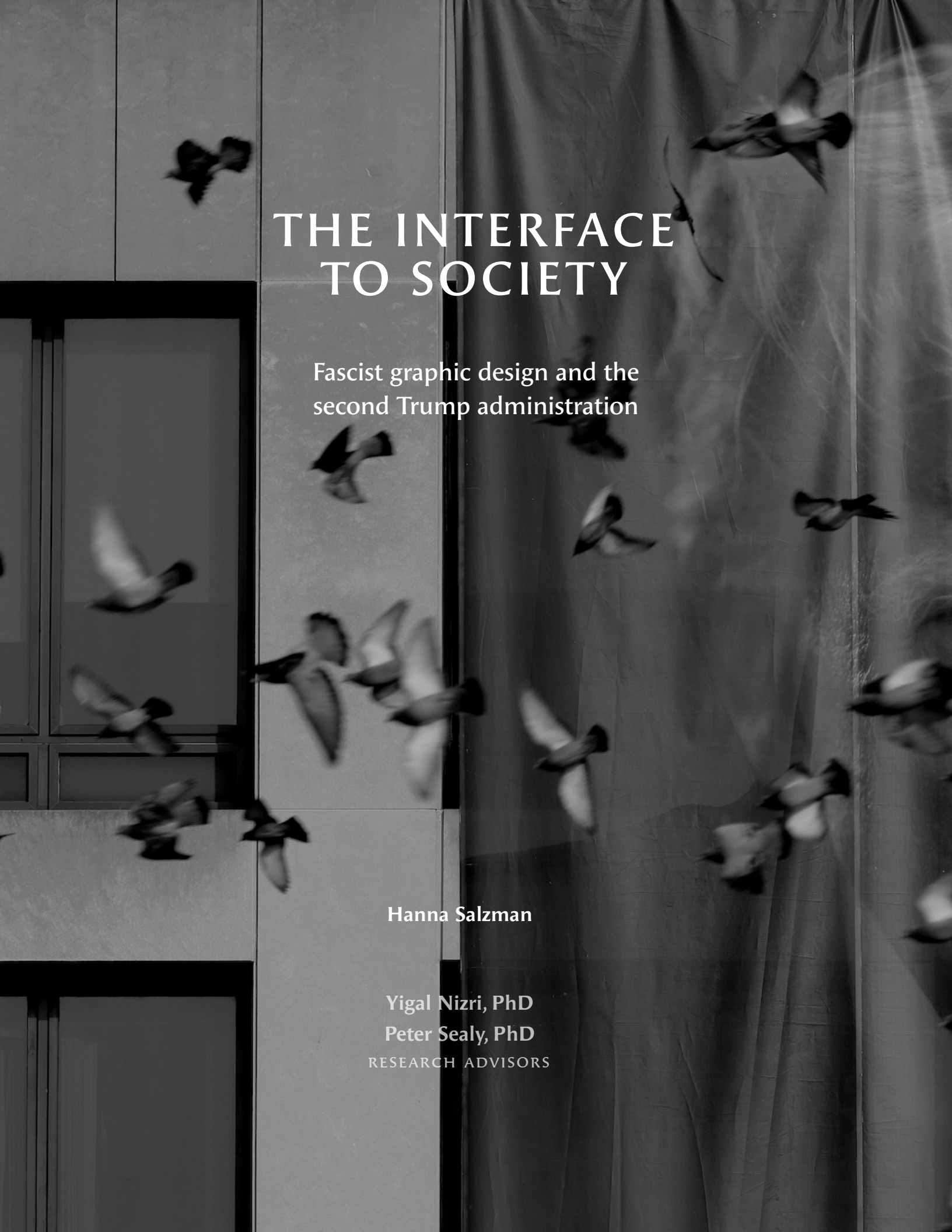


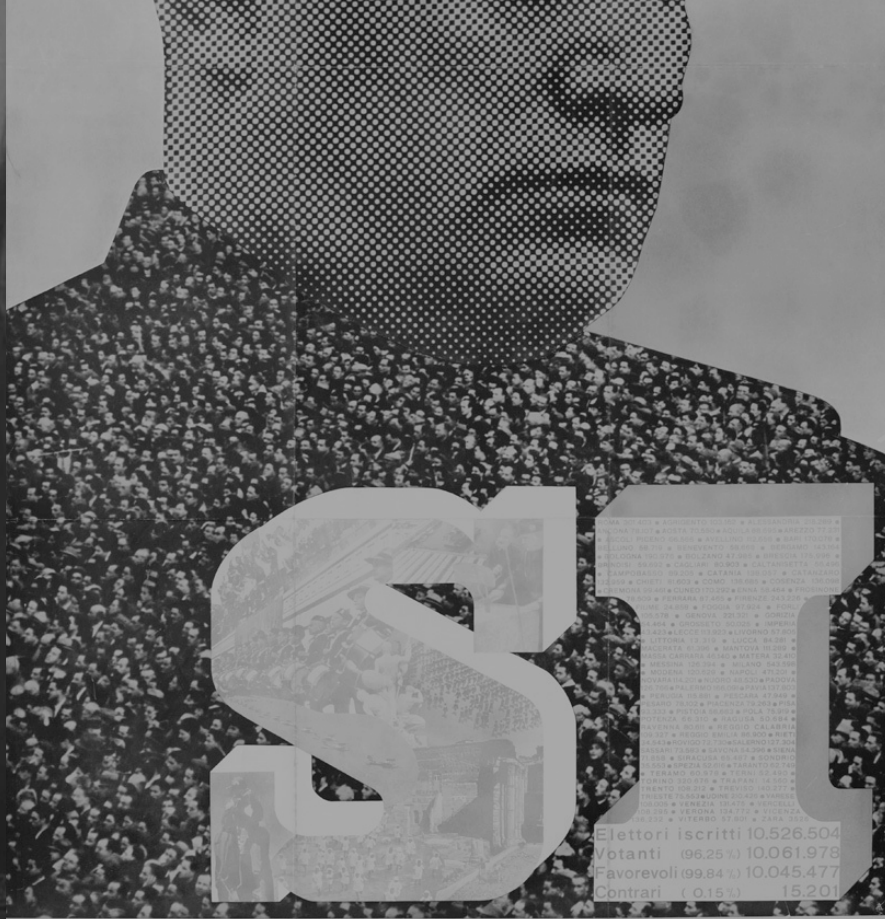
THE INTERFACE TO SOCIETY

Fascist graphic design and the second Trump administration

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The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that … one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism.

HANNAH ARENDT

Acknowledgements

This paper was one of the most fascinating things I have undertaken, and to honor the delicacy of the work that has gone into researching its contents, I wish to mention its place in time. Its outline deals with two phases: the first is a comprehensive literature review of authoritarian design by analyzing Nazi visual language and elements of graphic propaganda in the period leading up to and during World War II; the second is a comparative historical analysis between these techniques and contemporary visions of the second Trump administration. This structure contrasts a much-discussed backdrop to a contemporary subject with far less reporting. While it enables a better academic resource for comparing the two, there are risks that come with doing it this way.

The initial proposal for this paper was submitted to the University of Toronto's research supervisors for the Laidlaw program sometime in the winter of 2025. It was not until the following summer that the vast majority of this research was conducted. At the time of this paper's completion, there remain very few existing reputable journal articles—and only minimal newspaper and web articles—covering the federal design system of the second Trump administration. The paper analyzes the goals of the administration up until September 2026, but acknowledges they are subject to change. It is both possible and highly likely that how the administration pivots its design approach and communicates its ideology—like any presidential administration—will change over the course of the next two years. I would be remiss if I did not mention how fluid the possibilities presented by this essay may be. My goal is not to make sweeping generalizations about the contemporary state of American affairs, but instead carefully extract how governments today use design to achieve and enforce their political goals. Finally, a large portion of contemporary commentary on design during the second Trump administration focuses on architecture. There is an abundance of additional literature on Nazi and authoritarian architecture to support the [relative] abundance of literature on Trumpian visions for architecture. I have deliberately minimized my research on this subject to focus on the same applications with graphic design and related media in hopes it will encourage further discussion and analysis.

Thank you to the multitude of people and institutions that have supported this research and its completion. This research was made possible through the financial support of the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation, in collaboration with research supervisors Elena Shik and Shraddha Prasad at the University of Toronto. Thank you to my two co-advisors, Professors Yigal Nizri and Peter Sealy, for their continued support across every stage of my research, and an additional thank you to Professor Jason Stanley for taking the time to meet me in Berlin and provide assistance with concerns related to fascism and comparative historical analysis. This paper was inspired by an exhibit at Poster House in New York about graphic propaganda in Fascist Italy, and further supported by museums, libraries, and archives in my visit to Berlin.

ABSTRACT

Within recent years, increasing academic inquiry has been made into whether Donald Trump and his policies can be described as fascist, often comparing his administration to well-established fascist regimes as references. Less frequently mentioned in this discourse, however, are the crucial roles of graphic design and visual language that each government uses to articulate its policies. This paper compares the most influential fascist visual language of the Nazis during World War II to the visual language of the second Trump administration to analyze the importance of harmonizing design and policy in constructing a fascist government. Specifically, it looks at the Trump-established National Design Studio and its impact on the American visual language through advancements in web design, social media, and generative artificial intelligence.

Keywords
Visual language; political communication; fascism; graphic design; branding; web design; generative artificial intelligence; typography

Introduction

United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued a memorandum to the department's diplomats and employees last winter demanding that all communication be set in the typeface Times New Roman, replacing the Biden administration's promotion of the typeface Calibri for its accessibility.[1] The memo called the use of the Calibri typeface an "illegal, immoral, radical" and "wasteful [instance] of D.E.I.A. [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility]," and claimed that by setting matters of state in Times New Roman, the department would promote the administration's aim of "restor[ing] decorum and professionalism" to the nation. Initial reports about the memo primarily discussed its role in Donald Trump's culture, framing the minutiae of enforcing typefaces as a purely symbolic way to "end diversity." However, the reports did not focus as much on the historical precedent behind making such a change. Under the dictatorship of Mussolini, for example, Roman qualities were to be embodied in the text and style people wrote. The Nazis enforced exact styles of typefaces to symbolically occupy every space of the German public. During World War II, the minutiae of type became a powerful weapon in the fascist propaganda arsenal.

As the behavior and policies of the Trump administration have become increasingly compared to fascist rhetoric, so has the administration's obsession with aesthetics and its overall brand. Cultural critique focuses largely on Trump's interest in redefining design through architecture and far less on his obsession with graphic design. This paper aims to reconcile this disparity by focusing on Donald Trump's creation of a National Design Studio and its impact in a world defined by a new type of graphic propaganda; one in which branding takes place more in the digital world than the physical, where this branding reaches and influences minds beyond a single country or culture.

0.1 Michael Crowley and Hamed Aleaziz, "At State Dept., a Typeface Falls Victim in the War Against Woke," the *New York Times*, December 9, 2025, https://nytimes.com/2025/12/09/us/politics/rubio-state-department-font.html.

1 The origins of fascist aesthetics

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 the party's 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, overwhelmingly approved by 99.8% of voters.[1]

Mussolini's focus on aesthetics during the war was at the core of Italy's political strategy. Six years earlier, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia, he had called for the establishment of a new "fascist art," which was meant to be bold, blending the memories of a past in which Italy was once prosperous and influential, and a future in which Italy would be again.[2] Notably, however, Mussolini did not narrow the scope of fascist art and aesthetics in his speech. Emergent ideas of modernism clashed with visions of an Italian past; ancient Roman civilization and empires that ruled the world demanded a focus on grandeur and order, which modernism disassembled through abstraction.

How were clashing ideals of classicism, modernism, and futurism meant to be reconciled in a unified art? For the fascists, these were all part of a larger political strategy of storytelling. As the philosopher Walter Benjamin argued, fascism came to be defined by an "aestheticization of politics," by writing a national myth through art and abstracting material conditions to present an agreeable contract to the Italian people.[3] By abstracting a narrative of Italy's past, fascist art could sculpt the country's classical identity into a malleable concept, letting modernism and futurism in and out as needed at the sole discretion of the party.

The most powerful images of this application of fascist aesthetics were its namesake, the *fascio*, and the *Duce*. The *fascio* (fasces) was represented by a bundle of sticks, bound often with an axe in the center. Its history is rooted in many places throughout Roman history, typically alluding to the notion of strength in republican unity. *Il Duce* (the Leader) referred to the sole dictator of Italy, deriving from the Latin title of *dux* (king), which validated Mussolini's ascension as ruler of the fascist state, a position which no one but him held.[4]

It was no coincidence that a vulnerable Italian public took comfort in these symbols after World War I. Although the 1934 elections produced results under murky circumstances of coercion and intimidation, it was ultimately the Italian people who accepted the party and its appointments. Its design had been influenced by the images of Italian fascism since Mussolini's rise fifteen years earlier, a period in which the portrait of the *Duce* was to be framed in every classroom and public building in Italy, in a look which changed to the malleable tune of fascist art and aesthetics.[5] Over the twenty-one years that the Fascist Party ruled over the Kingdom of Italy, fascist art manifested in the form of posters and magazines; structures and monuments; mottos and behav-

1.1 Steven Heller, *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th Century Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press, 2011), 84–85.



1.2 Dennis P. Doordan, "In the Shadow of the Fasces: Political Design in Fascist Italy," *Design Issues* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 41, https://doi.org/10.2307/1511586.

1.3 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1935; repr., Schocken Books, 1969), 19.

1.4 Heller, *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th Century Totalitarian State*, 80–81.

1.5 Italo Calvino, "Il Duce's Portraits," the *New Yorker*, December 30, 2002, https://newyorker.com/magazine/2003/01/06/il-duces-portraits.

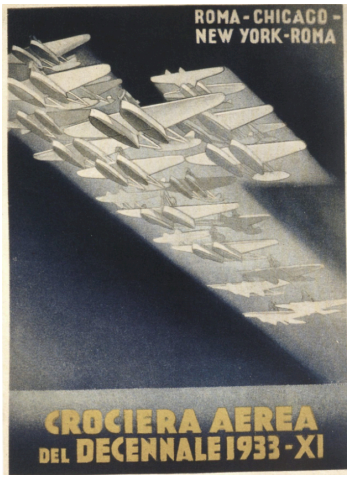
iors, each time changing standards to reflect the political desires of the party, or in reaction to its state. The branding of fascism in these media fashioned strong men (as Mussolini declared women weaker) and illustrations of wartime action, every time tying an image of strength to a fascist icon. The *fascio* was a motif used to remind the public that the future of Italy was reliant on complete faith and participation in the bundle. The *Duce* was plastered on monuments and posters to remind the public who Italy fought for and who was the axe in the center of the bundle. The Roman salute bound the fasces by forcing fascist aesthetics into ordinary interactions.[6]

But, as the historian Steven Heller describes, Mussolini was a writer, not an artist, and lacked clear ambitions for fascist art beyond imagery. Fascist aesthetics were not entirely one with fascist policy, meaning design and propaganda were beneficial for winning elections and rallying—and intimidating—an electorate, but it did not translate into significant political momentum as World War II crept in.[7] Italy's infamous entry into the war without a clear vision and a strategy focused on expanding the regime while minimizing fighting was not the bold strokes of political strength fascist art had aestheticized. This is likely why the enduring legacy of fascist aesthetics after World War II became less associated with the policies of the fascists and more with the successfully belligerent Nazis.

1.6 Doordan, "In the Shadow of the Fasces: Political Design in Fascist Italy," 39–40.

1.7 Heller, *Iron Fists*, 87.





2 Harmonizing authoritarianism with design

MUSSOLINI MAY NOT HAVE BEEN AN ARTIST, but Hitler was. It is often mentioned that Adolf Hitler's twice rejection from the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts forced him to apply his artistic passions to politics. Nazi dogma even claimed this pivot was a temporary noble act to "relieve the German suffering," after which he would return to painting.[1]

A glance at Hitler's pre-war art portfolio reveals how his visions of design shifted between his art career and his rise to power in 1933. Formerly focused on traditional subjects of painting, including watercolor landscapes and still lifes, Hitler developed as an artist towards graphic media in his twenties and thirties, by which time he had extensive experience in communications and propaganda. The strength of the iconography of the *fascio*, alongside communist symbols, influenced Hitler to eventually design the Nazi flag in 1920. Like the *fascio*, Hitler aimed to appropriate a historically significant and equally malleable icon, the swastika, into one that would represent his political party. To support his new appointment as the propaganda artist of the National Socialists, Hitler pushed for this banner to be displayed at mass rallies and speeches. His writing in *Mein Kampf* further illuminates his ideology behind the swastika as an envisioned national symbol, as he equated the struggle and victory of the "Aryan man" to the party's core tenets of anti-Semitism and discrimination, each embodied by the icon.[2] It would not be long thereafter that Hitler applied his communications skills in the arts to public speaking, which earned him great respect among Nazi party leadership.

By the time the Nazis gained political momentum and Hitler had been appointed the leader of the party, and thus chancellor of Germany, he had already developed a new title to represent himself. After seizing German rights through the use of emergency authority in 1933, the Nazis quickly consolidated political power, eventually declaring Hitler as the sole leader of the state. *Führer* (Leader), like *Duce*, gave Hitler the appearance of a new, absolute leader. The influence of Mussolini and the Italian fascists inspired Hitler to wage broad campaigns, each governed by allegiance to the *Führer*, the swastika, and the Aryan man, all to preserve the nation. His face, too, appeared wherever one looked, and a new fascist aesthetic emerged.[3]

Nazi art focused on similar myths to the fascists, promoting unity in political consolidation through the promotion of the "authentic" German and an exclusion of the "other." Hitler believed that visual propaganda was one of the primary causes of the Allied victory in World War I, which Germany failed to adequately respond to in their own media. Almost immediately, the Nazis authorized research into graphic design and its psychological impacts, which was meant to be exclusively read by the Nazi's propaganda arm, out of public view to protect national security. Its conclusions were published as *Das politische Plakat* ("The Political Poster"), and highlighted the techniques the Allies used to manipulate public opinion in hopes that a Nazi aesthetic formed around

2.1 Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyebode, "*The Gallery of Miracles and Madness: Insanity, Modernism, and Hitler's War on Art* by Charlie English William Collins. 2021," the *British Journal of Psychiatry* 220, no. 4 (March 31, 2022): 247, https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2021.181.

2.2 Heller, 14–17.

2.3 Heller, 29.





similar principles would build on the momentum of Hitler's propaganda to integrate into the German political strategy. The foreword, written by the report's author, Erwin Schockel, describes how repetition of party icons and slogans constructs a collective memory of the nation and its people. This memory seduces a populace into believing their individual struggles come from the nation's and a present loss in patriotism, surrendering its future to the nation's rulers.[4]

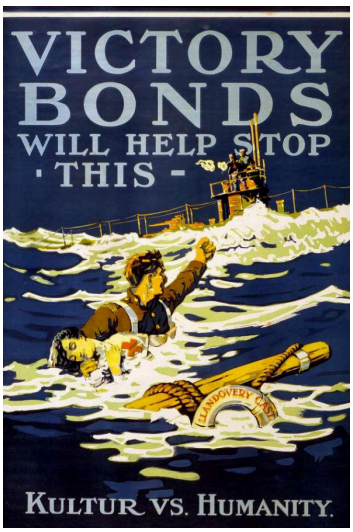
2.4 Erwin Schockel, *Das politische Plakat*, vol. 1, 1939. Translation from the German Propaganda Archive at Calvin University, https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/pdf/ThePoliticalPoster.pdf.

An authoritarian visual language

While Schockel makes clear that the Nazi philosophy is central to the nation's success, his—and Hitler's—advocacy for graphic design to play the central role in legitimizing it marks a turning point in fascist art and aesthetics. He praised Allied propaganda for developing a graphic system that unified text and image, "to give [the masses] the courage and spirit to solve a task that it perhaps would not be able to accomplish without a great model."[5] Nearly three hundred pages are lined with reflections on previous German graphic styles and side-by-side comparisons with accomplishments in American, Soviet, British, and French poster design. Models already produced by the Nazi propaganda arm, emphasizing the swastika and Hitler's design prowess, accompany commentary to define the visual language of a successful Nazi party.

2.5 Schockel, *Das politische Plakat*, 97.

2.6 Schockel, 10–28.



Schockel and leaders in the various Nazi propaganda factories, including its head, Joseph Goebbels, constructed this language based on a key number of factors which were to be followed to ensure party allegiance and success. Chiefly, they said, large text and a bold image were to be placed together in harmony to put "the fire" into the spirit of the German people, as they would surrender autonomy and place it in the hands of the party if the party advocated for what was already "in their nature." This methodology drew on what was already apparent in the visual language shared among the Allies, but the Nazis sought to force a political call in every message. Previous posters produced by the United States Office of War Information, for example, would often highlight the vague pursuit of "freedom," but they were primarily focused on getting Americans to contribute to the war effort through investing in war bonds or by enlisting to fight. Only sporadically would posters mention the enemy by name or depict a deliberately derogatory caricature of the enemy, which the Nazis took advantage of.[6]

2.7 Heller, 83–84.

The Nazis harmonized text, image, icon, and philosophy, transforming their visual language into the key mechanism of instilling fear in the everyday German. Jews were, of course, the primary scapegoat, and entire graphic campaigns became dedicated to the social and physical exile of Jews from towns across Germany.[7] Design was rapidly weaponized to create a uniform that a pure Aryan wore. Its visual language was distinct: Aryans did not just belong to a race by "blood and soil"; they also had to adopt writing styles and appearances that aligned with the ideals of the chief Nazi designers to verify their purity.



Jewish and degenerate art

The Nazis frequently changed what design elements were approved and forbidden by the party. However, Jews remained a throughline. Much like how the authoritarian visual language of the fascists in Italy branded the regime by looking to the future while—and by—bringing back the past, Jews helped brand the Nazis by forming a consistent opposition. The Nazis' so-called "solution to the Jewish question" relied not only on the physical Jews present in Germany and Europe, but on the ideas they claimed Jews spread.[8] As Schockel exemplifies repeatedly in *Das politische Plakat*, it was crucial that Jews were to be viewed with disgust for their evilness and impurity and simultaneously commended for their cunning effectiveness in infiltrating the public.

Schockel mentions, for instance, the "thoroughly Jewish" works by the German graphic designer John Heartfield (*né* Helmut Herzfeld; referred to by Schockel as "Herzfeld–Heartfield"), who used photomontage techniques to create advertising material for the German Communist Party.[9] What makes Heartfield's art successful, according to Schockel, was his ability to embody the Communist Party's ideology in his posters. By consistently overlaying a large image of a recognizable figure and attaching a memorable slogan, the viewer became loyal to the aims of the party once the smallest element resonated with them. If they liked the figure they knew, the ideology of the poster joined the figure in their worldview, thus generating more support for the party. This was often tied to a call to action, such as an instruction to vote for the party in an upcoming election, but what Schockel admired most was its ability to create action through inaction. A poster calling to action could be used as the last step in a process during which previous posters had already cultivated a susceptible following. But photomontages were a "Jewish" medium; Schockel claims that, while Heartfield's Jewish identity prevailed in its "emotional depth," infiltrating the pure German state with Jewish Soviet ideology, his cleverness fell short in his style.[10]

Photographs and collages, which were seen as a degeneration of true artistic talent, were seldom used by Nazi designers. Instead, they sought to combine strong text formatting with drawn images.[11] It was through this combination that the visual language of the Nazis was complete: depictions of what the Nazis aimed to communicate, either photorealistic or with clear artistic form, allowed them to propagate a unified ideology through design. A photograph or photomontage could cleverly manipulate memorable faces and slogans, but through an artist's rendition, a designer could construct an alternative reality favored by the party. When photographs were used, they would always include real-world versions of graphic icons to keep the design system unified, such as the swastika, Iron Cross, eagle, or a photo of Hitler.

This unification was the core of the Nazis' *Gleichschaltung*, a principle describing the totality of Nazi control over all spheres of life in the state.[12] The visual language of the party had to be harmonized in all aspects of public and private life to ensure complete obedience and loyalty to its messages, amplifying the success of its propaganda.

2.8 Julius Yourman, "Propaganda Techniques Within Nazi Germany," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 13, no. 3 (November 1939): 149, https://doi.org/10.2307/2262307.

2.9 Schockel, 95.

2.10 Schockel, 86–87; 96.

2.11 Heller, 56–57.



2.12 Thomas Schaarschmidt, "Multi-Level Governance in Hitler's Germany: Reassessing the Political Structure of the National Socialist State," *Historische Sozialforschung* 42, no. 2 (2017): 220, https://jstor.org/stable/44234960.

To enforce the visual language of *Gleichschaltung*, it was essential that opposing styles of art and design were banned. If photomontages were unsuitable for German propaganda for their "Jewish" ethos, they certainly could not be tolerated in the public sphere either. With a harmonic visual language, the Nazis began expelling artists and removing their artworks from museums and other exhibitions. As the historian Mary-Margaret Goggin describes, the Nazis exploited the unfavorability of modernism and modern art to mark what was un-German or "Jewish." Because the general public did not understand or find itself emotionally attached to modernism, the Nazis were able to declare it immoral with little to no resistance.[13] Modernism was too expansive, equating art depicting Germany's heroism and beauty with "meaningless" art, so it was easy enough to discard the latter.

Between the summer and fall of 1937 in Munich and the country's largest cities, the Nazis exhibited over six hundred works of art that the party had labeled as "degenerate," synonymous in nature with "Jewish," "communist," "Bolshevik," and any of the party's other enemies. Degenerate art joined the circuit formed of these communities as the party purged them from German life for threatening a "feeling" of German strength and nationalism.[14] Visitors who came to see the free exhibition understood immediately what they were to think when it came to matters of art. The party drew a clear line between art that promoted the morale and prosperity of the German state and that which was harmful, further justifying the totality of Nazi visual language and suppression of what preceded it. Importantly, this meant that art on the other side of the line—what was not "degenerate"—needed clear boundaries as well. Such art was to disregard individuality to uplift the homeland: clean of Jewish influence, art was to depict proportional, non-abstract men and women who reflected the future of an Aryan civilization. Men were to be as strong and healthy as the nation, while women were to never be nude, instead rearing children with the nation's values.[15]

2.13 Mary-Margaret Goggin, "'Decent' vs. 'Degenerate' Art: the National Socialist Case," *Art Journal* 50, no. 4 (winter 1991): 85–86, https://doi.org/10.2307/777328.

2.14 Goggin, "'Decent' vs. 'Degenerate' Art: the National Socialist Case," 88.

2.15 Goggin, 86.



The role of typography

For the Nazis, the internal front of *Gleichschaltung* was to be taken as seriously as the battlefield. Hitler believed that the war was a temporary hurdle, after which people worldwide would capitulate to the superiority of Germany. The Reich would rule over the entire world and breathe the Nazi visual language. He boasted that German would become the universal *lingua franca* and all cultural identity within other territories would be secondary to the overarching state's mandated principles.[16] The smallest details of everyday life were magnified throughout the state by repetition. This was true of the swastika and other government icons, which became as salient as those of corporations, and the same was true of the lettering styles used and enforced by the state.

2.16 Albert Speer, *Spandau: the Secret Diaries*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (1947; repr., Macmillan, 1976), 47.



The style most synonymous with the Nazi period is blackletter ("Gothic" or "Fraktur"), a category of type derived from scripts which were originally handwritten by German monks transcribing religious texts in the Middle Ages. It is most easily distinguished by its sharp edges and lines and consistent weight (i.e., lacking a stronger or "bolder" version of the same font).[17] Scribes aimed to have each letter look as similar to one another as possible for consistency, while sharp strokes assisted in the more difficult curves in Latin characters, such as an *o* or *s*, which were rendered spikier. The most dominant form to produce books and other large pages of text throughout Western Europe, it maintained its popularity as Johannes Gutenberg carved forms to set his Bible in the same style upon the invention of the first mechanized printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. Gutenberg's Fraktur distinguished each character separately, in contrast to cursive letterforms which were joined with one another, likening their shapes to a continuous handwriting script.[18]

With the popularization of movable type in Western Europe, Fraktur blackletter became synonymous with German identity. It was used beyond setting books and became widespread throughout all printed matter, from documents to signage. It contended between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with Antiqua, a Roman type derived from Latin cursive letterforms, which were seen as more legible in their rounded nature and thinner weight. As printers across Europe began shifting from Fraktur to Antiqua, the Germanosphere held on to its prized writing style. To preserve its connection to Fraktur while modernizing with the rest of Europe, it was common for German text to be set in Fraktur, while foreign and academic affairs were to be distinguished in Antiqua type. Between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, Fraktur came to represent Germanic qualities of strength and intellectual sobriety, while Antiqua came to represent the spoils of France and Italy, where it was popularized. Martin Luther, for instance, advocated for the use of blackletter type to separate German Protestantism from the evils of Roman type, associated with Vatican Catholicism. In some cases, a Protestant Bible would be printed in Fraktur, with exceptions for words of evil or sin, individually set in Antiqua.

The Nazis took advantage of Fraktur's history, and blackletter type became an element just as important as the swastika and Hitler's image when constructing the Nazi visual language. Posters, logos, official documents, and books alike were all typeset in Fraktur to emphasize their "Gothic" German purity and honor the greatness of the country's heritage. *Mein Kampf* was set in Fraktur, just as were street signs and guides for separating and marking victims at concentration camps.[19]

But there was just one problem: Hitler hated Fraktur. The contradicting ideals of rebirthing the great German past while modernizing for a futuristic Reich made blackletter an unrealistic standard for the future of the state. In a speech to the Reichstag in 1934, Hitler argued that it would be impossible to realize German as the *lingua franca* if conquered nations across the world had to figure out how to read and set Fraktur. The influence of the Reich would blanket far and wide be-

2.17 Philipp Luidl, "A Comparison on Fraktur and Roman Type: A German Study," in *Blackletter: Type & National Identity*, ed. Peter Bain and Paul Shaw (Princeton Architectural Press and the Cooper Union, 1998), 16–21.

2.18 Roman Mars et al., "Fraktur," February 18, 2020, accessed August 5, 2026, https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/fraktur.





2.19 Heller, 48–49.

yond Europe; it could not propose Gothic type just as it could not propose Gothic architecture in a world now defined by the industrial "age of steel and iron, glass and concrete, of womanly beauty and manly strength, of head raised high and intention defiant."[20] As strong-willed as Hitler was and demanding in the Nazi style, he, alongside Goebbels, was just as understanding of the need to compromise on using Fraktur type in the first years of the Reich to promote the Aryan ideology of purity and "German-ness" as much as possible. Its history was too strong and undeniable, and following Schockel's principles of authoritarian design, it was necessary to reach and invigorate the spirits of the working class. It was not until 1941 that the Nazis became comfortable enough in their power to shift away from Fraktur type in pursuit of the universal Roman lettering. Now that they had substantial territorial gain, it was much more aligned with the principles of *Gleichschaltung* to harmonize type that applied to both Germany and these occupied regions. To reconcile the unmistakable contradiction, the Nazis simply invented a myth of them "discovering" Fraktur's "Jewish origins."[21]

2.20 Adolf Hitler, speech to the Reichstag, 1934, trans. Thomas Grout, University of Chicago, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/encyclopaedia_romana/luftwaffe/aircraft/Ju-87/typography.html

2.21 Heller, 54.


Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei

Der Stellvertreter des Führers

Stabsleiter

München 33, den

z.Zt. Obersalzberg, den

Rundschreiben

(Nicht zur Veröffentlichung).

Eing. 0. JAN 41

Zu allgemeiner Beachtung teile ich im Auftrage des Führers mit:

Die sogenannte gotische Schrift als eine deutsche Schrift anzusehen oder zu bezeichnen ist falsch. In Wirklichkeit besteht die sogenannte gotische Schrift aus Schwabacher Judenlettern. Genau wie sie sich später in den Besitz der Zeitungen setzten, setzten sich die in Deutschland ansässigen Juden bei Einführung des Buchdrucks in den Besitz der Buchdruckereien und dadurch kam es in Deutschland zu der starken Einführung der Schwabacher Judenlettern.

2.22 Heller, 56.

The influence of Nazi design

The Nazis fundamentally transformed how states viewed the importance of design as part of their national identity. The success of Nazi propaganda through their uniquely authoritarian visual language taught governments across the world that effective branding would increase the public's trust in the state. The state itself *was* a brand; its organizations were its sub-brands. Military arms were abbreviated as if they were corporations: the SS, SA, and Gestapo masked their actions through easy-to-swallow identities with logos and slogans fit for the contemporary age.[22] It was further advantageous that the state was exacting in how it exercised control over its brand identity. The broad categories of the state's enemies and scapegoats (e.g., "Jewish" and "communist") enabled flexibility in style. Shockel embodied this in his philosophy that a successful state could not limit itself to one style, but the concentrated focus on a particular set of elements strengthened a campaign's efficacy.

Ultimately, when the Nazis fell in 1945, it was the distinct branding of the Allies that signaled the defeat of the Reich. The strength of the state's visual language was embodied in its priority among the Allies to completely erase the Nazi brand from public life. The swastika and other state logos (e.g., those of the SS) and Fraktur type were among the first visual icons that vanished overnight. Modernism and avant-garde or "degenerate" art were unbanned and encouraged to hasten the cleansing of the Nazi brand.[23] The Allies knew what to purge because of the explicitness and clarity of the National Socialist brand.

2.23 Mikkel Dack, "An Army of Academics," in *Everyday Denazification in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 25, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009216326.

Step 1
Construct a perfect pentagon, bisect the sides and connect these points to make a 5-pointed star within the pentagon.

Determine the center point of the star and connect it with all 5 points, allowing these lines to radiate from the pentagon.

Using the center point of the star, draw a circle with a radius equal to 3/4 the length of one side of the pentagon. Points where the circle intersects the lines radiating from the center of the star are labeled "A".

Step 2
Divide the side of one point of the star into three parts; 5 units to 3 units to 5 units as illustrated.

Construct a second pentagon larger than the first by the 5 units measurement determined above.

Connect the five points of the large pentagon (B) to the five points (A) determined in Step 1.

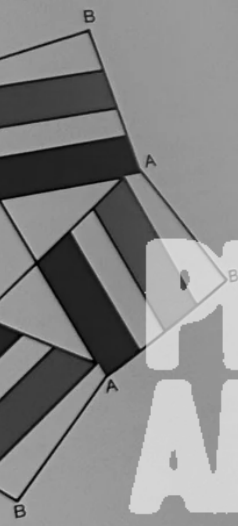
Step 3
Divide the remaining four alternating sides of star points as shown in Step 2, extending the lines to "AB".

Step 4
Using "A" as center point, draw three circular arcs beginning and terminating at "AB".

Step 5
Complete inward extension of arcs with straight lines from "AB", paralleling them to the sides of all 5 star points.

Step 6
The circle of letters reading "American Revolution Bicentennial 1776-1976" must always be accurately reproduced and shown in precise relationship to the star as illustrated below.







Step 6



3 Branding the American state

IN THE DECADES FOLLOWING THE WAR, global graphic design trends shifted drastically. The abolition of the Nazi visual language and the liberation of modernist and avant-garde forms led to a worldwide aesthetic revolution. With countries celebrating the end of the war and moving forward, global trade grew drastically, and with it came an exchange of versatile international styles, suited for use regardless of location. The Nazi obsession with a visual language linked to a hyper-specific brand of the nation's past allowed graphic design to evolve without constraints. The horrors of the war also instilled a global desire to move forward. Agencies like the Office of War Information in the United States dissolved, and countries began reconsidering how state propaganda should be framed in the unknowns of the postwar era.[1]

Many of the graphic designers who had been driven out of Nazi Germany, pioneering design at institutions like the Bauhaus, fled to the United States during the war. Introducing modernism through architecture and design, the modern "International Style" grew increasingly popular, eventually intertwining with rapid technological innovation to shape the graphic identities of the corporate world. Between the 1950s and 1970s, consumer brands across categories adopted "graphic standards," detailing precise instructions on how each corporation's freshly modern logos, type, and color were to be reproduced.[2] The American government, distancing itself from a unified aesthetic reminiscent of the Nazis, was slow to do the same. In 1953, the State Department, which was primarily reassigned the responsibilities of the Office of War Information, established the United States Information Agency (USIA) with the goal of "promot[ing] U.S. national interests through a wide range of overseas information programs."[3] Under the direction of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, it was the nation's main propaganda arm during the Cold War. It learned from the successes of Goebbels and Schockel, deploying more antagonistic, artistic graphics meant to scare the public from the "Reds," but stopped short of integrating its design philosophy with a harmonized national visual language.[4]

Federal arts funding in the United States

The visual identity that guided the Apollo 11 mission in 1969 was generally unremarkable. Cold War propaganda had certainly evolved to match what had worked during World War II, but unlike the Nazis, internal government design was not standardized. System manuals, instruction guides, and other documents prioritized functionality over aesthetics. It seemed ridiculous that taxpayers would fund anything more than the legibility required to plant the American flag on the moon. But, at the same time, the United States had turned into a beacon of artistic freedom after becoming one of the essential safeguards of

3.1 Executive Order No. 9608, 10 Fed. Reg. 11223 (Sept. 1, 1945), https://federalregister.gov/executive-order/9608.

3.2 John Harwood, "Eliot Noyes, Paul Rand, and the Beginnings of the IBM Design Program," in *The Interface: IBM and the Transformation of Corporate Design, 1945–1976* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 40–45, https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816670390.003.0002.

3.3 "United States Information Agency," Federal Register, accessed August 5, 2026, https://federalregister.gov/agencies/united-states-information-agency.

3.4 The USIA held active propaganda campaigns through graphic media (posters and film), as well as a number of radio broadcasts and libraries in states abroad, meant to spread the "American message." It did not unify this system abroad with one at home, which is what leads me to this claim, although it is very clear that the Eisenhower administration sought to influence foreign cultures through the propaganda of the agency.

modernism after World War II. Art was more political than ever, becoming the most essential tool in the American arsenal against the Soviet Union as a proxy for liberty in addition to propagandist goals.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965. Signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in one of his many "Great Society" acts to pass sweeping progressive legislation after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy two years earlier, the NEA captured the critical role of art in promoting a free and knowledgeable society.[5] Like much of the Great Society doctrines, it mirrored the progressive reforms of President Franklin D. Roosevelt that led the United States out of the Great Depression before and during its entry into World War II decades earlier. It specifically referenced the Works Progress Administration (WPA), whose art and design sector funded some of the most influential outputs of American art in the twentieth century, a key reference for Schockel in *Das politische Plakat*. The posters produced under the program, Schockel explained, utilized the utmost effective elements, hooking a viewer's eye through a commanding use of color and type, and then providing a simple illustrated ideal of what the viewer should believe in.[6] These posters were meant to promote underrepresented American beauties, such as the diverse landscapes of the country and monuments to the country's identity, but also the WPA itself and the relief Roosevelt was providing to the country during the Depression. Only the frontier of the nation's involvement in World War II led these posters to shift to wartime propaganda.

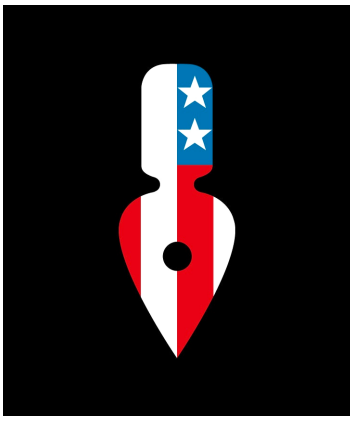
In just ten years, the NEA remodeled this budding vision from a progressive program that would invest in artists who defined the country as a haven for creative freedom to one that revolutionized the government's relationship with design. The early years of the Endowment were slow to focus on graphic art—the NEA directed its funds at rescuing elite performing arts institutions threatened by the "Space Age," such as ballet and opera theaters. While this protected the art forms most in need, its support dwindled among a society now interested in "little a 'arts,' such as popular or mass culture."[7] When President Johnson shocked the nation by not running for re-election in 1968, the future of the Endowment was immediately put into question.

3.5 National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, 20 U.S.C. § 951 (2018).

3.6 Schockel, 10–14.



3.7 Dana Michael Harsell, "My Taxes Paid for That?! or Why the Past Is Prologue for Public Arts Funding," *Political Science and Politics* 46, no. 1 (January 2013): 74–80, https://jstor.org/stable/43284282.



The American corporate visual language

It is somewhat of a surprise that the NEA, a landmark of progressive legislation, first focused on highbrow art, while the succeeding conservative administration under President Richard Nixon transformed the program into one of modern aesthetics. Between the beginning of his administration in 1969 and his scandalous resignation in 1974, the NEA provided the United States with a visual identity that matched the "mass culture" it was surrounded by in the corporate world. Over $80 million was allocated to the agency from the federal budget during

Nixon's term, marking an over 260 percent increase from the $9 million allocated under Johnson.[8] The critic Diana Budds traces the NEA's radical overhaul to a letter written to Nixon from one of his closest friends, Leonard Garment. Garment, a liberal jazz saxophonist-turned-attorney, became an unlikely ally and confidant of Nixon when Nixon worked in his law firm prior to becoming president. His passion for the arts persuaded Nixon to invest in the NEA as he framed it as an investment in his administration's approvals among the public, likening a well-funded NEA to a new beloved WPA in an age of technological innovation:

> In our country, cultural affairs represent an area of under-attention as compared to our technology. By providing dramatically increased support for cultural activities, you may gain increased respect from groups which have hitherto not been favorable to this administration. For an amount of money minuscule in total budget terms, you can demonstrate your commitment to "reordering national priorities" and to emphasizing the quality of life in our society.

Garment remained one of Nixon's most loyal advisors throughout his term, and worked with the second chair of the NEA, Nancy Hanks, to bring his vision to fruition.[9] The expanded resources enabled Hanks to hire some of the most influential corporate graphic designers in the country to apply the same standards popularized in the International Style to the government. Pioneers of modern graphic design, such as Ivan Chermayeff, Richard Danne, and Bruce Blackburn, were commissioned to renovate forty-five agencies in the International Style. Catching the government up to the trends of the rest of the design world, graphic designers harmonized the American visual language through a similar set of standards to the Nazis. Firstly came the grid: popularized by Massimo Vignelli, any elements were to be laid out in a grid compatible with modernist graphic tradition. Afterwards came type, which was to be set in Helvetica, a 1957 Swiss typeface renowned for its neutrality, a principle necessary to a nation championing individual and creative freedom, and logos, which were to be abstracted to evoke the same quality. It is during this period that the renowned design systems for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Washington D.C. Metro, and Public Broadcasting System (PBS) gained their iconic modern identities. Finally, NASA was rewarded with graphics fitting for the Space Age in its famous "Worm" logo and standards manuals.

The stark difference between the Nazi visual language and the renovation of the American federal identity was the level at which the NEA was integrated with American politics. Nixon remained a strong advocate of the Endowment's mission, but the NEA remained an independent agency. It would be preferable if the mission could harmonize an aesthetic that reflected the identity of the seventies, but agencies elected to be renovated, rather than required. Quite commonly, it did not interest agencies to rebrand and make what they thought were unnecessary changes. This lack of enforcement was also clear in the objectivity of the International Style, which did not provoke the masses through enemies and propaganda. Nixon enjoyed that design could be used as a temporary political tool for himself, but it was not part of any larger scheme.

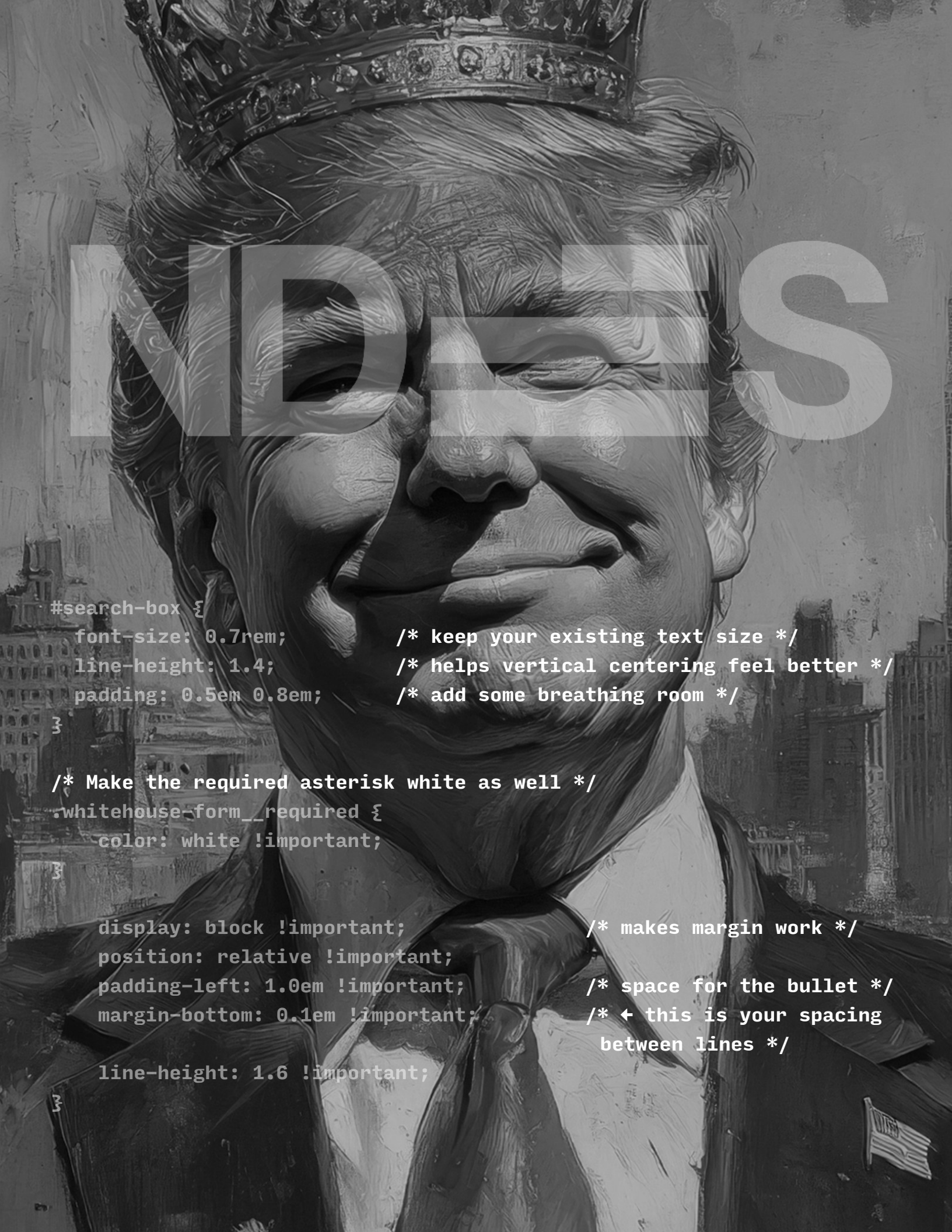
3.8 "Leonard Garment," National Endowment for the Arts, accessed August 5, 2026, https://arts.gov/honors/medals/leonard-garment.

3.9 Diana Budds, "Nixon, NASA, and How the Federal Government Got Design," *Fast Company*, March 6, 2017, https://fastcompany.com/3068659/nixon-nasa-and-how-the-federal-government-got-design.









```
#search-box {
  font-size: 0.7rem;          /* keep your existing text size */
  line-height: 1.4;           /* helps vertical centering feel better */
  padding: 0.5em 0.8em;       /* add some breathing room */
}

/* Make the required asterisk white as well */
.whitehouse-form__required {
    color: white !important;
}

    display: block !important;              /* makes margin work */
    position: relative !important;
    padding-left: 1.0em !important;         /* space for the bullet */
    margin-bottom: 0.1em !important;        /* ← this is your spacing
                                               between lines */
    line-height: 1.6 !important;
}
```

4 Donald Trump and the National Design Studio

SEVENTY YEARS AFTER the display at Palazzo Braschi, Donald Trump announced he would issue a sweeping set of orders to "set [the United States] on the proper course" by "taking America back" from the policies of the previous administration under Joe Biden.[1] Since being elected to a second, non-consecutive presidential term in 2024, Trump has issued over two hundred executive orders, covering swaths of policy ranging from "seafood competitiveness" to the "domestic production of critical medicines."[2] Such orders represent directives to federal agencies until regulated by laws passed in the American legislative chambers, and are largely considered symbolic of the administration's interests and priorities rather than enforceable laws for the American public.[3]

Among the storm of orders passed within his first hundred days was Executive Order 14338, titled "Improving Our Nation Through Better Design." The order, signed in August 2025, directs substantial federal resources to the establishment of a "National Design Studio" under the "America by Design Initiative." In its brief, two-page outline, it allocates funding for the studio, led by a "Chief Design Officer," to revitalize and harmonize the nation's visual language, consistent with the administration's goals, and "enhance the public's trust in high-impact service providers, and dramatically improve the quality of experiences offered to the American public."[4] The studio itself contains two websites, one for the National Design Studio (NDS), containing information about the agency and its progress, and one for the America by Design Initiative (ABDI), containing the influences driving design policy at the federal level. It is not entirely clear why the ABDI exists or is separate, but its multi-stanza manifesto describes how the American state will accelerate the reliability of government websites, applications, and standards to meet contemporary standards. It opens with the following remarks:

> What's the biggest brand in the world? If you said Trump, you're not wrong. But what's the foundation of that brand? One that's more globally recognized than practically anything else.
>
> It's the nation…where he was born. It's the United States of America.

The Initiative references the specific influences of Nixon and the NEA in its new effort to harmonize the government's design, making it easier for the average American to access federal agencies' resources through "an Apple Store like [*sic*] experience."[5]

After its creation, Trump appointed Joe Gebbia, the billionaire cofounder of the online homestay marketplace Airbnb, to lead the NDS, with corporate design executive Peter Arnell serving as its "chief brand architect," a role not mentioned in the executive order or on either the NDS or ABDI websites.[6] Its staff largely comprises other members who worked under Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency before it was terminated, including members who were hired at the department at the age of nineteen.[7]

4.1 Dareh Gregorian et al., "Trump Signals Major Policy Changes as He Begins His Second Term," *NBC News*, January 23, 2025, https://nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-prepares-slew-day-1-orders-immigration-gender-rcna187164.

4.2 "Executive Orders," The White House, accessed August 5, 2026, https://whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-orders.

4.3 Susan A. Hughes and Roger Porter, "Explainer: Executive orders as a governing tool," Harvard Kennedy School, June 4, 2025, accessed August 5, 2026, https://hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policy-topics/democracy-governance/explainer-executive-orders-governing-tool.

4.4 Exec. Order No. 14338, 90 Fed. Reg. 41759 (August 21, 2025), https://federalregister.gov/documents/2025/08/26/2025-16396/improving-our-nation-through-better-design.

4.5 "America by Design," August 21, 2025, accessed August 5, 2026, https://americabydesign.gov.

4.6 Ben Dreith, "Peter Arnell selected as America's first chief brand architect," *Dezeen*, May 4, 2026, accessed August 5, 2026, https://dezeen.com/2026/05/04/peter-arnell-americas-first-chief-brand-architect.

Harmonizing state design in the digital era

The NDS claims its goal is to renovate outdated federal systems for the digital era, just as the NEA aimed to do with federal organizations for the modern era. It maintains some of its principles, such as treating the government's branding as if it were a corporation, but struggles to achieve consistency in the principles driving its priorities of efficiency, accessibility, and aesthetic harmony.

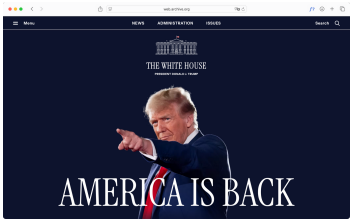
When the presidency exchanged hands in January 2025, the White House unveiled a new brand identity on its website and social media platforms. It came with a new logo and fonts, as well as a new layout to showcase the progress of the second Trump administration. This was not a unique part of the handover; since its inception in 1994 with President Bill Clinton, the White House website has been re-adapted in each administration, typically partnering with outside designers to create a professional look. Web design in the internet's early years was incredibly limited, however, and it was not until President Barack Obama that the White House became connected to the digital world. Both the White House and the President each had websites and social media accounts (e.g., @POTUS on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) that were modernized to distribute information readily to the public.[8] Between 2009 and 2021, digital trends in web and type design changed dramatically. The digital presence of the administration under Joe Biden showcased this most evidently, as the administration partnered with the creative agency Wide Eye (and again with Jonathan Hoefler) to renovate the presidency's White House logo and brand identity across all accounts. The administration further launched new government-run websites and social media accounts to incorporate into its arsenal outside of traditional department or agency pages.[9] Invest.gov, for instance, linked users to a page outlining Biden's proposals for investing in American infrastructure (this page no longer exists); Covid.gov, another, linked users to information related to Covid-19, including treatments and vaccines (this page under the second Trump administration redirects to a WhiteHouse.gov page titled "Lab Leak: the True Origins of Covid-19").

The NDS, leading the redesign of the second Trump administration, similarly took great strides in its renovation of the 2025 iteration of WhiteHouse.gov and the administration's social media accounts. Its design did not partner with outside agencies, instead using free, open-source type from Google Fonts. Its primary identity uses Instrument Serif and Instrument Sans, a pair inspired by Apple's iconic use of Garamond type in its advertising campaigns like "1984" and "Think different," amplifying Gebbia's pursuit of a government following the brand identity of a specific private corporation.[10] This brand identity is set on a backdrop of web elements like a rotating status bar at the top of the White House site and justified paragraphs. It has become synonymous with what designers and software engineers in the 2020s have coined as "vibe-coded," meaning its design patterns match those that are often output by generative artificial intelligence (AI) software. This "vibe"—one that aims to match the aesthetics of Apple and other innov-

4.7 Makena Kelly, "DOGE Operatives Are Joining Donald Trump's New National Design Studio," *WIRED*, August 29, 2025, https://wired.com/story/doge-operatives-joining-national-design-studio.

4.8 Ian Bogost, "Obama Was Too Good at Social Media," the *Atlantic*, January 6, 2017, accessed August 5, 2026, https://theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/01/did-america-need-a-social-media-president/512405.

4.9 "The Biden-Harris White House," Wide Eye, accessed August 5, 2026, https://wideeye.co/case-study/the-white-house-biden-harris-transition.



4.10 Katie Deighton, "The Skinny Font Taking Over Tech Companies and the White House," the *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 2025, https://wsj.com/lifestyle/serif-instrument-skinny-font-e22b8054.

ative technology-design companies—imprints itself in thousands of websites. Rather than hire a firm to cultivate a unique identity through a design system, the average person requires little to no knowledge of the technological skills required to design or code a website, and can instead prompt a generative chatbot to produce the code necessary to realize their vision, or "vibe," on the web.[11] However, this is a dangerous practice. Not only can a generative AI tool accidentally expose crucial security vulnerabilities if not checked properly, but it also dilutes the diversity of creativity in contemporary branding.

Nonetheless, the NDS appears to have embraced this approach in its grand effort to redesign the entire federal government. It is what has enabled the publication of hundreds of webpages tied to government-owned domains, and is significantly easier to blanketly implement since the NDS chose freely available assets to make up its brand identity. An analysis of thirty-five government websites revealed consistent artifacts of "vibe-coding," both in its design and source code, primarily ones that result from a pasting of AI-generated code without cleaning up or otherwise revising its results.[12] The design artifacts included five central repeated elements which are often used by "vibe-coding" designers for their widespread presence across the web among low-staffed or poorly-maintained sites: (i) landing pages that included one sole hero banner or "coming soon" page; (ii) webpage or cursor animations that altered the effects of text or momentum of the page scrolling, popularized by Apple in its "parallax" effect; (iii) text effects such as glowing letters, gradient colors, or paragraphs which highlight words one-by-one as the user interacts with the site; (iv) inconsistent design styles across sites, included mismatched fonts, image and font sizes, logos, and images that fail to load or are displayed at low resolution; and (v) webpages that vary greatly in accessibility or performance when viewed on screens of different resolutions. The source code artifacts revealed instances that were not cleaned up by the NDS, such as code comments that have no visual bearing on the site, but indicate readable instructions in the code. When generated by AI, as appears predominantly in the websites analyzed, these comments typically greatly simplify what the code in each section does and organize it with direct instructions on how the "designer" should implement the code to achieve its "vibe." Many instances also reveal its place in relation to previous iterations; for example, the Aliens.gov redirect has sections which say things like "Make the required asterisk white as well," demonstrating the AI made errors which the "designer" explicitly described needed to be changed to match their deliverables.[13]

4.11 Kevin Roose, "Not a Coder? With A.I., Just Having an Idea Can Be Enough." The *New York Times*, February 27, 2025, https://nytimes.com/2025/02/27/technology/personaltech/vibecoding-ai-software-programming.html.

4.12 See appendix for a more detailed report on the analysis.



4.13 Specific quote taken from the source code of https://whitehouse.gov/aliens.





Embracing artificial intelligence

An NDS approach that relies on "vibe-coding" may additionally explain grammar errors, like the ones on the NDS website, or why websites feature elements like paragraph text which is manually broken up

by adding lines instead of proper text formatting, but this methodology is consistent with the federal government's increased devotion to artificial intelligence, specifically generative AI software.

With immense accelerations in the capabilities of generative AI since 2016, Trump's second administration has made it a central priority. In December 2025, the Department of Defense (currently attempting to rebrand to the "Department of War") announced a $200 million contract with Google's cloud computing department to develop GenAI.mil, a web platform meant to "revolutionize" American military action and internal logistics.[14] In July 2026, the White House announced a $5 billion investment in the Genesis Mission at the Department of Energy, seeking to "harness AI for science" and "accelerate scientific discovery."[15] Across bureaus and agencies, generative AI continues to be at the forefront of the federal government's toolkit. This extends to the approach of the NDS in using it to define the nation's visual language, but also importantly extends to social media and AI-generated imagery, which has been integrated into the nation's visual language with Trump's policy.

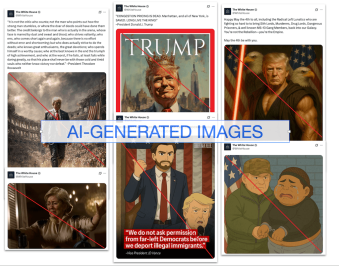
Trump himself embraces the capabilities of AI-generated imagery the most within his administration. Between January and October 2025, the Poynter Institute reported that Trump had personally posted thirty-six images generated by AI, primarily either embellishing himself or attacking his political opponents, on his personally owned social media platform, Truth Social.[16] Although he does not frequently post to Twitter (or "X," since Elon Musk revoked his suspension), the White House account remains consistently active, where the social media team promotes similar imagery. This has most frequently been used to promote short-term campaigns from the administration, such as AI-generated maps that depict the Gulf of Mexico as the "Gulf of America," but also long-term campaigns, such as the administration's attack on immigration and its mass deportation efforts, which the account supports with AI-generated images, cartoons, and videos meant to praise Trump's policy. Many such posts harken back to a period of "return" and have the AI use images and type reminiscent of an American myth "before immigration" to support this policy. The NDS views the widespread use of AI-generated images as part of its visual strategy to rebrand the government while claiming it is done harmlessly; multiple of its newly created websites, such as SafeDC.gov, include AI-generated fake heroic "photographs" of police and border patrol officers, FBI agents, and soldiers to recruit new hires.

Another core use of generative artificial intelligence in the federal government's new visual language is a focus on Trump's image and face. Among some of the most viral images depicting the president, posted both on Trump's Truth Social account and the White House and affiliated Twitter accounts, are AI-generated images of him as a hero walking from the Colosseum surrounded by supporters, the King of the United States (in reference to the nationwide "No Kings" protests), and a bodybuilder with a Star Wars lightsaber and two bald eagles, among many other icons tying the American visual language to his sole leadership.

4.14 Jim Kelly, "Google Public Sector awarded $200 million contract to accelerate AI and cloud capabilities across Department of Defense's Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office (CDAO)," Google Public Sector, July 14, 2025, accessed August 5, 2026, https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/public-sector/google-public-sector-awarded-200-million-contract-to-accelerate-ai-and-cloud-capabilities-across-department-of-defenses-chief-digital-and-artificial-intelligence-office-cdao.

4.15 "Trump Administration Announces More Than $5 Billion for the Genesis Mission, a National Mission on AI for Science," The White House, July 22, 2026, accessed August 5, 2026, https://whitehouse.gov/releases/2026/07/45502.

4.16 Loreben Tuquero, "Trump's White House is testing the limits of AI-driven political messaging," The Poynter Institute, October 28, 2025, accessed August 5, 2026, https://poynter.org/fact-checking/2025/trump-white-house-ai-political-messaging.



5 Conclusions

MANY SCHOLARS WITHIN the last two years have likened the behavior of the second Trump administration to the rise of different fascist and authoritarian regimes worldwide.[1] Although it is difficult to determine the exact influences driving the administration in both policy and culture, it would be erroneous to discard the overwhelming similarities as coincidence. Defining fascism is notoriously hard, because its origins in Italy and subsequent adoption by the Nazis make its most popular iterations greatly different. Adding the unknown of Trump invites further controversy with the concept of American exceptionalism, the notion that the freedom vested in the United States inherently provides checks against any true fascist takeover.

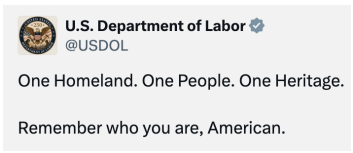
These debates loom heavily over American political discourse today. It is not the purpose nor intention of this essay to conclude whether Donald Trump should be considered a fascist or to set strict standards by which fascist leaders should be considered. Instead, a robust analysis of the well-documented weaponization of visual language in the established fascist rule of Nazi Germany has been compared with a robust analysis of the NDS and the uncategorized visual language of the second Trump administration. Such a comparison illuminates undeniable similarities that prioritize an integration of visual language and policy, and take advantage of new graphic media to push the boundaries of how these two define the visual language of the country as a whole. Returning to Walter Benjamin's definition of fascism as the "aestheticization of politics" describes why scholars have become increasingly interested in the ways the Trump administration uses graphic information, typography, and the new media of web design and generative AI to further its political strategy. The NDS and its subtle integration, however, have been omitted from the picture, largely due to a lack of scholarly in-depth analysis and research.

Comparisons in the visual language between Trump's second administration and fascism would be useless if they were explicitly one-to-one. It is the subtleties of the NDS and what can be described as the "New White House" that indicate the aestheticization of politics in the contemporary age. Unlike the Nazis, the Trump administration has not enforced its visual language as far into the everyday life of Americans as Germans in World War II experienced. There are, so far, few laws restricting an alternative visual language or preventing the public from producing art that contends with a national style. However, there are key similarities in the creation and distribution of propaganda that raise concern. The mission of the NDS to produce thousands of new websites that each target a singular facet of the administration constructs a visual language harmonized with policy through the use of digital tools. The addition of generative artificial intelligence enables the administration to construct realities that enforce this harmonic visual language. Schockel described how the promotion of illustration enables successful propaganda, allowing the Nazis to manipulate the public's perception

5.1 Thorsten Wojczewski, "Fascism and Foreign Policy: Trumpism and the Politics of National Decline and Rebirth," *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (July 1, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf099.







better than photography; introducing technology like generative AI that creates photorealistic illustrations takes Schockel's principle to another level. Combined with images that promote a myth of Trump "returning" the United States to a more prosperous time without certain groups, the methodology overlaps consistently. This is consistent in its message about "making America great again," in immigration policy, in the NDS desire to forge Nixon's NEA vision in a new "Apple Store like [*sic*]" world, and in every other aspect of the image of the nation.



Regardless of how the entire Trump administration ought to be politically categorized or regarded, the evidence reviewed in this essay suggests that the designers and propagandists behind the NDS, ABDI, and New White House are deliberately using the principles of fascist visual language as part of a harmonized link between the way America acts (in laws and enforcement) and looks (in its visual language). There is always a danger in linking these claims so as not to expand the scope of fascism too broadly to where it has no meaning, but the graphic qualities of the administration should be examined as equally relevant in scholarship. When this is considered, such a conclusion does not stray from others made regarding policy and other comparison methods between the two in contemporary research.

This essay further concludes that the increased use of generative AI and AI technology in the government's branding, web design, and social media presence highlights a unique frontier for the aestheticization of politics, which must not extend its principles further than it already has. While existing government websites have largely been untouched so far in the NDS redesign ventures, likely due to their complex backend databases that are difficult to engineer through AI without security risks, the average citizen must remain vigilant in their use of government-designed and operated websites as their trust in the public is gradually eroded, similar to fascism. Groundbreaking new technology makes comparisons with the past considerably more difficult, but the desire to create a national identity through a harmonized aesthetic across the most advanced and popular digital tools today cannot be ignored. It is the hope of this essay that it contributes to more significant scholarship that expands the analysis of a new national visual language beyond the question of whether Donald Trump is a fascist, and steers the discourse about what the American public should look for in the direction of the everyday technology and systems they use.

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Images

Cover and preface images

Cover: 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.

p. i, left: Poster: "Greater Germany: Yes on 10 April" (1938). This election poster emphasizes the essence of connecting to the simplest part of the audience's mind, as represented by the hands raised in a unified Nazi salute.

p. i, 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.

1. The origins of fascist aesthetics

p. 1: Photograph taken outside the Italian Fascist headquarters at Palazzo Braschi in Rome, 1934. The massive poster on the facade of the headquarters features an abstract depiction of Mussolini's face, surrounded by the word *Si* (yes), referencing an upcoming vote on the party's proposed cabinet.

p. 2: Italian National Confederation of Fascist Industrial Unions membership card from 1932, featuring modern typography and illustrations of industrial buildings, with the powerful icon of the *fascio* in the center.

p. 2: 1933 poster, with modern, bold, sans-serif typography supporting war planes flying in the formation of the icon of the *fascio*, which is the light in the darkness of the sky.

2. Harmonizing authoritarianism with design

p. 3: 1937 photomontage reading "Give me 4 years time," highlighting the importance of the swastika and its synonymous leader.

p. 3: Page taken from the Nazi organizational handbook, containing pennants for sub-organizations within the Nazi party, all unified under the colors of the regime, Fraktur type, and the icons of the eagle and the swastika.

p. 4: 1918 Québécois World War I poster depicting a Canadian soldier holding an unconscious nurse from the Red Cross after being attacked by a German warship. This poster was praised by Schockel for its successful graphic elements, which he claimed helped the Allies win the war, and demanded the Nazis improve upon in their propaganda and visual language to win World War II.

p. 4: Two promotional posters for *The Eternal Jew*, a 1940 anti-Semitic propaganda film produced by the Nazis to convince Germans of the "Jewish question." The posters feature Latin type meant to mimic the Yiddish script alongside anti-Semitic illustrations of various Jewish caricatures, amplifying Schockel's principle of prioritizing

illustration over photos, as they could more easily transform reality in the minds of the German people.

p. 5: A "technically and propagandistically excellent photomontage by the Jew Herzfeld [Heartfield]," according to Schockel. The simplicity of the hand and its strong motifs are praised in its 1928 message: "The hand has 5 fingers. With 5 you strike the enemy! Vote list 5 Communist Party!"

p. 6: Infamous Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels visits the "degenerate art" exhibition after it came to Berlin in 1938. He looks at abstract paintings and sculptures by the German artist Emil Nolde. It would later be revealed that Nolde was a proud member of the Nazi Party and a strong-willed anti-Semite.

p. 7: Two photographs depicting the immense prevalence of the swastika and Nazi flag in everyday German life during World War II. As Schockel described, the repetition and existence of the flag in every German space left no room for the populace to think of anything but loyalty to the party. Image created by author.

p. 8: Fraktur (Blackletter/Gothic) type specimen. Letters designed in this style were mandated in virtually all German spaces and official documents, until it was banned in 1941 after it was abruptly "discovered" to be of Jewish origin.

p. 8: Strategic demonstration of the Nazi visual language embodied in a c. 1938 poster harmonizing the Fraktur type of the regime, the colors of the regime, the policy of the regime, and the slogans of the regime: "One people, one empire, one leader."

p. 9: Memorandum issued after Hitler declared Fraktur to be Jewish in favor of Antiqua (Roman type). Note how while the memo itself is written on a typewriter using Antiqua, the letterhead containing the most imperative Nazi elements ironically still uses Fraktur.

3. Branding the American state

p. 10: Standards manual for the bicentennial of the American Revolution principally designed by Bruce Blackburn, coinciding with NEA branding of the U.S. government. Like all other branding efforts, it employed the neutral Helvetica. Overlaid is a logo made for the rebranding of the National Parks Service, which would later be referenced in the identity of the National Design Studio under Trump. Its slogan, "Take Pride in America," was not as provocative as it would be today, highlighting the transformation of American visual language under the second Trump administration. Image created by the author.

p. 12: One of the most iconic WPA posters under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. It repurposes the acronym of the administration to emphasize the various missions of relieving national struggle through employment and beautification. Note how it addresses the most prominent issues facing the nation while not directly attacking America's enemies.

p. 12: 1963 identity for Graphic Arts USA designed by Tom Geismar.

p. 13: Artistic demonstration of the modern EPA logo set at various letter sizes, included in the official standards manual of the agency.

p. 13: The famous NASA "worm" logo, which was phased out but has since resurfaced for its beloved modern and "futurist" aesthetic quality. The National Design Studio emphasizes this logo for its popularity, but likely because it also seeks futurist aesthetics in Trump's focus on NASA and his "Space Force." One of the NDS-designed websites includes the "NASA Force."

p. 13: Color logos for PBS containing the red, white, and blue for the U.S. on the left and various modern saturated colors for the modern era of color television.

4. Donald Trump and the National Design Studio

p. 14: Image generated by AI mocking the "No Kings" protests against Trump's rhetoric of becoming the sole leader of the United States. This AI-generated image was posted on the official White House Twitter account with a red border and Roman capital type "TRUMP," satirizing his *TIME Magazine* cover. Overlaid above is the new National Design Studio logo, set in the principal font of their website, "Neue Montréal," designed by the Canadian type foundry Pangram Pangram. This identity is inconsistent with the type used for the White House or across any of their other websites. Overlaid below are snippets of source code copied directly from government websites analyzed in the paper's study, which have code comments indicating that the code for its design was generated by AI, likely ChatGPT. Image created by the author.

p. 16: Screenshot from the WhiteHouse.gov website from after the transition to the second Trump administration. Showcased is the NDS-loved font Instrument Serif, used as the administration's official font for its inspiration from Apple's Garamond cut.

p. 17: Unaltered screenshot from Aliens.gov, which contains a bizarre web structure, indicating front-end generative AI artifacts.

p. 17: Unaltered screenshot from SafeDC.gov, containing AI-generated images of Trump with law enforcement standing in front of the Washington Monument.

p. 17: Unaltered screenshot from AI.gov. The oversight of the slogan not displaying properly on any smaller-sized displays contradicts the supposed priority of the NDS of accessible design.

p. 18: A selection from the Poynter Institute of AI-generated images posted by the official White House account on Twitter, either heroically depicting Trump or attacking political adversaries of the administration.

p. 19: The hero banner of AmericaByDesign.gov, where the manifesto of the National Design Studio lies. The repetition of a hero banner with one big logo at the top and a message with a button as depicted is further indicative of "vibe-coding" elements generated by AI. The type is still set in the Canadian Neue Montréal, and beneath it is an AI-generated video of a waving American flag.

p. 19: A digital poster uploaded to the official Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Twitter account aimed at recruiting Americans to join Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the "fight against illegal immigration." The team creating the post placed images for contemporary recruitment efforts against an American propaganda poster from 1936 during World War II. The post was captioned, "Which way American man?" a reference to the 1978 anti-Semitic and white supremacist book "Which Way Western Man?" warning against the "erosion of Western civilization."

p. 19: A caption from a video (not pictured) uploaded to the official Department of Labor Twitter account, evidently drawing from the Nazi slogan pictured previously of, "One people, one empire, one leader." The video in the Tweet shows a statue of George Washington under the text "Remember who you are," with various paintings and posters from American history, including war bonds posters.

p. 20: An AI-generated image of Trump depicted as the pope posted on his Truth Social account. This image of Trump as a single leader like the Pope contends with his push towards extreme religious conservatism, and was negatively received by many, including his own supporters. It is perhaps one of the only recent instances in which the administration's attempt to shift the Overton window with its visual language was instantly acknowledged.

Appendix

Study on government websites and artifacts of generative AI

This study analyzed thirty-five (35) government websites and artifacts of generative AI in their source code as defined:

- "government websites" refers to websites with the .gov or .mil domain, registered and operated by the United States government. Most websites analyzed were created after Trump returned to office as president on January 20, 2025. These sites were: 250.gov;* AI.gov;*† AIExports.gov;*† Aliens.gov;*† AmericaByDesign.gov;*† COVID.gov;* DOGE.gov;*† EarlyCareers.gov;* FosteringTheFuture.gov;*† Fraud.gov;* Freedom.gov;* GenAI.mil; Genesis.Energy.gov;* GetActive.gov;* GreatHealthcare.gov;*† HSTF.gov;* MAHA.gov;* MerryChristmas.gov;* Moms.gov;* NASAForce.gov;* NDStudio.gov;* ProductOfUSA.gov;*† RealFood.gov;* Retire.OPM.gov;* SafeDC.gov;* SaveAmerica.gov;*† TechForce.gov;* TechProsperityCorps.gov;* TrumpAccounts.gov;* TrumpCard.gov;* TrumpIRA.gov;*† TrumpRx.gov;* War.gov; Why.gov;*† Waste.gov.*
- "artifacts [of generative AI]" refers to several design elements which often remain visible after the use of generative artificial intelligence technology. This includes front-end elements visible to all users visiting the websites and back-end elements visible to users who analyze the website's public source code.

* Elements of the front-end were categorized as: (i) landing pages that included one sole hero banner or "coming soon" page; (ii) webpage or cursor animations that altered the effects of text or momentum of the page scrolling, popularized by Apple in its "parallax" effect; (iii) text effects such as glowing letters, gradient colors, or paragraphs which highlight words one-by-one as the user interacts with the site; (iv) inconsistent design styles across sites, included mismatched fonts, image and font sizes, logos, and images that fail to load or are displayed at low resolution; and (v) webpages that vary greatly in accessibility or performance when viewed on screens of different resolutions.

† Elements of the back-end were categorized as descriptive, plain-English instructions that remained in code comments or blocks.

Results found that 94 percent (33 out of 35) of websites analyzed contained artifacts visually present on the front-end of the website, and 31 percent (11 out of 35) contained artifacts clearly present on the back-end of the website. All websites that revealed artifacts visually present on the back-end of the website also contained artifacts visually present on the front-end of the same website.