in angry red fire. Myra then bombastically announces that: "My

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁴¹ *Myra Breckinridge*, Directed by Michael Sarne (1970; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 2004, DVD).

purpose in coming to Hollywood is the destruction of the American male in all its particulars ... the destruction of the last vestigial traces of traditional manhood, in order to realign the sexes, while decreasing population thus increasing human happiness and preparing humanity for its next stage."⁴² The film presents Myra's attack on the American male as an attack on the American *nation*, and the constant presence of atomic explosions reinforces the movie's paranoid conflation of queerness and communism. Her character simultaneously embodies anxiety and paranoia about queerness, feminism, and communism, and through this the film portrays the technological and social changes of the 1960s as emergent threats to the American way of life.

Myra focuses her plan to destroy American masculinity and conventional sexuality on the young and picturesque couple Rusty Godowski and Mary Ann Pringle. At the film's climax, Myra straps a bent-over Rusty to a table under the pretense of performing a medical exam. Then clad in a sparkling American flag bathing suit, Myra puts on a harness and dildo before she anally rapes Rusty. While readying herself to sodomize Rusty, Myra explains that she is doing a practical educational demonstration to show him that, "there is no such thing as manhood."⁴³ The film visually simulates Myra's orgasm in the scene with a repeat of the film's opening shot of an atomic bomb, and this time with a subsequent flash of people engulfed by the explosion. As she sodomizes Rusty, Myra Breckinridge as the transsexual, feminist, and communist villain-protagonist sodomizes the American nation.

In contrast to *BVD*, the audience knows about Myra's

⁴² Sarne, *Myra Breckinridge*.

⁴³ Sarne, *Myra Breckinridge*.

transsexuality from the start of the film. But in both films, the villain's transness is not revealed to the other characters before a climactic moment. After she rapes Rusty, Myra Breckinridge has a dramatic meeting with the acting school's board of directors to finally secure her inheritance. At the meeting, she takes off her panties and shows her genitals to the executives before she announces that she is the same person as Myron Breckinridge.⁴⁴ She was a villainous enemy of the American way of life who hid in plain sight while she covertly acted against American values. For the paranoid American audiences of 1970, who were in the midst of global and domestic political challenges to the American empire, Myra's aptitude for deception showed that enemies to their way of life could truly be anywhere. In his historical overview of the convergence of American anti-communist and anti-gay paranoia, Douglas M. Charles wrote:

Gays and Communists exhibited similar traits in the popular American mind: gays and communists both kept their true identities hidden, both seemed to move around in a secretive underworld, both had a common sense of loyalty, both had their own publications and places to meet, both recruited members to their ranks, and people believed both were mentally abnormal.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Sarne, *Myra Breckinridge*. Despite the film opening with what is heavily implied to be a vaginoplasty, this climactic scene contradictorily implies that Myra has retained some element of 'male-genitalia.'

⁴⁵ Douglas M. Charles, "Communist and Homosexual: The FBI, Harry Hay, and the Secret Side of the Lavender Scare, 1943–1961," *American Communist History* 11, no. 1 (April 1, 2012): 103–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2012.666097>.

Myra's desire to destroy the virility of the American male exemplifies fascist paranoia about threats to whiteness, racial health, and the safety of the United States against the communist threat. Myra's eugenic mission is a sensationalized analog for the fears that ascendant communism or Black and Indigenous power would interfere not just with patriarchal gender, but with American settler-colonial sovereignty and the economic and social orders of a nation built on the fragile machine of white supremacy. Myra is the perfect cinematic embodiment of the fascist aestheticization of politics.

Conclusion: How Might the Historian Respond?

This paper has ultimately sought to demonstrate that queer, trans, and gender variant people have been targeted as political enemies before in moments of increased counterinsurgency, and we can, or perhaps *should*, look to this past to understand our present. Further, this paper has hoped to show that the embodied, nature of transness has historically provided ideal material for the fascist process of the aestheticization of politics and therefore the production of counterinsurgent spectacle and propaganda. An expansion of this work would seek to add further evidence and nuance through the use of a wider variety of historical examples. By exploring the historical relationship between transness and fascism, I have hoped to show that historical amnesia threatens the ability of trans and non-trans people to respond to the ever-changing conditions of our world and the violence directed against all of us. Despite the limits of scholarship and the ultimate need for organization outside of academic spaces, there is a critical role for trans historians in political organizing. Though formulated as a

means of Black liberation, Walter Rodney's concept of the 'Guerrilla Intellectual,' is an expansive and useful framework to what this could look like. Scholar Tunde Adeleke noted that Rodney, "emphasized the critical role of education in the black struggle... the knowledge thus acquired would constitute the foundation for developing what he called 'concrete tactics and strategy necessary' for black liberation."⁴⁶ Historical scholarship is not the end of political work, but it can be a beginning which provides a vital tool that can be mobilized as part of larger agitation. The production of critical historical scholarship takes enormous amounts of time. In speed, it cannot compete with the quick and easy production of fascistic trans panic discourse. Instead, it must compete in quality. In our contemporary moment, the trained trans historian must use archives to produce and widely disseminate the kind of public-facing historical work that can provide the necessary knowledge for collective organization.

⁴⁶ Tunde Adeleke, "Guerilla Intellectualism: Walter A. Rodney and the Weapon of Knowledge in the Struggle for Black Liberation," *Journal of Thought* 35, no. 1 (2000): 45.

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