

Culture is fascism's first battle



HENRY A. GIROUX
OPINION

Cruelty has always been a political weapon, but in the current historical moment it has acquired a distinctive esthetic form.

By MAGA esthetics, I mean a visual and affective regime in which domination is staged as spectacle, violence is rendered stylish, and exclusion is performed as common sense. It is an esthetic that does not persuade through argument or policy. It educates through images, bodies, gestures and scenes of humiliation, training people to feel obedience before they are asked to think critically at all.

This esthetic did not emerge from nowhere.

The esthetics of cruelty haunt the darkest chapters of modern history, from the genocidal destruction of Indigenous peoples in North America and the enslavement of Africans, to the industrialized torture and extermination carried out by Nazi Germany.

In each case, cruelty was not only enacted; it was ritualized, justified and made culturally legible. Violence became thinkable because it was made visible in ways that erased the humanity of targeted groups.

What is chilling today is how close this logic has moved to home.

The march of neo-Nazi groups through Gore Park and downtown Hamilton was not an isolated eruption of extremism. It was a public performance of hate, a rehearsal staged in civic space, designed to intimidate, provoke and normalize a white nationalist presence.

Such spectacles belong to a broader transnational culture in which cruelty is increasingly displayed rather than hidden, and in which reactionary movements borrow freely from U.S. authoritarian esthetics.

These displays are not disconnected from the legalized terror inflicted elsewhere. In the United States, immigration enforcement agencies such as ICE routinely stage violence against immigrants and people of colour as bureaucratic necessity, transforming raids, detentions and deportations into media-friendly spectacles. Cruelty here is administrative, racialized and increasingly theatrical.

What travels north is not ideology alone but style: the normalization of intimidation, the glorification of force and the conversion of suffering into political theatre.

Yet something more is at work than the acceleration of state violence. There is a visible pleasure in cruelty, an enjoyment taken in the suffering of designated enemies, coupled with an ugly esthetic that turns domination into entertainment. Violence is not only justified; it is consumed.

In the MAGA esthetic, cruelty appears in multiple registers, most visibly in the “Mar-a-Lago face”: plastic smiles, exaggerated cosmetic enhancement, and beauty-pageant nostalgia staged against prisons, detention centres and armed authority.

Taken as a whole it signals a politics that treats the body as a surface to be engineered, disciplined and branded, a mask of dominance and emotional vacancy masquerading as strength.

Among MAGA men, a fever dream of authoritarian masculinity proliferates across TikTok, YouTube, X and other platforms.

They stage themselves as strongmen-in-training: squared jaws clenched in hostility, hypermuscular bodies forged in gym rituals that double as moral theatre, and rigid, armoured postures where repression hardens into aggression and vulnerability is converted into cruelty.

Digital culture intensifies this pedagogy, turning aggression into identity and domination into performance. These are not harmless displays but embodied lessons, teaching that power resides in hardness, compassion is weakness and democracy itself is a feminized liability.

Canada is not immune to these lessons.

When neo-Nazi symbols appear in our parks, bodies draped in white sheets and faces concealed, echoing the Ku Klux Klan and the ICE shock troops occupying U.S. cities, the MAGA esthetic is no longer imported but enacted.

When migrants are cast as threats rather than neighbours, and cruelty is excused as realism or security, the esthetic logic of MAGA politics has already crossed the border. The danger lies not only in borrowed slogans or flags, but in the slow acclimation to spectacle, fear and exclusion as ordinary features of public life. Fascism has always understood that culture is its first battlefield.

Long before rights are revoked or institutions dismantled, people are trained to desire authority, admire domination, and mistake cruelty for strength. Aesthetics functions here as pedagogy, shaping affect, memory, and consent.

To confront the cruelty of MAGA esthetics in Canada is therefore not a matter of taste or decorum. It is a democratic necessity.

Making these esthetics visible disrupts their power, exposing how violence is staged, how hatred is normalized and how fear is cultivated.

Culture can educate for cruelty, but it can also educate for resistance.

The choice is neither abstract nor distant. It is already being rehearsed in our streets.

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COURTESY OF EVA GUSE

In this 1934 photo from the Berlin Zoo are Else Fricke along with her two daughters, Hannelore, 4, left, and Eva, 3. For Family Day, from Berlin, Thomas Froese writes about his now 94-year-old Tante Eva.

How our family stories shape our lives today



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

BERLIN The German capital knows winter these days. An ice storm recently cancelled hundreds of flights including yours. But Tante Eva, your mother's sister, has her warmth.

You're visiting while returning to Canada from work in East Africa. It's good. In any season, Berlin, your birth city, still makes your blood jump.

Eva, 94, lives on her own in the same Friedrichsruher flat she's called home for more than 60 years. Defying age — five flights of stairs help — she hosts you with cakes and coffee and her gentle, thoughtful spirit.

Old photos, meticulously preserved, are brought out. Especially interesting is one from 1934, the three ladies wearing hats. Standing with their mother, Else, is little three-year-old Eva and sister, Hannelore, 4, who would later become your mother. They're at the Berlin Zoo.

Also posing, if that's the right word, on Else's lap is a young wildcat that's not entirely small. Gosh. Such keepsakes could apparently be had from the zoo in 1930s Berlin. It was, maybe, like the Marineland you knew in the 1970s, a place not of thrill rides, but where people could somehow connect with the animals.

Hardships would come. First, another world war, the second one in 20 years. By the time Hannelore and Eva were teenagers — it was always the two girls — Berlin was marred and divided beyond recognition. The war-ending Battle of Berlin killed hundreds of thousands, including tens of thousands of civilians.

Later, Hannelore left for Canada, married your German-Canadian father and started a family, only to return to Berlin pregnant with you. After losing her marriage, then her two children in a bitter international custody fight, and then losing hope in a larger sense, she died in Berlin by suicide.

But this isn't the end of this story, like it's not the end of any story of any family anywhere that knows deep loss or hard times. After all, you're in Berlin in 2026 on good terms.

It's a place of peace and easy reflection, even with the city's painful history. Most museums and memorials are free for this reason.

Not so long after your mother's death, your Oma and Tante Eva boarded a plane, Berlin to Toronto. To see you two kids. Imagine. You're just a boy in the 1970s. Years later you'd realize, my God, the grace those adults had to muster to pull off that visit, swimming in that great sadness, that grown-up grief of losing a wife and daughter and sister.

You remember it like a home movie, you the eight-year-old with a mop of boyhood hair. You're at

home in Niagara with your sister and father and his big sideburns and purple Pontiac Parisienne. Now Tante Eva, who never had children, and Oma, visiting all the way from Berlin. They just had to see you. So they crossed the ocean. It's really something.

You're each there, full of nothing but the moment and, somehow, your broken togetherness. Then one day where do you all go? To the animals at Marineland.

Later, during your first solo visit to Berlin as a young man, Eva gifted you family valuables, including the 8-mm film that she'd shot during that 1970s Niagara visit. And for more than 50 years she's sent packages and gifts to Canada, now to your own children.

She's but one example of a storied thread connecting generations with honour. And isn't this why we love old family photos? They tell so much, including how children can heal the soul. And in this there's something about the resilience of the larger human family.

Thanks, then, for Family Day, for a break, for something different in places like much of Canada.

With any luck the holiday, not widely known globally, will grow. Because everyone has a family story. Then it gets stitched into the fabric of any given community. If it weren't so, nobody would know where they come from, never mind where they're going.

FIND THOMAS FROESE AT THOMASFROESE.COM AND THOMASFROESE.SUBSTACK.COM.

LETTERS

Overdose crisis needs a champion

Re: Hamilton sets new record for opioid overdose calls — again, Feb. 12

How do the authorities involved take control of this tragic situation? It is a many-headed beast, and the only ones to profit at present are the drug dealers.

In January, there were a record 143 calls for suspected overdoses. Our paramedics get tied up on these calls, perhaps at the expense of other citizens, while the wait times at our emergency departments continue to increase.

Our present approach to the overdose issue seems to be a Band-Aid solution. A comprehensive, multifaceted approach that includes law enforcement, public health, additional treatment and supervised injection centres and a means to address the factors contributing to addiction needs to be employed. Who will lead the way to see our city out of this challenging issue? *Ray Varey, Dundas*

Fund health care, not advertisements

Every day, we see and hear ads “Paid for by the government of Ontario” — in other words, “paid

for by the people of Ontario.” Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent without consultation of the people.

Instead of cutting funding to public health care, ask the people where they would prefer to see those millions spent. I'm sure public health care would be the choice. Put our money where it is needed. *Ian Martin, Hamilton*

City should buy college residence

We all know the Doug Ford government is not going to increase social assistance and disability support rates beyond inflation — not now. Not ever. So what can be done to help all the unhoused people trying to live on these programs or on minimum wage jobs? Frank Soberg outlined a great idea in the Spec recently. Apply for federal and provincial support, in addition to municipal money, to buy Linden Hall, a former Mohawk College 150-room residence. The city has wasted millions — most recently \$18 million because of the lack of preparation against a cyberattack. More millions were lost by not planning properly for the temporary shelters on Barton Street. We can't continue to leave people on the streets. Here

is a way to provide 150 of them with a space to call home. Can we not just do it?

Carol Town, Hamilton

Act of kindness appreciated

I was recently shopping at a small Asian grocery on Queen Street. After racking up a \$40 total, I found myself without a debit card. I had \$20 in change in my car and told the cashier I had to leave the rest, as they decline credit cards.

However, a very kind woman behind me insisted on paying the rest and refused my offers to e-transfer her. Thank you! I shall pay it forward. *Callie Archer, Burlington*

Inmates could clear sidewalks

Hamilton has a jail/detention facility, right? Instead of the inmates sitting around, watching a big screen and exercising in the weight room, how about handing them a snow shovel to help these people who can't do it themselves? Supervised, of course. Same in the warmer weather — why not get them to walk the beaches and clean up the shores? *Rusty Escott, Dunnville*