



ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGE

rewriting historical memory through design

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Research questions

1. How has the contemporary digital landscape enabled governments to adopt and produce new forms of visual language as a means of securing power?
2. What design trends and themes emerge across various case studies as markers of attempts to manipulate collective memory and identity when comparing contemporary examples to historical precedents?
3. How is the visual language formed by these trends implemented and/or weaponized within each study to promote specific goals by the leaders of a government?

Background

IN THE EARLY SPRING OF 1934, ahead of the country's general elections, the Italian Fascist Party erected a large poster on the facade of their local headquarters at Palazzo Braschi in Rome. The design featured a large, geometric portrayal of the face of their *Duce* (leader), Benito Mussolini, surrounded by wall-to-wall text that read "SI SI SI SI SI..." and so on. The repetitive language of *Si* (yes) referenced the coming referendum to accept the party's proposed list in a simple yes-or-no vote, which was overwhelmingly approved by 99.84% of voters.¹ Across the pond, the German Nazi Party operated under orders from the *Führer* that echoed similar sentiments: modern art and design were designated as "degenerate" and accused of threatening the security of the German state. In an effort to consolidate power and redefine collective memory, the Ministry of Propaganda established design standards that promoted "traditional" motifs in imagery, typography, and composition.²

These two examples from the World War II era illustrate the critical role of design and propaganda in shaping public opinion and reconstructing narratives among the general population. While not exclusive to this period or these countries in history, these archives present some of the most visible and accessible records of the trends manipulated to achieve each regime's desired outcomes and how they were implemented. Today, media consumption is increasingly unpredictable, presenting new frontiers for visual language. As governments promote messages to their constituents in varied ways, design remains one of the most central principles to forming a cohesive identity and distributing it *en masse*. New challenges present themselves as this identity becomes inherently intertwined with foreign policy, trade relations, and corporate interests within the private sector.

Within the past ten years alone, as trends in different fields of design have changed, the way governments have adopted various design principles has changed dramatically. In the United States, for example, design within presidential administrations was relatively standardized before accelerating sometime around Barack Obama's famous "Hope" campaign, when new forms of design, particularly web design, set new benchmarks for modern adoption. Later administrations, namely Joe Biden and Donald Trump in his second presidency, respectively, used these new areas as sandboxes for implementing different trends and perspectives in design, each hoping to appear more modern than the last. Upon being re-elected and inaugurated in 2025, Donald Trump signed an Executive Order aimed at "improving [the] nation through better design" through a new "America by Design" initiative and an accompanying National Design Studio. Its manifesto, as detailed on each website and in the order, described how the government would utilize artificial intelligence and current design principles to "enhance the public's trust in high-impact service providers, and dramatically improve the quality of experiences offered to the American public." It has drawn immense criticism for its implementation thus far, with many comparisons likening the program's work to that of the World War II era.³

Goals and interests

As governments adopt new forms of technology, design's crucial role cannot be understated. The current landscape presents a critical juncture in design history to be analyzed by first understanding its place in history and then assessing where it may lead us collectively in the future. This study reframes design as a historical instrument of governance, revealing how digital media has become one of the state's most effective weapons, especially with new advancements in artificial intelligence technology.

With a background in graphic design, web design, and typography, it has been fascinating to experience how governments have used the same contemporary principles or references I adopt in my work to achieve different objectives. My active participation in the design community at the University of Toronto intertwines with my studies, particularly in MUN180: Hitler and Stalin Today (Prof. Tim Snyder), JAV200: Introduction to Critical Theory (Prof. Mitchell Akiyama), and RLG338: Religion and Religiosity in Israel–Palestine (Prof. Yigal Nizri), which each cover different ways in which political factors across the world influence culture and identity, often by some means of visual language.

Interdisciplinary and international focus

As the examples highlighted in the introduction demonstrate, design as it relates to government and political messaging transcends both borders and disciplines. Drawing on my primary coursework from architecture and design, and in my electives covering European history and fascism, religious studies, and Jewish culture, I hope to highlight the transcendent qualities of design that make it such a permeable vessel for governments in their messaging, and express how this quality has evolved with innovation in technology and civil progress.

To enhance the international focus, my research will focus on a variety of case studies, divided into two categories: one for historical precedents in context through archives in Germany for their importance in design and propaganda during World War II, and one for contemporary precedents in context through North American approaches in Canada and the United States. Smaller inquiries will briefly address comparable approaches elsewhere in the world in pursuit of supplementing my main research focus while not obscuring its primacy.

Methodology and timeline

Focusing on the primary examples in North America and Europe will capture a holistic methodology, which will be supplemented by digital research. Within Canada and the United States, an abundance of digital resources presents a strong bedrock for the contemporary cases. For the historical cases, while several European institutions provide partial online access to digitized propaganda posters and visual materials, these collections are often fragmented and incomplete, and will require consultation with archivists at each site in person to conduct the most comprehensive research and assess the most accurate conclusions from my findings. The study will involve coordination with curators to find the most salient instances for manipulating collective memory in visual language, which can be applied today.

The following timeline is proposed in three phases. To optimize travel, field research will be centered in Berlin for budding connections with large museums and libraries between July 10–20. These institutions contain resources specifically focused on visual language and propaganda and will help emphasize how their developments in design contributed to global impact between 1914 and 1991.

Preparation

The first three weeks will be dedicated to conducting a literature review of existing research on historical and contemporary cases, and what recent scholarship exists in comparing the two. Here, there will be a strong balance between journal and news articles, and visuals will start to be cataloged as I start to assemble a database for later comparison. I will also conduct research on contemporary examples through accessible digital resources, which will enable me to begin proposing hypotheses in the next phase of research.

Field research

After solidifying my foundation through existing works, I will travel to Berlin to conduct comprehensive research on the visual language and propaganda central to each war period. Ten days will be spent working with archivists and curators across the city to view Holocaust and WWII visual archives in person and determine which specific patterns in design held strong influence. Findings from the weeks prior will allow me to predetermine with the archivists which collections will be the most productive for my research. Connections have already been established with a few libraries and museums in Berlin that have graciously offered to assist with their resources.

Consolidation

Updating my database and catalog during the field research period will allow me to smoothly return to Toronto and consolidate my findings. With adequate time spent prior researching both contemporary and historical examples, interlaced with periods for documenting my hypotheses, I will be able to use these final weeks for drawing conclusions in comparing my findings and articulating an argument for state tactics in weaponizing visual language.

Supervisor and resources

I am incredibly grateful to work with two professors on this project to provide the rigorous supervisory support required to conduct my analysis. I will meet with Professors Peter Sealy and Yigal Nizri on alternating weeks to discuss my ongoing database and catalog, review developing theses and conclusions, and use their interdisciplinary backgrounds to provide feedback and suggestions on additional areas of interest.

Professor Peter Sealy holds the position of Undergraduate Director of the Bachelor of Arts in Architectural Studies program within my faculty at Daniels, with a research background centered in Berlin and the relationship between fascism and perception through architecture and design. His expertise relating to Berlin and Germany during World War II will be of paramount importance to my field research and review of historical precedents.

Professor Yigal Nizri, a professor outside of Daniels, has cross-appointments in the Department for the Study of Religion and the Anne Tanenbaum Center for Jewish Studies, the latter of which he holds the position of Undergraduate Director. With an additional design background from the Cooper Union, Prof. Nizri has extensive experience researching topics of interest related to culture, art, and language, particularly in the relevant contexts of war, colonialism, and with a focus on Jewish history, all of which will guide me in my research.

External resources, such as academic libraries, museums, and other forms of archives related to field research and/or travel expenses, have been outlined in the budget proposal.

Outcomes

By examining how visual language shapes collective memory, this project will produce outcomes that align with the Laidlaw Program's emphasis on ethical leadership, critical communication, and social responsibility. At this critical moment in world history, leadership comes not just from the actions of administrations, but from the language used to communicate intentions. Design acts as an alternative language for executing leadership, whereby patterns emerge despite methods of communicating having changed drastically.

In creating a database and catalog to compare historical and contemporary uses of visual language, my research will uncover what elements of design have been invented, repeated, and reworked to control narratives or rewrite historical memory. These detailed comparisons will lead to conclusive hypotheses and arguments about how contemporary digital design has enabled similar methodologies. Analyzing by method of design (prints, leaflets, and posters, compared with social media posts, website design, and artificial intelligence technology) will highlight what precedents should be looked to for designing national identity with the least harm to a country's population.

References

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3. Ali Breland, "The Trump Administration Is Publishing a Stream of Nazi Propaganda," *The Atlantic*, January 27, 2026, <https://theatlantic.com/national-security/2026/01/social-media-trump-administration-dhs/685659>.

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Image attribution

Cover photo

Birds fly past a giant banner with the image of President Donald Trump on the U.S. Department of Labor building on Jan. 5, 2026, in Washington. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty).

Page 2, left:

Poster: "Greater Germany: Yes on 10 April" (1938). This election poster emphasizes the message of jumping on the Nazi political bandwagon, as represented by the hands raised in a unified Nazi salute. Taken from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/election-poster>.

Page 2, right:

Designed in 1934 by the Swiss artist Xanti Schawinsky, this poster was commissioned by the National Fascist Party to celebrate Mussolini's retention of power after the year's sham election. Taken from *The Future Was Then: The Changing Face of Fascist Italy*, an exhibition at Poster House, New York City, United States.