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# "Do You Want Meme War?"

## Understanding the Visual Memes of the German Far Right

*Lisa Bogerts and Maik Fielitz*[1]

"People respond to images in a stronger way than to text. By using images, we can do excellent memetic warfare and bring our narratives to the people" (Generation D. 2017: 2).[2] Commenting on "the power of images", in 2017, German far-right activists widely circulated a "manual for media guerillas" that offered advice about how to effectively engage in online activism that would challenge the real world. Just a few months later, a far-right online activist under the pseudonym Nikolai Alexander initiated the project Reconquista Germanica (RG) and invited adherents to "reclaim" cyberspace. The Youtuber launched a mass project on the gaming forum Discord to invade the web with coordinated raids that would disseminate far-right propaganda. However, his ambitions went far beyond mere rhetoric: He assembled 'patriotic forces' to use RG as a place for convergence, attracting members and sympathizers of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), the German and Austrian sections of the Identitarian Movement and loosely organized neo-Nazis. He envisioned the largest far-right online network active in Germany, one willing to shake the pillars of liberal democracy and build a community that pushes far-right agendas. In just a few weeks, RG counted several thousand members who were ready to attack opponents, distort digital discourse and polarize online interactions. One of their central weapons: internet memes – graphics of visual and textual remixes shared and widely distributed in online spaces.

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**1** | Special thanks to Stephen Albrecht, Merle Strunk and Philip Wallmeier for their thoughts on this contribution.

**2** | All German quotations were translated by the authors.

Just a lousy joke by some kids, one might think. How could a troll army without any real-world interaction seriously engage in collective action? Some years ago, these virtual communities were irrelevant for researchers on far-right extremism. Only recently has the online space entered the research agenda as a venue of antagonistic politics and "cultural wars" (Nagle 2017). For some time, the far right has explored the internet as a hub for mobilization, propaganda and cultural subversion (Caiani/Kröll 2015). With the general expansion of online communication into all spheres of life, the internet has become a natural medium and catalyst space for far-right propaganda, making digital space a central site for the current resurgence of far-right influence.

If far-right groups, just like other political actors, utilize cultural means to win the hearts and minds of potential adherents, we must go beyond purely cognitive accounts to also examine affective and aesthetic means. While ideology is often projected onto images, no doubt, political actors also employ images strategically in order to disseminate their ideology in more or less subtle ways and to persuade others to share or reject certain views and values (Sturken/Cartwright 2001: 21). Drawing on methodological tools from visual culture studies, this essay highlights the importance of taking visual memes seriously instead of reducing them to a merely illustrative role. Although, at first sight, memes seem to be humorous, sometimes silly and absurd – but in any case, harmless – everyday expressions of online cultural creativity, they can still convey hate messages, attract new supporters and give rise to bigotry. In fact, we can barely understand recent far-right cultures without taking into account the diverse messages that memes disseminate.

While there is plenty of reflection on the spread of memes in the broader digital world, this essay focuses on the strategic use of visual meme content by far-right entrepreneurs, asking: What visual language, narratives and strategies do RG memes employ to appeal a broad spectrum of potential supporters? Taking the case of RG, we want to expand the debate on far-right efforts to co-opt online cultures as a gateway to express different hate messages and mobilize supporters.

## Visual Culture and Memes in Far-Right Movements

Emphasizing the political power of everyday images and popular culture, visual culture assumes that everyday images inform how we *see* the world, and thus literally shape our world*views* (Sturken/Cartwright 2001: 10). The world of entertainment, everyday images and popular culture are loaded with political interests and more or less subtle ideological assumptions (Hall 1993). Therefore, Fahlenbrach et al. argue that critical visual research must disclose key visual narratives of memes by both anonymous and visible activists as part of the public discourse (Fahlenbrach et al. 2014: 210).[3]

Engaging with visual online memes is a participatory practice of interjecting cultural information and normative narratives within ideological conflicts, which may "shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and action of a social group" (Knobel/Lankshear 2007: 199; see also Hristova 2014: 265; Nooney/Portwood-Stacer 2014: 248). Employing humor and rich intertextuality, online memes can be spread fast, anonymously and efficiently. Concerning the affective potential of humor and joy in social movements, an associate of the internet activist collective Anonymous claimed: "[...] boredom is counterrevolutionary. Political resistance needs to be fun, or no one will want to participate" (cited in Ferrada Stoehrel/Lindgren 2014: 252). Due to their participatory incitement, "memes appear to be democratic in their widespread use and mutation as they survive and grow through participation, while they remain structurally autocratic in their conservation of a key idea" (Hristova 2014: 266).

The possibility of conserving and disseminating key messages while displaying creativity 'from below' may render online memes an especially attractive medium for far-right entrepreneurs. Memes take to a digital level the New Right's effort to appropriate Antonio Gramsci's idea of the struggle over cultural hegemony – i.e. the production of consenting ideas in civil society  – what they call meta-politics (Bar-On 2013). Along with the increasing significance of social media, the web may be considered a metapolitical terrain for the reshaping of public opinion. Likewise, far-right activists in Europe, as Nicole Doerr argues, strategically use "[...] visual or symbolic media provocation that speaks to multiple audiences"

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**3** | For research on memes from a visual culture perspective, see the 2014 special issue of the Journal of Visual Culture (Nooney/Portwood-Stacer 2014).

(Doerr 2017: 4). Reconquista Germany aimed to become a central actor in this battle over ideas and – overall – attention.

## RECONQUISTA GERMANICA: JUST ANOTHER TROLL NETWORK?

Reconquista Germanica hit the headlines in the context of the German federal elections of 2017 by attempting to subvert online discourses, to intimidate supporters of democratic parties and to support the election of the AfD (Davey/Ebner 2017: 21). Formed in September 2017, RG can be described as a far-right network that organizes collective digital action against political opponents and pushes the agendas of far-right movements and parties in online space. Strongly inspired by the American Alt-Right, RG's interventions center around the common topics of ethno-nationalism, anti-Muslim racism, anti-Feminism and the rejection of immigration.

Using the online gaming platform Discord, far-right online activists converge to exchange on political beliefs and plan digital political actions. Before the deletion of their server in February 2018 by Discord, RG could assemble around 5000 members (Kampf 2018). However, metrics are hardly convincing in the digital world where even a few savvy activists can influence the discourse through fake accounts, bots and multiple identities (Kreißel et al. 2018). Usually there is no physical contact between the users. Every user acts under a pseudonym and is careful about sharing personal details.

Repeatedly, the group has described itself as a "satirical project that has no connection to the real world".[4] But this is not true. RG's aim is to provide a forum to "effectively connect and pool patriotic forces".[5] Unsurprisingly, we find a mosaic of the most important far-right parties and movements represented on the platform, such as the Identitarian Movement, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) and the AfD. It is noteworthy

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**4** | Quotation retrieved from the welcoming text of the Reconquista Germanica Discord server discussed in the TV documentation "Lösch dich" (Delete yourself). See Anders, Rayk (2017): "Lösch Dich! So organisiert ist der Hate im Netz", 26 April 2018 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvKjfWSPI7s)

**5** | Reconquista Germanica (2018): "Unsere Wunderwaffe im Kulturkampf", 17 June 2018 (https://www.bitchute.com/video/1ObHTNg73w0G/).

that RG endorses strong references to National Socialist ideology, the international far right and neo-Nazi community.[6] Hence, the appearance and language are strongly martial, misogynist and vulgar, while the organization follows a fixed hierarchy, centralized orders and military ranks. To climb up the ladder, one needs to prove commitment by joining organized raids when RG activists target social media platforms by attracting public attention through the seizure of hashtags or the massive spamming of the comment columns.

## A Visual Analysis of Far-Right Memes

In our empirical analysis we examined 110 publicly accessible images that had been uploaded to the RG meme gallery.[7] By using memes, RG focusses on a mélange of humor, misanthropy and political message. Accordingly, RG developed a meme factory in their internal forum that was open for users to copy and paste the content and spread their compositions on social media. The group even appointed a 'memelord' responsible for the dissemination of favorable memes, which shows how central memes are to their practice of online mobilization. On their official, publicly accessible website, RG provides a meme gallery that counts several hundred copy-paste images for visitors to freely use. While most are categorized around the preferential topics of the Alt-Right, such as *immigration*, *leftists*, *foreign politics* and the *media*, we find one category called *Reconquista* that strongly represents the self-understanding of the group.[8] For our empirical analysis, we have analyzed the different ways that content from this

**6** | For instance, we took the title of this chapter from a meme in our database, that depicts the cartoon character Pepe the frog in Nazi uniform reminiscent to the infamous Sportpalast speech by Joseph Goebbels in 1943 invoking 'total war'. RG modified it into: "Do you want meme war?".

**7** | While most of the images are so-called caption memes, the database also includes several GIFs (moving images). See http://reconquista-germanica.info/meme-galerie/reconquista/

**8** | The content varies widely according to the categories and the much more aggressive imagery in categories, such as *immigration*, is likely to deliver interesting results as well. However, we decided not to reproduce these predominantly racist and violent images. It is noteworthy that *Reconquista* contains some of the most

category targets broader audiences and have deconstructed the aesthetic methods that are applied.

In order to identify common visual elements and narratives, we first conducted a visual content analysis (Bell 2004; Rose 2016) utilizing the software MAXQDA, and then examined the specific strategies of some representative images in more depth. By coding the images and counting the code frequencies, we shed light on which persons, objects, animals and symbols appear in the image files and how they are linked with each other. In another round of coding, taking into account the text elements as well, we identified nine key topics (*theme codes*) usually addressed by RG[9] as well as six stylistic and aesthetic features. The aesthetic styles include cartoons (used in 23 memes), 1980s vaporwave style (17), video game aesthetics (8) and hipsterish nature photography (5). Further, they often use historical image material (32) or refer to popular culture (24). In the following, with the help of representative image examples, we demonstrate how RG memes combine a variety of stylistic and aesthetic strategies and visual tools to appeal to multiple audiences, and still convey messages in line with their core ideological far-right beliefs. These memes represent "remixes" (Hartmann 2017) of the most frequently identified stylistic and aesthetic traits and are arranged according to RG members prime motive.[10]

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professional images of the entire site. This shows how important it is for RG to generate some kind of group identification (through images and memes).

**9** | Frequencies of key themes: Militarism (addressed in 58 images), nationalism (49), sympathy with National Socialism/fascism (27), ethnic and cultural supremacy (17), anti-system/anti-establishment (16), traditional values/nature and family (14), anti-leftism (13), patriarchic gender roles (11) and racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism (10). Additionally, we used the code "non-explicit/unclear" for images without a direct reference to any of these themes (17).

**10** | Although, against the backdrop of our research question and the wider body of data, we provide only one of many possible interpretations, we are aware that image interpretation is highly subjective and varies according to the viewer's individual background and knowledge.

## Cartoon Remixes

Numerous RG memes re-contextualize fictional characters from comics or cartoons and employ aesthetic styles associated with this media genre. Such references to popular culture include Pepe the frog (16), adopted from the US American Alt-Right (see Miller-Idriss in this volume), and figures from Japanese anime/manga culture, inter alia. A meme with the title *Captain Germanica* (figure 1)[11] depicts the Marvel superhero *Captain America*, who in 1941 was designed as a patriotic soldier with superhuman fighting abilities. Military uniforms (31) and male characters (51) are the two most frequent visual elements in our dataset. The heroic figure is here remixed with characteristics from the German context, such as the national flag (black-red-gold) (8) and the logo of the AfD (3), which consists of a red curving arrow



*Figure 1: Cartoon remix. Text on the bullets: culture of guilt ("Schuldkult"), Islamism, liberalism, degeneration, communism and political correctness.*

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**11** | Source: http://reconquista-germanica.info/meme-galerie/reconquista/#! http://reconquista-germanica.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Captain-Ger manica.jpg.

pointing towards the upper-right, symbolizing future and progress. Both the modification of "America" to "Germanica" (in old-German Fraktur script) and the RG logo on the shield leave no doubt that the group considers itself the defender (here: the shield) of the only political party (the AfD) it considers able to protect Germany against the 'threats' (the bullets) of liberalism, communism, Islamism and 'political correctness'. The bullet with *Schuldkult* (cult of guilt) indicates the common far-right rejection of acknowledging and memorializing Germany's guilt for the atrocities of the Nazi regime (Suermann 2016: 270). Borrowing the biological/medical term 'degeneration', the authors describe an alleged backward evolution of the human species, referring either to the political parliamentary system or to 'degenerated' gender roles in feminist or LGBTQI identities.

Tracing back the evolution of this meme, we see clearly that it was copied from a neo-Nazi meme creator. In this earlier version, there are swastikas instead of the German flag, the RG logo and the AfD logo, and another bullet is labelled with "jews".[12] No doubt, although the reversion of a popular and historical comic superhero may look humorous and creative at first sight, it reproduces far-right themes such as militarism, nationalism, and Islamophobia as well as anti-leftism and opposition to the political establishment.

### Historical Remixes

As the *Captain America* example demonstrated, numerous memes make use of historical images with a focus on military battles, attributing them with a new meaning. In our dataset, such imagery includes WWII propaganda posters or black-and-white photos from the Nazi era (e.g., of heroic *Wehrmacht* soldiers or members of NS youth organizations) or paintings from art history (e.g., portraits of the German emperors Frederick the Great and Otto von Bismarck). Representing a historical version of militarism, swords (12) and knights (13) – mounted elite soldiers from the Late Middle-Age – are among the most frequent visual elements in the *Reconquista* meme gallery. The knight is a common role model in historical German iconography, providing a heroic figure of mystic identification with the Fatherland in a Christian nationalist mission (Krüger 2011: 98–100).

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**12** | https://www.deviantart.com/neetsfagging322297/art/Captain-America-Rebellion-poster-633861202.

More specifically, several memes depict knights with the Crusader's cross (a red cross on white grounds) (4), who defended the Mediterranean and the 'Holy Land' from Muslim rule in a series of religious wars.



*Figure 2: Historical remix.*

One of the memes (figure 2)[13] builds on a painting of the Battle of Montgisard (1177) by the artist Charles Philippe Larivière, in which King Baldwin IV defeated the Muslim sultan Saladin. A huge army of Crusaders descends from a castle, following two leaders with a sword and Christian crosses, while on the horizon, large clouds of smoke indicate an already ongoing battle. Combined with the dominant bold lettering *Reconquista Germanica* and the group's logo (49), this image illustrates one of RG's main narratives: reference to the so-called Reconquista (reconquest) of the Iberian Peninsula in the name of several Christian kingdoms between 722 and 1492. Many far-right groups, especially the Counter-Jihad network, play with this allegory and contemporize the crusade images to express anti-Muslim sentiments, claiming Islam to be incompatible with 'Christian' Europe. Claiming to 'defend Europe' against an alleged 'islamization of the occident' due to migration (Virchow 2016), RG aims to present itself as standing in the tradition of the Crusades and thus subtly reproduces Islamophobia. Understanding its activities as a contemporary crusade mis-

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**13** | Source: http://reconquista-germanica.info/meme-galerie/reconquista/ #!http://reconquista-germanica.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/reconquista3-1.png.

sion, it is no coincidence that RG's rune-like symbol[14] is a modification of the Greek letters Chi (χ) and Rho (ρ) of the Monogram of Christ, or that in other versions of the logo it also contains a sword. While historical 'sources' carry the authority of visual 'evidence' supporting their claims with a trans-historic legitimacy of a long tradition, the mix with more contemporaneous stylistic features gives the narrative a more 'youthful' appearance.

## Vaporwave Remixes



*Figure 3: Vaporwave Remix. Text: "The Future Belongs to Us."*

In some of the memes, works from art history are combined with more contemporary aesthetic styles and a future-oriented narrative. For instance, Figure 3[15] mixes a famous painting with so-called vaporwave aesthetics

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**14** | Due to its similarity with the bluetooth logo, the German entertainer Jan Böhmermann mocked RG's symbol as indicating "a very bad bluetooth connection" when he launched his counter-campaign "Reconquista Internet" in April 2018 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAYjSLtz6wQ)

**15** | Source: http://reconquista-germanica.info/meme-galerie/reconquista/ #!http://reconquista-germanica.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Zukunft-geh%C3%B6rt-uns.jpg.

(see also figure 2). Many of RG's memes employ this retro style, which draws on technology, design, music, TV and video game culture from the 1980s by using neon colors (mainly pink and purple), chrome logo typography, blurred or pixelated images and grid optics.[16] These trendy visuals make historical references less 'old-fashioned' and more appealing to a younger audience and/or persons with an affinity to 80s popular culture. The artist of this recontextualized painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (ca. 1817), Caspar David Friedrich, is one of the most important painters of German Romanticism, who has been praised by the Nazis for his allegorical landscape paintings attributed with a nationalist message. Similar to his paintings, RG memes often depict romantic natural settings, such as sunsets or sunrises (8), with people seen from behind gazing towards the horizon (12). The composition of this image puts the viewer in the same perspective as the person depicted in the image, seeing – just like him – the Black Sun symbol (2) rising on the horizon. This occult Nazi symbol includes three swastikas superimposed upon each other and was inscribed in the SS headquarter *Wewelsburg*. It is often used as a substitute for swastikas, whose depiction is forbidden by German law. In the memes, *sympathy with National Socialism/fascism* is repeatedly expressed by such visual elements, *Wehrmacht* uniforms and the black-white-red flag of the German Empire (3), which was also used in the early days of Nazi government (1933–1935). The text "The future is ours" (Die Zukunft gehört uns) implies a 'we', promising the viewer that they to will become part of a strong and heroic community whose days are about to come.

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**16** | Arena (2016): The State of Vapor[Wave]: An Interview with Gran Turismo, 18 September (https://arena.com/article/the-state-of-vapor).

## Nature Remixes



*Figure 4: Nature Remix.*

As another far-right theme, the memes frequently address *traditional values* regarding *nature and family*. These images commonly depict mountains (11), fields (2) and forests (10), focusing on landscape associated with Northern or Central Europe. In far-right imagery, nature represents "the majesty of the Fatherland" (Forchtner/Kølvraa 2017: 266), providing an idealized habitat for the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. Being the smallest cell of this supposedly genetic community, the ideal core family lives in harmony with nature, which is envisioned as being pure and safe from the decadent influences of urban spaces. One meme, for instance (figure 4),[17] depicts woodcutting as grounded, honest work in contrast to the money-grubbing workplaces of the cities. Notably, both the woman and the children of the 'natural family' are blonde and blue-eyed, symbolizing the

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**17 |** Source: http://reconquista-germanica.info/meme-galerie/reconquista/
#!http://reconquista-germanica.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/15105222
71514.jpg.

'Aryan' prototype of an alleged Germanic heritage. This theme of *ethnic and cultural supremacy* is reinforced by the graphic element in the center of the collage. Symbolizing the reproduction of racial purity, the Othala rune is popular in neo-Nazi circles with blood-and-soil references. It was used by an SS mountain trooper unit in the Second World War and later referred to the neo-Nazi Viking Youth group that was banned in 1994.[18] It expresses a *völkisch* thinking, the idea that genetic heritage makes people "an organic unity, a true subject of history" (Forchtner/Kølvraa 2017: 255). While the beautiful woman in the upper-right wears a white, traditional dress, symbolizing purity, and seems to be responsible for the domestic realm, the man on the left upper-left side wears a contemporary military uniform, defending and protecting the idealized traditional lifestyle by using the latest means of ground warfare available. In terms of restrictive visual representations of *patriarchic gender roles*, the collage visually reproduces the binary opposition between active male (attributed with power and productive work) and passive female (attributed with beauty and reproductive work) (Mulvey 1999: 839), which John Berger famously described as "men act and women appear" (Berger 1972: 47).

However, it must be mentioned that not all of RG's memes employ misogynist stereotypes. Some also visualize women in strong fighting positions as well, probably to appeal to and integrate female supporters (Forchtner/Kølvraa 2017: 268). Regarding aesthetic style, the collage combines nature and family photography with the simplicity of modern graphic design, giving the meme an aura of what hipster culture idealizes as a nostalgic return to a simple and (self)sustainable lifestyle.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout history, fascist mass movements have fascinated the people not only because of their charismatic leaders and policies, but also by their aestheticization of politics (Benjamin 2002). This wider cultural appeal is pursued by contemporary fascism as well (Miller-Idris 2018). Regarding the online imagery of the extreme right, Forchtner and Kølvraa argue that images serve as vehicles in the delivery of political identity (Forcht-

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**18** | Anti-Defamation League: "Othala Rune", (https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/othala-rune).

ner/Kølvraa 2017: 262). Since the far right, too, has undergone a process of (post-)modernization, it must be regarded as closely intertwined with post-modern (youth) cultures who express themselves creatively and often ironically on social media. However, although the self-representation and the attraction of followers requires a more contemporary aesthetic than the formal uniformity associated with National Socialism, far-right online imagery manages to conserve ideological core values despite the tensions between references to symbolic heritage and an updated graphic style (Forchtner/Kølvraa 2017: 254).

While, at first sight, memes appear to be harmless instances of everyday visual culture and merely ironic, they still manage to convey key ideological narratives of hate and bigotry. Far-right media strategists are aware of the dual nature of memes and have turned ambivalence into a mode of contestation in the digital space. Memes have been central to a transformation of far-right visual cultures, making them attractive to wider circles and subcultures. Humor and satire are key to contemporizing hate messages and distorting public discourse (Schwarzenegger/Wagner 2018), but also to veiling the ideological roots of Nazi symbols and to circumvent censorship. As the *Handbook for Media Guerillas* claims: "An adversary who is laughing is already halfway on our side" (Generation D. 2017: 9). Moreover, in image-text combinations typical of memes, text elements (including titles, if any) are able to give images completely new meanings. In our dataset, most of the memes (82) are a combination of images and text elements, while several contain only images (24) and only a few (4) consist only of text. In the manner of postmodern aesthetic eclecticism, they link historical narratives with more contemporary styles, and thereby normalize militaristic, nationalist, völkisch and racist content. In other words, the content seems contemporary even though it is old.

Assuming that RG memes combine a variety of aesthetic styles, we argued that they appeal to multiple audiences far beyond those who unambiguously identify with neo-Nazi and other far-right symbolism. No doubt, this case study gives only a limited insight into the contradictory galaxy of internet memes produced and conveyed by the far right. Since we decoded only one of RG's many meme categories, we did not take into account more violent and provocative messages, which may also be found on the internal community server. While here we have here focused on the representations directed outwards to society at large (front stage), internal meme communication strategies (back stage) may be another promising

field of research, even if the lines between both are increasingly blurred (see also Introduction in this book). By employing humorous ambiguity, 'hipsterish' aesthetics or references to popular culture, particularly cartoons and video games, this more subtle, not overtly political imagery may offer access points for undecided and not-yet politicized users to develop affinities with and support for far-right causes. Hence, we need to put more emphasis on the power of everyday images in order to understand the ways that the far right attracts supporters, especially if we hope to reverse their mainstreaming strategies.

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