

*Global Consciousness and New Visual Order: The
Populist Aesthetic Challenge*

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Figure 1. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro after his swearing-in on January 1, 2019, in the capital of Brasilia, addressing the crowd with a Fascist salute. (Andre Penner/AP)

This short essay presents a cutting-edge interpretation of the evolving gestalt of the global social whole by addressing the intersection between visual globalization, political theory and national populist ideologies. It focuses on the right-wing populist production, circulation, and consumption of “new” global visual imagery.

Drawing on the W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of "the surplus-value of images" (2005), it challenges traditional socio-political epistemologies and the symbolic domination of national-populist image circulation in the social web and, more broadly, in the Internet. Specifically, I use computational data analysis methods to examine visual big data by means of similarity of image circulation and analyse and interpret these new figures of knowledge of the global by combining the quantitative and qualitative methods of "digital visual ethnography" and "global iconology" through the lenses of sociopolitical theory (Durante 2009— [2007—]; Pink 2013). This is highly relevant, since the social web and social network echo-chambers—a metaphorical description of a situation in which ideas and beliefs are amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a closed system—have been crucial for the global spread of national-populist ideologies and system of values, both conservative and progressive (Figure 1.). In doing so, I argue that the emerging *visual-ideological* apparatuses of images reflecting and interpreting national-populist ideologies spread at global level are an 'old wine in new bottles.'

Globalization and the Populist Aesthetic Challenge

Feeling threatened by globalist corporate elite groups on the one side and by the challenge of cyber capitalism with Chinese characteristics (see on this issue Hassan 2008; Strom 2020; Zuboff 2019) on the other side, national populist leaders such as Farage, Le Pen, Bolsonaro, Trump and Salvini (Figure 2.) cry out for a new kind of moral bond with the "real people" grounded on an exclusionary and simplistic narrative of national identity, supported by the echo-chambers of global capitalistic corporate (especially media) apparatuses.

Given the worldwide growth of the "Instagrammar" visual politics, the domination of the image simply cannot be ignored. I argue that in the global era of computer vision (Google DeepMind) and pattern recognition algorithms we should consider the epistemic power of visual images, since they are not anymore "unmeasurable" but useful tools and a resource for investigating complex phenomena. Janni Hokky and Matti Nelimarkka observe that '[i]n political science, discussion on the role of affects and emotions has been rare, but the rise of populism has drawn attention to affectivity as the insufficiency of economic and social-structural explanations has been shown' (2019, 3).

In an online short essay published in 2019 (November 26) on *global-e* titled "Globalization and the Populist Challenge", historian of ideas, Manfred B. Steger, observes that the global spread of national populism has deeply challenged the once hegemonic market-globalist discourse and concludes by asserting that globalization is not finished yet but "assumes different forms, including the paradoxical gestalt of globalizing national populism" (see also



Figure 2. “I am the last of the good Christians,” Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right League 2019 (TGCOM24)

Nederveen Pieterse 2021; Steger 2019; 2020; Steger and James 2019, pp. 187-208). While I share the scholar’s analysis and its understanding of populism “as a rising ideology that draws its ideational power from the intensification of worldwide interconnectivity” (2019), I stress the importance of defined aesthetic practices that are strategically used by populist leaders in the context of a highly mediatized society suffused with visual technologies. As media theorist Robert Hassan observes, “... where would digital life be without the visual dimension?” (2019, p. 133). However, even Hassan in its “Uncontained”, a critical and fascinating analysis of the encroachment of the digital upon our inner world, only touches the issue.

As a visual activist, my concern with the global rise of national populism is not of a merely semantic nature but involves a more inclusive, visual approach (Durante 2021a, 2021b). It is worth noting that the rise of national populism around the world has been made possible by the affordance of digital technologies and the symbolic use of politics (Edelman 1985; Manovich 2017; Thompson 1991), particularly by means of the production, circulation, and consumption of ideologically and emotionally charged visual imagery and new figures of knowledge, which

I have identified as “visual ideological markers of national populism”. A particular class of images that condense, suggest, and support a new *symbolic re-spatialization* of the world in a context of a continuous ideological fragmentation, and increasingly militarized urban spaces of utopia and dystopia (see on this issue Pessoa Cavalcanti and Garmany 2020; Jonas and Wilson 2018).

In *Understanding Media*, philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1994, p. 18) asserted that “the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinion or concepts but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance.” What’s more, given that political ideologies are all about symbolic systems, aesthetics can be understood as a defined form of political thinking relevant to political theory (see Durante 2018).



Figure 3. Still from a video, Christian Values, Facebook. Donald Trump shows off Bible in pitch to evangelicals. Posted by Donald J. Trump

A new *gestalt* of the global social whole?

It seems that nationalism has currently become increasingly significant. Alan Knight observes: “Populism returns . . . to haunt the sentient world, undeterred by the bright dawn of democracy and neo-liberalism” (1998, 226). Furthermore, in his “Europeanization as Glocal-



Figure 4. Trump supporters near the US Capitol, on January 6, 2021, in Washington, DC. [Shay Horse/NurPhoto]

ization”, Ronald Robertson comments that nationalism is one of the more prominent characteristics of contemporary Europe (2014, 6-34). However, new forms of world respatialization are related not only to objective economic and political structures of governance (Middell and Marung 2019) but also to a subjective (embodied spatial transformations), aesthetic dimension that informs *re-globalization* and national populism’s “political style” (Audi 2009; Balirano, De Cesare and Fruttaldo 2018; Moffit 2016).

Many studies have linked the success of populism to supporters’ feelings of resentment and resentments on their differences (Crociani-Windland and Hoggett 2012; Da Silva and Vieira 2018; Demertzis 2006; Hokka and Matti 2019), showing in this way how the combination of anger, fear and hope leads to certain political actions, such as support for populist parties (Capelos and Demertzis, 2018), while media theorist Mark Davis defines the current online public sphere as the “...‘anti-public sphere’ ... as that space of online socio-political interaction where discourse routinely and radically flouts the ethical and rational norms of democratic discourse’ (2020, p.1). As a matter of fact, populist images, emotionally and

ideologically charged by a combination of fear, anger, and hope, are shaping a new global *gestalt*, a new perception of the global social whole. It is interesting to note that for Slavoj Žižek (2009, 210) “[i]t is only right-wing populism which today displays the authentic political passion of accepting the struggle, of openly admitting that, precisely insofar as one claims to speak from a universal standpoint, one does not aim to please everybody, but is ready to introduce a division of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’”.

The aesthetics of the border wall and the symbolic power of fear



Figure 5. A sign reading on a fence at Hungary’s border with Serbia near the village Asotthalom, Hungary, on April 8, 2019. (Darko Vojinovic/AP)

When the fence at Hungary’s border with Serbia (Figure 4.) near the village of Asotthalom was reinforced and the images of barbed wire double fences, recalling the tragic memory of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, circulated globally, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán claimed: “The people in Austria and Germany can sleep tight because the Hungarians will protect Europe’s external borders here” (Gorondi 2019).

Looking at the wall from the standpoint of the psychology of border control and of the current global populist rhetoric, it seems that walls (wire double fences or any types of “beautiful” border wall (Trump 2018) change the way we think because they make “the invaded” feel

protected after suffering the fear of the invasion (of “the other”). From a sociological point of view, walls and fences have proven crucial as material and symbolic sites of inclusion and exclusion (Figure 5.).

Building the Border Wall



Figure 6. Crosses bearing the names of people who’ve died crossing the U.S. border adorn the Mexican side of the wall in Nogales, Mexico. (Photo by Jonathan McIntosh, Wikimedia Commons, license: <https://bit.ly/1rMF1556>)

What is the state-of-the-art of Donald Trump’s big wall? Although it is not easy to answer the question, it has been more than six years since the former president of the United States (US) announced his presidential bid with a promise to build a “big, beautiful wall” between the US and Mexico (Figure 6.). However, it was the signature promise of Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign, to mitigated the impact of the proposed wall at the border with Mexico, in an disgraceful Twitter (2018) American President Donald Trump embarked himself on a



Figure 7. This combination of pictures shows the eight prototypes of US President Donald Trump's US-Mexico border wall being built near San Diego, in the US, seen from across the border from Tijuana, Mexico, on October 22, 2017. (GUILLERMO ARIAS/AFP/Getty Images)

discussion on the aesthetics of the wall arguing on the “beauty” of the selected materials and the idea of the wall itself as a symbol (Figure 6. and 7.).

Was the former US president suggesting that we have to experience fear to realize that it is just beauty in disguise? A military camouflage? Those two images are Western constructs of desire and fear, a clear “political statement”, of Orbán and Trump's love for the aesthetics of fear and the symbolic value of protection as a cure. Although, since border fences are the product of fear, it can be argued that the construction of walls will only exacerbate this fear without contributing to fix the problem (see on this issue also Shultz and Mares 2018). Nevertheless, let me observe that it is hard to imagine a more appropriate set for an American dystopian story about immigration than that one between the desert of Arizona and the Mexicans borders, luckily, the wall that exists in 2021 is not the wall Trump promised in 2016.



Figure 8. Demonstrators at the National Front neo-nazi rally and White Pride Worldwide Demo in Piccadilly, Manchester, UK 28th March 2015

Admittedly, the politics of representation of national populist - their political style- relies not only on the aesthetics of fear and protection (Figure 7.). What I have identified and classified as “visual-ideological markers of national populism” represent the visual-ideological structured apparatus, a repertoire of symbols and patterns of recognition able to connect the aesthetics of the Holy Roman Empire to the fragmented landscape of the (political) ideological struggle of the twenty-first century. This happens by making use of a cocktail of images, symbols and text combining a repertoire of crosses and rosaries (Figure 2.), special copies of the Holy Bible (Figure 3.) and military parades celebrating the sovereignty of the modern self-contained nation-state in a context of agonization of neoliberal globalization (Figure 1.). Supported by the dark web, the “white pride” movements against human rights values worldwide (Figure 8.), and the conservative far-right wings representatives inside the apparatuses of the state, the rise of national populism seems unstoppable, while concurring with Davis the everyday ‘post-normative’ democratic discourse has itself become deeply inflected with reactionary and populist themes (2020).

As a matter of fact, the visual regime of representations emerging from the rise of global populism and object of this inquiry is paradoxically made of walls, wires, border fences, national anthems and flags supported by slogans on the sovereignty of the nation-state and the Christian nature of Europe, as well as of global echo-chamber. In a context of ever-increasing



Figure 9. After this image was posted on Twitter with the caption “Via Getty, one of the rioters steals a podium. Getty Images.

globalization of the world and high mediatization of society, old and new symbols (and catch-phrases), when globally circulated, are inherently part of the process of *re-globalizing* the world, and do not simply foster a new imagined community of anti-globalists. Indeed, what comes out from the briefly analysed images is that they promote a sense of danger to the survival of the nation-state and the feeling that this danger should be fought against (Figure 8).

Through the circulation and implications of this particular type of images made newly visible by the digital networked media, the national-populist regime of representation has gained affective force by also establishing a new economy of the visual and redefining a new visual regime of the global social whole.

As previously discussed, emotions such as anger, fear and resentment among parties and social movement supporters are essential for the success of national-populist movements. This study shows that digital network media are effective tools to mobilize people by means of emotionally and ideologically charged images.

Conclusion



Figure 10. Trump supporters near the US Capitol, on January 6, 2021, in Washington, DC. [Shay Horse/NurPhoto]

The main goal of this short essay was to better understand how the global spread of right-wing nationalistic ideologies supported by populist political parties like the Northern League in Italy, the Social Liberal Party in Brazil, and the French Nationalist Party, or social movements like QAnon in US (Figure 10.), are facilitated by means of the visual ideological markers of national populism.

I argued that, in a context of a highly mediatised and web-centric society we cannot rely solely on textual-philosophical approaches or big data analysis; visual images can help us to identify and better understand the production of new visual-ideological patterns of recognition all the way up to global scale.

While there are numerous points to consider in acknowledging the epistemic power of the image, here I want to emphasize that in a context of image domination the ability to analyze these messages is crucial for the future of social sciences and political theory, but even more important to protect democracy. From a theoretical point of view, the new *gestalt* of the global social whole relays on the fact that different, however similar forms of national populism, beyond the symbolic dimension of their aesthetic practices, are an integral part of the re-

globalization processes. This perspective of critical analysis also assists to better understand the local-global articulation as a continuum rather than as a clashing dimension.

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