

BENT TIME:
THE COLLAPSE OF MEMORY,
POWER, AND MASCULINITY
by Paola Paleari



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Historical time—the vast, uneven flow that stretches across generations, administrations, conflicts and ideologies—does not move in a straight line. It twists, lingers, repeats. We like to believe that it moves forward, that we grow more enlightened as we progress. We look back at the horrors of the past with shame, telling ourselves we've learned, that our better manners will keep them at bay. We labelled the last century—with its burden of war, fascism, and genocide—as the age of atrocity, and solemnly vowed “never again.”

Bent Time, a short film by the German artist Paul Haas, confronts the afterlife of that broken promise. A recent graduate of the Städelschule in Frankfurt, Haas emerges here as a filmmaker unafraid to explore the moral ambiguities and political tensions that shape contemporary life. The film reflects on the ways in which history seeps into the present, not as a lesson learned but as a pattern repeated, and offers an unsettling meditation on the erosion of memory and the cyclical nature of destructive ideologies.

Produced in 2024 and set in the idyllic sun-bleached countryside of North Saxony where the artist grew up, the film follows Gerd, Benny and Karlo—three young men drifting through summer with a sense of boredom and purposelessness. Their friendship is marked by emotional ambiguity, simmering aggression, and an atmosphere heavy with unspoken tension. Just beyond the confines of their toxic triangulation, the threat of political violence hovers like the heat: invisible yet inescapable. Even if the three are never portrayed stepping

into overt extremism, their language, rituals, and behavior reveal how deeply such ideologies can seep into the psyche through affect and proximity—perhaps even more than through explicit indoctrination.

Watching the film today—in the wake of Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency, Elon Musk's infamous Nazi salute at his inauguration, the rise of far-right extremism across Europe, and the Western world's complicit silence amid the ongoing ethnic cleansing in Gaza—the film reads not only as fiction but as cultural prophecy.

COMING OF AGE IN A WORLD THAT REFUSES TO GROW UP

The most striking feature of *Bent Time* is the way it alternates between childlike play and sudden, jarring aggressiveness. One moment, the three protagonists are giggling in a garden pool, performing clumsy attacks like toddlers pretending to be sharks. The next, they're reminiscing about a violent clash at a football stadium. "We really gave it to them in Meuselwitz," Karlo boasts, his voice thick with pride. Gerd, passive but visibly affected, nods. The line between game and battle, fun and harm, is dangerously undefined.

The film shows how the manifestation of physical power serves as an attempt to stake out identity as well as a trap that keeps its wielders locked in a state of emotional stasis. Both performance and prison, violence becomes a substitute for communication and growth. The characters are not just navigating adolescence—they are circling within it, unable to move forward. Their masculinity is shaped by a world that teaches boys that to "become a man" means learning to dominate or to disappear. Donald Trump and Elon Musk—best buddies in the

most literal, schoolyard sense—perform their power like adolescents daring each other to go further. They embody the apex of a broken model of masculinity that values conquest more than care, feeds on ego, and favors loudness at the expense of accuracy.

This isn't about gender so much as it is about posture—a political strategy that prioritizes domination over dialogue and rhetorical aggression over nuance. Female leaders, like as Giorgia Meloni of Italy, have embraced the same combative style of politics that made it possible for Trump to verbally attack a fellow leader and president of a besieged state on worldwide television with no significant diplomatic consequence.¹

The Italian philosopher and writer Umberto Eco borrowed George Orwell's term "Newspeak" to address this phenomenon.² All forms of fascism, he noted in 1995, rely on the reduction of language to narrow thought and suffocate dissent. When complexity is replaced by slogans and ambiguity is framed as betrayal, critical reasoning itself becomes suspect. This linguistic flattening echoes across social media posts, political speeches and viral soundbites, where nuance

- 1 See "Trump and Vance erupt at Zelensky in tense Oval Office meeting", CNN, February 28, 2025: <http://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/28/politics/trump-zelensky-vance-oval-office/index.html>. Last accessed on April 23, 2025.
- 2 "Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak. Newspeak was invented by Orwell, in 1984, as the official language of Ingsoc, English Socialism. But elements of Ur-Fascism are common to different forms of dictatorship. All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning. But we must be ready to identify other kinds of Newspeak, even if they take the apparently innocent form of a popular talk show." Umberto Eco, *Ur-Fascism (Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt)*, The New York Review of Books, June 22, 1995 issue.

is sacrificed for virality. The result is not just a dumbing down of discourse, but a deliberate shrinking of the space where alternatives might be imagined.

THE ALGORITHMIC PATH TO EXTREMISM

One of the quiet horrors in *Bent Time* is how ideology enters the frame. Benny shows Gerd a disturbing video—violent, likely real, and already removed from the platform it appeared on. “How did you find the video?” Gerd asks Benny. “Algorithm. I don’t know” is Benny’s reply.

The radicalization in *Bent Time* is technological, ambient, and deeply normalized. The protagonists are not ideologues. They’re emotionally disoriented young men with a smartphone in their pockets, absorbing content fed to them by a system designed for passive engagement and addictive behavior.

Fiction, yes—but disturbingly close to reality. In recent years, online phenomena such as trolling³ and incel communities⁴ have become breeding grounds for radicalization, not through formal recruitment but through forums, message boards, and meme-based echo chambers. These digital spaces offer scapegoats that thrive on alienation and resentment and often end up feeding an underlying condition of distress.

3 A “troll” is a slang term for a person who intentionally tries to instigate conflict, hostility, or arguments in an online social community. Once confined to the fringes of internet subculture, trolling has become a fixture in mainstream politics—most recently exemplified by Donald Trump posting an AI-generated image of himself dressed as the pontiff following the death of Pope Francis. See “Trump criticised after posting AI image of himself as Pope”, BBC, May 4, 2025: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdrg8zkz8d0o>. Last accessed on May 5, 2025.

As in *Bent Time*, the descent doesn't come through overt indoctrination. It unfolds quietly, in isolation, shaped by the constant drip of content. The screen, rather than the street, is the new front line of ideological contagion.

We are living in a time when digital platforms are less public squares than weapons of influence—tools increasingly controlled by authoritarian-leaning billionaires. Elon Musk owns X and uses it to amplify far-right voices while silencing critics. Mark Zuckerberg's Meta ecosystem continues to incubate conspiracy theories, misogyny and white supremacist content, all while claiming neutrality.

When those who control the platforms of public discourse flirt openly with fascist imagery or refuse to regulate harm, the line between ideology and infrastructure collapses.

FASCISM AS ATMOSPHERE

In *Bent Time* there are no heroes nor villains. It is a story about memory: how easily it bends, how quickly it fades, and how dangerous it is to let others shape it for us. It confronts the paradox of youth shaped by a culture where the most powerful men play games with real-world repercussions, and the next generation is left to navigate a digital minefield of manipulation and hate.

- 4 "Incel" is a term associated with an online subculture of mainly young male individuals who define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, and who may blame, objectify and denigrate women and girls as a result. The incel ideology is characterized by the hatred of women that is often expressed through hate speech or, in certain cases, physical violence. See Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incel>. Last accessed on April 24, 2025.

And yet the film does more than diagnose a cultural sickness—it forces us to confront the structures that allow it to thrive. Through its unspoken emotional terrain, *Bent Time* reminds us that history is not a distant past but a living force, shaped by the language we use, the stories we tell, and the platforms we navigate daily.

In an era where memory is constantly overwritten by distraction, denial or design, Paul Haas's film points to the quietest danger of all: the distress hiding behind comfort. The apparently harmless basement nights, pool fights and numb scrolling are staging grounds for deeper unrest. What appears benign may already be infected. In a society that teaches us to equate peace with passivity and comfort with safety, numbness is the camouflage of harm rather than its absence.

To watch *Bent Time* is to feel time itself stretch and warp, to experience the slow erosion of meaning, and to recognize how easily fascism can arrive as a background we learn to live inside. It leaves us wondering not so much how we got here, but how much of it we no longer notice at all.





I'm really curious to see



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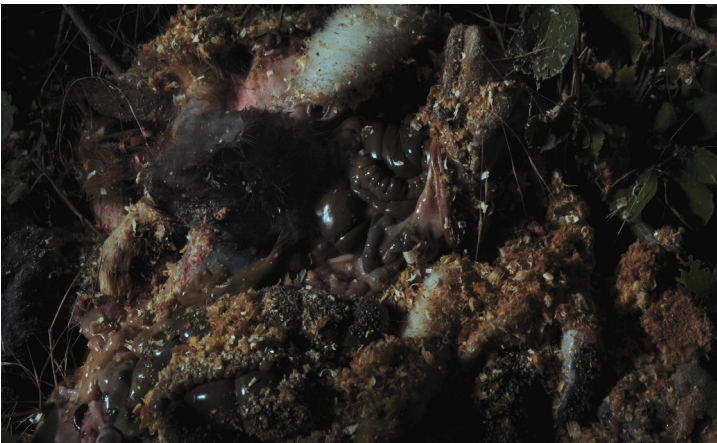






















All images:
Paul Haas: *Bent Time*, 2024, film still

PAUL HAAS

is a visual artist based between Frankfurt and Brussels. In his practice, he is interested in the question of how inherited aesthetics and cultural habits shape the present. Mainly through the use of moving images, Haas' work makes historically determined conditions tangible and challenges them. To this end, he uses both documentary and fictional techniques. Based on a research process that includes visits to archives, the examination of theoretical texts and interviews with historical subjects, he develops a network of information from which the artistic work subsequently emerges.

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