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Steven Heller – *The Swastika and Symbols of Hate: Extremist Iconography Today* Creative Review

Daniel Cookney

In an age of heavily marketed multinational brands, consumers regularly encounter graphic symbols that are capable of triggering quite specific responses. Yet there is one especially potent mark that may be Western society's agreed logo for evil; a work of simple geometry that acted as a propeller for the 20th Century's most feared killing machine: the swastika.

Yet despite its provoking widespread revulsion, in his latest publication, Steven Heller acknowledges that the Nazi seal still remains a source of fascination for graphic designers. Not least, for Heller himself. In fact, this book, *The Swastika and Symbols of Hate: Extremist Iconography Today*, is certainly not the first time that you will have found him writing about it. As one of, if not *the* most prolific critics of graphic design, it was perhaps inevitable that he would have accepted the difficult task of explaining how this ancient form – once a sacred religious motif – was unearthed by the Third Reich and turned, as he puts it, into “a visual obscenity”. That challenge already culminated in Heller's *The Swastika: Symbol Beyond Redemption?* almost 20 years ago. He has since contributed other articles on the topic to the likes of *Print* magazine and *Design Observer*; each attempting to come to terms with both the historical aspects of the swastika and the writer's own engagement with it largely as an emblem of the past. What makes it different this time is that, alarmingly, he is forced to challenge the swastika's recent resurrection alongside a whole range of other symbols signalling newer nationalist movements.

“The book is intended as a reaction to the Trump, Falange, Salvini, Orban and other right-wing resurgences,” he confirms while pointing to 2017's Unite The Right rally in Charlottesville, USA (where Nazi and other far-right flags were flown) as “the tipping point”.

“I feel miserable that it's coming back. But when you look at the history of the 20th century, it was inevitable. It was also inevitable that many with white superiority as their gospel will take unkindly to the growth of ‘minority’ population migrations. My new version is just underscoring what I already felt about a symbol that represents this wave plus more antipathy thrown in for good measure.”

His own antipathy for both this insignia and the intent behind its resurfacing hasn't stopped him producing an intricate and highly visual body of research shifting through imagery that once furthered Hitler's retrograde ideologies through to output by Boris Artzybasheff that satirized the swastika during the Second World War. Yet in Heller's exploration of its origins – detailing how its markings were found at Troy, on antiquities from China and India and in Native American beadwork – the book still stops short of invoking its re-evaluation: something that his earlier *Symbol Beyond Redemption?* had clearly questioned.

“My thoughts have changed,” he says – acknowledging what are the swastika's forever unavoidable links to the scourge of antisemitism (something that, itself, has experienced an upsurge in both the left and right of the political sphere in recent times). “It should be banned in the West as a symbol of hate. Now, I realise that is hard to enforce and that it goes counter to my liberal notions of free speech. But it is indeed a criminal emblem for white supremacists and ultraright populists. The war of symbols is not going to be won by ‘neutralising’ it.”

And then there are all the associated memes. The internet and what Heller describes as the “readymade toxicity” that can emanate from social media has offered testing grounds for neo-fascist imagery largely posted by individuals emboldened by the web’s anonymity. Arguably, it is here that this visual material and its associated politics are predominantly distributed and normalised through their repeated use. For example, the flag for the fictitious nation of Kekistan – itself a rework of the German Reichskriegsflagge with its prominent swastika replaced and further adorned with elements relating to, notorious troll-friendly bulletin board, 4chan – has become popularised alongside a hijacked Pepe the Frog (first stolen from Matt Furie’s Boy’s Club comic) as indicators of the so-called ‘alt-right’ movement. In turn, they have been joined by a whole series of poorly drawn racist toad avatars known as ‘groypers’ and, more recently, a nihilistic amphibious clown character called Honkler.

Although some might argue that these represent some harmless distractions from what is a niche online community, Berlin-based research fellow, Tom Vandeputte has also discussed them in terms of their continuation of fascism’s tendency towards the appropriation of symbols. As Vandeputte Tweeted, when reflecting on the manifesto of the gunman who killed 51 people at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand earlier this year: “fascism doesn’t have a language of its own; just as it only offers a ‘pseudo-politics’ – a perverted version of struggle, change, revolution, hope”.

“It is textbook media relations,” notes Heller. “Latch onto issues with relevance and milk them. Hitler was a ‘designer’ of sorts, but it took his media manipulators to make his regime spring alive.”

But who are the people now willing to create the look and feel of the propaganda issued by hate-peddling organisations in 2019? And what does this say about their own ethics? In the case of Generation Identity – the European anti-immigration group that employs the Greek letter Lambda as its insignia in some nod to the Spartan fight against invasion – it is actually headed by neo-Nazi Martin Sellner, an Austrian graphic designer who was once given 100 hours of community service for placing a swastika on a synagogue. In fact, his group actively recruit young people and run classes on graphic design and marketing: then placing these activities at the forefront of its campaigning for the removal of Islam from Europe. However, elsewhere, the visual output appears to be uncredited, derivative and, in many cases, quite amateur. But Steven Heller doesn’t see the unsophisticated approach as being an obstacle: having already identified how a swastika doesn’t have to be well produced “to make its mark or to evoke visceral reactions”.

“I’m in Italy now, and the Lega Nord has gained massive power not because their design is good, which it is not, but because it is saying what some people want to hear,” he says before reminding us that it’s not really the design or the designers that we should fear.

“Those people are behind the scenes, not making logos,” he offers, adding “beware of Steve Bannon: he knows how to use all the elements and push all the buttons.”

[ends]