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REVIEW

Clean look, dirty politics: visual neo-fascism and fashion as a weapon

Clean look, dirty politics: el neofascismo visual y la moda como arma

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, three fashion trends served as a harbinger of the rise of neo-fascism in the US. These trends are considered to have systematically promoted racism, nepotism, social inequality, and patriarchy. These trends are: old money, Tradwife, and the clean look, trends that have become popular on social media and which were a silent cry foreshadowing a change of regime. This paper will expose the intrinsic relationship between fashion as a tool of power, the resurgence of neo-fascism, and seduction as invisible and desired coercion, where digital social media has constructed the appropriate stage for the aesthetic presentation of certain political communities, as the media is the privileged space for political mediation. This paper draws a historical parallel with Benito Mussolini's fascist Italy, where fashion was used in a similar way. At that time, clothing served to accentuate differences with "the other" and, at the same time, to forge a hegemonic aesthetic that reinforced the values of the regime, similar to what Trumpist neo-fascism has done with its MAGA sect. Thus, this analysis highlights how fashion, both in the past and in the present, can be a subtle but powerful vehicle for the dissemination of political ideologies.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Fascism; Feminism; Fashion; Racism.

RESUMEN

Durante la pandemia de COVID-19, tres tendencias de moda sirvieron como presagio de la ascensión del neofascismo en E.U.A. Se considera que estas tendencias han promovido sistemáticamente el racismo, el nepotismo, la desigualdad social y el patriarcado. Estas tendencias son: el *old money, el Tradwife y el clean look,* tendencias que se han ido popularizado en redes sociales y las cuales fueron un grito silencioso que presagiaba un cambio de régimen. La presente ponencia, expondrá la intrínseca relación que existe entre la moda como herramienta de poder, el resurgimiento del neofascismo y la seducción como coacción invisible y deseada, en donde las redes sociales digitales han construido el escenario adecuado para la presentación estética de determinadas comunidades políticas, pues los medios de comunicación son el espacio privilegiado de la mediación política. En este trabajo se establece un paralelismo histórico con la Italia fascista de Benito Mussolini, donde la moda fue utilizada de manera similar. En aquel entonces, la indumentaria sirvió para acentuar las diferencias con "el otro" y, al mismo tiempo, para forjar una estética hegemónica que reforzara los valores del régimen, algo similar a lo que ha hecho el neofascismo Trumpista con su secta MAGA. Así, el presente análisis subraya cómo la moda, tanto en el pasado como en el presente, puede ser un vehículo sutil pero potente para la difusión de ideologías políticas.

Palabras clave: Estética; Fascismo; Feminismo; Moda; Racismo.

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INTRODUCTION

When we think of fashion, we tend to associate this concept with big catwalks in Paris or New York, models of spectacular and impossible beauty, and a multi-million-dollar industry that reports huge profits every year, but we often forget that fashion is more than that. Fashion is a historically situated social phenomenon that tells us about changes in people's tastes, the appropriation and reinterpretation of materials and aesthetic concepts, as well as the vindication of certain elements that were socially marginalized within society. Fashion gives us an insight into the spirit of an era, which is why it becomes a political tool, either in a positive or negative way.[1,2]

In the last three years, three very specific stylistic trends have become popular on social media platforms such as *Instagram and TikTok*. On the one hand, there is the so-called "*old* money" fashion trend, inspired by the European aristocracy and nobility. On the other hand, the *Tradwife* trend*,* which refers to women who practice traditional gender roles and marriages, and finally, the trend known as "Clean look," which is characterized by minimalist and invisible makeup, seeking to give the appearance of freshly washed and, above all, youthful faces.

These trends began to gain popularity in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bietti[3] believes that fashions and trends can only emerge in times of uncertainty, of God's withdrawal, because where the ephemeral is law, fashion finds its rhythm, governs according to its design, and extends its logic to all areas of existence. For his part, fashion history specialist Manuel Castillo (ManuStyling on *TikTok)* believes that the shift to these trends is due to the fear and lack of security generated by the pandemic, causing individuals to lean towards a nostalgic and economical lifestyle, creating a break with the trend of hyper-makeup (false eyelashes and nails), body implants (breast implants, butt implants, lip fillers, etc.), and the hypersexualization in clothing promoted by the Kardashian family since 2012. Added to this change in fashion is the economic uncertainty generated by the pandemic, as a lifestyle such as that promoted by the Kardashian family was unsustainable for the majority of the population, making sober fashion styles a more affordable choice at that time.

These trends, which germinated in the midst of a health and economic crisis, were at the same time a harbinger of the political movement that was gaining strength in several countries of the global north, namely fascism. and although at first glance we might think that fashion and fascism are unrelated, Benjamin[1] in his famous essay *"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"* considered that fascism transforms politics into an emotional and aesthetic spectacle, where fascism introduces the aestheticization of political life. In this sense, fashion not only covers the body, it takes it, shapes it, symbolizes it, and transforms it into a living banner, which is exposed in the media, allowing the individual who observes it to fictitiously participate in power, as the media allows the subject to think of themselves as an entity with the power to make decisions, but these decisions are based on limited options that have been provided to them in advance.

In this paper, we propose to analyze how these three fashion trends were a harbinger of the rise of neo-fascism in the US. We will expose how each of these trends systematically promotes racism, nepotism, social inequality, and patriarchy. To this end, we will use as an example the styles selected by the First Lady of the United States, Melania Trump, and her stepdaughter Ivanka Trump during Donald Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2025. This work seeks to expose the relationship between fashion as a tool of power and the rise of neo-fascism, since in Benito Mussolini's Italy, fashion, as it is now, was used as a fundamental propaganda weapon to mark differences with the other, while trying to create a hegemonic aesthetic that promoted the values of the regime.

This work is part of my doctoral research, which focuses on the role of glamorous magic as a tool of empowerment among practitioners of neo-pagan religions in Mexico City. Although at first glance it might seem that there is no connection between glamour magic and the rise of neo-fascism , I have found evidence that suggests that glamour magic is a counter-response to the conservatism that has begun to take hold in certain strata of society.

DEVELOPMENT

Fascism in Pastel Tones: *Tradwives, Old Money,* and *the Clean Look*

On January 20, 2017, the world was shaken by Donald Trump's arrival at the White House for the first time. During his first term, the US president would have to face the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic crisis (a task at which he would fail, incidentally). During this same period, we would have presidents such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Georgia Meloni in Italy. It seemed as if the world had suddenly been invaded by privileged white men and women who defended the idea of traditional heterosexual families, who were against feminism and human rights in general, and who had a strong sense of nostalgia for an almost idyllic past in their respective nations.

As experts analyzed the speeches of these figures and the political situation that was beginning to take shape in different countries of the global north, a concern began to spread, as these speeches were very reminiscent of those preached by an Italian politician and military leader in the 1930s, and despite his death almost 100 years ago, it seemed that his political ideas were more alive than ever. Fascism seemed to be returning from the dead to establish its regime of terror in the 21st century.

Fascism was a mass movement and political ideology that originated in Italy and dominated different parts of Europe in the first half of the 20th century, leading to the outbreak of World War II. This political movement promoted a totalitarian, anti-democratic, and militaristic state; based on the notions of homeland and race, it resulted in the oppression and persecution of minorities by the army.[2] In the specific case of Italy, Benito Mussolini sought, through various mechanisms, to create a hierarchy among the people, dividing them into those who were considered desirable and those who were not. Among the mechanisms used by Mussolini was fashion. Although dressing is something we have normalized, fashion is a powerful mechanism of symbolic communication. Bietti[3] considers that fashion shows its fascist potential, since beyond a prefabricated model, fashion limits distinction, because although human beings constantly struggle to feel different from the rest, at the same time they are consumed by the fear of looking too

different and not fitting in with the group to which they belong.

While in Mussolini's Italy, explicit violence was the usual way to achieve hegemony in fashion, in contemporary neo-fascism, the logic at work is a whitewashed, seductive, and deeply affective, which relies on digital social networks such as *TikTok or Instagram* to generate trends with different political purposes, which become trends and, therefore, aspirations for millions of people in various parts of the world. In this sense, the media creates a new type of public and political space, which is configured from private experiences.[4] In the case of social media, these have become places for the dramatization of social representations, constructing beautifully decorated political spaces (which do not appear political), which generate in the observer a need to obtain what is seen in these spaces, whether they be articles, experiences, or political ideas.

An example of this are the three fashion trends that have become popular on the social network TikTok since the COVID-19 pandemic to the present (a period that coincides with the growing number of political parties with neo-fascist ideas in countries of the global north). These trends are *Tradwives* fashion, the *Old Money* style, and the *Clean look* style. Little by little, *TikTok's For You pages* began to be flooded with tutorials, *storytimes, unboxings,* or family blogs from various influencers and models, recreating one of these three styles in their daily lives. As the months went by, this trend would jump from digital social networks to clothing stores such as Zara, Mango, Pull&Bear, among many others, creating a hegemony in the appearance of many women who consumed this content, aspired to have similar lifestyles, and also agreed with the way of thinking of the influencers who promoted these styles.

This allows us to ask ourselves: To what extent can the aesthetics of power change the perception of political legitimacy? And how do these seemingly harmless fashion styles reinforce the message of Trumpist neo-fascism?

We must first remember that clothing is an indicator of economic and social status and can even become a political symbol, an indicator of magical and religious status, a reinforcement of beliefs, customs, and values, as well as a sexual symbol, according to the classification of anthropologists Cordwell et al.[5] To this we must add that clothing tells us who is in charge, who belongs to a group, and who we should expel. We can see these elements reflected in Donald Trump's speeches, in which he constantly talks about who good Americans are, how they look, and how they should act, making an important distinction between them and those whom the Trump regime considers undesirable, i.e., marginalized minorities, feminists, members of the LGBT+ community, people with disabilities, and anyone who threatens traditional American values. As Anderson[6] would say, a white, armed, nationalist "us" versus a racialized, urban, dissident "them."

And it is precisely these three fashion styles that embody these supposed American values, which Donald Trump constantly replicates in his speeches, in the aesthetics of his cabinet members and family, and in the aesthetics that the conservative sector in the US has popularized. Each style is characterized as follows:

- The Clean Look: characterized by an appearance of cleanliness, minimalism, extreme neatness, slim, young, "perfect" bodies, and implicit whiteness as an ideal. Heavy makeup with extravagant colors is set aside in favor of nude tones that give the appearance of no makeup.
- Old Money: imitates the style of the traditional bourgeois elite, with discreet clothing from exclusive designers, associated with heritage, social segregation, and nepotism. The colors chosen for this style are beige, white, gray, and ivory.
- Tradwives style: a movement that glorifies the traditional female role: women who present themselves as submissive wives, homemakers, defenders of "traditional values," and staunch enemies of feminism. Their fashion style focuses on silhouettes from the 1950s, i.e., discreet busts, small waists, and wide hips hidden inside calf-length dresses. Hair is usually dyed blonde.

In this three aesthetics, we can see the romanticization of eras where class, race, and gender differences were strictly controlled. In this sense, they promote nostalgia for a *pure* past with a *proper order,* where each individual knew where they belonged in the social structure. Likewise, these fashion trends promote unhealthy beauty standards that put people's health at risk, making female bodies sick and weak, as all three promote whiteness, the infantilization of the female body, and extreme thinness. These three trends segregate those who do not have high economic capital, who are not cisgender, and who are not heteronormative.

This aesthetics are presented as elegant, correct, timeless, and above all desirable, which allows for the naturalization of an unequal social order, where bodies are disciplined without the need for explicit violence. Michel Foucault tells us that power not only represses, but also produces identities and bodies through practices such as fashion.[7] In the case of these three-aesthetics linked to Trumpist neo-fascism, we see that they are a form of power production, as they discipline, normalize, and exclude anything that does not fit the US president's political agenda. The visual universe of *tradwives,* the refined style of *old money,* and the cult of *the clean look* are not mere cultural trends: they are expressions of a political project that has managed to nationalize order, hierarchy, and discipline in an aspirational and nostalgic way.

As mentioned above, these three fashion trends have become popular on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. By making these trends go viral, these media outlets create an image of society that structures reality, not in the realm of empirical reality, but rather in the field of representation.[4] In other words, the power of social media acts on society by largely determining the representation that individuals have of it, since in this sense, the media, going hand in hand with aesthetic trends, is responsible for transmitting certain feelings to individuals through aesthetics and visuals, with respect to the content they consume, shaping them not only on the outside, but also on the inside.[8,9,10,11]

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin[1] warns that fascism responds to the crises of capitalism not by eliminating social tensions, but by offering the masses the possibility of expressing themselves without transforming the structures, since fascism aestheticizes politics, turning it into a spectacle to which everyone aspires. This aestheticization can take subtle, softened forms that integrate domesticity, femininity, and consumption as vehicles of control. In this sense, the visual

universe promoted by certain sectors of the right on social media, which associate beauty with purity, whiteness with morality, and femininity with obedience, embodies a form of fascism in which power acts not through terror, but through seduction. And with the advent of digital social media, the media power on which the neo-fascist movement has relied has created in those who consume this type of content a sense of belonging, of being part of a specific collective, since media power is a power that shows, recreates, dramatizes, and embodies a staging that seeks to appeal to the feelings of viewers, making them feel part of something greater and that supports them.

Power, writes Foucault[7], produces realities. When we see content creators on TikTok embodying an ideal of white femininity, submission, and heterosexuality, they are not only promoting a type of visual content: they are modeling subjectivities, normalizing ways of life, and reinforcing power relations that seem *natural* because they are aesthetically pleasing. In this context, the aestheticization of politics no longer requires grand state scenography. Today, a politics of everyday life has emerged that produces obedience without visible violence, through filters, nostalgia, and neoliberal aspirations embodied in normative bodies.[12,13,14] Where there is a de-individualization of the subject, who merges into the aesthetic forms normalized by neo-fascism, ironically, they do so at the same time as they think they are defining themselves through their own decisions, when in reality their cultural consumption on social media is marked by an agenda that seduces the individual and makes them embody the role that suits the regime**.**

Disciplined beauty: Melania, Ivanka, and the theatricality of conservative power

As shown in the previous section, fashion has played a very important role in the spread of conservative thinking in the United States thanks to fashion influencers, and lifestyle influencers, who write family blogs showing idyllic and conservative lives. These videos, popularized mainly on platforms such as TikTok, show us how these three trends have been replicated millions of times around the world, creating a whole movement. In this sense, figures such as Melania and Ivanka Trump have joined this trend, using them as a symbolic element that demonstrates the current of thought with which they are aligned.[15,16,17,18]

This is a strategy they have followed since Donald Trump's first term, and which they repeated, but with greater care, at the inauguration on January 20, 2025.[19] The outfits they wore were part of a staging that sought to produce an image of power deeply linked to conservative, nationalist, patriarchal, and racial values. Susan Sontag mentioned that fascism is not only an ideology, but also an aesthetic that manifests itself in forms of control over the body, aestheticizing obedience, hierarchy, and discipline, creating in the observer an idea of aspiration and longing linked to these aesthetic models.[20]

In Melania's case, she chose a sky blue outfit designed by Ralph Lauren for the occasion. This design directly evoked Jackie Kennedy, a historical figure who embodies a domesticated femininity, respectful of the role of silent companion to male power. Melania presented herself as a first lady who restores the nostalgia for an era idealized by the American right, that is: white, orderly, feminine, and hegemonic heterosexual. In the words of Paul Preciado, the female body is a political surface on which the strategies of sovereign power are inscribed.[21] Melania did not speak, but her body spoke for her, communicating stability, control, respect, and obedience to the new regime.

Ivanka, for her part, presented herself as a modernized version of the republican princess. Her ivory white dress, designed by Oscar de la Renta, communicated purity, femininity, and confidence. As a daughter and presidential advisor, her figure blended the private and the public, the familiar and the institutional. White is a color whose symbolism is usually directly associated with peace, purity, and freedom, but in this event it was reinterpreted in a conservative key, not as a symbol of freedom, but of the domestication of power over the feminine. In the symbolic logic of Trumpism, Ivanka functioned as a mediator between an aggressive patriarchy and a docile but ambitious femininity. As Angela McRobbie suggests, in the post-feminist era, women can be empowered while still embodying the traditional values that patriarchy requires to remain relevant.[22] This is something we can see not only in Ivanka, but in all the women who work directly for Donald Trump, women in positions of power, with stratospheric salaries, but who embody so-called traditional values, serving their husbands, their country, and now also their president, in a servile manner and without communicating their own ideas that might go against the regime.

The aesthetic discourse of both women during the inauguration served as a vehicle for soft fascism, where authoritarianism is not imposed through military uniform, but through the stylization of hierarchy and the restoration of symbolic order through the female body. Stylistic control and the evocation of classic models of white femininity became part of a visual policy that seeks not simply to beautify power, but to legitimize it. As Enrica Picarelli states, contemporary fascism uses fashion to represent a politics of appearance, which normalizes the reactionary under the language of beauty and familiarity.[23] In this case, both women embodied, each in their own way, the aesthetic dimension of the Trumpist project. And in turn, the image of these women is transmitted over and over again in different media, creating a visual discourse that invites other women to join this political project, seducing them through the gaze and aspirational feelings.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of contemporary Trumpism reveals a strategic instrumentalization of the aesthetics of the *Clean Look*, *Old Money*, and the *Tradwife* movement. These stylistic manifestations transcend the mere expression of a political identity to operate as mechanisms of seduction, normalization, and beautification of an authoritarian social order.

The embodiment of this phenomenon can be seen in the clothing choices of prominent figures within the Trumpist circle, such as Melania and Ivanka Trump. Their stylistic decisions have been meticulously employed to communicate a fascist message, presented under a halo of glamour. This "soft neo-fascism" is articulated through the activation of nostalgia for a hierarchical and exclusionary past. Unlike the explicitly violent manifestations of historical fascism, this approach presents it as desirable, even as an aesthetic trend that confers status and appeal.

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In line with the theoretical approaches of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, it can be inferred that Trumpism not only exerts its influence on corporate and institutional structures, but also permeates aesthetic imaginaries. In this process, the power generated by social media is also transformed into a purely symbolic power, which uses aesthetics to shape individuals, giving them a false idea of community, a uniform-like attire that molds both their bodies and their thoughts, all based on the sensations and feelings that these visual discourses generate in the individual. This process translates into an aestheticization of politics, where exclusion, privilege, and female submission (as well as that of racialized minorities and the LGBTQ+ community) are transformed into aspirational ideals. In this context, the struggle for power in the United States extends beyond the control of legal frameworks or armed coercion. Fundamentally, it lies in the dispute over the control of symbols, images, and visible bodies, crucial elements in the configuration and legitimization of political ideologies.

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