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Review

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REVIEW

Book Review: *Nazism and Neo-Nazism in Film and Media* by Jason Lee

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This review explores Jason Lee's timely work *Nazism and Neo-Nazism in Film and Media*. Lee raises several intriguing, and at times, challenging arguments about the position of the far-right as a mainstream power in modern society. Lee's work covers films, television, video games, and other media which raises possibilities for further discussions, as noted in this review. However, this review suggests that Lee's work too often abandons its remit as a study focused on film and media to instead explore philosophy and politics, and also highlights problematic discussions in Lee's text.

Keywords: Nazism; Neo-Nazi; Politics; Philosophy; Trump

Nazism and Neo-Nazism in Film and Media is a ranging text moving from the representation of Nazis in film to their global spread and influence in modern politics. Throughout, Jason Lee makes a contentious but interesting argument that Nazism is in the mainstream and not the fringes of society. Trump's America is an overt example, but Lee argues this trend is a global issue noting the influence and normalisation of the far-right that has forced policy shifts among national centralist parties. Indeed, we live in a society that demonises the weak and poor (Lee points to the tabloid presses that present those on welfare as 'parasites') which are 'core values' of Nazism (Lee, 2018: 177).

Looking at film and media surrounding both Nazism and neo-Nazism is ambitious as either one would provide enough discussion for a fair monograph, for instance with Sabine Hake's *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History, and Democracy* (2012); however, Lee does well to connect the two. Discussion on film and television is mostly provided in the second and third chapters of the text; the second chapter

mostly focuses on depictions of Nazism and the Holocaust, moving from *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* (1975), to *The Reader* (2008), and *The Hunger Games* (2012), the latter of which Lee claims presents a Nazi work ethic (which Lee suggests is also found in capitalism). Here arguments on 'authenticity' are made, for instance, that Naziplotation allows the viewer to recognise and engage with the overt modification of history, whereas 'authentic' films such as *Son of Saul* (2015) present Nazis as 'the embodiment of evil' and so offer only a 'singular depiction' (Lee, 2018: 41–42). Neo-Nazi films are discussed briefly, with Lee noting that they offer 'ontological crisis' as a plot device, showing how 'normal' individuals descend to violence (Lee, 2018: 45); a stronger link could be made between this argument and later points about the acceptability of the far-right in modern society. More space is given to the Netflix series *NSU German History X* (2016) which follows teen neo-Nazis, where Lee notes how neo-Nazism is presented not as a group looking to history but instead towards a hopeful future. This is potentially appealing narrative to youth and Lee explains how neo-Nazis on *Stormfront.com* have found interest in parts of the show – an issue that deserves further academic discussion elsewhere.

In the third chapter, looking at Nazism and comedy, specifically *Look Who's Back* (2015), Lee argues that fiction can be used to educate and warn of history, as well as to detach the evil 'Other' from ourselves (Lee, 2018: 84). These are justified arguments, although the chapter is short and a wider exploration on a relatively niche field would have been intriguing – indeed, most of the chapter focuses on the novel of *Look Who's Back* rather than the film adaption, which seems to contrast with the purpose of the text. That Lee's focus moves away from film and media is emphasised in the following chapter on 'Necrospectives and Media Transformations' which heavily employs philosophical texts including Nietzsche, Baudrillard, and Levinas, among others. Without familiarity of such works, this chapter (and sections of the book overall) makes for complex reading. The separation of film and philosophy in Lee's book is jarring, whereas a merger of the two subjects (using philosophical text to support debates arising from film) could have been more conducive.

The following chapter on globalization offers an interesting overview of Nazism worldwide, importantly noting that through Trump and the media the splintered

right have united. The chapter concludes with a brief but constructive argument on Nazism in video games, arguing that the universality of gaming demonstrates the global branding of Nazism, and that Nazi games may even 'mirror' society – these are interesting arguments for expansion; Lee's work is strongest when looking at media in detail as such maintaining this focus would have been beneficial.

There are other issues with Lee's work. For instance, he explores the rising anti-Semitism in America noting that between Trump's inauguration in January and March 2017 there were over one hundred bombing attempts on Jewish community centres and synagogues in America (Lee, 2018: 130). Yet, Lee gives no reference for this, and upon researching the matter it materialises that the bomb threats (not bombing attempts) had been orchestrated by a teenager in Israel, not by American neo-Nazis (Beaumont, 2017); in Lee's text this is unclear, and is questionable evidence of rising global neo-Nazism. In a text that bemoans the manipulation of the media by Trump and his claims of 'fake news' this is a problematic misrepresentation. Equally, Lee claims that '[i]nstead of changing the world, citizens are more likely to photograph and record it' (Lee, 2018: 62), referring to this interaction as potentially able to provoke change but equally leading to a 'narcissistic' 'false sense of activity'. There is, perhaps, some truth to this, but Lee's comments read as patronising and dismissive, especially as recently several videos have spread on social media showing police brutality in America and have raised public awareness of the issue. Moreover, the Black Lives Matter movement started as an online campaign, and the #MeToo campaign has highlighted injustice and sexual abuse in the film industry and in society.

The concluding chapter of Lee's work ostensibly focuses on modern politics. For instance, Lee points to Trump's manipulation of the media, both social and news-broadcast, as evidence of Nazism entering the mainstream. Trump's politics often do align with the far-right, his comments on immigration and travel bans do point to extremism in mainstream politics. Lee equally argues that Brexit is evidence of the social shift towards the right. Yet, Brexit divided traditional boundaries of the political left and right (Moore, 2016), and relating Brexit to Nazism ignores the complexity of the vote and this political divide. Indeed, the relevance of Brexit to a text on

Nazism in the media is lacking. This said, Lee's concluding argument explaining how Nazis dehumanise themselves is potent, as is Lee's challenge to the normalisation of Nazism and far-right extremism in modern society and media. More emphasis on film and media is needed in Lee's work where the focus is often fragmented. Nonetheless, Lee's work raises thought-provoking points for ongoing discussions on the acceptability and spread of the far right in modern society, and how this affects our humanity.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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