

## GOOSE-STEPPING FASHION: NAZI INSPIRATION

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### **Abstract:**

In various forms of visual media, images of Hitler and Third Reich (Nazi) regalia, symbols and uniforms continue to influence aspects of popular culture. One such popular culture medium is fashion. This essay presents three areas of fashion that use Hitler and Nazi uniforms and regalia as fashion inspiration: 1). Nazi chic, 2). collections by fashion designers, and 3).hate couture (i.e., white power clothing). In particular, the use of Nazi inspiration in fashion is focused in the areas of punk fashion, bondage and fetish clothing, Asian Nazi chic (including Harajuku fashion), designer runway lines, and hate couture specifically designed for white supremacists. Also included are instances of Nazi fashion used as political statement (especially as part of the Hitler/fascist analogy meme) and Nazi imagery used as an advertising tool. Implications, including ethical concerns, are presented and discussed.

**Keywords:** Nazi chic, hate couture, punk, white power clothing, Hitler analogy, T-shirt

Adolf Hitler was one of the most influential people of the modern era. The atrocities of the Holocaust and the near destruction of the world by the Third Reich were seminal events in the history of the western world and the repercussions of Hitler's Nazi regime continue to affect global politics and ideologies. Images of Hitler, his officers, Nazi Party rallies, military mobilizations, the brownshirted 'stormtroopers' of the SA and the sinister SS squads are part of the visual history of the world. Hitler was well aware of the power of clothing and symbols, especially uniforms and the swastika motif. The well-tailored uniforms of the Third Reich played an important role in the mobilization of the propaganda machine orchestrated by Goebbels (Welch, 2002). Whether through books, movies, television or other forms of media, the history, legacy and images of the Nazis continue to be a part of our cultural reference and an influence on popular culture. The Third Reich—or more appropriately, the 'look' of the Third Reich—is also

having a surprising influence on one aspect of popular culture: fashion. This essay will examine three areas of fashion inspired by Adolf Hitler and the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (Nazi Party): 1). Nazi chic, 2). collections by fashion designers, and 3). ‘hate’ couture.

## **Nazi Chic**

‘Nazi chic’ is a term used to describe the use of Nazi-themed images, styles and items in aspects of popular culture, including fashion. Nazi chic garments and accessories include actual or reproduction Nazi uniforms, hats, boots, belts, as well as regalia (the insignias, symbols and other official items that represented the Nazi Party) [1]. One of the most visual social groups to wear Nazi chic was the punk rock subculture in the United Kingdom of the 1970s. Punk rock followers and musicians wore clothing and other items, such as jewelry and armbands, embellished with Nazi symbols, especially the swastika. In Nazi chic, the motif of choice is the swastika. Symbolizing luck and auspiciousness, the swastika dates back to at least the Neolithic Period, and was used in many Indo-European cultures and Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism (Wilson, 1894). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hitler and the Nazi Party adopted it as the symbol of the Nazi Party and the Third Reich; soon the swastika became the symbolic embodiment of evil. Because of the association of the swastika with Hitler and the Nazis, the swastika often produces a visceral reaction, especially among people who lived through or studied the events of World War II. The punk generation, made up of young people who only remembered hearing about Nazi horrors and the war, did not view the swastika with the same revulsion as their parents and grandparents. Instead, punks wore the swastika as an outward symbol of their rejection of the post-war society, British culture, and the political and economic climate of the 1970s (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Punk Jacket, 1977*. Image © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS.

The swastika and other Nazi symbols were incorporated into garments manufactured and sold by two of the leading British designers of the punk look during the 1970s, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood. Their punk style was designed specifically to be worn to challenge the British Establishment, create controversy, and attract attention. McLaren and Westwood's boutiques soon became a major source for punk rock clothing, including Nazi chic fashions.

Two of the most famous garments designed by Westwood and McLaren were the 'Destroy' swastika shirt (Changing styles, 2004) and the red swastika T-shirt worn by Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols in the 1980 film *The Great Rock 'N' Roll Swindle* (Figure 2).

Both of these garments are considered as iconic of the punk rock look of the 1970s. The 'Destroy' shirt has taken its place in fashion history, but Sid Vicious' swastika T-shirt recently created a stir in the music memorabilia world when it was placed for auction in May 2010, with a starting bid of £10,000 or approximately \$15,444 USD (in 2010 dollars). There had been Internet



Figure 2. Sid Vicious' swastika T-shirt.  
Image courtesy of Helen Hall and Dig  
Gallery (2011).

chatter previously on the ideology of Sid Vicious and the Sex Pistols (“Was Sid Vicious a Nazi?,” 2003; “Why did Sid Vicious wear Nazi shirt?,” 2008; “Were the Sex Pistols racist?,” 2008); in the month before the sale, Internet articles revived these questions about Vicious and the potential buyer of the shirt (Harper, 2010; “Sid Vicious was a nazi-punk?,” 2010). The most popular opinion expressed was doubt that Sid Vicious wore the swastika shirt to show allegiance or support for white nationalism. Instead, Sid Vicious is believed to have worn the shirt specifically to generate controversy, gain attention, and as a way to show contempt for society in general (Harper, 2010; “Sid Vicious was a nazi-punk?,” 2010). People commenting on the possible motives of the buyer of the shirt appeared to assume that the shirt would be purchased for its value as a punk memorabilia item (Hall, 2010a; Harper, 2010; Hudson, 2010). Because of its swastika symbol, the shirt did produce a strong reaction from one online journalist, who called the potential buyer of the shirt a “moron” and stated

Well, even if you're not a Nazi, if you're walking around with a fucking swastika on your chest or own this shirt somewhere, people are going to think you are. Good luck convincing them otherwise. Even if you buy it and don't wear it in

public, what are the chances you're going to display this prominently in your home without shame? Slim to none....Do you really want to be some douchebag who owns something that symbolizes the murder of tens of millions of people? It will be forever associated with that. (Harper, 2010)

The shirt did sell, as announced by Helen Hall online and via Twitter (2010b). The amount received for the shirt was not disclosed, nor was the buyer of the shirt. However, Hall reported that "The buyer hopes to exhibit it so everyone will be able to see it in the flesh! Watch this space...(2010b.)" As of June 2011, no exhibition had occurred or has been scheduled (Hall, personal communication).

Historically, punk music fans reject the notion that they are white supremacists, but often punk rockers are mistaken as white supremacists. The confusion is understandable. The punk music/Nazi chic trend was forming at the same time that the National Front, a white power skinhead movement in the United Kingdom, was also forming. Because there are tonal similarities between punk and white power music, as well as some shared clothing and appearance practices, these two movements became linked. Punk rockers, however, maintain their use of Nazi symbols is for shock value, to deliberately antagonize mainstream society. In a 2005 interview, Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees stated that she wore a Nazi armband for most of 1976 to shock the Establishment and "as a glamour thing"; but she also admitted "I have to be honest but I do like the Nazi uniform. I shouldn't say it but I think it's a very good-looking uniform" (Goddard, 2005). Mark Hamm believes that people in the punk movement who used Nazi symbols on clothing and accessories had no "ideological construct", and used those symbols for their shock value—or, as Hamm (1993) suggests, the "ideology of fuckyouism" (30). A long-time punk rock fan who writes for the webzine *The Summer of Hate* has nothing but disdain for anyone who believes that punks are neo-Nazis because of the use of swastika and other Nazi symbols, stating "[I]f anyone got into Nazism because of it [punk rock] they soon left punk rock, and good riddance, too. I don't want stupidity on my side anyway" ("Punk and the Swastika," n.d.).

Nazi chic is also one of the most popular trends in fetish and bondage costumes; the black uniforms of the *Schutzstaffel* (the SS) were used for that purpose by the erotic underground society of Berlin before World War II (Craik, 1993). SS uniforms are still extremely popular as fetish costumes, because of their association with absolute power and the creation of fear. Nazi chic fetish costumes feature the silhouette, design lines and colors of the SS uniforms; actual Nazi insignias and regalia, such as Nazi Party pins, Nazi buttonhole pins and the SS (Sig Rune) ‘double thunderbolt’ are not necessarily used. For fetish practitioners, the attraction is not related to Nazi ideology but rather to the symbolic power of Nazi images. However, there are a significant number of neo-Nazi fetish practitioners that advertise on the Internet and those sites do show people costumed in reproduction Nazi uniforms, complete with Nazi regalia. For these fetish practitioners, the uniform and the ideology are one; the websites will include white nationalist propaganda, as well as links to white nationalist organization websites [2].

The most prevalent use of Nazi chic occurs in Asia, and is a trend that appears to be gaining popularity. In the June 2000 online magazine *Time Asia*, Donald Macintyre reported the use of Nazi style furniture, decorative art and motifs as interior environments in South Korean bars, restaurants and other public places. One bar, the Fifth Reich, has an interior that is decorated with Third Reich icons and images, including pictures of Hitler; the wait staff wear swastika arm badges. A 22-year old Korean man interviewed by Macintyre (2000) admitted that he knew what the Nazis did, and that those deeds were evil, but that this knowledge did not evoke any emotions in him: “I don’t hate them, I don’t like them. But at least they dressed well.” In 2003, the Hong Kong department store Izzue used Nazi symbols and items as store decorations in its fourteen stores for a marketing campaign. Izzue also sold T-shirts and pants with Nazi symbols and motifs; one branch projected Nazi propaganda films on its walls as part of their in-store promotion (Johnson, 2003; Luk, 2004). One visual merchandising display that caused some comments was a gas or oil metal drum with a swastika painted on it; one blogger wrote “What is the significance of a metal drum with a swastika painted on it? *What’s supposed to be inside that drum?*” no doubt a reference to the Zyklon B gas used to murder Jews in concentration camps (Johnson, 2003, italics in the original). A diplomat at the German consulate in Hong Kong urged people to boycott the stores (Luk, 2004); responding to a number of

complaints, the company issued an apology, blaming the ignorance of the designer, and removed the displays within three days (“ADL Outraged,” 2003).

In 2005, Simon Masnick, a freelance writer living in Hong Kong wrote an article titled “Let’s keep Nazis out of fashion” and described various examples of the use of Nazi imagery from Singapore to Japan that were being used as marketing techniques. Masnick (2005) acknowledged the need for businesses in an increasingly competitive world to use unusual marketing strategies to sell products, but he decried the use of Nazism as a marketing tool and admonished the media and the public “to remain vigilant against such crude desecrations of memory and bring pressure to bear if it happens again.” He acknowledged that Nazism is not well understood by Asians, because Asians were not very involved with the war in Europe during World War II. However, he contends that “Ignorance of history is not an excuse...Ignorance breeds intolerance and hiding behind ‘I didn’t realize it was offensive’ cannot be an excuse, just as it is not in law or other contexts” (Masnick, 2005).

Harajuku is an area in Tokyo, Japan, well known as a shopping district with stores that cater to young people. A cultural phenomenon (and tourist attraction) has developed in Harajuku, in which young people, predominantly girls and women, create and wear fantastical street fashions based on historical and popular culture events; these young people are known as ‘Harajuku girls.’ Street fashions developed by Harajuku girls are cosplay (costume play), a style of dressing that eclectically combines various historical and pop culture characters and costume, such as anime and cartoon characters, superheroes, historic figures and pop culture icons. One of the hottest fashion looks for Harajuku girls is Nazi chic. According to Jill Sherman (2009), who publishes the fashion and pop culture website *Trend de la Crème*, there are entire stores in Tokyo that specialize in fascist fashions. Harajuku girls don a number of Nazi-themed costumes that exhibit a wide range of fashion looks: from SS jackets and hats over dresses (Harajuku Nazi, 2008), to pink skirts and tops with swastika motifs (‘Pink Nazi’, 2009). Their hair is often styled to resemble the front bang sweep of Hitler, and they also wear or paint on Hitler mustaches. Although many Japanese consider Harajuku Nazi chic as harmless cosplay, this trend appears to defy description for many Western observers. An American musician and essayist who lives in

Tokyo, W. David Marx, publishes a personal blog *Néomarxisme* under the name ‘marxy’, and he offers a tongue-in-cheek explanation for this fashion trend in his notes on a book by Takeda Tomohiro, *Nazi Inventions*:

Did you know that the Nazis were responsible for TV, highways, space travel, and other wonders of the modern era? At least, someone bravely sticks up for the Nazis and restores their honor as Mothers of Invention for New Tomorrow. From the press jacket: “No matter who is responsible for these discoveries and inventions, these great contributions to mankind have a value [for us all].” On the author: “He has pursued the ‘true nature’ of the Nazis as his life work.” Turns out they are master inventors and not the epitome of evil. Now I finally understand why all those kids in Harajuku proudly wear the swastika: they are saluting the innovation of the Autobahn! (Marx, 2007)

Like punk rockers, Harajuku girls also prefer the swastika as a predominant design motif; this type of Nazi chic is referred to as ‘*Swastikawaii*’, a combination of the word ‘swastika’ and ‘*kawaii*’, the Japanese word for ‘cute’ (Sherman, 2009). *Swastikawaii* includes clothing or accessory items that use the swastika in combination with something considered as ‘cute’ or ‘girly’, such as using a swastika as a motif on a pink T-shirt or on a pink-colored replica of an SS officer’s hat. *Swastikawaii* also includes the incorporation of a swastika on a popular culture item (such as a toy) or image. Examples include swastika-decorated teddy bears and ‘My Little Nazi Pony’ with a swastika armband on its right foreleg. Another pop culture character, ‘Hello Kitty’, has also appeared as *Swastikawaii*, with ‘Hello Kitty’ wearing an SS officer’s cap superimposed over a black swastika [3].

‘Führer Chic’ is a type of *Swastikawaii* that features representations of Adolf Hitler in various anime and cartoon styles. The representations range from a Hitler who looks remarkably similar to Eric Cartman from *South Park* to a youthful ‘tween-age Hitler. Führer Chic images portray the ‘softer and gentler’ sides of Hitler: Hitler as a teddy bear with a mustache and one paw raised in a ‘Seig Heil’ salute accompanied by the slogan ‘Hug Hitler’; ‘Cute Hitler’ holding a flower; Hitler sitting and hugging a fawn (‘Baby Deer Loves Hitler’, likely taken from a



photograph of Hitler petting a fawn, which can be seen at the website Adolph the Great.com), Hitler dancing ('Hitler Dansen', especially ironic because, according to Nerin Gun, a biographer of Eva Braun, Hitler hated to dance); Hitler in boxer shorts decorated with hearts as a Valentine's Day card ('Everyone needs love on Valentine's Day. Even an evil Dictator!'); and Hitler grabbing a giant cupcake ('Hitler Loves Cupcakes'). There are also a number of Hitler plush dolls, some in complete uniforms. On the soft-sculpture dolls, the facial features may be difficult to distinguish, but the Hitler image is clear, because of the inclusion of his trademark mustache and front bang sweep (Sherman, 2009).

A controversy involving the use of Hitler images in an ad campaign occurred in May 2010 at the New Form fashion store, located in downtown Palermo, Sicily; the campaign targeted the teenage and twenty-something market (Donaldson, 2010). The ad agency Zerocento erected 18-foot tall posters throughout the city with the image of Hitler as NDSAP Chancellor and National Leader, wearing his yellow-brown uniform tunic with a few 'minor' changes: purple eyeshadow, a hot pink uniform tunic and hat, a bright teal tie, a red heart armband, instead of the usual swastika armband (Figure 3).



Figure 3. 'Pink Hitler' poster. Image © Marcus Brandt/epa (courtesy of European Pressphoto Agency).

The ad slogan was “Cambria [Change] Style—Don’t Follow Your Leader” and, according to a Zerocento agency executive, “invites young people to create their own style and not to be influenced by their peers” (Donaldson, 2010). Palermo city leaders did not accept Zerocento’s explanation; one city councilor declared “The use of an image of a person responsible for the worst chapters of the last century is offensive to our country’s constitutional principles and to the sensitivities of citizens” (Donaldson, 2010). The ad agency contended that such critical reaction to the ad was excessively negative, because they believed the campaign “ridicules” Hitler. The ads generated no comments from the international brands sold in New Form, which include Miss Sixty, Calvin Klein and Diesel. According to the agency, these posters would be taken down in a few weeks, and replaced by a campaign featuring the Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse Tung. (Author’s note: As of June 2011, no evidence that the Mao campaign was implemented could be found.)

### **Fashion Designers and Nazi Inspiration**

Nazi chic might be dismissed as a quirky fashion trend, a fad that is limited to the young and ignorant. As an advertising tool, Nazi chic is an example of the non-traditional marketing technique, which relies on creating a ‘buzz’ and generating attention for the product or firm, thereby justifying its use. But what happens when runway fashion designers use the Nazis as fashion inspiration for their collections?

In 2005, Prince Harry, third in line to the throne of the United Kingdom, wore “a German desert uniform and a swastika armband” to a costume party (“Harry says sorry,” 2005) [4]. This created a huge public outcry when pictures of Harry in his costume were published in newspapers. Prince Harry issued an apology through the Clarence House Press office, stating “It was a poor choice of costume and I apologize” (“Harry sorry,” 2005), likely hoping this was the end of the controversy. Little did Prince Harry know that he may have unwittingly started a fashion trend. In 2006, a fashion writer suggested that, perhaps inspired by Prince Harry’s “Gestapo look”, London fashion designers Rocky and Louise Mazzilli of Voyage and Alexander McQueen for his McQ line created collections that used swastikas and other Nazi symbols as

motifs and embellishments (“Behind the seams,” 2006) [5]. Although these designers are known for their controversial couture presentations, they evidently crossed a line; few people in the London fashion world were impressed and “reactions were swift and damning” (Roth, 2005). Suzie Bubble (2006) in her fashion blog *Style Bubble* remarked “I have no problem with fashion poking fun, making political and social commentary, but there are some things that should be left well alone, and this is one of them.” From comments on her blog, it appeared that most people agreed with her, and were especially offended at the use of the swastika as a design motif. As ‘neonoir’ [*sic*] wrote “The swastika is such a negative icon. Just like the “N” word in America, people fruitlessly try to put another spin on it (e.g. with rap/hip-hop) but no one can erase its history.” ‘Maren’ was even more insistent, writing ‘This is terrible! The Swastika is the ONE symbol that you absolutely should NOT use in any circumstances. World War 2 isn’t that long ago, and it makes me sad to see how ignorant these people are’ (Bubble, 2006, emphasis in original).

The question of the appropriateness of using Nazi styles as fashion inspiration occurred during the 2010 finale of Season 7’s *Project Runway*. The winner of Season 7, Seth Aaron introduced his line stating that his inspiration was Russian and German military of the 1940s. Blogger April Peveteaux (2010) immediately interpreted this as a Nazi-inspired line and the selection of Seth Aaron as the winner of *Project Runway* by the judges left her “scratching my [her] head.” Comments to her article indicated that many were in agreement with her. ‘Stunned’ wrote “I was COMPLETELY and IMMEDIATELY repulsed and weirded out when Seth Aaron stated his inspiration” (Peveteaux, 2010, emphasis in original). Another comment came from ‘OUTRAGED’, who stated that the Nazis killed her family, and demanded an apology from the show and the station and suggested that “The fashion we wear outwardly represents our inner allegiances and beliefs” (Peveteaux, 2010, emphasis in original). ‘UTTERLY APPALLED’ was also disgusted by this collection, addressing the designer “Seth Aaron, maybe the truth is that you are not a racist or anti-Semite, but just that you are too ignorant to know better. If that’s the case just admit it and apologize” (Peveteaux, 2010, emphasis in original).

Still others commenting to Peveteaux's article believed that people were being oversensitive. 'SecretSuzy' and 'meganpmom' [*sic*] weren't reminded of the Nazis; 'meganpmom' stated "Don't think you can take fashion that literally or you would be offended by loads more collections." Another comment from 'Banality' believes that it was merely "visual inspiration, not philosophical emulation." To 'Mom2Ty\_Jess', the entire episode was reduced to "It was just clothes.....oh my!" (Peveteaux, 2010).

In an on-line interview with Missy Schwartz (2010) after the final show, Seth Aaron explained "It was about a *statement*. They [the Nazis and the KGB] made a statement that people didn't forget. That's the inspiration. It wasn't literal with any of the actual uniforms, it wasn't literal with any of the beliefs." He continued "You gotta take risks. And some people are gonna love it and some people are gonna hate it. That's the way it goes. [*Laughs*] Hopefully people will get it after they start reading it on every site. It's like, *hellooo!* But a good controversy never hurt anybody" (Schwartz, 2010, emphasis in original).

As with Peveteaux's blog, there were many comments and opinions in response to his exit interview with Schwartz and explanation of his collection inspiration. While some people were not convinced by his explanation, others were squarely in his corner and believed he did nothing wrong. Some did not believe that Aaron has any penchant for the Nazis, but were clearly uncomfortable at his reasoning. As 'scott' [*sic*] wrote

When I first heard Seth Aaron describing his inspiration as he presented his collection, I was taken aback. Plus, several models in a row fit the blonde Aryan prototype. It was genuinely chilling. I was even more disturbed that no one on the show commented on it. I'm half-Jewish. Maybe that's why. It's disconcerting when one can allude to horrific atrocities in such an offhanded way. I think he should have explained himself better, or not at all. If he simply used the word "villain," instead of forties German and Russian, I would have enjoyed his work a lot more, and been spared the sense of nausea. That said, he's clearly not a neo-nazi and he deserved to win. I can't fault him for being as insensitive, or ignorant as the average American is. I do wish he apologized here instead of reveling in the

controversy it's creating. He's saying he was drawn to the style because of its indelible power without addressing the murders, tortures and unimaginable evil evoked by it. His talent is great; his opinions leave a lot to be desired. (Schwartz, 2010)

## **Hate Couture**

Ignorance, aesthetics, or a desire to gain attention—even negative attention—are all reasons that fashion designers might take inspiration from Nazi clothing and regalia to create fashion. But what about the deliberate use of Nazi symbols and images to create and sell hate couture—clothing and other fashion items designed and sold expressly to be worn by those who believe in white supremacy?

Hate couture is a term that was used by Anthony Karen (2008) to describe custom designed and sewn Ku Klux Klan clothing; I have expanded that term to include all clothing and appearance practices that are specifically used to promote the ideology of hate groups. In the world of white nationalists and white supremacists, hate couture plays an important role in designating group membership and creating a sense of belonging. Hate couture clothing and appearance practices also provide a sense of group history and continuity, and often become part of the tradition and heritage of the group, aiding in legitimizing not only the group, but also their actions. Hate couture can include uniforms or appearance practices that are proscribed by hate groups, such as the BDUs or 'battle dress uniforms' and shaved heads of the National Socialist Movement, and the white robes and hood of the Ku Klux Klan. But the majority of hate couture worn by members of hate groups are adaptations of mainstream fashion items. Of all the hate couture fashion items available, none appears to be more popular than the T-shirt—specifically, the message T-shirt.

Once the ultimate anti-establishment symbol, the T-shirt is now a ubiquitous, mainstream fashion item, worn by young and old alike. There is a wide variety of work T-shirts and dress T-shirts, available in many different style and fit categories. In particular, one style of T-shirt, the

message T, has become one of the most effective non-verbal methods used to communicate political messages and viewpoints. For the hate group, not only is the message T-shirt part of the ‘common man’ bricolage, but also has the added bonus of providing one of the most visible, potent and protected means to express ideological views. Because message T-shirts are considered a form of free expression, the messages on most shirts, no matter how offensive, are generally considered as symbolic speech protected under the First Amendment in most non-education situations (Brody, et. al., 2001; Greenbaum, 2002).

Hate couture T-shirts, also referred to as white power Ts or racist shirts [6], can be simple, with just the name of the group or the group logo. But hate couture T-shirts also follow fashion trends like regular message T-shirts. One popular look in hate couture T-shirts is the vintage or retro look. Nazi Germany military posters are used as graphic designs on the shirts; recruiting posters are especially striking, especially those with representations of the idealized Aryan soldier protecting *Das Vaterland*. Using vintage posters as the inspiration for T-shirt graphics often masks or dulls the message of hate or exclusion that is represented, changing the focus to history, rather than ideology (Figure 4).



Figure 4. 'Waffen SS Volunteer Shirt' from Aryan Wear (2011c).  
The shirt reads 'Join the Waffen SS when you turn 17'.

Designers of hate couture T-shirts often use popular cultural references or icons in their designs, adding what they consider humor and irony to their message. In 1991, Tom Metzger, leader of the White Aryan Resistance (W.A.R.) advertised T-shirts with Bart Simpson in a Nazi uniform in his newsletter. The graphic on the shirt included the phrase ‘Pure Nazi Dude.’ Twentieth Century Fox filed and won a copyright infringement lawsuit and the shirts were pulled from Metzger’s publications. Metzger viewed this humorously, stating “We like to use humor and satire like anyone else does. I didn’t create this particular (Nazi Bart) character. The shirts were sent to me by someone else. We always like to use things that we think are funny” (“Metzger agrees,” 1991).



Figure 5. The 'Happy Hitler' T-shirt available from Aryan Wear (2011a).

Another pop culture icon, the ‘smiley face,’ has also been co-opted by designers of hate couture shirts to create the ‘Happy Hitler’ T-shirt (Figure 5). This design incorporates the trademark hairstyle and mustache of Adolf Hitler with the iconic 1970s yellow smiley face. The shirt was featured in *The Nazi Pop Twins* (2007), a documentary by James Quinn that features the Prussian Blue singing duo, Lynx and Lamb Gaede. Their mother, April Gaede, is a prominent white nationalist and has a radio program that airs through the Stormfront organization. Lynx and Lamb—nicknamed the Nazi Olsen twins—were photographed wearing ‘Happy Hitler’ T-shirts, and soon became a media sensation (Gell, 2006). Like Metzger, their mother April downplayed

the significance of the shirt in the documentary: [*Holding up the T-shirt to the camera*] “The famous T-shirt. You know, I really honestly, still I, I still don’t understand why people don’t find these hilariously funny. You add a little triangle [*she points to the forehead*] and a little rectangle there [*she points to the nose area*] and all of a sudden everybody’s Oooooo, this is scary, scary, scary. [*Laughs.*] Ah, it’s just funny, it’s just kind of funny” (Quinn, 2007).

Popular culture references from movies have also appeared as graphics on hate couture T-shirts. One white T simply features the slogan ‘Deport Pedro’, a take-off of the ‘Vote for Pedro’ tee featured in the 2004 movie *Napoleon Dynamite*. Two other hate T-shirt designs are based on the logo of one of the most recognizable United States’ consumer products, Tide® laundry detergent: A basic white T with the familiar orange and yellow Tide® logo and the word ‘Pride’ in the place of the name ‘Tide’ accompanied by the phrase ‘For a Whiter, Brighter Future’ (Figure 6). Using the same graphic, a black T features the slogan ‘Try Zyklon B It’s a Gas’ (Figure 7). All of these shirts, including the ‘Happy Hitler’ T-shirt, can be purchased online. Aryan Wear, based in Texas, is one of the most well known sources among white nationalists for hate couture clothing in the United States (Douglas, 2005).



Figure 6. 'Pride For a Whiter, Brighter Future' T-shirt available at Aryan Wear (2011b).





Figure 7. 'Zyklon B It's a Gas' T-shirt available at Aryan Wear (2011d).

An example of gallows humor used in a hate couture T-shirt first appeared in 2005, when a person using the name 'Helmut Doork' [7] designed a T-shirt with the graphic 'My grandparents went to Auschwitz...and all I got was this lousy t-shirt' accompanied by the slogan, 'Arbeit Macht Frei', "work shall set you free", the phrase on the entrance gates to Nazi concentration camps (Doork, 2007). 'Doork' (2007) designed the shirt for three reasons: "(1) to question why it is okay to makes jokes about anything (no matter how tragic or serious or sacred) *but* the Holocaust, (2) to comment on the commodification of the Holocaust by various organizations and individuals who claim to act on behalf of survivors, and (3) to amuse myself." The shirt, originally sold by online retailer CafePress.com, was eventually removed from sale, due, in large part, to protests from the Anti-Defamation League who received a number of complaints from many people, including Holocaust survivors and their families ("Online retailer removes," 2006). The shirts continue to be available on other online sites, along with other Auschwitz-themed T-shirts. On the Zazzle.com website, other shirts feature a graphic of the camp gate with the same slogan as the CafePress shirt, as well as the tag line 'My grandfather died at Auschwitz...He fell out of a guard tower.' Other T-shirts for sale on the Zazzle site also reference Auschwitz in the same comedic vein, but there is also another shirt for sale with the

phrase ‘Auschwitz....yes it happened’. Perhaps Zazzle.com is attempting to appeal to consumers who may want to confront Holocaust deniers—those who might not view concentration camps as sources of humor.

Adolf Hitler is unquestionably the most revered figure in the white nationalist movement; among white supremacists, he has the status of a rock star. His image is used as the main design motif on many hate couture T-shirts. But, unlike his representation on the ‘Happy Hitler’ T-shirt, most images represent Hitler as dignified and commanding. Many of the images are taken from Nazi propaganda photographs and newsreel stills; many appear to have been modified (or photoshopped) to enhance Hitler’s appearance, presenting him as younger, taller, more muscular and generally more attractive. One very popular shirt first designed in 1984 and still in demand today is the ‘Adolf Hitler European Tour’ T-shirt. This shirt features a picture of Hitler in his military uniform and a map of Europe with Nazi-conquered countries outlined in black. Underneath the map is a list of the year in which each country was invaded and conquered; unsuccessful campaigns are noted as ‘*Cancelled*’. Like other items in the ‘Political Clothing’ category, this shirt is available on the Internet.

Another trend in Hitler T-shirts has messages combining sarcastic humor and political opinions; how accurate the references are regarding various ideologies is often questionable (and sometimes obtuse). In one T-shirt, Hitler appears alone with the phrase ‘My Che and Mao t-shirts are in the wash’, suggesting that all three men shared the same ideologies and beliefs and, by extension, that the person wearing the shirt also shares them. Other Hitler Ts also invite political agreement (‘Hitler was right’) or absolution (‘Don’t blame me, I voted for Hitler’). Still others border on the absurd (‘Hitler was right, donuts are delicious’). These shirts are not only fashion items, but are also marketing tools, and share many of the characteristics of non-traditional marketing techniques, such as unconventionality, an attempt to create a ‘buzz’, and the creation of a positive association between the consumer (the wearer) and the message (Hitler and his ideology).

Hitler-themed T-shirts are not always used to advocate white supremacy ideologies, however. Instead the use of these images has become a powerful method to send strong political messages, as historical analogies. For decades, political discussions and opinion pieces have included Hitler or Nazi/fascist analogies to describe politicians, political agendas and actions (Goldberg, 2007; MacDonald, 2009; Stolyarov, 2007; Waldman, 2010; Ward, 1935). The use of Hitler analogies are often used in discussion of presidential politics, and since the administration of Woodrow Wilson, American presidents are repeatedly linked to fascist ideology and, by association, Hitler (“American Notes,” 1972; “Berkeley study,” 2003; Davis, n.d.; Goldberg, 2007; Moser, 2006). The use of Hitler and Nazi analogies in political discourse grew so rapidly with the spread of the Internet that, in 1990, Mike Godwin formed what would become known as “Godwin’s Law” or “Godwin’s Rule of Nazi Analogies”: “As a Usenet [Internet] discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one” (Godwin, 1993; Skirvin, 2003). During the Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama administrations, these comparisons accelerated and became more visual; not only have they been presented larger-than-life on billboards, but, in the instances of Bush and Obama, the comparisons have become T-shirt art. As protests against Bush administration policies, the image of George W. Bush was presented dressed like Hitler (complete with the mustache) and with the Nazi swastika. T-shirts will frequently substitute a swastika symbol in place of the ‘S’ in the name ‘Bush’ (Figure 8). Obama-as-Hitler T-shirts may be as simple as the phrases “Hitler gave some really great speeches too!” (Figure 9) and “OBAMA = HITLER.” The T-shirts are easily purchased on the Internet through a number of websites. A June 28, 2011 Google search for ‘Bush Hitler t shirt’ and ‘Obama Hitler t shirt’ produced 4,940,000 hits for Bush, and 10,700,000 for Obama. This is a significant increase from a Google search performed on August 2, 2010, with 749,000 hits for ‘Bush Hitler t shirt’ and 756,000 hits for ‘Obama Hitler t shirt’.



Figure 8. 'Say No to Bush' T-shirt available from Café Press (2011).



Figure 9. 'Hitler Gave Some Really Great Speeches Too!' T-shirt available from Printfection (2011).

## **Implications**

Many people dismiss clothing and appearance as unimportant, frivolous and meaningless, but how and why people choose to present themselves through clothing and appearance choices

does have meaning. Clothing and appearance are powerful symbols and are extensions of the body and the self, the most immediate means of personal communication. So personal are clothing and appearance practices that, typically, people do not—and often *will* not—wear clothing with specific symbols or messages with which they disagree. For example, it is unlikely that a person who dislikes a political candidate would wear a campaign T-shirt that is emblazoned with a picture of that candidate or his or her political slogan. It is equally as unlikely and perhaps disingenuous to claim that there is nothing political or philosophical in wearing fashions inspired from Nazi clothing, regalia and symbols.

Those who wear Nazi chic and Nazi-inspired fashions often contend that they wear those fashions because of their design appeal and aesthetics, and they do not attach any meaning to the fashions or motifs. I argue that some items of clothing, like Nazi uniforms and regalia, should not be divorced from the context, origins, and the atrocities that were committed by those who so proudly wore such garments. The lack of a designer's realization of the association of how Nazi ideology was reinforced by the Nazi 'look' is troubling, and it is unclear whether this reveals ignorance or insensitivity. When Nazi-inspired fashions appear as costume play (i.e., cosplay) or on the runway, they become a form of entertainment. As entertainment, the ideology and deeds of the Nazis become minimized, even trivialized. Nazi-inspired fashions become legitimized, and, in a type of 'fashion killology,' [8] people become conditioned and pre-disposed to accept these fashions upon repeated exposure.

That is the major implication of using Hitler and the Nazis as fashion inspiration. Certainly, it can be argued that fashion designers and those who wear Nazi chic may not have racist intentions, but those who manufacture and sell Nazi-inspired hate couture and other related merchandise clearly want to expose the public to white supremacy in an attempt to recruit new members; hate products, such as clothing, are also one of the main sources of income for large hate groups (Moser, 2003). Regardless, no matter what the intention, repeated exposure to Nazi-inspired fashions will condition the public to racist messages. This is especially likely to occur with message T-shirts that use humor, irony or sarcasm. Although a shirt with a controversial message may be blithely dismissed (e.g., 'it's only a T-shirt'), there is a greater possibility that,

in this growing culture of meanness and incivility, a sarcastic or cruel message T-shirt might even be considered as funny and ‘hip’—as a sarcastic joke. Sharing a joke or a laugh creates bonds between people; humor can encourage acceptance and tolerance, not only of the person, but also the message. People may not even initially realize that a humorous message might indeed have an underlying theme of racism—after all, most people have been told that racism isn’t funny. Likewise, ‘cute’ depictions of Nazi leaders and symbols may give an impression that Nazis—and by extension, neo-Nazis and other white supremacists—may not be that terrible. The use of popular culture icons and products, such as the Tide® detergent logo and the smiley face, in combination with racist messages, create non-threatening, safe and familiar associations. A hate group’s ideology may seem normal and mainstream when associated with comfortable, commonplace, everyday popular culture images.

Whether fashions are created to deliberately support white supremacist ideology or created out of ignorance and insensitivity, the use of Hitler and the Nazis as fashion inspiration is a cultural trend that is gaining momentum. Holocaust denial and white nationalism ideologies are also on the rise. Fashion should not be used as a method to support or create a revisionist version of Hitler and the Nazis. A final thought about the use of Nazism as a fashion inspiration is the lack of empathy for the victims of the Nazis and the apparent ignorance of the history of the Third Reich, Hitler and the Holocaust. As fashion historians and instructors, we have an obligation to make sure that our students are aware of the historical context of the fashions that they may select for inspiration. In this way, we can help ensure that our students make appropriate and ethical fashion inspiration choices.

### **Endnotes**

1. When Nazi uniforms are used as Nazi chic, the uniform of choice is the black uniform of the SS issued during the pre-war period 1932-1934. In 1935, the everyday use of the black uniforms ended and they were not worn exclusively by SS branches during the actual war years, except in certain circumstances by some members of the Allgemeine-SS.

2.The website of Rex Curry, the ‘Libertarian Lawyer,’ gives examples of Nazi regalia porn. Other examples of Nazi symbols and regalia used in fetish photos can be found by viewing a photo gallery of Michelle McGhee on the TMZ website.

3.Real kittens have also been made-up to look like Hitler and can be seen at <http://www.catsthatlooklikehitler.com>. These feline versions of the *Führer* are called ‘kitlers.’

4.The ‘German desert uniform’ worn by Prince Harry was likely a reproduction of the yellowish-brown uniform that was worn by the German Air Force (*Luftwaffe*) in Africa during World War II.

5.In this instance, the use of the word ‘Gestapo’ is a misnomer. The Gestapo was a plainclothes secret police organization and had no uniforms before 1939. In 1939, Gestapo officers who were also SS members started wearing the wartime field gray uniforms, but never ‘on the job.’ Because the Gestapo was a secret organization, the use of a uniform would have been counterproductive to its purpose.

6.‘Racialist’ is a term gaining popularity with white nationalists to describe their position concerning white pride and white supremacy. This term is considered by some as a value-neutral term and is used by white nationalists to avoid the use of the word ‘racist’ and the appearance of racism. There is much controversy over the definition and use of ‘racialism,’ but its adoption and use by many white nationalists suggest that their interpretations include an aspect of perceived racial superiority.

7.The name ‘Helmut Doork’ is almost certainly a pseudonym. Helmut Doork—sometimes spelled Dorque—is the main character in the 1972 Jerry Lewis movie *The Day the Clown Cried*. Lewis plays Doork, a washed-up German clown who is used by the Nazis to lead children into the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Because of its controversial subject matter, the movie has never been officially released, and has become the stuff of urban legends.

8.‘Killology’ is a term that was invented by a military psychologist (Lt. Col. Dave Grossman) to explain the desensitization that occurs in people who are repeatedly exposed to violence on television, movies, literature, real life situations, etc. I combine this term with ‘fashion’ to

describe the eventual acceptance of a fashion item or look upon repeated and consistent exposure or conditioning.

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