

The New Right 2.0

*Participatory Culture and the
Politics of the Extreme Right*

Matei Balan



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Participatory Culture and the Politics of the Extreme Right

Supervisors: Steffen Krüger & Cristina Archetti (Fall 2020 – Fall 2021)

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the online ecosystem of right-wing extremist subcultures appropriates and instrumentalizes mainstream and fringe cultural artefacts to further a loosely defined radical political agenda. Building on a set of complementary and interdisciplinary theories, I will conceptualize this movement as the New Right 2.0, defined by participatory culture and software interoperability. This conceptualization will be then supported by archival data from far-right websites and publications along with synchronously collected data from two different subcultures of the same extremist ecosystem, the image boards 4chan and 8kun (8chan), and the cluster of far-right Telegram channels known as Terrorgram. The analysis suggests that specific patterns occur in the creation and use of both image and non-image-based memes as well as the discussions around them. The results provide insights into the heterogeneity and volatility as well as some of the main operational logics of the New Right 2.0 as these elements play an increasingly significant role in the circulation of far-right propaganda. They will also stress the potential importance for both researchers and intelligence agencies in using case-specific knowledge to counter domestic terrorism, radicalization, and interference in any democratic process. The ultimate aim of this thesis is to contribute to scholarly discussions on the role social media has in the production of extremist content, its circulation, and how this can contribute to the radicalization of some.

Acknowledgements

In her 2018 book, *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods, and Research*, American sociologist and historian Kathleen M. Blee, mentioned that she had rarely talked to researchers of racist movements who don't suffer from emotional burnout and don't have some parts of their personal lives affected by their research. My case is not an exception to this. Writing this thesis has indeed been a rewarding and stimulating process. But the toll of documenting the far-right has proven far greater than I had ever imagined.

Halfway through this project I had found that the issue of emotional and psychological safety for students who research extreme communities is often overlooked and ultimately hard to tackle. There is no one-size-fits-all methodology or solution to the effects this type of work can have. In search for solutions to this I have attended seminars, support groups, and friendly conversations with other researchers. I have shared the challenges and frustrations of my work with people who have either been in the field for too long or who, just like me, have merely entered it. All of these conversations had one thing in common: nobody really knows what's a good and responsible way of protecting your emotional integrity. The subject of therapy comes up along every now and then, yet most public counselors aren't specialized in dealing with this issue. At times, the solutions offered to young researchers sound a lot like the same advice we give for anything, all the time, in the 21st century: take good care of yourself, sleep enough hours, drink water, don't take it personally. In the end, what provided some measure of comfort has been the realization that this type of work contributes to something far greater than one researcher's ambitions. Yet this realization wouldn't have found me if it weren't for all the people that surrounded me with their support and ideas.

Having said this, I owe a debt I cannot ever truly repay in full to the following people, without whom this thesis would have never seen any other desk than my own.

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2021, a report released by the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) assessed that far-right extremist digital networks occupy an increasingly central and influential role in the Western and local terrorist threat. The fact is worrisome especially given how easily accessible most of these networks are. As the report states, "many of those who enter these digital networks are not necessarily extremists, but people who are initially attracted to extreme and groundbreaking content" (PST, 2021). There, through the vehicle of radical humor and irony, "violent content is designed through interactive processes between users", including the non-extremists, "and is largely based on cultural references taken from popular culture" (PST, 2021). These networks can thus be seen as functioning as entry points into extremist ideologies and groups, and as hubs for radicalization by the means of politically instrumentalized cultural artefacts like fictional characters taken from independently produced comic books, household Hollywood blockbusters, popular video games, and popular memes. The relationship between these online communities and their use of (pop)cultural artefacts makes the subject of this thesis.

In the past five years, other intelligence and law enforcement agencies have also deepened their knowledge on this issue when reporting on the Internet activity of right-wing radical or extreme groups. Most recently, a 2020 report released by the United States Department of Homeland Security acknowledged the extremist instrumentation of social media assessing that "violent extremist media almost certainly will spread violent extremist ideologies, especially via social media, that encourage violence and influence action within the United States." Then, the 2020 EUROPOL *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (TE-SAT) covered the subject in more detail, and identified right-wing extremist propaganda to be increasingly similar to the jihadist one in its growing advocacy for lone wolf attacks. Just like PST (2021), EUROPOL (2020) stresses that "right-wing extremist online discourse uses the internet troll-culture – with its use of sarcasm and innuendo – both to manipulate political opponents and to avoid personal responsibility for hate speech and incitement to violence". The report states further that right-wing online spaces "provide encouragement, the opportunity to converse with like-minded individuals, to radicalize and provide guidance for terrorist attacks." (EUROPOL, 2020).

This activity takes place on a large variety of platforms, like dedicated right-wing websites and pseudo news websites, but more importantly, in online spaces which were not right-wing to begin with, but have rather been colonized by right-wing subcultures and communities (e.g., Discord, Twitch, Telegram, Whatsapp, Twitter, Youtube, Reddit, and 4chan). Due to their affordances, such as the interconnectivity with other sites, these online spaces are used to disseminate right-wing extremist content and narratives into popular culture (EUROPOL, 2020). One way this is achieved is through the constant reshaping and workshopping of extremist memes which are initially spread as propaganda by right-wing actors and then by the disinhibited mainstream audience. The aim of this practice is to infiltrate an extremist agenda into popular culture by using popular cultural artefacts.

Some of the best-known online spaces, which in the past five years have been at the center of the discussion about the growing threat of right-wing terrorism, are the boards dedicated to discussing politics (/pol/) on 4chan (Hine et al., 2016; Hagen, 2018), and 8kun (/pnd/) - formerly known as 8chan (Hagen, Burton, Wilson, & Tuters, 2019), and the ecosystem of Neo-Nazi Telegram channels known as Terrorgram (DFRLab, 2020 A; DFRLab, 2020 B). These assessments on how digital affordances, like anonymity, facilitate right-wing activity as well as the political instrumentation of meme culture and the act of trolling are also corroborated by the media.

In 2020 and 2021, it has been reported that two young boys have led the Estonian and the UK branches of the far-right terrorist group *Feuerkrieg Division* (FKD), (Gonzales, 2020; Campbell, 2021), which largely conducts its propaganda and recruitment operations on Telegram. They were able to do so anonymously, from behind a computer screen, a situation which allowed them to be in charge of recruitment of new members and who advocated for violent action (ibid.). Also in 2021, the Norwegian media reported on how Hans Jørgen Lysglimt Johansen, the leader of the far-right party *Alliansen* (The Alliance) was active on Neo-Nazi Discord chat rooms where he worked towards gaining the support of far-right Norwegian trolls whom he instructed, in one instance, to target the Antiracism Center in Oslo in one of their raids (Klungtveit & Skybakmoen, 2021a+b). Johansen instructed the trolls to "copy the anti-racist foundations campaigns using the same layout, but exchange pictures of dark-skinned people with whites" (ibid.) – this presumably to provoke a strong reaction from his adversaries which he could then exploit for his own political gains.

However, while law enforcement agencies warn against the worst-case scenario outcome of user engagement on extremist networks, i.e., violent attacks, other researchers advocate for a more nuanced approach to involvement in terrorist activity, presenting violence as not the only and most likely outcome of radicalization. As Schuurman (2020, p.16) points out, involvement in terrorist activities is frequently associated with the execution of violent attacks, but this is in fact "only one of several 'organizational roles' available", as extremist groups or cells are likely to have just "as many if not more individuals in non-violent 'support' positions related to logistics, recruitment, propaganda or finances. There are also likely to be participants who are best classified as simple 'hangers-on' with limited interest in actually doing anything" (Schuurman, 2020, p.16). Therefore, to better understand the distinction between violent and non-violent outcomes of radicalization we need to acknowledge the numerous forms that involvement in extremist activities can take (Schuurman, 2020, p.16; Busher & Bjørge, 2020, p.6).

Thus, as far as existing knowledge goes, violent action as a product of radicalization dominates the scholarship and the focus of the counter terrorism efforts, whereas non-violent action remains a largely unexplored issue. The affordances of Web 2.0, understood here as the interactive or participatory Internet, where users create and circulate their own content, a process facilitated by the interoperability and interconnectivity of social platforms, make it easier than ever to be what Schuurman (2020) calls a 'hanger-on' on extremist networks and in consequence to engage in non-violent activities.

But while one can say with high probability that the spike in far-right extremist activity, both violent and non-violent, during the past five years is related to user engagement on extremist digital networks, a lot of ground remains uncovered in the existing scholarship about the qualities and nature of this relationship. Furthermore, misconceptions about the relationship between the use of social media and the process of radicalization permeate our society on all levels from daily interpersonal discussions to government policies. As Archetti (2015) has observed, these misconceptions are based on assumptions that "the information space in the digital age is far simpler and more linear than it actually is" (p. 50) and that the *availability* of extremist material equates *reach* (ibid.).

This thesis explores at length this connection between online extremist activity and non-(physically)violent outcomes, here understood as the political instrumentation of popular culture. As

a contribution to research into popular culture and political mobilization (see e.g., Milkoreit, 2017), non-violent engagement in extremist activities (see e.g., Schuurman, 2020), and the nonlinear relationship between radicalization and user engagement (see e.g., Archetti, 2013 & Archetti, 2019); this thesis inquiries into the purposing and use of popular cultural artefacts to achieve a right-wing political agenda focused on establishing cultural hegemony. In theory, this imagined cultural hegemony would then usher in right-wing political dominance (Nagle, 2017; Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall & Murdoch, 2020). It is worth acknowledging here that the plausibility of this ushering-in thesis rests entirely on a far-right conspiracy-oriented worldview – the pursuit of metapolitics and cultural hegemony is justified by the movement’s belief that its opponents and enemies already actively control contemporary Western societies and their cultures with an explicit agenda to continue this process. It then becomes obvious that cultural hegemony as seen by the far-right is defined by false assumptions, paranoia, and conspiracy theories.

Having said all this, the question I seek to answer in this paper is:

Do the cultural artefacts that make up the bulk of the user engagement on the far-right cyberspace have specific operational functions, and if so, which are they and how do they work towards achieving a right-wing political agenda?

Ultimately, what my study shows is that user generated content gestures toward three main functions that serve a culture-oriented right-wing political agenda. These functions are intimately tied to the characteristics of Web 2.0, participatory culture and software interoperability.

In the remainder of my introduction, I present some of the previous research pertaining to my research interest, namely the activity of the movement that is now known as the Alt-right and the cyber ecosystem of far-right communities at large and the common focus on fighting a culture war either as a preamble or as a substitute to the political one. Following this, I present my research questions and interests in depth and provide an outline of the thesis.

1.1 Existing scholarship and research

The literature covering the engagement of the far-right cyberspace in political activism by the means of appropriating cultural artefacts is scarce. I understand this process of conducting political activism through the means of appropriating a cultural artefact as using any number of artefacts for

purposes they were not intended and attributing to them meanings their authors did not consciously encode. Literature on this subject is relatively scarce as researchers still struggle to understand a phenomenon that has been in the making long before it entered the mainstream in 2016-2017 with Donald Trump's presidential election victory and the controversy surrounding the (mostly) online community that supported him: the Alt-right.

In terms of books and chapters published on the subject, since 2015, there are some examples of research covering the culture war waged by the Alt-right seen in the context of an opposition between Internet mediated right-wing and left-wing politics (for example Nagle, 2017). Then there are some analytical takes on how the Alt-right represents the same old ideas of white nationalism, but rebranded to cater to a younger audience (for example Stern, 2019). Some of the other important perspectives on the subject take the form of historical studies, laying out the history of the modern far-right, be it global or US-centered, with its main traditions and modes of discourse, and accurately explaining how and where the Alt-right fits in this pre-existing milieu of radicalism and extremism, and also how it has contributed to the mainstreaming of racism and far-right ideology as whole (for example Ross, 2017; Mudde, 2019, and Mondon & Winter, 2020). One other segment of research relevant to this thesis is represented by studies which have isolated the Alt-right phenomenon to the confinements of US politics. This part of the scholarship is concerned with how the movement was born as a reaction against the American conservative movement and the Republican party just as much as against the progressives and the democrats. It has also identified core differences and frictions within the movement as well as its limitations and grand exaggerations (for example Hawley, 2017 and Wendling, 2018). Then, beyond the Alt-right subject, there is a consistent body of work where researchers conduct in-depth analyses on how, where, and why the radicalization process takes place, with the online spaces as one of the most worrisome aspects (for example Miller-Idriss, 2020).

When it comes to published reports, papers, and articles on the subject of the Alt-right's role in the political landscape of the 2016 US elections and after, these are more focused, more coherent, and more valuable when it comes to providing the field of research on far-right extremism with fresh analytical and theoretical perspectives. There is a growing body of work on the mainstreaming of the far-right through the affordances of social media (for example Davey & Ebner, 2017; and Heikkilä, 2017), of which a considerable part shows that the phenomenon which came into focus in 2016 for the entire world, was already in the making and under the scrutiny of scholars long before

(for example Caiani & Kroll, 2014). There is also a focus in the scholarship on specific ideological and rhetorical discussion points that are constantly circulated in the far-right cyberspace and have consequences in the offline world (for example Davey & Ebner, 2019; Tuters, 2018; Krüger, 2018; and Deem, 2019). There are also reports which cover the emergence of the Alt-right and its lingering effects in specific geographical and social contexts outside of North America, more precisely in the Scandinavian space (for example, Ranstorp & Ahlin, 2020).

Lastly, there is some research that mentions the Alt-right, along with 4chan and the now defunct Daily Stormer as its main producers of political memes. This body of research acknowledges the complex design behind the process placing it in the theoretical landscape of participatory culture. In their report for Data & Society, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation*, Marwick and Lewis (2017) analyze how extremist online subcultures take advantage of the current media ecosystem to "manipulate news frames, set agendas, and propagate ideas" and point to the fact that these groups have developed "techniques of 'attention hacking' to increase visibility of their ideas through strategic use of social media, memes, and bots - as well as by targeting journalists, bloggers, and influencers to help spread content" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

This study is an important one for my research interest as it explains how the far-right political agenda becomes mainstreamed by identifying the dependence of traditional media "on social media, analytics and metrics, sensationalism, novelty over newsworthiness, and clickbait" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), which makes it vulnerable to manipulation. The study also points out how the many different factions of the New Right 2.0, of which the 'alt-right' is just one, "may diverge deeply in their beliefs, but they share tactics and converge on common issues or meta-narratives" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). It also stresses that "the far-right exploits young men's rebellion and dislike of 'political correctness' to spread white supremacist thought, Islamophobia, and misogyny through irony and knowledge of internet culture" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Then, the very susceptibility of mainstream media to media manipulation only increases distrust in the idea of a reliable 5th Estate, only leading to increased disinformation and radicalization.

Marwick and Lewis (2017) observe how those who engage in this ecosystem of extremist online subcultures "educate each other and collaboratively develop techniques for spreading ideas and 'red pilling the normies' ". In this process of workshopping radical and extremist materials, the milder image-based memes are intended to work as 'gateway drugs' to more extreme ideas. The

authors also describe how a grassroots propaganda and disinformation machine was fine-tuned through the process of constantly incorporating feedback and through the fact that its creators educated themselves by studying relevant literature.

Members of these communities share a wide range of literature to educate themselves on the media and public opinion and to cement their identity as in-the-know, educated “memetic warriors.” This includes classic media studies and sociology texts, such as *Understanding Media* by Marshall McLuhan and *The Crowd* by Gustave Le Bon, as well as material on propaganda and persuasion techniques. They circulate bestselling self-help texts like Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, books by the “father of public relations” Edward Bernays, pioneering leftist community organizer Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*. (Marwick & Lewis, 2017)

In their analysis Marwick and Lewis (2017) also emphasize the importance of the process of politically appropriating and circulating cultural artefacts as one which all the members of the community play a part in. They point to how these online spaces exemplify Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, since these communities have “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.” (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Taking previous academic research into account, the need for a better understanding of this new digitally mediated form of far-right political activism and extremism becomes evident. Moreover, this places my research among the first projects that proposes that we first and foremost look at this politically extreme environment through the scope of participatory culture.

1.2 Researching online extremist subcultures

As I am conducting research on a loosely defined virtual community, I choose two complementary qualitative methods, one for collecting my material in an ethical manner and another one for analyzing it. The first one is online ethnography (Skågeby, 2011) and it will aid me in setting my research goal, entering the communities I am going to study, and selecting my material. The second one is hermeneutics, and especially the device of the hermeneutic circle (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) which will aid me in analyzing my material, allowing me to follow my sources wherever they may take me. I will therefore start with three main platforms of interest: 4chan, 8chan, and Telegram. Then, in each case I single out specific threads and communities I to analyze as

exemplary cases of more complex wholes.

In the cases of both 4chan and 8chan, I follow the politically incorrect boards (/pol/ and /pnd/ respectively), with the latter being the more extreme one in the sense that the Neo-Nazi content is predominant. Lastly, I have singled out a handful of Neo-Nazi Telegram channels, where the circulated content is yet more extreme. I thus establish what might well be seen as the spine of the far-right cyberspace. From this spine, I will follow the circulation of artefacts to different other platforms, such as YouTube, BitChute, Twitter, etc. and also to far-right blogs, publications, and podcasts, such as Counter Currents and Guide to Kulchur.

In my data collection I have analyzed various discussion threads from the boards concerned with politics on 4chan and 8chan. In the case of 4chan that board is /pol/ and in the case of 8chan /pnd/, I have picked these discussion threads depending on their subject and popularity. On 4chan, threads are deleted after they reach the maximum count of comments, so whenever I identified a thread relevant to my thesis, I had to act quickly and preserve as much of it as possible by making screenshots of the content before it was eventually deleted. In the case of 8chan, however, threads are stored in perpetuity, unless the admin deletes them on purpose. In the case of Telegram, Neo-Nazi channels have been under intense scrutiny during the past year, especially after the events at the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021. As a result of this scrutiny, most of the channels I have observed have been deleted by Telegram.

As such, the narrower selection of my data comprises of no less than 1000 comments and images. I only selected discussion threads that appeared of interest to my theme of ‘participatory extremism’, to the effect that other topics, views, and operational methods of this community remain unaccounted for. However, since my study of this community covers the span of a full year along with following the circuit of certain cultural artefacts across platforms, outside of the three above mentioned ones, I argue that there is enough evidence to consider the process of politically appropriating cultural artefacts (along with the functions of this process identified in this thesis) as representative of this online community in general. In line with the agreement achieved with NSD, I have collected only data relevant to my topic, which does not include any form or personal data of any individual or group of individuals.

Doing research on this online community has proven to be both a moral and ethical challenge. First, there are no clear rules in regard to what is considered private or public space on

the Internet. So, I had to draw my own limitations, which I briefly explained above. I will discuss my ethical choices in detail in chapter 4.1. And second, there is the moral question of whether conducting this study will further provide this community with an outlet for its hateful rhetoric and propaganda. I believe that the benefit of writing this thesis lies in offering a fresh theorization of how this movement is different than the traditional far-right milieu, and how it uses the affordances of Web 2.0 to its advantage. I identify the costs of writing such an analysis to be minimum. Even though this work will be available to the public, I believe that it leaves little room for extremist discussion points to get through to the audience and further deepen the problem of far-right propaganda and radicalization.

To analyze my data, I have chosen the hermeneutic circle (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). This method allows the researcher to conduct an effective analysis on data that is comprised of both textual and visual materials. By reading and re-reading the analyzed material I was able, over the course of one year, to form three distinct hypothesis that will aid me in proving the three identified functions: political mobilization, grassroots disinformation, and radicalization and indoctrination. In this process I have also been able to flesh out the most relevant case studies that illustrate each process.

The functions are identified in the circulation of politically appropriated cultural artefacts between convergence intermediaries and a grassroots audience. I identify the convergence intermediaries as the members of this community with the most influence provided by their popularity showcased by aspects such as the number of followers, how often cited by their peers as well as by academic researchers and lastly to what degree they are acknowledged by other intermediaries. Then, the grassroots audience, I argue, is composed of the bulk of users who come and go on each of the platforms, with various degrees of involvement and commitment to the movement.

Using the methods of ethnography online I will collect and analyze some of the most popular artefacts after I will have traced them from my initial three sources (4chan, 8chan, and Terrorgram) to other platforms like, *Counter Currents* and BitChute. Therefore, I will not only monitor how the artefacts that form my case studies are synchronously discussed by users on 4chan or Terrorgram, but I will also follow how they are discussed by far-right political influencers and authors like Greg Johnson from *Counter Currents*, and Fróði Midjord from *Guide to Kulchur*

podcast.

I focus on ideological attributed to both mainstream and fringe cultural artefacts (for example, *The Lord of the Rings* represents a mainstream artefact, while the *White Boy Summer* meme a fringe one). I also look at the very specific ways these interpretations are concealed by discursive methods like trolling but are not limited to. I also identify each artefact as inherently open to interpretation and therefore this condition to be the one primarily exposed to exploitation from political actors. In the case of discussions surrounding 4chan and 8chan style of Internet culture I will show how trolling and radical irony conceal these politically appropriated interpretations. In this sphere of activity, I also identify platforms like *Guide to Kulchur* and channels like *Black Pigeon Speaks* that operate in the same discursively dishonest manner. In the case of the fringe part of the far-right cyberspace i.e., its most extreme parts, I will show how these interpretations are attributed openly, without any pretexts. This latter sphere of activity covers Telegram's Terrorgram and publications like *Counter Currents*.

Since I am interested in identifying the main functions of the mainstream and fringe cultural artefacts circulated by the cyber community of far-right political actors, I hold my secondary research questions to be the following:

Who are the far-right political actors that politically appropriate mainstream and fringe cultural artefacts and what is their agenda?

What are the common qualities of the cultural artefacts appropriated in the far-right cyberspace?

What do these common qualities say about the performance of the functions?

What are the most common results and effects of this political instrumentation of cultural artefacts?

1.3 Outline of the thesis

In Chapter 2, I start my thesis by building a background picture for my research perspective. I

presenting the cyber ecosystem of far-right subcultures and further expand on the concepts that define it and also place it in a longer history of the global far-right's predilection towards appropriating a vast array of cultural artefacts from ancient religious symbols to movie costumes and popular works of fiction. A presentation of 4chan, 8chan, and Terrorgram, their position as hubs for extremism and radicalization will then follow. Finally, I elaborate on my choice of material as I have picked a handful of case studies that illustrate the process I am discussing as a whole.

In Chapter 3, I present my theoretical support for this thesis. I touch upon the process of cultural production and circulation as theorized by Bourdieu (1993a), which is rooted in the pre-Internet age. Then I slowly transition to Henry Jenkin's (2006) model of Convergence Culture, which is representative of our current age, where the interplay and overlap of interests between media producers, grassroots intermediaries, and grassroots fandoms accounts for the main circuit of mainstream popular culture. I make this transition by looking at different modes of interpretation that have defined over the decades the place and class struggle of the audiences. I show how with the advent of the Internet and then with that of the Web 2.0 audiences have gained more and more power, at times bypassing that of the media producers in the circuit of cultural production and reception. This power is now used by political actors whom are also fans of different pop cultural artefacts, which they are not shy to politically instrumentalize as to connect with other fans and other politically like-minded peers. Out of this rich theoretical context I build a three-level analytical tool that will allow me to engage with my material at different levels and effectively deploy my four complementary theories to produce valuable insights.

In Chapter 4 I discuss at large the methodological considerations of this paper. Here, I will expand on my methodological approach which consists of a hybrid between online ethnography and the hermeneutic circle. The former requires setting a clear statement of the research perspective before conducting it. Therefore, I state that I entered this community as a cisgender straight white man with an Eastern European Orthodox upbringing. Even though I have never participated in any groups or actions even remotely tangent to the far-right, I cannot say that I am an outsider. Given my identity and my cultural background, a great deal of the content that I have been studying is propaganda addressed for a demographic which I am a part of. Thus, I close this chapter with a discussion of the ethical considerations regarding researching online communities.

The analysis of my findings follows in Chapter 5. Here I will test the three different

hypotheses that have emerged as I have collected and read and re-read my material. Each hypothesis is meant to support each of the functions of the process of politically appropriating cultural artefacts. These three functions are political mobilization, grassroots disinformation, and indoctrination and radicalization. By using the analytical tool developed in Chapter 3 from my four main complementary theoretical perspectives, I will establish, as a means to test each hypothesis, who is the community that politically appropriates cultural artefacts and what might its agenda be judging from this process. Then, as I identify that interpretation is underlying aspect of appropriation, I will discuss at large the modes of interpretation observed and some of their qualities. Finally, I look at effects and implications of the process both in within the confines of the community and the mainstream.

I follow up with Chapter 6, where I discuss my findings, presenting some of the overlapping roles of the identified functions as well as the frictions that emerge between them. I present my concluding remarks in Chapter 7.

2. Background: Popular culture, far-right politics, and the Internet

In her 2020 book, *Hate in the Homeland*, Cynthia Miller-Idriss explains that the history of how the global far-right "has created, cultivated, and weaponized the internet is much more complex, relying on a strategic combination of online and off-line activities that enables the far-right to maximize the circulation, communication, and effectiveness of far-right ideologies." (p. 138). Popular culture, with its widely available and accessible artefacts, plays a key role in how these far-right political activities are designed, carried out, and also in their degree of effectiveness.

In this chapter I present a background picture for my research. This picture starts with a historical view of the far-right and its inclination and affinity towards using popular culture to achieve its goals and communicate its agenda. I also touch upon how this historical picture points towards the fact that the far-right relationship with the Internet and with popular culture positions it as a largely unexplored segment of participatory culture. After that, I present a hierarchical perspective of my three initial sources and why they are central to my research interest. I then

present how I have branched out of the initial three spaces, into the far-right cyberspace, before settling on the most valuable sources and case studies for my analysis.

A few historical considerations: the American KKK and Italian MSI Youth Front

Historically, the French *Nouvelle Droite* (ND) that emerged in the late 1960s has been the first far-right political group to adopt the doctrine of metapolitics and cultural hegemony (Griffin, 2006, p.681). And it is to the ND and some of the groups it has influenced, like *Génération Identitaire*, that movements such as the American 'Alt-right' are most often compared to in their political instrumentation of memes and popular culture (Nagle, 2017; Hawley, 2017). However, the relationship the global far-right has with popular culture of different decades and how it uses it to deliver its agenda precedes the ND and its ideation of cultural warfare as formulated by intellectuals like Alain de Benoist (Griffin, 2006; Capra Casadio, 2014).

In Italy, in the 1960s and the 1970s, the Youth Front of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), organized a music and arts festival called *Campo Hobbit* (Hobbit Camp). This marked the Youth Front's effort to rejuvenate party led politics and present neo-fascism as an ideology appealing to the youth. The MSI Youth Front used the legendarium of British author J.R.R Tolkien to create a seemingly apolitical space for debate where they could convince their leftist counterparts of the validity of their cause and subsequently recruit them to their own ranks (Hof, 2020; Ferraresi, 1996, p.155). *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's 1937 novel, as well as his *Lord of The Rings* trilogy, were used by the MSI Youth Front as entry points for new recruits into neo-fascist ideology. For example, by using Elémire Zolla's interpretation that the myths in *Lord of the Rings* represent a perennial philosophy that must be understood in opposition the modern world, the Youth Front created an effective entry point into the works of Julius Evola (Hof, 2020).

Such uses of elements from popular culture can be traced even further back in time, all the way to the predecessor of European fascism (Paxton, 2015, p.128), the American Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The first wave of the KKK used elements from the popular culture of late 19th century, like the carnival costumes which its members often wore during raids, to mislead its victims and the public officials (Parsons, 2015, p. 84). On a similar note, the second wave of the KKK took inspiration from the methods and the goals of the first Klan and it adopted its now easily recognizable regalia from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and its ceremonies from those of the Freemasons (Parsons, 2015; Gordon, 2017).

Furthermore, Griffith's film presented a romantic and fabricated historical image of the first Klan and this image was in turn taken from another fictional romanticization of the Klan; Thomas Dixon Jr.'s 1905 novel *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, the source material for Griffith's movie. The book is credited with creating the image of the Klansmen as rogue mounted knights, clad in white robes, who organized themselves in local fraternal orders, for which Dixon Jr. took inspiration from the Scottish clans of highlanders. Gordon (2017, p. 12) describes how, in 1915, when *Birth of a Nation* became the first blockbuster hit in history, the American preacher William Joseph Simons, inspired by Griffith's film and the Leo Frank's lynching, "got a copy of the original Klan's 'Prescript' and used it, as well as Masonic rites, as a basis for a new ritual" and a new visual and ideological identity for the Klan, with the aesthetic elements of Griffith's film dominating the public image of the Klan. *Birth of a Nation* also became a recruiting tool for the Klan as the movie was screened during recruitment events.

Presenting the cases of the MSI Youth Front and that of the KKK side by side we notice how two distinct functions of popular culture emerge. In the case of the MSI Youth Front, this is the facilitation of entry points into the group's ideology and agenda via a seemingly apolitical work of fiction. The other one showcases how a group's visual identity and mythos coagulate based almost entirely on fictions. What these two functions have in common is that they both rely on a cultural artefact to function. I explore this condition of cultural artefacts as catalyzers and conductors for political propaganda and agenda at length in my analysis.

The far-right goes online: the early years.

The Spring of 1984 is considered the moment when the far-right went online for the first time, with its first prolific bulletin board, *Aryan Liberty Net*. Its founder was Louis Beam, then the leader of multiple Texas KKK factions. Beam is considered the first important proponent of the 'lone wolf' or 'leaderless resistance' model of activism and over the years he has "encouraged anti-government and racist terrorism by means of small underground cells that cohere through ideology rather than formal organizations" (ADL, 2013). Beam is also credited with guiding the American white supremacist movement into the computer age of the 1980s. Determined to make good use of the newly available technology, Beam used the new cyber frontier to spread his teachings and mentor domestic terrorists (SPLC a). Here is the message Beam wrote to herald *Aryan Liberty Net*:

Finally, we are all going to be linked together at one point in time. Imagine if you will, all of the great minds of the patriotic Christian movement linked together and joined into one computer. All the years of combined experience available to the movement. Now imagine any patriot in the country being able to call up and access those minds, to deal with the problems and issues that affect him. You are on line (sic!) with the Aryan Nations brain trust. It is here to serve the folk. (Berlet, 2001)

Beam undoubtedly shared the same enthusiasm and excitement surrounding the emergence of the computer era and the Internet as everybody else who felt energized by the new technology. And just like many others, Beam seems to have immediately thought of specific ways this new technology might be used to further his worldview. What the then emerging Internet implied was that people no longer needed to meet in person to participate to various activities. If they shared the same interest this was enough. The removal of the organizational link (then still incipient) was compatible with Beam's view that coherence through ideology is stronger against law enforcement interference than the formal organizational one. Wherever there was a computer linked to the Internet and a white supremacist to use it, the movement would have a chance to continue its so-called struggle. A year later, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) released the first public report on the white supremacist groups' use of computer technology (ADL, 1985).

In 1985, Tom Metzger, an influential American white supremacist, Neo-Nazi skinhead and Klansman, created an even more efficient bulletin board called *White Aryan Resistance* (W.A.R.). Together with Beam and George P. Dietz, an earlier digital pioneer of the white supremacist milieu, Metzger is credited with having established a strong white supremacist online presence in the early 1980s (Smith, 2017). Then, in the 1990s, the *World Church of the Creator* (WCOTC or the Creativity Movement) ran its own bulletin board through which it reached its recruits far and wide (Smith, 2017). George Burdi, a white power musician and racist skinhead, who appears in my first analysis chapter, where he discusses the Traditionalist themes in Tolkien's legendarium with two other far-right political actors, became radicalized when he got involved in *Church of the Creator* (the predecessor organization of WCOTC).

As early as the 1980s, the white supremacist milieu has been relying on zines and bulletin boards. In this reliance, the movement is no different from other groups united by a common interest. Just like benign Star Trek fandoms circulated their texts on the pre-Web 2.0 platforms, so did white supremacists. Yet in the past this subject has often been overlooked when discussing participatory culture and politics, as academic conversations on participatory culture have rarely

focused on the creation of negative and hateful messages and the communities that spread them (for ex., see Stanfill, 2020). Yet, this community, united by its loosely defined far-right ideology, is still a part of participatory culture. I will proceed to show in the following chapters, by relying on fandom centered theoretical perspectives, like Jenkins' (2006) *Convergence Culture* and Milkoreit's (2017) *pop cultural mobilization*.

2.1 4chan, 8chan, and Telegram: a hierarchical approach

I will now explain the logic behind my choice of picking 4chan, 8chan, and Terrorgram as initial sources. At the very surface what drew my attention to these three was the media coverage they received and how they each have been identified, on numerous occasions, as hubs for rampant extremism. Terrorgram is known for its overtly Neo-Nazi chat rooms with their circuit of extremist literature and visual materials (DFRlab, 2020a). 8chan, an image board formed by 4chan users who wanted their own platform, where they could post extreme content without any moderation, came under public scrutiny after far-right terrorist Brenton Tarrant published his manifesto there. It quickly became obvious that 8chan was more extreme than 4chan when it came to graphic and content and that it was mostly populated by a new generation of Internet-culture-embedded Neo-Nazis (Hagen et al., 2019). Links that showcased how users migrated from 8chan to the more extreme Terrorgram started to come to the fore (Boyle, 2019). It is by now well established that 4chan users became radicalized on the platform by users who migrated from Stormfront around 2014-2015. And it is known that, in the pursuit of even more freedom to circulate extremist content and discuss far-right point of views, 4chan users migrated to 8chan. In this light, one can conclude that there is a steady flow of users who start their journey to radicalization on 4chan, transition to 8chan, and end up on Telegram.

My research shows that 8chan is less populated today, and users most likely jump from 4chan directly to Telegram as posts from Terrorgrammers who invite new users to channels such as *Deathkvl Postng* (now deleted by Telegram) or *Feuerkreig Division General* are regular on 4chan's politics board (/pol/). These invitations most often occur on what has proven to be a steady, almost daily /pol/ discussion thread called "/nsg/ - 4 National Socialism General 4". However, 8chan, although with less user activity, still manages to produce ample extreme material. For example, in 2020, during the BLM protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd by a police officer, on 8chan's politics board, /pnd/, appeared a post written by an anonymous user presenting a video

game he was working on. Called *Black Lives Splatter*, the rudimentarily produced video game offered players the option of either driving their car into BLM protesters, which in the game were presented as holding up red signs with yellow hammer and sickle painted on, or simply stop and go on a shooting spree. The protagonist of the game was Moon Man, one of the most prolific memes of the Alt-right in 2017 (ADL b) which it appropriated from a 1980s McDonalds ad. In responses to the original post, users offered their ideas for how the game might be improved. Some suggested a variation in the guns or car one might use. One user suggested specific vehicles: a NASCAR racing car with the number 88 (the number stands for Heil Hitler, as letter *h* is the 8th in the alphabet) as well as the Third Position symbol; George Lincoln Rockwell's 1961 Hate Bus¹ which was driven by American Neo-Nazis throughout the Southern states in response to the Civil Rights movement; and a "portable nigger lyncher" which was also accompanied by a detailed plan for how to mount a crane with a noose attached to it on the back of a pickup truck. This example is perhaps one of the most extreme visual materials circulated on the platform, but it pales in comparison with the materials circulated on Terrorgram, which include instructions for how to make pipe bombs, how to poison city water supplies, as well as the regular Neo-Nazi compendium with titles ranging from Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and James Mason's *Siege* to Louis Beam's *Leaderless Resistance*, Robert Taber's *War of The Flee*, and in some cases Routledge editions of terrorism studies literature.

As I am not concerned with one particular platform and how exactly it facilitates the circulation of extremist content from a technical perspective, but with the negotiated meanings of the circulated artefacts, I will not provide in-depth details about 4chan's, 8chan's, and Telegram's technical specificities. The general consensus is that 4chan's and 8chan's built-in anonymity affordances (one can choose to post under one's real name, but nobody ever does) as well as the relative ephemerality of the former (threads get deleted from 4chan after they reach a maximum number of posts, yet they are turned by users into archived threads where the discussion can be continued for an unlimited time) is what attracts users with extreme views to these platforms.

As for Telegram, the end-to-end encryption has been correlated to the surge of extreme users to the messaging app. Furthermore, it is fairly easy to create multiple backup channels on Telegram if one wishes to do so. The logic of backup channels is that if one gets reported for going against Telegram's policy regarding graphic content and violence then users know where to go next. For this reason, most Neo-Nazi Telegram channels that make up so-called Terrorgram are almost a copy of another copy. This points to the fact that despite strict moderation from Telegram, users are able

to bypass content moderation efforts and to move their activity on another channel where all the literature and other materials have been previously exported. This is the main reason why throughout my thesis I will refer to this community using Terrorgram as an umbrella term. This is not to say that there are no significant differences between the various Neo-Nazi Telegram channels I have covered in my initial data collection, but that they are not of importance to answering my research question.

Whatever specific faction the users of Terrorgram might believe they are building, every one of these channels, from those who post more about eco-fascism to those who only post about the Third Position, there is no actual difference in the bulk of the material they circulate and the discussion points they regularly touch on. Since I have used the hermeneutic circle to analyze my material and trace a few specific case studies from platform to platform my focus has been the specific circulated artefacts rather than the ideological particularities and differences of these groups.

It is also worth noting that the overall image of Terrorgram has been heavily influenced by the now defunct Neo-Nazi website called *Iron March*. It is on this website that groups like *Atomwaffen Division* have started coalescing. Then, when *Iron March* was taken down, its community largely migrated to Telegram. As a consequence, a big part of the literature and visual materials circulated on Terrorgram is what users have saved and stored from *Iron March*. Alexander Slavros' (the website's founder) independently published editions of texts like Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, everything from Julius Evola, Pentti Linkola's *Can Life Prevail?* and William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries*, are therefore present in every Terrorgram compendium.

2.2 New Right 2.0: the far-right cyberspace

As I will explain at length in the next chapter, where I touch upon the methodological considerations of my thesis, after a period of synchronously monitoring discussions on these three platforms, I identified a few case studies which I then follow onto other platforms. In the initial phase this has taken me everywhere from forums like Stormfront to websites like *The American Futurist* (where James Mason² is still active as a contributor) and publishing houses like *Counter Currents* (a publication dedicated to the pursuit of metapolitics from which I will use material in all three of my analysis chapters). Furthermore, I was able to identify less known far-right spaces like

patriotportal[.]org (which I traced from Stormfront as well as from the Counter Currents comments section) where one can find lists of so called 'pro-white' lawyer firms, pro-white dating platforms, lists of so-called political prisoners, pro-white schools, firewall software, lists of far-right oriented bands, and far-right merchandise shops (which include well documented far-right clothing brands like Midgård³).

I also followed discussions around memes and certain themes, like "the great replacement theory", to BitChute (a YouTube-like video sharing platform preferred by the far-right due to its lax content moderation). It was on BitChute that, for example, I was able to find a video made by the prominent Alt-right content creator known as *Black Pigeon Speaks* on the subject of Pepe the Frog in the context of the pro-democracy Hong Kong protests, which had previously been deleted from his YouTube channel. On BitChute I was also able to find all of the episodes from Fróði Midjord's metapolitical oriented podcast, *Guide to Kulchur*, where Midjord and various guests discuss popular culture from a far-right perspective.

It is in this vast and at times overwhelming cyberspace populated by extreme political actors and defined by extreme-right world views I was able to work out my most valuable case studies: the political appropriation of Tolkien's legendarium, especially *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*; the recoding through appropriation of Pepe the Frog; and the far-right meme White Boy Summer (WBS).

The New Right 2.0

Lastly, what I must clarify in this chapter is the terminology I use to refer to this extreme right cyber milieu. The American Alt-right has managed to position itself as the first far-right movement that operated by taking advantage of the affordances of the participatory Internet (what we know as Web 2.0). It has also managed to position itself as the first movement that effectively (I discuss this claim of effectiveness at length in my second analysis chapter) used trolling and memetics to affect political mobilization and, in the view of the community, influence the outcome of political events. However, using the term 'alt-right' to refer to a global cyber community of radical and extremist factions, and not just the 2017 American movement is problematic.

During a series of seminars on the subject of the rise of the global far-right, hosted by the Center for Research on Extremism (CREX), in 2020 and 2021, Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss from American University, who is a sociologist and the head of the Polarization and Extremism Research

and Innovation Lab (PERIL), has repeatedly drawn attention to how problematic the use of the term 'alt-right' actually is. She has repeatedly emphasized, both as a guest speaker of the CREX seminars and as a moderator, that calling whatever part of the far-right the 'alt-right' further validates a misleading self-attributed label of an extremist movement. I believe this call for caution when using self-attributed labels of hate movements to be more than justified in the field of research.

To talk about the Alt-right in the present tense does validate, even if only at a surface level, the movement's tongue in cheek statement that the Alt-right was meant to be an alternative to right wing politics. Furthermore, when we speak of the Alt-right we automatically reference a political movement that has seized to exist even though its legacy is still alive.

For the past five years, the online forums and chat rooms of the far-right have been filled with edgy remarks on how the 'libs' and the 'normies' have bought into the 'alt-right' meme. The butt of these jokes are more than often scholars and journalists. Even Andrew Anglin, the creator of *Daily Stormer*, recognized this during the 2020 US presidential elections. *The Daily Stormer*, named after the Nazi propaganda tabloid *Der Stürmer*, was an openly Neo-Nazi and white supremacist 4chan-like website, that in 2016 became a home of the most radical 4chan and 8chan users, and which in the meantime has been pushed to the fringes of hosting services and it's now nearly impossible to access. Anglin has been long regarded as the almost archetypical image of the extremist far-right troll (O'Brien, 2017; SPLC b) and one of the most ardent proponents of the Alt-right movement back in 2016 and 2017. When confronted about the “Alt-right project” by users on GAB (an alternative social media platform that under the guise of free speech hosts far-right extremist content) during election week, in November 2020, Anglin responded that “The alt-right failed because it was meant to.”. Of course, after the movement has shattered throughout 2017, in the wake of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, where a white supremacist drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing anti-racist activist Heather Heyer and injuring others, a lot of its former self-appointed representatives, like Anglin, have implied that the failure of the movement was part of a cunning plan.

I argue that whether the Alt-right was an improvised act, able to sustain a public face on the back of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign, or it was a master plan for making American politics implode, the discussion is almost irrelevant. What demands one's attention is that further talking about the movement on its own terms, no matter how much well intended scholars try to separate academic definitions of the Alt-right from those voiced by the movement, contributes to keeping it alive in mainstream culture. This is unfortunately exposure that the far-right will be able to reuse,

reshape, reinterpret, re-conceptualize, and repurpose for as long as this will be a recognizable and emotionally loaded cultural reference. For example, Hermansson et al. (2020) give the definition of the International Alt-right as follows:

an international set of groups and individuals, operating primarily online though with offline outlets, whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack from pro-multicultural and liberal elites and so called 'social justice warriors' (SJWs) who allegedly use 'political correctness' to undermine Western civilization and the rights of white males. (p. 2)

One problem with definitions like this one making their way into academic scholarship is that they sound too much like Milo Yiannopoulos' (Gamergate anti-feminist and self-styled Alt-right activist) definitions, which he published in Breitbart with the sole purpose of misleading journalists and scholars. Political scientist George Howley, in his 2017 book *Making Sense of the Alt-right*, noted the same thing in a correction for his chapter and explained that he was misled by Milo and other figures in the milieu.

At the same time, I believe this to also be a shortcoming caused by the attempt present a somewhat new phenomenon while lacking the proper terms to refer to it.

To use the Alt-right term and label in the context of this thesis would mean not only mean to fall for the trolling, but to further a gross inaccuracy. This inaccuracy most often takes form under the assumption that the Alt-right means any far-right online community in general.

For the purpose of this thesis, I propose the term New Right 2.0 (NR 2.0). I compose it from combining two key fundamental aspects of the far-right movement I am researching. First, there is the focus on culture as both a means to an end and an end in itself, which it picked up from the European New Right. Here, both Nagle (2017) and Hermansson et al. (2020) pin point to a tradition defined by fighting and winning the culture war before the political one – started, in fact, by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci and his ideas of cultural hegemony. And second, I argue that this global digital movement is one defined by the affordances and characteristics of Web 2.0. These are, in broad strokes, software interoperability and participatory culture.

New Right 2.0 is therefore a term I develop not only because it accurately describes my research subject, but it will also allow me to properly contextualize the Alt-right and fit it into a bigger and more well-informed picture. This then has the potential to aid further researchers in understanding how this digital strain of far-right might change its form in the coming years, no matter what visual identity or titles it might adopt.

My concept also emphasizes the movement's chronological distinctiveness and positions it in a historical sequence which implies both continuity and transformation. I cannot claim that the term is a perfect one, or that it answers all the questions. New Right 2.0 emphasizes the reality of a movement that has been long in the making and which has made its mark only recently with the rise of social media platforms. I therefore encourage other researchers to develop terms that suit their area of interest best and, if need be, criticize and challenge the accuracy and validity of this one.

In the following chapter I present the complementary theoretical perspectives pertaining to my research interest and elaborate on the analytical tool I have developed to analyze my material.

3. Theoretical perspectives: the Participatory Right

Having touched upon a few historical considerations of the relationship the far-right has with popular culture, I now present an overview of the theoretical perspectives pertaining to my research interest, which will ultimately aid me in better understanding this relationship as well as in analyzing my material.

I begin by looking at the issues of cultural production, circulation, and reception. I identify this circuit to be the foundation of understanding how cultural artefacts are appropriated and then used for specific purposes. Then, I discuss the overlap and interplay of interests and poles of power at the core of this circuit between media producers and the audience of fans. I identify Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* (2006) model as the contemporary dominant mode of interpretation and circulation of cultural artefacts. I also look at some of the earlier and most notable modes of interpretation, starting with Umberto Eco's early iteration of media jamming, and continuing with Stuart Hall's model of Encoding/Decoding, I then move on to Henry Jenkin's concept of textual poaching.

Then, I discuss a few of the qualities of the artefacts that can be considered popular culture and also touch on those that do not fall under this category. Following this, I present a perspective where cultural artefacts function as empty signifiers for political movements who seek representation. I then transition to a discussion on Manjana Milkoreit's (2017) model of pop cultural mobilization, one of the central theoretical perspectives of this paper. After this, I touch on a few

considerations regarding Memetics, understood here as units of cultural reproduction (not to be mistaken for memes), and how it can be contextualized as a form of non-violent participation.

I close the chapter with the presentation of an analytical tool that I build from my four key complementary theories: Convergence Culture (Jenkins, 2006), the empty signifier (Laclau, 2018), encoding/decoding (Hall, 2001) and pop cultural mobilization (Milkoreit, 2017).

3.1 Cultural production, circulation, and reception

Bourdieu (1993 a) sees cultural production as an interaction between three distinctive fields of practice: the artistic field, the field of power, and the field of class relations. According to him, these three fields are co-existing and permeable. The artistic field is nested in the much larger field of power which, in turn, is nested in the wider field of class relations. These three fields are presented in terms of dominant and dominated forces. But with the advent of the Internet and the Web 2.0, Bourdieu's fields of practice have become more permeable with a two-way flow between the two poles of power. On the one hand, cultural producers in the artistic field achieve personal and professional status when working in a seemingly free and top-down manner, but on the other, the receptive flow from the field of power and class relations fragment the sphere of cultural production in terms which function according to an economic and demographic logic.

Web 2.0 – the participatory Internet – and online fandom have outdated the previous nature of communicative flows presented by Bourdieu (1993 b & c) and now function as a stable bridge between these three fields. This bridge then functions as a power exchange territory. Media producers harvest user data and monetize it for marketing purposes and to inform the artistic field and the process of artistic creation. At the same time, fans of today, fully aware of how their participatory fandom practices and their data are being monetized by media producers, use this as leverage to ask for content that better responds to their emotional needs and political affinities, thus turning the issue of representation into a (cultural) political agenda.

Bourdieu (1993 b, p.76) states that the symbolic and commercial value of an artefact (this can be anything from a work of art to a film or a novel) is the work of consecrating agents - someone who "by putting it on the market, by exhibiting, publishing or staging it, consecrates a product which he has 'discovered' and which would otherwise remain a mere natural resource; and the more consecrated he personally is, the more strongly he consecrates the work.". He places these

consecrating agents into what he calls the "circle of belief" (p. 77) - the field of production seen as a system of objective relations between agents and institutions and also as the site of struggles for monopoly of the power to consecrate; to continuously generate value. Participatory fandom adds a new class of such consecrating agents to Bourdieu's (1993 b) "circle of belief ". As Shefrin (2004) explains, "due to their close textual readings, their enthusiastic critical analyses, their extreme dedication, and their growing numbers, active fans are beginning to be recognized as important contributors to the formation of collective belief" (p. 269). He adds that: "active fans form a hybrid class of consecrating agents— they may possess scholarly knowledge without being scholars, or they may possess a discriminating eye without being professional critics" (ibid.).

It is this new class of consecrating agents that makes the subject of this thesis and invites further investigation. Shefrin's (2004) claim that "fans form a hybrid class of consecrating agents" is perhaps the most important one here. It is also a good transition to Henry Jenkins' theoretical model of Convergence Culture, which he published in book form in 2006, two years after Shefrin's paper, confirming and nuancing this assessment of the importance of fans in the formation of collective belief.

3.2 Convergence Culture and participatory fandom

Jenkins' (2006) theoretical framework of Convergence Culture laid out the predominant dynamics between the poles of power defined by media producers and media consumers and, just like Bourdieu (1993), showcased a struggle over meaning and its production instead of one defined by economical aspects.

In the Convergence Culture model things function as follows. A corporation pushes the cultural artefacts it has produced in a top-down manner onto its target audiences as well as other, wider audiences (we can agree that artefacts are enjoyed by people who haven't been accounted for in any market-audience projection). These are artefacts which have been produced on the basis of the data extracted from the online behavior of said audiences. The audience receives the artefacts, unpacks (in Hall's model: decode) them, consumes them, and ultimately appropriate them regardless of the encoded message or meaning from the producing end. These appropriations are then again released into further circulation, where they co-exist with the initial and unaltered versions of the original artefacts. Between these two, there are the Grassroots Intermediaries

(Jenkins, 2006), or what Shefrin (2004) recognizes as active fans who form a hybrid class of consecrating agents, and who come to possess the professional and discursive knowledge of professional consecrating agents like critics, scholars, and others. This in-between category deals in an unauthorized flow of media content and at times, depending on how consecrated these Grassroots Intermediaries (Intermediaries enjoy an elevated status in the Grassroots group), they can be powerful actors in Convergence Culture, regulating how fandoms receive artefacts produced for them from the pole of Corporate Convergence.

It is the latter two that are of central interest for this thesis. The intermediaries and their audience, of which they are a part of, can form their own ecosystem of media production, circulation, and reception. As I will show in my first analysis chapter, in the case of New Right 2.0, which constitutes such an ecosystem of convergence between fandom actors, cultural artefacts are taken from the sphere of mainstream production and are being politically appropriated to advocate against the very pole of power which is seen as being at fault for the perceived issue of representation this political movement thinks it has. Between the two poles of intermediaries and the audience we can then see the formation of a smaller circle of belief, where far-right political actors work to produce not belief in the value of a work of art but belief in the ideological dimension of an artefact – an ideology which they attribute to it through the process of interpretation.

Milkoreit's (2019) account of fans-turned-political-actors who use objects of fandom to mobilize other fellow fans and thus achieve a political agenda, also focuses on the top-down/bottom-up relationship between the intermediaries and the audience. Adding this convergence model to Milkoreit's (2019) observations of fans politically mobilizing fans adds a new dimension to the discussion: specifically, that of the constant recirculation and reinterpretation of meaning. Milkoreit (2017) points out that most of the scholarship about pop culture and political mobilization implies that pop cultural narratives have inherent, self-evident meaning for their audiences. The opposite is in fact true, he holds. Pop cultural artefacts don't have inherent meanings, they can be read and interpreted in several ways. What is to be pointed out here is that this availability of various meanings and interpretations sits at the very foundation of the common fan cultural practice of appropriating and intentionally misreading cultural artefacts.

3.3 Mode of Interpretation I - Textual Poaching

Jenkins (2009) discusses the concept of textual poaching, drawing from Michel de Certeau's idea of "an impertinent raid on the literary preserve that takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader" (p. 24). De Certeau's (1984) initial analogy – that of "nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves" (De Certeau, 1984, as cited in Jenkins, 2009, p. 24) – paints the relationship between readers and writers as an "ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for the control over its meanings" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 24). This echoes much of the rhetoric of the French Nouvelle Droite and the European New Right (ENR) - that the only true war that there is to be won is that of ideas; a war that will always take place in the abstract field of culture. In the United States, this rhetoric has been emulated by political actors who were quick to support the momentum the Alt-right had in 2017, such as Richard Spencer, Jarred Taylor, Greg Johnson, and Steve Bannon, who also went a step further and merged this approach with the specter of already extreme online subcultures that dealt in the circulation of meaning of pop cultural artefacts (Beran, 2019; Nagle, 2017; Hawley, 2017).

Even though the practice of textual poaching is characteristic of the age of media production and consumption that preceded Convergence Culture, when fandoms existed at the margins of the 'respectable' audience, it is still relevant to talk about it in terms of an actual fandom practice. Cultural artefacts are poached for highly ideologized meaning(s), appropriated, and thus instrumentalized. Furthermore, due to the extreme nature of the political interpretations attributed to cultural artefacts by the actors and groups identified in this thesis, these groups come to constitute a discriminated niche from the perspective of Corporate Convergence.

Jenkins (2009) states that "what is significant about fans in relation to de Certeau's model is that they constitute a particularly active and vocal community of consumers whose activities direct attention onto this process of cultural appropriation" (p.28). Drawing from this, the unstated mission of all the significant groups and outlets that compose the NR 2.0 and which are defined by fandom certainly falls within these lines of channeling all intellectual resources towards the process of appropriating cultural artifacts, in order to achieve a stable and lasting form of soft power. As Jenkins (2009, p.28) accurately observes, "fans are not unique in their status as textual poachers, yet they have developed poaching to art form". The same observation can be applied to the NR 2.0, whose members, especially those who frequently and to some extent professionally engage in

cultural criticism, are not unique in their status as textual poachers. Yet, they have appropriated and developed poaching into a tool of political activism.

3.4 Mode of Interpretation II - Encoding/Decoding

To discuss the appropriation of media content by its viewers requires that we look at the communication process between media producers and viewers. According to Stuart Hall (2001), an audience that acts like this, appropriating the broadcasted message or willingly misreading it, operates outside the dominant or preferred code by the producers who have encoded the message. Hall (2001) identifies three hypothetical positions from which the decoding of the message may be constructed: 1) the dominant-hegemonic position – the viewer takes a connoted message from an artefact and decodes it in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, so the viewer operates inside the dominant code; 2) the negotiated position – the receiver of the message still operates within the dominant code, but ultimately rejects it as it does not fully correspond to their beliefs and experience of the world, and 3) the oppositional code – the receiver understands both the literal and connotative dimensions of the discourse but decodes the message in a very specific and highly ideologized way. What Hall (2001) points out is that while a message is not open to all the possible interpretations and misreadings, its encoding in a dominant code cannot guarantee its reading in that dominant code. This helps us consolidate the idea that the consumers of a pop cultural artefact will not read that artefact in the same way. Therefore, when these fans are politically mobilized behind an artefact they will be so as a heterogeneous crowd, responding to different meanings and messages.

Assessing how the NR 2.0 appropriates cultural artefacts by using Hall's (2001) three modes of interpretation can be somewhat tricky. For instance, to be able to judge if a group or a specific political actor is operating in a negotiated or oppositional manner implies the identification of the encoded message first. However, statements pertaining to what the creators of some of the artefacts have tried to accomplish can be found. Furthermore, plenty cultural artefacts that are politically appropriated by the NR 2.0 have been the subject of scholarly research for decades and different interpretations of their meanings are available.

It is then possible to holistically distinguish from this wide range of auxiliary materials the encoded message or meaning of certain artefacts (in certain cases, the absence of any one author

and its replacement with that of the collective authorship plays an equally important role in research). It is also possible to make sense of how the encoded message is so open to interpretation that it fosters a multitude of subsequent other interpretations which, even though extremely ideologized in nature, still cannot be judged as fitting into the negotiated or oppositional reading. As I will show in my first analysis chapter, with the case study of Tolkien's legendarium, the encoded message seems to, in fact, be so permissive in the ideological interpretation it fosters that it really becomes impossible to determine whether this interpretation is oppositional or negotiated at all.

What Hall's (2001) Encoding/Decoding theoretical model helps us clarify however is that any intended interpretation and therefore usage of a cultural artefacts does not guarantee that it will be decoded and read/interpreted in those terms. This observation will be explored at length in my analysis.

3.5 Mode of Interpretation III: Jamming

I have so far presented two modes of interpretations that defined different aspects and eras of the relationship between media producers and their audience. Jenkins (2009) and Hall (2001) both identify forms of poaching as either a voluntary and informed action (Jenkins, 2009), or an involuntary and almost unconscious interaction with the received artefact/message (Hall, 1999). This draws attention again to the fact that, as Bourdieu (1993) observed, this struggle over establishing the dominant meaning is ultimately a struggle between the bottom-up audience and the top-down media producers and consecrators, which goes against the very open nature of the artefact. But then if we take into consideration that not all misreadings, ideological or not, are unintentional, then we can ask why someone would willingly misinterpret an artefact and to what end.

In 1967, Umberto Eco published *Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare*, an essay in which he revolted against Marshall McLuhan's bleak assertion that in an age where the mass media triumphs through its bombardment of the individual with ideology, the human being dies. What Eco argues is that the individual is not an empty vessel in which the broadcasted messages and codes can be dumped freely, but an intelligent being who might as well misread and misinterpret as an act of political guerilla resistance. Eco (1986, p.320) noticed that "the battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates,

but where it arrives.". Just like Jenkins, Eco (1986) finds the individual has the power to render any top-down intention or encoding useless through the simple act of jamming the message - interpreting it in another fashion than it was supposed to.

This practice, in its literal form, known as culture jamming, has been long employed by different political groups to make a statement against the political and commercial establishment. As Mark Dery (1993) observed in his seminal essay, *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs*, the strains of conventional culture jamming ranged from "Not Channel Zero, a collective of young African-American 'camcorder activists' whose motto [was] 'The Revolution, Televised'" to such a thing as "academy hacking — cultural studies, conducted outside university walls, by insurgent intellectuals.". In the field of fandom, fanzines that moved online promised a bright and pluralistic future where everyone could be an editor and/or a publisher, going directly against the commercial interests of the top-down producers. Dery (1993) goes on to quote one Mitch Kapor, president of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a group concerned with free speech, privacy, and other constitutional issues in cyberspace who stated that "any person can be a publisher. It's better than the media we now have".

Eco was more optimistic than McLuhan in the late 1960s, and Dery observed the overwhelming overall optimism of the early 1990s, when the emergence of the first Internet bulletin boards led people to believe that what Jenkins (2006) calls "collective intelligence" would become realizable - a state of collective knowledge where only the most important and "good" information would be pushed to the front and circulated.

But as I have shown in the background chapter, organizations like Aryan Liberty Net and Church of The Creator were already moving their activity to this 'new and exciting' medium as early as the late 1980s. By the early 1990s, when Dery (1993) wrote his essay, one could have easily found one's way online to the Aryan Liberty Net newsletters and many other far-right webzines from across the world. And even though these zines weren't yet using the practice of culture jamming themselves, it becomes clear that the overall optimism of the Internet boom of the 1980s and 1990s prepared what came later: the misinterpretation and appropriation of broadcasted messages for the purpose of achieving a radical political agenda. Culture jamming is often discussed in terms of a means to resist top-down interests and encoded messages coming from the pole of media producers. However, it was only until the past five years that it became clear how this



Figure 1. Judy and Nick, the protagonists of *Zootopia* (2016), redrawn to wear SS uniforms.

practice can be used by any political actors against vulnerable groups as a means to disinform and employ scare tactics. Culture jamming, misreading or misinterpreting a message, is not bound by any one intention or agenda.

3.6 The qualities of a cultural artefact

When I am talking about the political appropriation of an artefact for different agenda-related purposes, I am not referring to artefacts that have been taken from popular culture only. The NR 2.0 appropriates a wide range of artefacts and these also include fringe and independently produced artefacts that do not quite have a place in popular culture as they are known by only a select few. However, as is the case of Pepe the Frog (Beran, 2019; Nagle, 2017), these artefacts can end up in the mainstream.

The Oxford English dictionary presents two definitions for the word artefact (chiefly British spelling *artifact*). First, an artefact represents an object made by a human being, typically one of cultural or historical interest. And second, an artefact is also something observed in a scientific investigation or experiment that is not naturally present but occurs as a result of the preparative or investigative procedure. In this thesis, an artefact of the far-right or of the New Right 2.0 is then something understood to be produced by this movement and as having significant cultural and historical value both from a research perspective and from the perspective of the studied group.

Popular culture, or pop culture for short, is broadly understood as "a set of generally available artefacts: films, records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc." (Strinati, 2004, p. xiv) that are dominant or prevalent in a society at a given point in time. Then the other kind of artefacts I have mentioned, the ones taken from fringe or marginal culture, are defined by their relation of subordination to the pop cultural artefacts. If the former are defined by their popularity, then the identity of the latter is defined by their level of obscurity. This is a condition which at times can be a consequence of a conscious effort of keeping the artefact in the underground, therefore positioning it as counterculture. Other times, it can be a consequence of the complex class relations of inequality in the process of cultural production, that is some artefacts ending up in the underground, because they didn't cater to the wider audience and not because their creators did not

wish it to be so.

The first quality of these artefacts, taken both from mainstream and fringe culture and sub-cultures, is that they do not possess agency (this is left to the consumer-fans who appropriate the artefacts). Then there is the openness which, to a certain degree, all artefacts have - but especially those taken from popular culture. Lastly, there is the degree of popularity which, for the scope of this paper, I use to estimate whether an artefact is of any conscious importance to the movement or not. For example, the meme where the protagonists of the children animated movie *Zootopia* are present wearing SS uniforms (see Figure 1) has surfaced only a handful of times during my research. The meme popped up to lesser degree than others in the far-right cybersphere. On the other hand, the original facial composite that the FBI used to search for the Theodore Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber (universities and airline bomber) is a direct reference (see Figure 2) to the movement's affinity for Kaczynski's ideas of rejecting the modern world through violence. His manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future* can be found anywhere from 4chan to 8chan and Terrorgram.

3.7 Pop cultural artefacts as empty signifiers

I have so far discussed how pop cultural artefacts can and are interpreted in a number of ways. In the case of fandoms, misinterpretations and appropriations are a specific and common practice that ensures the flow of media content between fans. These interpretations, as I will further explain in this chapter, can be used to achieve different political goals.

The very idea that a pop cultural artefact is susceptible to a multitude of readings and interpretations, even though not infinite, implies that politically mobilized fandoms are heterogenous movements that bring together a range of different interpretations of the same artefact and political affinities. We can then ask why do people who don't necessarily agree with what an artefact means, or is

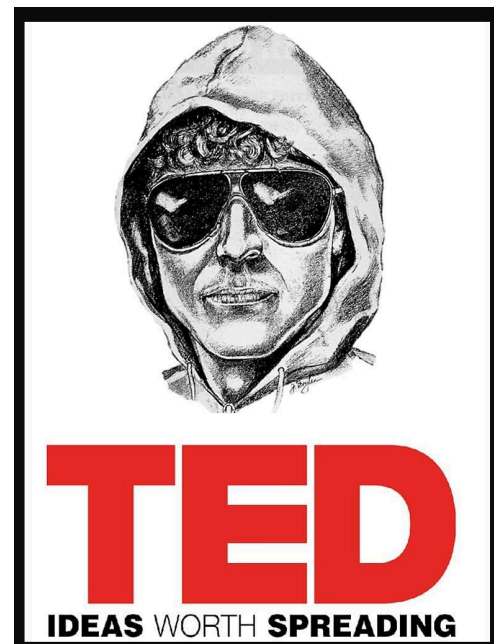


Figure 2. The wordplay uses TED, the name of the conferences and the short for Theodore, to evasively state that his ideas are worth spreading.

about, agree to rally behind it when the artefact becomes a political symbol.

Ernesto Laclau's (2018) idea of the empty signifier sheds the light we need here. Laclau defines an empty signifier as "a place, within the system of signification, which is constitutively irrepresentable; in that sense, it remains empty, but this is an emptiness which I can signify because we are dealing with a void within signification" (2018, p. 221). Pop cultural artefacts fit the definition of potential empty signifiers precisely because of their versatility and potential to appeal to people in search of meaning and representation. The crystallization of fullness/emptiness, an articulation between particular content and universal function, can only take place if "a partial content takes up the representation of a universality with which it is incommensurable" (Laclau, 2018, p. 222). These artefacts then function as more than allegories, which help us digest complex issues, but as unifying symbols that bring together not only the readers who operate within the code, but those who operate outside of it as well and thus read and interpret the artefact differently.

3.8 Pop cultural mobilization

To this rich scholarship Milkoreit (2017) adds the theory of pop cultural mobilization, looking at popular culture as used to influence politics from a participatory culture perspective. She defines pop cultural mobilization as the nexus between cultural phenomena and political realities, as "the deliberate, instrumental appropriation of a pop cultural phenomenon to mobilize an audience for certain political goals." (Milkoreit, 2017).

In her paper, she analyzes viewers-turned-political-actors and their use of the (GOT) Game of Thrones (2011) TV series as an allegory for climate change to spark political mobilization on a burning global issue (Milkoreit, 2017). The discussion about the use of pop culture in the process of political mobilization and activism becomes one focused on the consumers of the artefacts, the fans – and their reading of the artefact – who use the object of their fandom to effect political change by communicating, through the object of their fandom, with like-minded peers who share their interests and cultural background.

As Milkoreit points out, the political mobilization attempts of these fans-turned-political-actors will be more effective if the substance of their writing aligns with the cultural values (and GOT [Game of Thrones] interpretations) of their readers." (2017). As for the functionality of this process, we can identify three distinctive mobilization- related functions: 1) creating awareness:

political actors seek to inform and raise awareness towards a specific issue among other fellow fans; 2) making an issue more accessible: some problems might be beset by communication and engagement challenges, so creating analogies between a popular artefact and the given problem allows for a smoother understanding of it; 3) getting people emotionally connected: some problems may seem dense and disarming so they may need to be communicated in a simpler way, and, if possible, with emphasis on strong emotions, positive or negative (Milkoreit, 2019).

The relationship between political-actors and an audience with the potential to be politically mobilized, highlighted in Milkoreit's (2019) analysis, can be further elaborated by using the aforementioned Convergence Culture framework (Jenkins, 2006), more precisely with its interplay between two forces and one intermediary: 1) corporate convergence: the top-down commercially directed flow of media content; 2) grassroots intermediaries : participants who actively shape the flow of media content but who operate outside any corporate system; and 3) grassroots convergence: an informal and often unauthorized flow of media content where consumers can appropriate and recirculate media content (Jenkins, 2006).

3.9 A few considerations regarding Memetics

Prosser (2006) writes that "an ideology is among the most difficult assaults known to conventional warfare practitioners", and identifies memes as one of the few existing tools that offer some measure of promise in psychological warfare. He defines memes as units of cultural transmission, or "bits of cultural information transmitted and replicated throughout populations and/or societies" (Prosser, 2006), drawing from Dawkins (1976) who defined the concept in biology, as a self-reproducing and propagating information structure analogous to a gene.

A suggested logic provided here by Prosser (2006), for the purpose of memetic warfare, is that these units of cultural transmission influence ideas, which in turn inform beliefs. These beliefs will then generate and influence political positions, affect emotions and will ultimately have the effect of influencing behavior, thus producing actions (Prosser, 2006, p. 7). Following this logic, memes are contextualized as tools of social engineering. The conclusion is then that "any attack upon an ideology must consider an assault on a central or transcendent 'idea' or group of ideas as means of achieving success. Memes as ideas are then 'in play' as tools (or means) to attack ideologies." (Prosser, 2006, p. 7). Here, the definition of memes as units of cultural transmission,

broadens the concept beyond the scope of how we think of Internet memes.

Finkelstein (2011) acknowledges the unique power social media has in ensuring propagation, impact, and persistence of memes. He points towards the centrality memes play in culture, stating that "culture is also shaped, exemplified, and propagated by memes and narratives (which are a type of meme)" (Finkelstein, 2019). In a similar manner, in 2015, Jack Giese, a known Alt-right organizer, invokes Russia's use of 'troll farms' to spread pro Kremlin propaganda, ISIS' use of image-based memes to recruit, and far-right activist Carl C. Johnson's extreme trolling techniques with whom Giese (2015) explains he had discussed over some beer potential ways to troll Daesh. Giese (2015) explains further how one could choose to play on "Daesh's prejudices, fears, and hypocrisies, enlisting gay activists worldwide to start and spread an #ISISisgay hashtag, the idea being to denigrate and ridicule Daesh in a way that weakens its appeal to recruits" (Giese, 2015), clarifying that "trolling, it might be said, is the social media equivalent of guerrilla warfare, and memes are its currency of propaganda."

Only by looking at Memetics as an avenue of research can we begin to understand some of the qualities of this practice in grassroots movements. I suggest that there might be a reason why ad-hoc online movements have been so successful in their trolling campaigns. The nature of Convergence Culture is that of a constant class struggle over which meaning is the dominating one. And since any struggle can be politically instrumentalized, in the case of NR 2.0 this becomes a matter of speaking truth to power through the practices and logics of fandom culture. That power just so happens to be defined by the far-right worldview predominantly oriented towards conspiracy theories. Fandom culture and knowledge are then used in an attempt to complement this.

3.10 Three level analytical tool

To analyze my material and test each emerging hypothesis, I assembled an analytic tool that will help me establish a number of crucial aspects: community and agenda, interpretation, effects and implication. Since I am analyzing how political actors make use of cultural artefacts to achieve a political agenda, I therefore judge that I first need to establish which community I am looking at and what might be its agenda judging from how it appropriates said artefact. Then, I look at how the political actors interpret the artefact in a very specific manner, tailored according to their agenda. Lastly, I look at the central effects and implications of this process, be it regarding the artefact itself

and how it is perceived by the mainstream audiences or regarding other socio-cultural implications. At each level I will seek to establish the following points.

Level 1: Community and agenda

At Level 1, looking at specific cases of far-right political actors who appropriate cultural artefacts to communicate their agenda, I establish what role they play in the Convergence Culture model. I will also follow textual and subtextual elements to establish where on the radical right political spectrum these actors and their communities are located. Subsequently, judging by the very first level of interpretation, I establish what their collective agenda is. As I will show, this agenda is broadly defined by the issue of representation, or lack thereof, and the logic behind the process of politically appropriating an artefact is defined by the struggle to solve this said issue.

Level 2: Interpretation

At Level 2, using Hall's (2001) encoding/decoding model, I identify how the political actors decode, interpret, appropriate, and then recirculate artefacts. I will also present the common denominator of these artefacts, which is defined by their affordance of a multitude of readings. Therefore, I will investigate the encoding of the artefacts I discuss and show how their quality as empty signifiers (Laclau, 2018) and unifiers is instrumentalized (in one specific case consciously). This will help me transition to the next phase of my analysis.

Level 3: Effects and implications

At Level 3, predominantly using Milkoreit's (2017) theory of pop cultural mobilization I will establish some of the lasting effects of the process of politically appropriating any artefacts. I add the last necessary link to my analysis by looking at what has been communicated through the use of the artefact as well as the reception of the mainstream of that artefact. Together with the previous two points of analysis, this will aid me in assessing my findings in my discussion chapter.

In the following chapter I present in detail how I have selected each of these case studies, and how I will use them to test each of my three emerging hypotheses pertaining to each function.

4. Methodology

In this chapter I expand on the set of complementary qualitative methods I use to collect my material, analyze it, and produce my findings. In the first part I present a discussion on the method of ethnography online, the framework I have used to identify my sources and collect data. Then, in the second part, I expand on the hermeneutic circle I have used to form the hypotheses which helped me establish each function and analyze the pertaining material.

The first part of this chapter thus offers a detailed description of how I approached my sources and selected the three case studies for my analysis: the Lord of the Rings books and movies, Pepe the Frog, and a 2021 white supremacist meme called White Boy Summer. I detail how I initially started surveying specific discussion threads and chat rooms on 4chan, 8kun and Terrorgram, where politics were discussed. I did this for over two years, during which time I constantly followed artefacts wherever they took me. I followed this material outside of these initial three sources all the way to far-right blogs, publishing houses, YouTube channels, Twitter accounts and podcasts. I built each case study, meant to test each of my three hypotheses, using material with which I could map out the way of this process from the fringes of the movement and all the way into the mainstream. Then, I also touch on a few ethical and moral considerations of my research.

Lastly, I present a complete rundown of my analysis process from establishing the context of research to interpreting the related text of the case studies. Here, I detail how I have formulated the three hypotheses, each meant to test the functions of the process I am studying. I also explain how I use my three-level analytical tool, developed in chapter three, to conduct a hermeneutic analysis of the collected material.

4.1 Ethnography online

As I am need to collect synchronous data from a wide range of virtual communities and be able to branch out my research into other, archival sources, I will use the qualitative method of online ethnography. I judge this method to be suitable for my research interest as together with my second methodology, hermeneutics, it will allow to analyze my material and produce my findings.

According to Skågeby (2011) to conduct ethnography is to put together "a description of individuals, groups or cultures in their own environment over a (long) period of time." (p. 410).

Therefore, ethnography online is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities (Guimarães, 2003, & Kozinets, 2002, as presented in Skågeby, 2011). Just like its offline forerunner, ethnography online "is not explicitly wed to a specific set of methods, but commonly the utilized methods are qualitative in nature" (Skågeby, 2011) and they most often are document collection, direct observation and participation, and also mediated interviews with key members of the community. I will not participate in the community I am studying, but instead observe the community anonymously and collect material directly from it. I do this as what most cyber communities, not only the far-right leaning ones, call a lurker - a user who keeps up with all the discussions and activity of the community but does not participate in them. However, having immersed myself in the material for so long, even as a researcher and even though I have not actively participated in its production or recirculation, I recognize that a certain measure of participation cannot be denied. But since self-participation is a key part of understanding anything, I argue that this kind of participation, subjective involvement, will contribute to my interpretation process.

Moving on, I loosely follow Skågeby's (2011) online ethnological procedure. This consists of defining a setting and a research perspective, making an entrance into the studied community, then establishing how data is collected and analyzed.

Declaring of research perspective

Skågeby (2011) advises to formulate and declare one's research perspective before initiating research. This also means taking into consideration prior interpretations and personal experiences with the researched subject. Therefore, I must unpack my position as an internet user in context with the three online communities (4chan, 8chan, and Terrorgram) which have also served as my entry point into the hermeneutic circle.

As a researcher, my position falls between the outsider/insider dichotomy. For many years, I have been what the 4chan community calls a lurker. In this (passive) capacity I have witnessed the coming of white supremacists from Stormfront to 4chan, followed by the coagulation of a crypto far-right subculture on the platform which then styled itself as 'Alt-right'. Later, this movement moved further to its own image board, 8chan, with its more extreme factions colonizing the messaging app Telegram, creating what researchers have called "Terrorgram" (DFRlab, 2020 a;

DFRlab, 2020 b). This position of an outsider with insider knowledge will allow me to effectively study this community whose jargon and symbols I am extensively familiar with.

My background, gender, and ethnicity add other layers that will have influenced my interpretation of the material. Because I am a white straight cisgender man with an affinity for everything pop-culture and an Orthodox conservative cultural background, I fall in the target demographic of much of the researched material. On top of this, I am not targeted as an object of hate, but as a potential ally. To put it in Foucauldian terms, I am a subject created by the type of discourse I am analyzing. But since I share none of the founding views and ideas of the community I am studying, I have proven relatively resistant to how its discourse attempted to work on me. This is also due to the fact that I am aligned with different discourses. This creates a tension in the form of some prerequisites that transcend the outsider/insider perspective. I consider it important to ask questions contesting these prerequisites regarding the knowledge I have of the far-right.

The best example of these prerequisites is how I first considered the effects of this far-right cyber community. I had long been familiar with the media coverage on the growing phenomenon of a digital far-right. However, as early as 2015 I was spending time on some of the platforms discussed in the news and I did not consider the content there extreme. I took it as an unfair judgement of a community, what some researchers have called the deep vernacular web (de Zeeuw & Tuters, 2020), misunderstood by outsiders. Was this judgement correct? The time I have spent observing the community has shown me that not everyone engages with extremist content for the same reasons or to the same extent. Yet, when this is the case, what can and cannot be labeled extreme content in the context of a participatory Internet is unclear at best. I argue that this is due to the very phenomenon this thesis covers: the political appropriation and instrumentation of pop culture artefacts by right-wing political actors.

To conclude, I ultimately consider my insider knowledge as limited. No matter how deep my knowledge about meme culture and its relationship to politics may be, my understanding of these interlinked concepts is still that of an outsider. I have always observed their deployment from a critical perspective and have never participated in the process myself. I also share none of the opinions, ideas, or political positions expressed by this community. Furthermore, until conducting research for this thesis, I had never entered many of the far-right spaces present in my analysis.

I state that I am aware of my position as what would be better labeled as a privileged outsider, so an outsider with important insider knowledge, and I will continue to be aware of this position as I will analyze my data.

Making an entrance (as a 'lurker' and not a 'glowie')

It is safe to say that my position as a researcher makes me undesirable throughout the far-right digital community I am studying. This is one of the main reasons why it would be extremely difficult to conduct interviews with 'valuable members', i.e., users who create, circulate extremist content and enjoy an elevated status within the community.

I have participated and collected material invisibly from this community. As explained above, my position has been that of a 'lurker'. Here, it is important that I explain the difference between a 'lurker' and a 'glowie'. They are both terms that carry negative connotations, but not to the same degree. The difference between these two terms illustrates why I had to engage with my sources anonymously, as a 'lurker'.

A 'lurker' may very well be a user that hasn't decided how to contribute to the community yet, or someone who is just shy. Even though 'lurkers' will be regularly made fun of, they are not seen as undesirable to the community as they are considered to be users who, in their own way, do important work in the shadows. However, a 'glowie' is someone who stands out through their behavior and, hence, 'glows'. The 'glowie' is believed to engage with the community for the purpose of provoking and then building a criminal case, writing an article, or simply collecting information about community members and then make their personal details public so that they can be publicly shamed or physically assaulted (doxing). When someone is suspected of being a 'glowie' they are met with hostility. Due to the nature of this thesis, I would certainly be considered a 'glowie'.

In the methodological framework of online ethnography, to conduct research as a 'lurker' is controversial. As Varis (2014) points out, to participate invisibly to the activities of the community one is studying affords "being entirely immersed in the environment and activities in question". Most of the arguments against this practice of anonymity suggest that this is not proper ethnographic observation (Varis, 2014). However, in line with Skågeby's (2011) guidelines for conducting online ethnography, which state that "depending on the type of community it is not

always technically possible to be open towards all other members", I argue for my anonymity adding that, even though technically possible, it would be counterproductive as it would most certainly single me out for trolling.

Setting

Any online ethnography should be accompanied by a definition of the setting in both social and technical terms. This is intended to "provide readers with the basic knowledge needed to contextualize the findings and insights presented later as well as judge how the studied phenomena relates to the chosen setting on a larger scale" (Skågeby, 2011).

Since I have branched outside my initial sources through the method of hermeneutics and collected material from other platforms, I present a setting encompassing all of these.

In the background chapter I have touched upon the origins and technical specificity of 4chan, 8chan, and Terrorgram as well as those of more mainstream platforms like YouTube, BitChute and fringe ones like Counter Currents, which I have covered in my analysis. This is the setting of my subject, where popular culture artefacts are constantly appropriated, instrumentalized and circulated by far-right political actors in order to achieve a loosely defined political agenda.

As I have previously pointed out, 4chan's /pol/ functions as an online space for an extremist subculture only in tight relation with the other intrinsic aspects of 4chan, like geek culture, meme culture, and trolling. 8kun, now crippled after having been repeatedly de-platformed by hosting services, is barely functioning as a forum for the far-right. That is if one does not take the Q-anon board into consideration, which is not covered by the scope of this study. The extremist content that surfaces on 8kun has less in common with meme culture, and more with the overtly extremist content circulated on Terrorgram or Counter Currents.

The social setting means the social context of the online community. In my time spent immersed in this transnational and trans-platform community I have observed that, at least at a declarative level, the majority of the anonymous users identify as white men. This is all the more obvious in the case of the far-right influencers whose work I have incorporated in my case studies, all of whom are white and profess some form of Judeo-Christian creed or otherwise align themselves with what they call 'white European values'. However, who exactly these people are is

not relevant for my research interest. My thesis is concerned with the workshopping and production of meaning and its subsequent circulation. In some cases, however, I bring up some personal relationships from a subject's past, but only if they are relevant to my research. More specifically, in my first analysis chapter, where I look at the function of political mobilization, I cite some media sources on George Burdi's background as a white power musician, mogul, and Neo-Nazi zine editor as it is relevant to further showcasing how a far-right political agenda is delivered through the appropriation of a cultural artefact (in this case Lord of the Rings).

Document collection and online observation

According to Skågeby (2011), the three most common data collection methods used in online ethnography are document collection, online observation, and online interviews. Out of these three, document collection and online observation are the most appropriate for my primary data.

Document collection implies gathering archived data, while online observation implies observing and gathering real-time synchronous data (Skågeby, 2011). Building on this methodological distinction between document collection and online observation, I split my data into two: archival and synchronous. In my case, I have started with the latter which, through a hermeneutic circling of wider contexts of current posts on the platforms, has led me to the former and the other way around. My synchronous data collected from 4chan, 8kun, and Terrorgram has led to collect archival data from YouTube and BitChute channels, far-right magazines, as well as older archived threads from 4chan, and the initial 8chan, at the same time, archival data has tipped me on what discussions to look out for while collecting synchronous data (see Figure 3).

Next, I detail the process through which I have singled out each of the three case studies presented in my analysis. These case studies, which help me illustrate each of the identified functions, will be approached again in the later part of this chapter, where I explain how I have formulated my hypotheses.

From data to case studies

Early into the material collecting process I started to notice that certain artefacts were used and politically appropriated more

frequently than others. These artefacts are claimed from both mainstream culture (so these are easily recognizable by the mainstream audiences and can be adopted accordingly) and fringe culture (these are more obscure and more than often their circuit is internal). Then there are those that manage to cross over. After a period of material collection that lasted a little over two years and during which I dug through discussions threads, read extremist literature, saved memes, and watched videos (see p. 16, *Achan, 8chan, and Telegram: a hierarchical approach*) I have been able to understand which of these artefacts are representative of how the community of political actors I am studying is appropriating cultural artefacts with the purpose of delivering a political agenda. Therefore, I have picked three individual case studies that each support a different function, and that are representative of each of the three forms of visibility explained above: marginal, mainstream, or crossover.

I use case study 1 to showcase the function of political mobilization. This case consists of discussions and political appropriation of Tolkien's legendarium, especially the Lord of the Rings movies and books traced throughout platforms and different types of data (see Figure 4). I came to

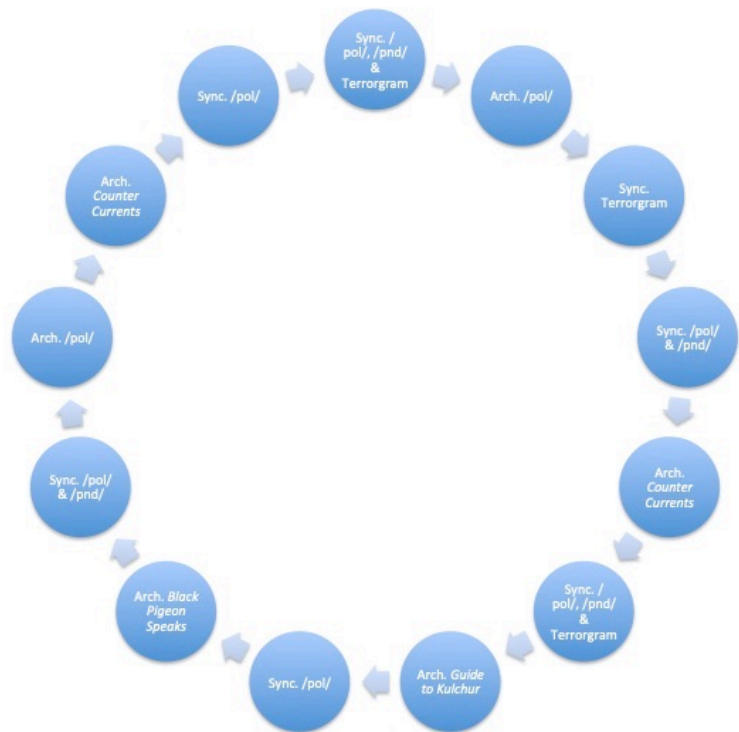


Figure 3. A visual representation of the collection process, switching between the synchronous and archival data.

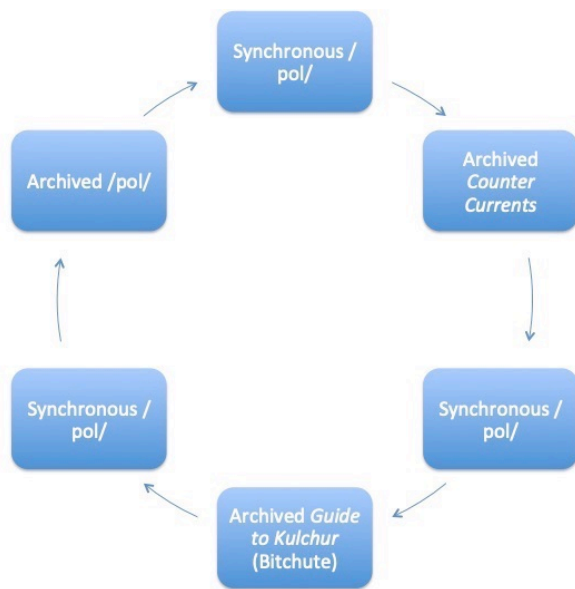


Figure 4. My collection process for the first case study, that of *The Lord of The Rings* and Tolkien's legendarium as a whole.

this material on /pol/, in a thread called 'rare #orcposting'. There I found out what #Orcposting was. And since this is a meme which trended before I started working on this thesis, I had to look for archival data. This is how I discovered how *Counter Currents*, an American white supremacist publication which advocates for the pursuit of metapolitics. Here *Lord of the Rings* was discussed in terms that were similar to the #Orcposting trend, where dark skinned

foreigners are seen as invaders of a supposedly white western world. From here, I returned to synchronous material collected from /pol/. Then I arrived once more to archival data with the *Guide to Kulchur* podcast. From here, I went back to synchronous data. This circular movement between synchronous and archival data has helped me understand that LOTR is a central artefact of the New Right 2.0. Furthermore, it has helped me, depending on how exactly it was discussed, to reconfirm the position in the movement of the platforms I have chosen to use in my analysis. For example, 4chan is closer to channeling LOTR as an extremist meme into the mainstream while *Guide to Kulchur* is less likely, and *Counter Currents* being the most marginal and unlikely source of extreme material for the mainstream. However, the meaning attributed to the artefact is consistent in its ideological interpretations, and it matters very little that the *Counter Currents* articles or *Guide to Kulchur* podcast episodes don't reach a mainstream audience as they do seem to reach to wide and amorphous 4chan community which has specialized in workshopping these extreme but cryptic versions of LOTR.

To showcase the function of grassroots disinformation I use case study 2. It consists of discussions and appropriations of Pepe the Frog, the anthropomorphic frog character that, with the help of an increasingly extreme cyber movement, has had its status shifted from an obscure comic book character to a mainstream symbol of hate. I have observed and collected these discussions and

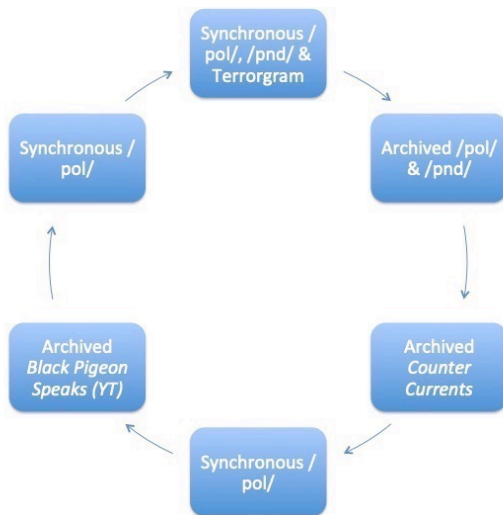


Figure 5. Visual representation of the collection process for my second case study, that of Pepe the Frog.

positioned at the fringes of the movement. I then traced the way Pepe was and still is politically instrumentalized all the way into mainstream platforms like YouTube, on a right-wing channel that often delivers extremist talking points called *Black Pigeon Speaks*, one of the most central political influencers of the movement. Lastly, I returned to synchronous data and collected material on how Pepe is perceived today by the same movement that turned him into a symbol of hate.

The last case study is that of a 2021 meme known as White Boy Summer. I use this case study to showcase the third and last function, that of radicalization and indoctrination. Unlike the other case studies, I became aware of White Boy Summer as it was being circulated in the far-right cyberspace. Therefore, most of the collected data is synchronous, with a few exceptions (see Figure 4). I was exposed to White Boy Summer on one of the Telegram channels belonging to the Proud Boys, and from there I followed it on 4chan's /pol/, onto *Counter Currents* again, on BitChute, and then back again on Terrorgram and 4chan.

Repeating this process of reading and rereading my collected material, all the while looking for new one, I ultimately achieved a point where further data collection stopped

visual appropriations across different platforms and types of data, each of one has led me to the next (see Figure 5).

Just like with the LOTR case study, I have begun my research with synchronous data collected from 4chan's /pol/. I then switched constantly between archival data and synchronous data as here too I dealt with a meme that trended years before I started working on this thesis. I have kept *Counter Currents* as a platform

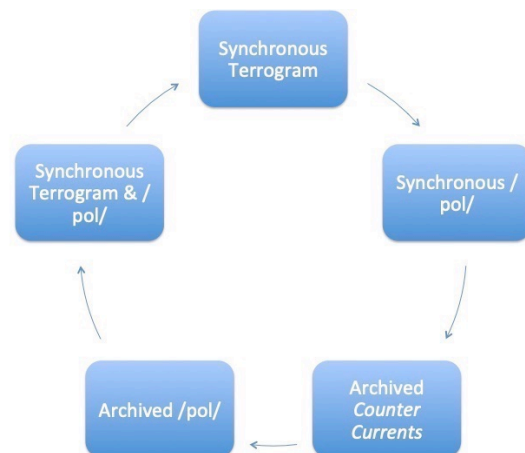


Figure 6. Visual representation of the collection process for my third and final case study, the White Boy Summer meme.

offering me new information. At this point of saturation, I stopped the collection of data.

Following, I will discuss some of the ethical decisions concerning my data collection.

Ethical assessment

The line between public and private space are blurred on the Internet and any researcher must take this into consideration while studying Internet communities. Larsen and Nørgaard Glud (2013, pp. 80-81) state that users "can act in public forums with a strong sense of privacy (or vice versa), and it is the context around the use of technology that determines the degree of publicity, more than it is the technology itself". At the same time, Larsen and Nørgaard Glud (2013, p. 80-81) explain that "different media are not in their essence either public or private, but instead are created by different circumstances" and that these circumstances vary from user to user and from platform to platform and it might also be subject to change over time. Having said and considered this, I must restate that this thesis is concerned with the circulation of meaning produced through the discursive appropriation of cultural artefacts. In other words, it is of little to no interest to me as a researcher who these appropriators are, therefore I am not interested in collecting any personal data. Furthermore, I conduct my collection of material on platforms that are highly anonymized either by their built-in affordances (in the case of 4chan and 8kun) or by the users themselves since they are aware of the legal repercussions of engaging with such content (in the case of the Telegram channels).

The situation is somewhat different in the case of my archived data. *Guide to Kulchur* is the project of Fróði Midjord, a known far-right figure who also organizes the far-right conference Scandza forum in Oslo. He is also a guest writer on Counter Currents and many other far-right publications under his own name. I judge his status to be that of a public figure. Midjord, just like all of my other examples, sign their public articles and public appearances with their own names and their websites are open to the public. Similarly, while studying the Facebook activity of the Thai far-right, Schaffar and Thabchumpon (2019, p.133) have argued that results must be anonymized when the results are published, according to the fundamental principles of social sciences, exceptions can be made when "the publication of names and organizations serves the empowerment of marginalized groups or when anonymization does not grant anonymity, because of the groups are too well known". One other exception the authors bring into discussion is the open profile of certain

figure which, just like a politician's, it "corresponds to a pamphlet or an information folder delivered by election campaigners on the street" (ibid.).

Greg Johnson, the founder of *Counter Currents* is an openly white nationalist whom has talked publicly at far-right events about his views. There is also the fact that he has published numerous books and articles under the moniker Trevor Lynch, however, he has been open about it on numerous occasions, and it does not appear that it constitutes any kind of secret. The fact that I connect him to his moniker in my analysis does not represent in no way any intention or action of exposing him in any way. The two guests Midjord has on his podcast episode concerning Lord of the Rings, which I use in my first analysis chapter, are also public figures in the far-right with one of them, George Burdi, being somewhat of a household name in the American white supremacist and racist skin-head scene. Lastly, there is the case of the youtuber Black Pigeon Speaks, one of whose videos I use in my second analysis chapter, also has his identity made public, but since he conducts most of his online activity using this name, I have refrained from giving his real one.

One last ethical consideration I must take into account is to what extent citing the material produced by this community furthers its agenda. As Massanari (2018) explains, the emergence of the Alt-right has presented researchers with quite a few methodological challenges. One of these challenges is the aforementioned issue of conducting research anonymously for the researchers' own safety. However, one other challenge represents the fact that reproducing the very words of the movement is a form of symbolic violence. In this instance I consider that the visibility of my thesis is limited and therefore it would further the movement's rhetoric to a very limited degree.

4.2 Critical hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle

Kincheloe and McLaren (2005, p. 311) state that "the critical hermeneutic tradition holds that in qualitative research, there is only interpretation, no matter how vociferously many researchers may argue that the facts speak for themselves". As my research question (see p. 4) requires that I look at wide range of artefacts (as wide as possible at first, I would argue) and identify dominant modes of interoperations and functions, I judge that I am in need of a method that would allow me to move around freely in this sea of material. I identify Hermeneutics as the appropriate method.

Furthermore, as one of the inherent missions of hermeneutical analysis is "to develop a form of cultural criticism revealing power dynamics within social and cultural texts (Kincheloe & McLaren,

2005, p.311), this also aligns with my theoretical approach, which leans heavily on power relations between the political actors who appropriate the studied artefacts. Therefore, I will engage in the process of analysis commonly known as a hermeneutical circle. In the remaining of this chapter, I will present in detail how I have engaged in a back-and-forth process of studying the parts (the text) in relation to the whole (the context), and then the whole in relation to the very same parts.

Entering the hermeneutic circle

I made my entrance into the hermeneutic circle through the initial three sources, comprised of the politics boards on 4chan and 8kun, and a number of Neo-Nazi Terrorgram channels. The logic of having chosen three sources that have offered me such a wide range of materials is that I sought to be exposed to wide range of materials so as to begin to understand the complex contexts that produced these materials. Subsequently, after immersing myself in the versatile and rich material, I was gradually better able to distinguish which examples were the most relevant to my thesis. Simultaneously, I was able to notice certain patterns regarding functionality and draw the hypotheses that then helped me test my assumptions.

Establishing the context and working with the text

After choosing the most relevant case studies for my thesis, I took an inductive approach and read the text thoroughly before taking any note. Afterwards, I engaged with the material again, this time taking notes on different levels of my analysis: community and agenda, interpretation, and effects and implications. I did this by employing informal textual analysis and working closely with my theoretical approach. During this time, I started to notice certain patterns occurring.

I began to notice that different interpretations and the different ways in which the artefacts were encoded were used at both the discursive and the subtextual level for different purposes. Therefore, I took note of how these functions seemed to be operationalized through the process of interpretation, where the author or creator of the artefact was either venerated and accepted as their creator or completely taken out of the equation. I also noticed that these extreme and politically far-right interpretations depended strongly not only on the vagueness of the encoded message but on some of its specifics as well.

I continued my analysis by going through my synchronous and archival data while writing down the emerging common themes. After this, I went over my notes and noticed that in line with my theoretical perspectives, the appropriation process seemed to have some common rhetoric behind it and a few common results. Therefore, I formed three hypotheses meant to test each of these observations.

Hypothesis 1: If the encoding of an artefact is vague, then political mobilization can occur. I will use this hypothesis to test my observations that some artefacts are specifically effective when politically appropriated due to their encoded vagueness. This represents the first function: political mobilization. As I show with my first case study, J.R.R Tolkien's legendarium, this is due to both the aesthetic and textual elements that position the artefact as an empty signifier. I showcase this through the first case study.

Hypothesis 2: If the emptiness of an artefact is signaled as a means of discourse, then grassroots disinformation can occur. I will use this hypothesis to test my observations that in the case of some artefacts their emptiness is used to deflect attention from the movement's radical and extreme appropriations. This represents the second function: grassroots disinformation. I showcase this through the second case study, that of Pepe the Frog.

Hypothesis 3: If the emptiness of an artefact is established by its appropriators, then radicalization and indoctrination can occur. I will use this hypothesis to test my observation that in the case of some artefacts, where authorial intent and control can be extirpated completely, the encoded can almost fully be regulated by the appropriators. This is the case of simple but extremely open memes, such as my third case study, White Boy Summer, that foster unconditioned participation and the consumption of extremist material. This is the third function: radicalization and indoctrination.

Closing the circle

Context is unlimited. There are no boundaries to the amount of material a researcher can study. Yet, as I have explained earlier in this chapter, by using the complementary qualitative method of online ethnography, I was able to establish a point of redundancy (to the extent that this is possible, given the format of this thesis) and stop collecting material on the grounds that it stopped providing me with fresh knowledge pertaining to my research interest. However, I find this to be more of a matter

of abandoning the circle, for obvious reasons, and not necessarily one of closing it. Furthermore, the context I have been able to establish will aid in future endeavors to come back to this subject and study it from a different perspective.

5. Analysis

5.1 Function I: Political Mobilization

Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing? / Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing? / They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow; / The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into the shadow.

Théoden's poem (Tolkien, 2004)

In this chapter I set out to demonstrate Hypothesis 1: if the encoding of an artefact is vague then political mobilization can occur. To achieve this, I will present my first case study, that of *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) and how it is appropriated by political actors on the far-right spectrum in both its literary and screen adaptation form and presented as a perennial philosophy whose essence is lost to 'our decadent and ruined' western world. This artefact is then also used, by drawing attention to some of the specific story elements of LOTR, to suggest what course of action one might have to take to rebuild and renew this world in crisis.

As part of the following case study, I bring into discussion a series of overtly white nationalistic articles on the subject of LOTR published on *Counter Currents*, a white supremacist publication whose stated mission is to win the cultural war. Then, I also bring into my analysis an episode from the *Guide to Kulchur*, a podcast dedicated to discussing popular culture from a far-right counter cultural perspective. In the episode I am analyzing, Tolkien's legendarium is discussed at large through the scope Julius Evola's brand of (Aryan) Traditionalism. Lastly, I end my analysis with a trend of racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic memes known as #Orcposting. These memes circulated everywhere between 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, and Twitter, at the start of the 2015 refugee crisis and continue to this day. The main theme of #Orcposting consists of comparing Syrian refugees and BLM protesters to the savage invading Orcs in Tolkien's legendarium.

Starting with *Counter Currents*, a platform placed so far at the fringe of the global far-right

readership that it is more popular with the Stormfront user base than with that of 4chan, I have traced the example of how LOTR is politically appropriated, for the purpose of political mobilization, by the N.R 2.0. My case study showcases how this appropriation keeps surfacing in different parts of the far-right cyberspace, from the most fringe to those that are closer and closer to the mainstream. Guide to Kulchur, for example, is reaching a wider audience than Counter Currents, with links to its episodes being shared on Neo-Nazi Telegram chat groups while also being recommended on 4chan and 8chan. #Orcposting, like any far-right meme trend that has become viral with the mainstream audiences, has permeated all known social media platforms.

By bringing together these examples and looking at them side by side it can be observed how the building of an artificial crisis is operationalized through the interpretation of a pop cultural artefact. This artificial crisis forms a central part of the community's agenda, which is concerned with the representation (or the lack thereof, in their opinion) of a so-called white culture and its people. The current case study illustrates how this particular agenda informs how cultural artefacts are appropriated. It also showcases how interpretations and meanings of the artefact are knowingly tailored to fit a political agenda and communicate it effectively.

As I have shown in my Background chapter (see p. 13), far-right political movements have long been using Tolkien's legendarium to provide appealing entry points into radical and extremist ideology. My research shows this practice to be a current one. The same global political community, united by the same ideological and philosophical perspectives, has been returning to Tolkien's legendarium regularly. It appears that these political actors find an inherent source of representation in this particular artefact based on its aesthetic and thematic inspirations which come from what the movement sees as a white European culture.

5.1.1 Community and Agenda: The Lord of White Representation

Greg Johnson is a renowned self-identified American white nationalist. He is the founder and chief editor of *Counter Currents*, a white supremacist publishing house and magazine. Johnson founded the platform with the purpose of connecting the white nationalist American audience to the doctrine of the European New Right. To this end, *Counter Currents* has published the works of renowned Nouvelle Droite ideologues Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye, whom have stressed the importance of striving to achieve cultural dominance as a means of achieving political power. This is, roughly speaking, the essence of meta-politics, and it has become the essence of *Counter*

Currents' mission as well. Here, a vast number of writers are published, all of whom push for an alternative interpretation of everything culture through the scope of what a far-right brand of identity politics concerned exclusively with white Americans and Europeans.

Counter Currents represents one of the more extreme and fringe factions of the intellectual far-right. Johnson, the platform's founder and chief editor, is openly white nationalist and he rarely makes use of euphemisms to express his ideas. For example, for Johnson, the world is not run by an intentionally corrupt elite, like more mainstream far-right political actors state, but by a Jewish cabal pushing Jewish propaganda meant to destroy the white Christian civilization. Johnson's political philosophy is fundamentally antisemitic. This is the basis of a specific type of far-right discourse that runs unchecked in the unmoderated or loosely moderated corners of Web 2.0.

Antisemitism and antisemitic conspiracy theories fit neatly into white nationalist interpretations of mainstream movies. If the entertainment industry is ruled from the shadow, then the products of this industry are living testimonies of this shadow system's exploits. Then these exploits must be analyzed accordingly so that white people can learn the truth. This sums up the entire logic of how *Counter Currents* interpellates its core readership.

It is in this convergence point of Antisemitic conspiracy theories and mainstream pop cultural artefacts like LOTR that we can begin to grasp the 'who' and 'why' of this process. In Johnson's case, we are dealing with a community of American white nationalists and supremacists, for whom he has been writing and holding speeches for over a decade now. The main issue of this community is a perceived lack of representation in the mainstream media and popular culture - the evidence of their perceived oppression. Johnson's *Counter Currents* is positioned as a solution to this lack of representation and promises to balance the scales by all means necessary by pursuing an agenda of winning back culture.

This agenda, defined by an attempt to establish soft power, can be better understood by looking at an exchange of comments between Johnson and one of his readers, under an article he published in 2012, called *Breivik: A Strange New Respect*. In the article, Johnson muses over the idea that upon his rehabilitation and subsequent release from prison, the Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik might "follow the path of rehabilitated ex-terrorists like Nelson Mandela and Menachem Begin" and even "end up a Prime Minister or a Nobel Peace Prize winner." (Johnson, 2012). One of his readers disagrees with his optimism and claims that a "white nordic"

will never be forgiven for a terrorist attack, (unlike Mandela and Begin, who in this reader's view have been rehabilitated due the fact that one is black and the other one Jewish i.e what the movement sees as privileged minorities). To this, Johnson replies in a manner that sums up the agenda of *Counter Currents*:

Of course, THEY aren't going to forgive him. WE will rehabilitate him, if we WIN — meaning create a new context, culture, narrative in which his terrorism seems a small thing, just like the terrorism of a Begin or Mandela seems a small and churlish thing to mention in the world THEY have made. It really comes down to strength of will, to moral strength: THEY are not stopped by these little things. They do not apologize. They just get on with it. WE will never win until we adopt that mindset. (Johnson, 2012)

Greg Johnson is also a big fan of both the *Lord of the Ring* novels written by J.R.R. Tolkien and the three-part screen adaptation directed by Peter Jackson in 2001, 2002, and 2003. He believes the latter to be among the best screen adaptations he has ever seen. This satisfaction comes from the fact that, according to Johnson, the movies preserve Tolkien's racist vision. This is from a review Johnson wrote in 2010, under the penname Trevor Lynch, about Peter Jackson's 2003 screen adaptation of *The Two Towers*, the second novel in Tolkien's trilogy:

[The Two Towers] is one of the greatest movies I have ever seen. I completely share the sentiments of the friend with whom I saw it: "I wish I could live in that world. It may be grubby and dangerous, but it is more beautiful, and life is more significant." (...)

The Lord of the Rings series is the most brilliant screen adaptation of a novel that I have ever seen. (...) It makes no concessions to political correctness and multiracialism. It contains not a shred of Jewish propaganda. This is particularly astonishing since the whole story is about different races joining together in a common quest. But Tolkien has a deeply racist vision, and he makes it very clear that the races of the fellowship all have White features. Thus, the Rings movies contain one of the Whitest casts you will ever see. This is particularly true of The Two Towers, in which the people of Rohan are a beautiful collection of Nordics. As for the enemy races — the Orcs, the Uruk Hai, the Southrons, the Easterlings — they all have non-White features. Indeed, in Jackson's adaptation, the stupid, muscular, aggressive, black-skinned Uruk Hai have long, stringy, matted hair that resembles dreadlocks and they are literally born from mud. (Lynch, 2010)

Johnson takes an accusation and a critique from the mainstream fandom - that Tolkien's legendarium is built on racist themes - and instead of rebuking it and pushing for another interpretation, he agrees with it. However, he ultimately uses it to argue for the legitimacy of his white supremacist worldview where racism is a natural reaction to the unnatural mingling and mixing of races. This is the reason why white supremacists showcase an aversion to

multiculturalism, since they see it inherently linked to a perceived racial impurity.

This represents a somewhat rare stance from a far-right political actor to criticism of racist themes in popular culture. The usual response alleges that the left means to push its agenda of multiculturalism on popular culture through such accusations or criticism and that, furthermore, the issue of racism is one completely made up by multiculturalists and the far left. This is an important indicator of the community Johnson represents through his writing: people with extreme political convictions that don't fear expressing them publicly and also seek to consume this type of extremist content.

Johnson writes this review in an attempt to establish a new culture and a context where the far-right set of worldviews will be the norm (where Breivik would be a Nobel laureate) rather than writing it in that climate. So, his position as a counter current dissident is reinforced, thus granting him legitimacy and discursive power within the white nationalist movement. This also positions him as Convergence Intermediary, especially when he attempts to address a pop cultural artefact's fandom and relies on its members to further circulate his highly ideologized interpretation.

There are the specific elements, of both the novels and the movies, that Johnson chooses to put into (his)perspective. He explicitly mentions Tolkien's racialist vision and how in his legendarium the Fellowship is a company of heroes whom are representative of all the races of Middle Earth. This is not entirely accurate. The Goblins and the Orcs are also races of Middle Earth, albeit foreign ones, bred by evil forces for the purpose of war and replacing the other, white races of Middle Earth. But overall, Johnson is not wrong in this observation. The way Tolkien colored and culturally coded the different races of his fictional world has long been criticized for resting on deeply racist tropes. Johnson points towards these very same elements, except according to his worldview, the fact that these have made it into the screen adaptations represents an anomaly in a corrupt system and a breath of fresh air for white nationalists. Then the artefact has almost magical qualities attributed to it. If a system controlled by the shadow elites whom allegedly discourage such portrayals of whiteness, through what Johnson identifies as "political correctness and multiculturalism", then LOTR is presented as a beacon of hope and resistance.

We can also distinguish the mode of interpretation which would only at first glance appear to fit Hall's (2001) definition of the oppositional code, where the artefact is attributed a highly ideologized interpretation which is in opposition to its initial encoding. In fact, the opposite is the

case. Johnson interprets the artefact in both a dominating and negotiated manner.

Further into his review Johnson spirals down into what might be the reason for why Tolkien's legendarium hits such a sensitive chord in him - to the extent that he feels comfortable stating that: "I wish I could live in that world. It may be grubby and dangerous, but it is more beautiful, and life is more significant." (Lynch, 2010) - and why it is such an important artefact for white nationalists to become familiar with.

Myth is a mirror in which we can see our souls (...) I would argue that the different races of the fellowship actually represent different aspects of the White racial soul, and the question that animates Tolkien's story is the same that animates Wagner's Ring, Homer's epics, Plato's Republic, and much of Indo-European mythology: What is the proper internal ordering of the soul, the proper fellowship of its parts? Should we be ruled by our reason, our pride, or our desires? Is it better to be simple than cunning? Can our scientific and technological abilities to understand and master nature be ruled by wisdom and put to right use? Or are we too weak to use them without being corrupted by them, so the wisest use is not to use them at all?

(...) I urge every White nationalist to see The Two Towers for a glimpse, in the here and now, of the White civilization that we have lost, and that we are working to create again. (Lynch, 2010)

Just like Elémire Zolla in the 1970s, Johnson also interprets LOTR as a perennial philosophy switching his discourse into the realm of the spiritual and the mystical. Johnson proposes that the different races of the fellowship (again, Middle-earth includes non-white races as well, but the Fellowship doesn't) represent different aspects of what he calls the "White racial soul". Here he references Plato, Homer, and The Ring of the Nibelungs, as to validate his argument. Then he talks about the different archetypal characters in the Fellowship. According to him, each embody traits and flaws specific to a so-called "White racial soul". However, unlike Zolla, whom equated the themes of LOTR with philosophical themes surrounding a rejection of the modern world, Johnson interprets the artefact using a made up white nationalistic perennial philosophy.

What is then to be clarified is to what extent this interpretation of LOTR is a granted one. It may seem at first that Johnson attempts to hijack a pop cultural artefact unrelated to his worldview. To make this assumption would be incorrect. The reason why LOTR has attracted the far-right in the past is that it is open to a multitude of interpretations, including ones that align with extremist beliefs. To this end, Laclau's (2018) concept of the empty signifier can be used to understand why and how this happens.

The debate about the racist undertones in Tolkien's legendarium is not new. Rearick (2004) opens his paper with a scene from a novel where two characters are engaged in a heated argument on whether LOTR is the work of a racist. One of the characters invokes the same aesthetic elements as Johnson, like the fact that evil races have dark skin, but as means to criticize them, not celebrate. Rearick (2004) uses this example to backtrack this critique of LOTR all the way to the 1970s, where the scene, taken from Jonathan Coe's novel *The Rotters' Club*, takes place, and to emphasize for how long this debate has existed within Tolkien's readership. At the same time, *The Hobbit*, another popular Tolkien novel, has been called the bible of the hippies (Ciabattari, 2014) as the counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s identified with its anti-materialistic and pastoral themes. So, the criticism of the author's alleged racist beliefs has co-existed alongside opposite political interpretations.

Rearick (2004) seems to argue that the political interpretations of pop cultural artefacts are defined and set into stone by the political affinities of its fandom. To this end he invokes the 1960s and 1970s youth counter culture and further argues that if Tolkien would have been racist, then he wouldn't have catered to such an anti-racist audience. Furthermore, he claims that the final argument against "Tolkien being a racist can be gained by looking at the overall message of the work rather than at particular battles or physical descriptions" (Rearick, 2004). However, had Rearick known about how the MSI's Youth Front used Tolkien's legendarium in the 1970s to convey a radical political agenda, he would have perhaps reconsidered his position, since these two were fans defining a specific set of interpretations for the artefact. Historically speaking, LOTR has fostered both a far-right leaning fan base and a left leaning one. The issue is not whether Tolkien was racist, but whether the themes of his work invite the kind of interpretations which can spark both accusations and celebrations of racism. This then begs the question if Tolkien's legendarium is open to enough interpretations that it can function as an empty signifier and unifier.

Ironside (2018) engages in an ample literary analysis of Tolkien's legendarium and shows how its core themes are consistent with the ideals of interwar Fascism. In his analysis, Ironside (2018) points to how the aesthetic elements in Tolkien's work portray a world in decay both materially and spiritually. Furthermore, he shows how certain character arcs, like that of Aragorn, the chosen but reluctant king, emphasize the need for renewal and for strengthening nationhood through reclaiming one's community and reestablishing long demolished hierarchies and replenish long lost bloodlines. According to him, Tolkien's legendarium offers the myths of the past as a

solution for fixing the present. Ironside (2018) also points to the fact that the different cultures and peoples of Middle-earth are built on separatism, despite the greatness they achieve through unity and that this creation of strong identities "build on clear linguistic, geographical, racial and cultural boundaries reflects the ideals of nationalism" (Ironside, 2018). All of these elements set Tolkien's fictional world as a "glorification of tradition, community, history, and heritage, as its narratives portray a renewal of past greatness as a means of countering the encroaching doom of evil, which is illustrated as individualistic, greed-ridden, industrialized materialism" (Ironside, 2018).

However, Ironside (2018) notes, this world is in the end incompatible with the fascist utopian ideals in one fundamental aspect: futurism. While inter war fascists were obsessed with ushering in an industrial revolution but by using a blueprint made out of the values and power structures of the past, in Tolkien's world, "the simplicity of rural life is something to be preserved and cherished (...) not reinvented" (Ironside, 2018). Furthermore, according to Ironside (2018), in Tolkien's legendarium, "industrialization is a chosen feature of modern decadence, which must be cleansed so that a new utopian order, founded on commonality, may be established". It is undoubtedly this utopia of commonality that resonated with the left-wing hippies of the 60s and the 70s and, as I will show in the third chapter of my analysis, it resonates now with those on the far-right spectrum who advocate for Eco-fascism and Accelerationism.

It then becomes clear that Tolkien's work, through its aesthetic and literary themes, invites quite a few ideological interpretations. Laclau's (2018) empty signifier is defined by a signaling of emptiness within signification, an emptiness which groups with little to no political representation might seek to fill. In the case of the present example, this community is one of white nationalists who consider that they lack representation at the very hands of the industry that produced LOTR. The importance of claiming this artefact is then twofold. First, the movies preserve Tolkien's racist themes. This is why they cater to their far-right fandom according to its members. Then, because they are seen as a rare occurrence in an allegedly corrupt system, claiming the LOTR movies as an artefact of the far-right is discussed almost in terms of an ideological duty.

It is only in appearance that the far-right operates in an oppositional manner by attributing its highly ideologized interpretations to LOTR. For this to be true, it would first be required that we identify the dominant code in relation to which the oppositional interpretation takes place. But as it can be concluded, LOTR invites a number of different, highly ideologized interpretations.

Also, to be noted here is that the boundaries between the source material and its screen adaptation is constantly blurred and the movies are indistinguishable from the books in these discussions. The execution of the adaptations is then judge depending on how much it preserves a perceived set of white nationalistic themes, that celebrate white culture, despite this practice allegedly being discouraged.

5.1.2 Interpretation: One Meaning to Rule Them All

Guide to Kulchur is a podcast founded and hosted by Fróði Midjord and it borrows its name from Ezra Pound's 1938 non-fiction book, *Guide to Kulchur*. It is unclear why Midjord chose to brand his podcast using Pound's book title. The book is an ambiguous set of musings on philosophy and culture, fragmented by the occasional positive remarks on Hitler and Mussolini. The only connection seems to be that Pound's concern that economy influences culture (here is where Pound slips into Antisemitic conspiracies about central banking) match his own. Midjord sees contemporary pop culture as an indicator of the current degenerate state of our society, the Kali Yuga⁴. This worldview is shared, under the guise of different ideological labels, by many of Midjord's guests⁵ on each episode, where they discuss movies, writers, philosophical schools of thought or art in general.

I focus on the episode called *Lord of the Rings and Traditionalism*. In it, Midjord and his two guests, PhilosophiCat and George Burdi, two far-right political influencers and musicians, discuss Tolkien's legendarium through the scope of Traditionalism. This sample illustrates how political actors like the ones discussed in this chapter enforce their own interpretations of the appropriated artefact.

For example, while discussing how the character Aragorn embodies all the qualities of the king archetype, Midjord wonders who would have these qualities in today's society. He reaches the conclusion that the "The Kali Yuga has come so far that we have lost the personality type completely". In another instance Midjord uses the character of Gollum, whom in Tolkien's story is corrupted by the ring of power, to further his view on the current state of our society:

One of the characters that is very interesting here is (...) Gollum (...). This sort of egotism, this sort of narcissism when you just care about yourself. I think that is one of the biggest lessons [of LOTR] because that is how life really becomes meaningless. And I think that is the path that we have taken in the modern world, where everything is about narcissism and everything is about sort of petty things and nothing is about

greatness. And we have a very cynical view of life. If you just look at popular culture everything is about cynicism in a way and it's like heroism and even heroic things are forgotten or mocked even. Is there any way to go back from this cynical view of life? (Midjord, 2020)

Here we can find Johnson's closing remark from his review of the *Two Towers*, that the movie offers a glimpse into a long-lost civilization that some are working to rebuild, but in another form. More extreme political actors, like Johnson, talk about an enemy-status-quo using an overtly Antisemitic vocabulary. But those like Midjord, who seek to reach a wider audience, use euphemisms in the form of philosophical concepts. The vague concept of greatness is placed in opposition to human flaws and discussed as something that's missing from our society. Just like in Johnson's article, an artificial sense of crisis is maintained with the artefact as a proxy.

Manjana Milkoreit (2017) observed in her study how fans of the *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) TV (GOT) show politically appropriate it to raise awareness towards the issue of climate change. This was achieved by using one of the story's central allegories as an entry point into discussions about climate change. While data on the political views of these fans⁶ is not discussed in Milkoreit's (2017) article, we understand that climate crisis is important enough to them that they would spend personal resources and attempt to solve it. There seems to be a direct correlation between a political issue's centrality and the effort put in the deployment of the political mobilization process.

We can then use this example to judge that the issues political actors like Midjord and Johnson convey by appropriating LOTR is central to their worldview that is all encompassing. Far-right intellectuals and commentators all over the world link every contemporary political issue, ranging from the refugee crisis to the issue of women's reproductive rights, to this central Antisemitic conspiracy theory. A pop cultural artefact can then be used as an entry point into this worldview and then as an emotional connection to it as well as a synthesis of its main talking points.

This is achieved and maintained not only through interpreting the artefact but by maintaining a state of resistance towards opposing interpretations. If the openness of the artefact would be acknowledged, claiming it from a far-right perspective would be difficult since the claim of other rival political fandoms would be acknowledged. Then, the connection between the artefact and the far-right political issue conveyed through it would be disrupted by other opposing worldviews. To better understand this, let's look at another significant discussion from Midjord's

episode on LOTR. This discussion is sparked by one viewer of the video stream called "Dr. White" (probably a reference to the protagonist of the *Breaking Bad* [2008-2013] TV show, Walter White) who simply comments "Orc Lives Matter". The following dialogue ensues, which I have edited for clarity:

Fróði Midjord: This is sort of a funny comment, from [he hesitates to read the name of the comment out loud] well it's a funny comment. Orc lives matter. The thing is that it has become like a trend to make memes about political events from a LOTR perspective. And that is in line with what we talked about in the beginning. Could have these films been made today rather than almost 20 years ago? There is the fact that all the themes are about sort of fighting for your fatherland, fighting for your people against other species or whatever. And these things, that everyone knows are the most natural things in the world, are presented like we are sort of supposed to pretend that we think they are offensive somehow. Do you have anything to say about those things?

PhilosophiCat: George knew something about this new Amazon series that I didn't know about.

George Burdi: There's the Amazon series which had to fire the entire writing crew. I forget his name but there was a gentleman that is a renowned Tolkien historian who was commissioned by Amazon to oversee the writing. He walked off and quit. They fired their entire writing crew. They've been working on it for months. They were supposed to already be starting to shoot right now, but they are in complete disarray. And I believe it probably has to do with the insistence on the SJW content being woven through it. I hope they don't do to it what they did to *Star Wars*. But the way it is nowadays it seems like every single show has to go that way or it doesn't get made. It's also interesting on the subject of Orcs Lives Matter, the fact that this past weekend, on Twitter, the number two trending hashtag was #orcs and the discussion about whether or not orcs are racists, whether Tolkien was racist, whether there is secret racial messages built into the idea of the orc.

PhilosophiCat: See I think that's just ridiculous. I think people who look for that are just looking for confirmation bias for their own ideology. The Orcs represent the forces of chaos! Not any particular race or creed or anything. You can apply the analogy of orcs to anything in this world that is a force of chaos, whether that be a government, a migrant invasion, a particular race, whatever.

George Burdi: ...an internal political movement trying to usurp your system.

PhilosophiCat: Anything that is working against Dharma, against Logos, against the will of God and the order in the universe is representative of the Orcs. And if you see yourself as the Orcs, and you identify with the Orcs, and you want to take their side, you're probably not the good guys. (Midjord, 2020)

Midjord begins this conversation by dodging the subject of Orc Lives Matter. He calls it a trend of making memes about political events from a LOTR perspective, which is at the surface an

accurate description. However, he does not mention which political events are discussed and what points, if any, do these memes make about said political events. Orc Lives Matter is a part of a broader trend of racist and xenophobic memes (#Orcposting) whose discursive goal is to mock multiculturalism at large. These memes consist of visual and textual analogies between the Orcs of Tolkien's legendarium and refugees, black people, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters, feminists, and other allies on the left side of the political spectrum. This analogy is then used to say that BLM protesters are savages, just like Orcs are; or that refugees are an invading force in Europe and the West, just like Orcs are in Gondor and Middle-earth.

One other function that this trend of memes serves is that they also interpellate European men with far-right views and urge them to position themselves as warriors and defenders of the realm - just like the men, the elves, and the other white races of Tolkien's legendarium. So, when Midjord explains that LOTR contains themes about protecting your fatherland from other species of invaders, we can judge that he acknowledges them in the Orc Lives Matter memes as well. Midjord also seems to position these themes of heroism and sacrifice as representing inherently white values. In his view, the fact that Tolkien's legendarium fosters such portrayals of whiteness means that movies like the LOTR trilogy couldn't possibly be made today, in the age of Kali Yuga.

Besides the odd implication of argument, which would suggest that Kali Yuga began sometime after Peter Jackson directed the last LOTR adaptation in 2003, we can start observing a pattern of discussing only things and issues that are lost to us and/or kept from us by people or systems of power with ill intent - movies that can't be made today, values that are not encouraged anymore, the king archetype which is now lost to us. This then invites a call to action defined by a need for renewal (of nationhood, nationality, and blood heritage) and going back to what once was and reclaiming these lost and even stolen values and virtues.

This is how the building of an artificial crisis is operationalized through the interpretation of a pop cultural artefact. Tolkien's legendarium contains themes that speak of the long-lost values of our Western civilization. In turn, because this artefact contains such themes, other artefacts cannot be produced today in the same since it is allegedly discouraged. The question of "who?" comes naturally at this point, as anyone will start asking why are these values lost and who doesn't allow these movies to be made. For Johnson's part of the far-right spectrum, the answer is the Jewish cabal and the society it has created. For Midjord and his guests the answer is the same, but will be

expressed through a series of euphemisms like SJW (social justice warrior), multiculturalism or political correctness.

George Burdi emphasizes this by bringing up something that is no more than a conspiracy theory surrounding the Amazon spinoff series of LOTR. This conspiracy started after Tom Shippey, a renowned Tolkien scholar, left as consultant of the writing team without any explanations. This is pieced together with announcements that Amazon will cast black actors to play elves. What Burdi implies here is not only that what he calls "SJW content" is forced onto Tolkien's fictional world, but that "SJW content" is incompatible with Tolkien's work. Here we can begin to notice how the interpreter of the artefact who controls the discussion and by extension the interpretation, positions themselves as the provider of solutions to this crisis and also maintains this position by exhibiting a firm disdain towards other interpretations.

A mix up occurs here, as the Twitter hashtag he brings up is meant to criticize racism, while the OLM memes use racism as a discursive tool. It is not clear if Burdi is unaware of the difference, but it seems highly unlikely for someone who has been so central to the American White Power movement of the 1990s and who is now deeply embedded in the new wave of far-right metapolitics. This shift in focus to interpretation of LOTR that oppose his own can then be interpreted as an instance of attempting to maintain dominance over how the artefact is interpreted. It also becomes clear that Burdi perceives such interpretations of LOTR, where Orcs are a racist trope, as a transgression against an artefact which he sees as belonging to him and his so-called white culture.

The condition of LOTR as an empty signifier is established first by the multitude of interpretations its themes foster. How it is interpreted also matters. Political actors seem to interpret it in a manner that pries open this rhetorical emptiness, using philosophical concepts and ideas as discursive wedges. These wedges also function as an interpretation proxy. The artefact fits the far-right worldview only because particular philosophical ideas wedged into it fit the far-right worldview. And since these philosophical ideas are presented as objective truths, the far-right worldview is legitimized and the artefact ultimately functions as a vehicle for this.

PhilosophiCat accuses people who see racist tropes in characters like the Orcs of seeking confirmation bias for their own ideology, even though what she and her discussion partners seem to seek the same thing. PhilosophiCat is also an avid promoter of Julius Evola's philosophy and she brings up his ideas in relation to LOTR throughout the podcast, discussing them in terms of

undebatable concepts of perennial philosophy. For example, she states with passion, her voice obviously trembling on the recording, that "anything that is working against Dharma, against Logos, against the will of God and the order in the universe is representative of the Orcs. And if you see yourself as the Orcs, and you identify with the Orcs, and you want to take their side, you're probably not the good guys". It is unclear if she purposefully misunderstands that those who criticize the racism in Tolkien's work do not identify with the Orcs, but rather don't like how Orcs are used to convey racist and hateful rhetoric. What is clear is that measures the world in terms of what is and isn't representative of chaos. Again, we have an extremely vague philosophical concept wedged in the artefact which appears to function as a written in stone justification for her own interpretation.

Henry Jenkins (2009) describes textual poaching as a struggle for possession of both the text and its meaning. But according to him, this practice is characteristic for the era that preceded Convergence Culture. The latter is defined by the importance for media producers of fan generated feedback. The former is defined by a circuit of interpretation and appropriation where fans operated rogue, with little acknowledgement or care from the media producers. Hubs of political fandom like *Counter Currents* or *Guide to Kulchur* evidently operate in the logic of the Convergence Culture era. But their radical and extremist interpretations position them as poachers and their feedback matters very little to media producers. It seems like these political actors are treated like poachers all the while they continue operating within the same Convergence Culture logic: fan feedback matters. We then begin to grasp the real effects of such politically extreme interpretations. It is not that the interpretations and feedback of people like Midjord or Burdi will be taken into account by corporate producers like Disney or Amazon, but that their discourse will permeate the way a vast majority of fans and pop culture enthusiasts approach artefacts like LOTR and enter extreme communities.

5.1.3 Effects and implications: Orcfugees, welcome!

Referred to only as #Orcposting, the trending 2015 Twitter hashtag that made it viral at the time, this wave of memes largely consisted of politically appropriated *Lord of the Rings* memes. Those who made these memes singled out refugees as target. In these memes, refugees are presented as non-human, violent invaders who were allegedly coming to Europe with the sole purpose of destroying it⁷.

The message is overtly implied through a series of painstakingly specific textual and visual

analogies. #Orcposting memes associated the wave of refugees with the armies of Mordor orcs by using shots from the three *Lord of the Rings* movies. Just as both in the novels and the movies, Orcs are the mortal enemies of the Men and their allies, these memes implied that refugees are, in fact, not refugees at all, but the mortal enemies of Europe. This narrative is constant with the far-right movement in Europe and North America, islamophobia being one of the main discursive and ideological pillars of this milieu (Aristotle Kallis, 2018).

Beyond the subtext of mocking and degrading vulnerable groups, the layout of each meme is meant to also mock media coverage of not only the Syrian refugee crisis, but its stance on multiculturalism and its approach to neoliberalist politics. For example, one of the most circulated #Orcposting memes parodies an actual October 2016

National Geographic magazine cover which featured a

family of refugees accompanied by the title "THE NEW EUROPEANS" and the subtitle "How waves of immigrants are reshaping a continent". The memed version keeps all the graphic elements of the easily recognizable National Geographic cover format, from its yellow frame and the placing of the magazine's name to where the titles of the main featured stories are placed at the top of the page. However, the family of refugees is replaced with an image of Mordor orcs from Jackson's 2003 movie. The title and subtitle are also replaced (see Figure 7) as follows: "THE NEW GONDORIANS - How waves of immigrants are reshaping a realm", implying that refugees cannot be possibly called "the new Europeans" or immigrants for that matter, no more than the barbaric Orc soldiers of the movie can be called Gondorians or immigrants. The #Orcposting meme also changes the date of the issue from October 2016 to March 3019, the fictional year when the events of the LOTR books take place. In relation to the other subtextual elements of the meme, this date might also be interpreted as a cautionary date; as if to say: *this is where we'll actually be in one thousand years if we keep seeing violent invaders as refugees and immigrants.*

Unlike the previous two examples, where we dealt with how political actors appropriate the

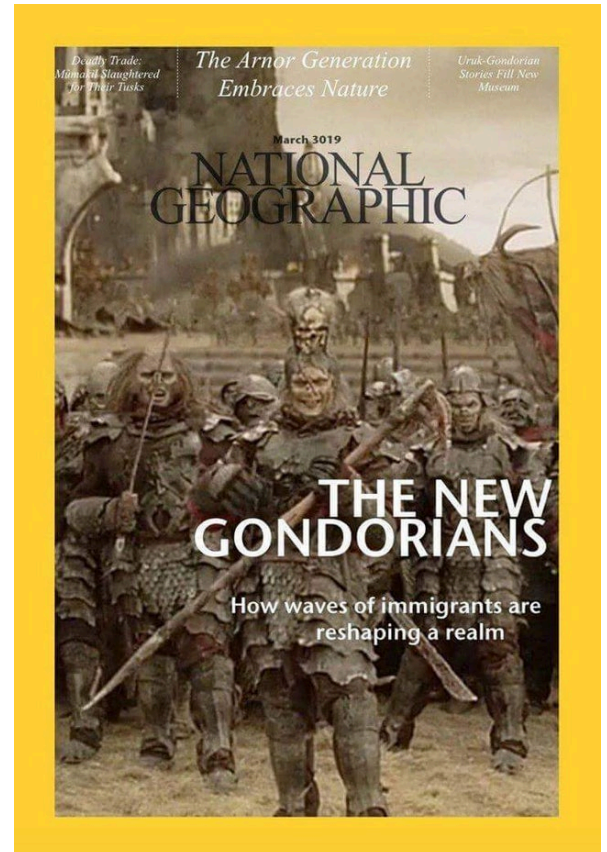


Figure 7. This #Orcposting meme compares war refugees to Orcs, the savage villains of Tolkien's fictional world.

artefact and then release it back into circulation in the format of a written text or a podcast episode, here we deal with a cross-platform community, whose members, with different degrees of involvement participate in creating these memes. They exchange feedback and advice on how to create the most effective memes. Here is how one work in progress is discussed on a /pol/ thread called "Orcposting V: The Lord of the Right". The meme is a picture of Azog the Defiler, an Orc from *The Hobbit* (2012) screen adaptation, holding the severed head of American comedian Kathy Griffin. The punchline of the meme is delivered through the news broadcast format. The banner spells: "Liberal Orc advocate culturally enriched" and "Internet Fascists celebrate one less leftist cunt in the world.". Kathy Griffin, a renowned comedian and pro-immigration advocate is known for having pulled a media stunt in 2017, when she posted a photo of herself holding what looked like Trump's severed head. This angered the Alt-right at the time. This meme is meant as revenge for that. "Thoughts?" asks the anon who made the meme. The feedback follows. "Breaking into reality isn't correct. Keep it lotr middle earth related deepest lore my man" points out one anon. Another goes into more detail about why this meme doesn't work:

Lol not really. Try to stick more to one universe thematically. Don't write mexican border and put an orc there and talk about internet fascists all in the same meme. Have it set somewhere in universe for example and talk about hobbits or some shit that don't deserve the enrichment I dunno lol.

Making memes may not seem like a complex job, but when it comes to the 4chan community, specific guidelines are workshopped out among its users, just as Marwick and Lewis (2017) have observed. What these anons point out is that one must work with the subtext rather than the text. Meaning has to be implied, not spelled out. Just like in a creative writing class, anons urge other anons to show, not tell. The reason why this is important is clarified by a third anon: "Just so we're clear, it's best to keep the real events out so normies don't catch on so easily".

The effect is the one desired. Normies do not catch on so easily, especially since imagery related to the LOTR movies does not immediately raise red flags like it is the case of, for example, Pepe the Frog. This, of course, has to do with the multiple interpretations fostered by Tolkien's legendarium as a whole. More than that, Peter Jackson's screen adaptations of LOTR and *The Hobbit* have gathered one of the most numerous and diverse fandoms in the history of contemporary popular culture⁸. Most Internet users do not see #Orcposting memes and immediately think that they are dealing with a far-right dog whistle, especially since a lot of these memes are subtle enough to bypass our first interpretation of them.

Perhaps one of the best examples to support this comes in the form of a personal anecdote. At the time of writing this very chapter, in the fall of 2021, I entered a Facebook thread on the issue of the rent referendum in Berlin. The discussion was between a closed group of friends, none of which harbor right-wing sentiments. Out of nowhere, one of the discussion partners, who is a close friend, shared an #Orcposting meme which showed the army of orcs overwhelming the city of Minas Tirith in Jackson's 2003 adaptation. He later explained that to him, the crowd of savage Orcs looked exactly like the Berliners standing in line for hours to get an apartment and that until then he had not yet been exposed to #Orcposting so he could not identify it immediately.

The fact that memes can circulate under what we could call our personal political radars makes them far more dangerous and effective than any podcast episode or white nationalistic take on LOTR. One needs to be aware of quite a few textual and subtextual elements to understand a message like the one encoded in the #Orcposting memes. One also needs to be aware of the far-right implications of these memes. What memes like these then do is to bridge these two pools of knowledge and provide an entry point into these extreme communities. This is then in line with Bjørge and Horgan's (2009, p.3) observations that individuals get radicalized in extremist communities after they have entered them for other reasons than their political convictions.

Why and how memes can be dangerous tools of radicalization and disinformation has been intensely debated in the last years. However, in this specific context, having moved from the fringe of the spectrum to the mainstream, I have shown how the same interpretations and the same agenda of gaining representation in the mainstream are workshopped and operationalized to achieve a wider audience.

Seen as a whole, these three examples prove that we indeed deal with an online political community that operates according to the dynamics of participatory culture. Each member of this vast community, which keeps no records of membership nor does it define itself as an actual community of fans to begin with, contributes in their own way to the process of political mobilization. And since the same political and ideological issues surface in every example, #Orcposting by definition being a tool of countering the official narratives of the media, we can judge that political mobilization indeed occurs on all levels. LOTR as an artefact is claimed and then used to provide an accessible entry point into the issue of a corrupt entertainment industry and media that create false current events narratives and that work against a so-called white culture and

its values. At the same time, specific elements of the artefact, like characters, characters arcs, or nested philosophical concepts are used to establish a strong emotional connection to the issue discussed; then the three examples each show how in every instance the artefact is used to synthesize the most important talking points of the agenda.

What one must not miss when studying this community is that, unlike in the case of Milkoreit's (2017) GOT fans who addressed other members of their own fandom, these political actors do not address the LOTR fandom in a direct and willing manner. Rather, the case is that the target are members of two fandoms. To be able to contribute to the far-right appropriation and circulation of LOTR one must be part of the LOTR fandom. As we have seen, a great deal of lore specific knowledge is required to properly discuss the artefact in political terms. Then, one must also be, on some level, part of what in this case can be called the far-right fandom or tribe. Furthermore, the adherence to the latter can be seen as vital, since one can have far-right sympathies, but be uninitiated in LOTR discussions - as I have discussed, intermediaries like Greg Johnson specifically address such an audience.

I have shown that political mobilization can occur when the encoding of an artefact is vague. This is defined by the artefact's encoded themes which foster a multitude of political interpretations, including radical and extremist ones. Then, what further facilitates this process is the method of wedging in philosophical concepts that are at once complex and vague enough to allow the intermediaries to communicate their agenda by discussing issues connected to it at length.

In the following chapter, I discuss to what extent other such artefacts can employ grassroots disinformation.

5.2 Function II: Grassroots Disinformation

"We all love Pepe, we love a glass of milk, we all love Ok! But I don't want to give the game away. I might get in trouble for saying this. But you know why we love all that stuff, right? Because we're making fun of you for thinking everything is racist. So just with a laser pointer we go to the grocery store and we point, ugh, milk. And you go 'AGH, MILK! MILK!' We're making you chase your own tail like a fanatic Chihuahua. Milk isn't really racist. There's no secret code because there's no Nazis."

Gavin McInnes, founder of the Proud Boys, on the Alt-right and its trolling tactics (Rebel News, 2017).

In this chapter I demonstrate Hypothesis 2: If the emptiness of an artefact is signaled as a means of discourse, then grassroots disinformation can occur. I will do so by taking an in depth look at my second case study, that of Pepe the Frog - an anthropomorphic frog character which, in the span of a decade has transitioned from the politically benign protagonist of an obscure comic book, to one of the most recognizable symbols of the contemporary far-right.

During Donald Trump's 2016-2017 presidential campaign, Pepe became known to the mainstream public as a symbol of the online community of right-wing radicals and extremists who supported him passionately and obsessively. That community, due the press coverage it received and due to how it used Pepe to employ political mobilization and affect disinformation, became known as the Alt-right. As I will show in this chapter, the very fact that the Alt-right was seriously discussed as a movement was a palpable effect of said disinformation, albeit one hard to replicate.

Disinformation is usually discussed in terms of top-down state efforts to conduct a form of psychological warfare on an adversary. Disinformation relies on confusion and fear and it plays on a society's worst socio-political and economical fears. Political scientist and expert in technology and national security Thomas Rid (2020a, p.14) explains that the goals of any disinformation campaign are invariable: "to exacerbate existing tensions and contradictions within the adversary's body politic, by leveraging facts, fakes, and ideally a disorienting mix of both". According to him, disinformation "may also be directed toward a single, narrow objective—to erode the legitimacy of a government, for example, or the reputation of an individual" (Rid, 2020a, p. 18). Disinformation campaigns are also, despite widespread misconceptions, imperfect and far less complex than one might think. For example, even though they disinform, disinformation campaigns are not always based on disinformation. They can also rely on delivering entirely accurate information at the right moment. Rid (2020a, p.20) emphasizes that, for effectiveness, sometimes, this accurate information can be flanked by little lies. He offers an example of how, in 1960, Soviet intelligence produced a pamphlet that recounted actual lynching of African Americans in Tennessee and Texas; which it then distributed in English and French in more than a dozen African countries, under the cover of a fake African American activist group. The purpose was to affect America's image in African Countries.

Similar tactics have been employed recently by far-right groups like Identity Evropa, whose members have set up fake Social Media accounts in 2020, and posing as ANTIFA members and/or

local chapters they spread footage of the looting that occurred during the 2020 BLM protests, implying that ANTIFA was claiming responsibility for the so-called attacks. When the news broke about the misinformation, it had little effect on the building tensions around the protests and how ANTIFA was used as a scapegoat (Collins, Zadrozny & Saliba, 2020). As Rid (2020a) points out, often, despite the evidence, disinformation as an offense often seems abstract, hypothetical, and unreal, thus hard to comprehend.

As I have shown in the background chapter, Memetics has been considered a potential tool of psychological warfare as early as 2011. Prosser (2006) talked about Memetics in terms that are very similar to those used by Rid (2020) to discuss disinformation - a set of actions that are meant to work unseen, affect ideas, and exploit existing tensions with the sole purpose of weakening an adversary.

I argue that with the advent of Web 2.0 a hand of extreme online communities, like that composed of 4chan and 8chan, discussed in the background chapter, have gradually stumbled upon these very tools of psychological warfare: Memetics and disinformation, with trolling being the underlying discursive practice and logic of both. I do not mean to imply that these communities have necessarily taken a page from how the KGB and the CIA have conducted their disinformation campaigns during the Cold War. Even though there is ample evidence indicating that certain members of the movement read extensively on the subject of psychological warfare, there is nothing to indicate that those actors have managed to employ these tactics successfully. What I am arguing is that, for the NR 2.0, the development of grassroots disinformation has been a matter of aggregational effort - facilitated by participatory culture and fandom. Furthermore, even though advice about how to employ complex psychological warfare operations have been circulated by the more knowledgeable members of the community, it is far more likely that the success of numerous trolling campaigns have been the result of a number of factors such as media coverage, the element of novelty for the mainstream audience, the element of surprise, and the fact that Internet communities weren't considered serious political threats prior to 2016.

In this chapter I look at how, through the character of Pepe the Frog, pre-existing socio-cultural tensions were exploited for political gain. Trolling constitutes an important element here as it functioned as a sure way to use the algorithms to propel divisive talking points and bits of disinformation into the mainstream. This was facilitated by the affordances of social media, which

have been proven to be vulnerable to exploitation by third parties. Furthermore, I also present one of the most tangible results of this disinformation: political actors falling for their own propaganda.

5.2.1 Community and agenda: KEK triggers the libs

In 2016, as mainstream audiences were learning who and what the Alt-right was - or at least what it pretended it was, the character of Pepe the Frog started flooding the Social Media platforms as this right-wing self-styled movement's most recognizable symbol. And in this lay the problem of a general agreement on whether the Alt-right was indeed a politically extreme movement. As it gained traction in the mainstream, the Alt-right attracted hardened US white nationalists like Jarred Taylor and well-known Neo-Nazi movements like the National Socialist Movement. But since one of its most debated symbols was Pepe, discussions about the movement's extremism and agenda derailed into heated debates about whether Pepe was a symbol of hate or not. Many believed that the mainstream media was just exaggerating, and that a meme was taken too seriously. This, as it turned out, was something that those who produced the extreme versions of the Pepe memes were counting on.

Pepe was talked about and he traveled everywhere on the far-right cyberspace. The discussions around it seemed to take a tongue in cheek approach to how the meme was received in the mainstream, with most of the comments, posts, and articles written about him employing trolling tactics or what we could call, in this instance, political gaslighting.

On publications like Counter Currents, some explained why Pepe (also named KEK by 4chan, after an obscure Egyptian Frog God of darkness) can't possibly be a symbol of hate:

A green frog cannot even factually be a White supremacist under the left's own swirling vision of burning crosses, flaming ovens, and values-voters that informs it. Can you think of a purportedly White supremacist society that would welcome green-colored people? Clearly these are the ravings of a senile cat lady [Hillary Clinton] and her slavish, slovenly courtiers. (Murray, 2016)

And he was even presented as a symbol of peace and multiculturalism:

Our ideal is a fraternal order of independent ethno-states. As in the holy scriptures of Boy's Club, we wish for a world where the distinct anthropomorphs of the human family are allowed to exist without forced intermingling. We want to secure a future for our Pepes, but that does not mean a world without Landwolf. We prefer peace to conflict, so we renounce, denounce, and resist state-enforced diversity policies, which will

destroy nation states and replace them with atomized slave-consumer cultures. As it is in the panels of our drawn scriptures, we want borders drawn between humanity's images. (Murray, 2016)

One can again identify a reactionary political agenda defined by unity achieved through the separations of ethnostates without the alleged enforced mixing of races. An ethnostate is a utopian sovereign state where citizenship is restricted to members of a particular racial or ethnic group. Murray goes on to invoke the source material of Pepe, the *Boys Club* comic book, to use its aesthetic elements - like the fact that the four friends and protagonists of the story, Andry, Brett, Landwolf, and Pepe are all anthropomorphic characters of different species (or races) - as an allegory that explains the far-right worldview. Therefore, ethnostates, white or not, must be separated just as the characters of *Boys Club* are separate in their identity.



Figure 8. An SS skull-like Pepe patch posted by a Terrorgram user on 4chan who claimed to have similar ones for sale.

The phrase "We want to secure a future for our Pepes, but that does not mean a world without Landwolf" (Murray, 2016) is all the more loaded with meaning and representative of an agenda. First, "we want to secure a future for our Pepes" (Murray, 2016) is a take on the Neo-Nazi fourteen words creed, "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children". Pepe is, of course, in this instance, the white children - an association validated and corroborated further by the predominantly white 4chan community that produced him as a powerful symbol. But then what this phrase also entails, beside the not so discrete wink to the Neo-Nazi movement, is that the goal of this seemingly new right-wing movement - one preoccupied with Internet culture and a progressive brand of right-wing politics - wasn't that far removed from the goals of more traditional white nationalists like Jarred Taylor or Greg Johnson. The claim is that securing a future for their Pepes does not entail a world without Landwolf. Landwolf is the character who is of a different race than Pepe, but what this message does is to repeat the common far-right rhetoric that non-whites and foreigners do not belong in so called "white countries" and they are tolerable as long as they confine to their own countries or ethnostates.

Then, in the claim that "we want borders drawn between humanity's image" we can see how the physical appearance of the characters of *Boys Club* is used to interpret the artefact in a similar manner as Johnson when he identified the different characters in the Fellowship of the Ring, all of

whom belonged to different races, as different aspects of the white racial soul. Here, Murray, uses these characters to advocate for a seemingly natural drawing of borders between humanity's images, *not races*.

The function of interpreting artefacts like Pepe in this manner is twofold. First, by using Pepe like this, pop cultural mobilization is employed via a cultural artefact that is highly popular with edgy and/or extreme online communities. These communities were and still are the target group for recruiting by far-right actors and they also provide the main flow of hangers on and non-violent participation (see Figure 8). But Pepe has also been increasingly popular with mainstream audiences (Hathaway, 2015). So, in a way, by keeping the language vague enough, the more engaged members of the community were addressed directly, while many of the hangers on from the mainstream were courted in ways that they did not truly understand. Then, the second function and the one that the Alt-right relied the most on was that Pepe had proven, at that moment in time, to be a source of societal discord. In other words, Pepe triggered the libs.

Elements pointing to this goal can be found throughout the New Right 2.0. For example, on one Neo-Nazi Telegram channel, this is how one user refers to Pepe and to what extent the same artefact can be used by the right today:

Pepe was top notch example of how War of the Flea should be conducted. We slowly drain this kike cucked world of blood until it just fuckin dies. it's the only way. we need patience. our children's children will reap for ages to come. we need something else then pepe, tho. lol. they're on to it now.

In another instance, a thread appeared on /pol/ where anons discussed how academics and federal agents research their community. The thread was started with two links. One link led to a 2018 Motherboard article about a new study on fringe and potentially dangerous communities that discovered that the bulk of extremist memes mainly came from 4chan and Reddit (Cole, 2018). The other link led to the actual paper by Zannettou, Caulfield, Blackburn, De Cristofaro, Sirivanos, Stringhini, and Suarez-Tangil (2018), where Pepe was mentioned no less than 63 times, with a wide range of extreme versions of the meme analyzed in depth. Anons discussed the topic at length, with some of them theorizing over whether the growing number of studies on the 4chan subject was of any indication of the mainstream's growing fear of the community. Others took the discussion further, laughing at the mainstream's attempt to figure out why their memes had such an effect, while the left's memes didn't. One anon explained it as follows:

the jews dont understand. they have a concept that is exclusively jewish called hasbara. it can be translated as diplomacy, explaining and propaganda. its about explaining things to non-jews why jewish interests must be served at all costs regardless of the truth. thats why jews on twitter sometimes pretend to be white and say things like "my fellow white people blah blah blah". they literally dont understand the value of being honest.

Another anon explains it further, alleging that they [by adding the (((echo))) around the word he signals that he is talking about jews] do not possess certain basic traits required for producing effective memes: "Memes believe it or not are ultra-sophisticated ways of communicating that (((they))) can't figure out how to break since they're essentially their own language and require humor and creativity to make and understand. Which the left simply doesn't have".

We can then establish that the reactionary agenda is very much aimed towards affecting the perceived adversary - even though this adversary is never concretely defined as one specific person, organization, or country - no matter the costs. This is because these efforts are in no way centralized, as communities like NR 2.0 have no hierarchies and they rely on their horizontality to function effectively and evade legislative regulations and penal repercussions. Whereas in the previous chapter the agenda seemed defined by the political group's condition of being marginalized by the mainstream media producers, here the agenda appears to be almost entirely defined by a wish to generate confusion and effect strong emotions on the adversary's side.

5.2.2 Interpretation: Pepe, the swiss-army-meme

The multifaceted identities and interpretations of Pepe (see Figures 9 and 10) can only be explained by his emptiness. The fact is not only that the far-right has appropriated Pepe, thus counting as one of the many movements or groups that have done the same, but that it has worked constantly towards the signaling that Pepe was used transnationally and multi-ideologically. This represented a means to avert attention - or at the very least dilute the severity of it - from the fact that the way they appropriated Pepe indeed pointed towards the extreme character of the movement. If Pepe was appropriated and reinterpreted by so many other movements, with opposing ideologies and worldviews, then it was impossible that Pepe could be representative of the ideology and level of political devotement of anyone in particular. By extension, in this maintained state of uncertainty, Pepe couldn't have truly been a symbol of hate, since he was so many other things to so many other people. Subsequently, those who appropriated him in an extremist way could evade the labels of



Figure 9. Two far-right versions of Pepe. On the left, accelerationist Pepe. On the right, white supremacist Pepe.

extremism and radicalism.

Here is how Black Pigeon Speaks, a known far-right YouTuber, argues against ADL designating Pepe as a symbol of hate, by bringing up the fact that Pepe had been adopted by the Hong Kong pro-democracy protest movement, which had and has nothing to do with the Alt-right or the far-

right at large:

With the adoption of Pepe as a symbol of freedom by the Hong Kong pro democracy resistance protesters it is clear for all to see that these organizations like the ADL and the SPLC along with the UK based odious organization Hope not Hate, they are totally out of touch with reality as well as Internet based culture. Pepe has been adopted and appropriated by many groups but he doesn't belong to anyone. Pepe doesn't belong to the Alt-right or the Alt-lite (...) Pepe has always been an anticommunist frog and thus his adoption by pro freedom, anticommunist demonstrators in Hong Kong is more than apt. Pepe represents utter distain for communists and communism. (Black Pigeon Speaks, 2019)

Pepe might have been adopted by the anti-regime movement in Hong Kong - since the regime is communist, then Pepe can be understood here as an anti-communist symbol. But there is no communist regime in the US or the rest of the European countries where the far-right has employed Pepe as tool of mobilization and disinformation. What Black Pigeon does is to use the legitimacy of the Hong Kong protest movement to launder the legitimacy of the far-right efforts to use Pepe to attack their political adversaries. Furthermore, while for the pro-democracy Hong Kong protesters communism is a real threat, for the NR 2.0 and the far-right at large communism is a mere conspiracy theory - another version of the same Jewish cabal (discussed in the previous chapter) - one allegedly pushed by Marxists in universities and used to assert dominance on culture through political correctness and progressive politics.

Then it is also worth noticing how Black Pigeon Speaks at once entertains two contradictory points of view to support his argument that Pepe is not a hate symbol. First, he claims that no interpretation of Pepe can be settled as the dominant or condemnable one, since he is interpreted and appropriated in so many different ways. The logic here would that then Pepe cannot possibly be

a symbol of hate. And then there's the idea that Pepe signifies anti-communism and is an international symbol of solely this due to the way he has been appropriated by one specific movement in Hong Kong.

To better understand how this symbolic emptiness that is used as a political tool of disinformation, aimed to at once confuse adversaries and establish a strong bond with like-minded peers,

we must discuss Pepe's signifier quality. Pepe was picked up as a meme by the 4chan community from a not so popular comic created by Matt Furie, called *Boy's Club* (Beran, 2020). Pepe started as Furie drew and wrote him, a slightly sad character, who just wanted to smoke weed and hang out with his friends (Beran, 2020). In his initial form, Pepe can certainly be described as politically lite. Then, as the anons of 4chan reinterpreted and appropriated Pepe freely in the underground, he started to signify emptily (Laclau, 2018) and attract the heterogeneous subgroups of the far-right, who in turn reinterpreted and appropriated pepe (Nagle, 2017; Beran, 2020). Thus, an obscure comic book character became an Alt-right symbol of hate. The transition of Pepe from an obscure character to a viral meme and then to a hate symbol is important because it implies a history of numerous rewritings and reinterpretations. It also showcases how Pepe ended up in the mainstream and a part of pop culture when the movement that used him the most, the Alt-right, ended up in the mainstream as well with Donald's Trump victory in 2016 (Nagle, 2017; Beran, 2020).

When media channels and celebrities started using sanitized versions of Pepe, his underground and counter cultural 4chan fanbase saw this as a serious trespassing against their common online culture and identity. People outside their community, who didn't share their values (Nagle, 2017; Beran, 2020), were now appropriating their content and turning it from what they perceived as counter culture into mainstream culture - even though much of the pop culture they were consuming was mainstream by definition.

Anons soon began to alter Pepe, turning him into memes that were so repulsive that he could not possibly cater to the sensibilities of the mainstream any further (Beran, 2020). This phase is often compared to that of the punks of the early 80s, who used repulsive symbols, including the



Figure 10. A more benign version of Pepe - here as the Guild Navigator from David Lynch adaptation of *Dune*.

Nazi swastika, to make their identity as unpalatable to the mainstream as possible. However, in hindsight, it can be judged that this is more similar to the Norwegian Black Metal subculture of the early 90s. Then, Black Metal fans sought more than to fashion an identity that could not be replicated into fashion trends and offshoot music genres, but to push a set of beliefs which included a contradictory mix of paganism, satanism, and even national socialism as a tool of resistance towards the mainstream. This versatile mix then created an openness within the meaning of the worldviews circulated by this fandom which eventually solidified into toxic ideologies and invited stronger national socialist beliefs, encouraging that they be explored at length (as a result, National Socialist Black Metal was born out of this movement). Similarly, in the case of Pepe, the almost infinite number of extreme identities that have been attributed to him, with the purpose of keeping the mainstream away from him, attracted extremists who were already looking for new ways to cater to younger audiences by making use of Internet culture and the affordances of participatory culture. While the racist, antisemitic, Nazi, Islamophobic, misogynistic, and many other extreme versions of Pepe didn't make these ideas more appealing, they certainly offered one the opportunity to seriously consider them, while masking them as edgy jokes (Nagle, 2017; Wendling, 2018, Beran, 2020).

From a countercultural symbol of marginalized fandoms, Pepe became the empty signifier that helped the far-right sanitize its image for the new pop culture savvy audiences. Pepe then fulfills Milkoreit's (2019) functions of making the issue more accessible— in this case, the issue is the ideology of the Alt-right, which in the fact that is a mix of old and new fascist, Identitarian, white supremacist, and Neo-Nazi ideas, which don't always converge, shows how Pepe perfectly fits Laclau's theory – and getting people emotionally connected – in this case, through the strong emotions that the politics of repulsive trolling imply. This back-and-forth process of appropriating Pepe can also be seen as a bypassing of the creator's encoding and thus as a recoding of the artefact's message. Therefore, we could say that those who used Pepe as a hate symbol did not operate within the de initial code - unlike the previously discussed example of LOTR, *Boys Club* does not foster neo-fascist interpretations of its text and subtext, even though, as I have already shown, even the simplest aesthetic elements like the separation of characters in different anthropomorphic species, can be politically appropriated. His political appropriators did, however, operate within the desired code of the recoding.

The New Right 2.0 has seemed to, at least to some extent, managed to recode Pepe. As we

know from Jenkins (2006 & 2009) the appropriation of media products by fans happens in the same process where Corporate Convergence represents the main producer and encoding hegemon. Fans do not have the power to recode an artefact as the corporate convergence constantly circulates its initial, unappropriated version of the artefact. But Matt Furie, the creator of Pepe the Frog is an indie comic book creator. He does not hold the power to dominate the process of circulation and recirculation of media products. Furthermore, as I will show briefly, this lack of authorial power is only worsened by the New Right 2.0 almost personal disdain towards him.

In the end, Pepe's emptiness as a signifier becomes evident from three clear perspectives: that of the more literal nihilistic emptiness with which its creator has imbued him, and which catered to the sensibilities of the early fandoms of 4chan (Beran, 2020), and that of the Alt-right's ideological heterogeneity which has adopted him as a symbol of hate. Then third, with Pepe surfacing in Hong Kong as a symbol that at the time seemed to stand for hope (Grey Ellis, 2019).

But because Pepe's source text was so obscure and was encoded with such an openness it was all the easier for the New Right 2.0 to not only appropriate it as an artefact, but claim it as its own. As one commenter points out in an 8chan thread, dedicated to the *Feels Good Man* documentary - that follows Furie's struggle to change how people think about Pepe, "nobody owns a meme, you can't 'take back' a meme". Pepe's quality as a work of fiction, produced by an author is not even acknowledged. Instead, Pepe is seen as a meme, and Matt Furie, its creator, as an awkward intruder. One other commenter, from a 4chan thread also on the subject of the documentary about Pepe and Furie, rejoices as well in watching Furie struggle: "I watched it last night. there is a scene where he begs the ADL to remove [Pepe] from the hate list and they tell him to fuck off in person. the documentary is amazing.". For Furie, to take Pepe back would imply to take him from the community that has developed such a deep attachment to appropriating him. Then, the same thread quickly spirals into side discussions on how to produce the most effective memes that would have maximum effect on the adversary. As one anon points out:

you can also read propaganda and public relations or marketing guides to give your memes more impact. colorful images work good for attracting attention, big letters have a stronger impact than smaller ones. also if you do text in some semitic style lettertype people will subconsciously associate it with jews. same for germanic lettering with germany, etc. but it has to have some truth to it. when mark zuckerberg memes are made that he is a robot and not human thats only possible because mark zuckerberg acts like a total sperg.

Another points out how the process of spreading a meme goes: "It always goes like this. 4Chan creates meme, Plebbit find it and steals it, Plebbit spamming leads to the rest of the normie web to see and exploit it. Easy."

This pattern occurs whenever Pepe's labeling as a hate symbol by the ADL is discussed, or Matt Furie's attempt to take him back from the far-right. First, Pepe's designation as a hate symbol is accounted for as a mere political act of oppression from leftist and Jewish organizations. Furthermore, in this first instance, Furie's role as the author and creator of Pepe is not only disconsidered but denied completely and the author becomes as much of an intruder as the mainstream audiences. Then, Pepe's quality as an empty signifier is underlined and instrumentalized to evade any label of extremism and maintain the artefact in a state of uncertainty which further allows its extreme version to be propagated in multiple directions, including the mainstream. Then, advice on how to effectively create memes with maximum shock and triggering value follow. This points to a high degree of intentionality and awareness of how Pepe as an artefact can be and is employed politically.

5.2.3 Effects and implications: the Great Meme War

In November 2020, as the votes for the US presidential elections were still counted and it wasn't yet clear if Trump would remain president or not, 4chan anons redeployed a posting tactic that they employed during his previous campaign. This, consisted of magically sending Trump all of their support. "Come on bois. Send Trump your power!" wrote one anon under a meme of Goku, a widely popular Japanese anime character in the 4chan community, engulfed in a ball of rippling energy, transforming into a superior being known as a super saiyan. ". Entire threads, consisting of this kind of messages and memes started appearing. They reached the maximum number of comments within minutes and then faded into oblivion. Then other, new threads appeared. In one of them, one anon, who identified himself as one of the first Great Meme War veterans, pointed to how stupid everyone's endeavor was: "bunch of retardfags. we're losing. they've banned shilled and cucked everyone who fought for Trump the last time around, now its just a bunch of newfag larpers thinking they know meme magic". This illustrates, perhaps better than anything else, one of the most lasting effects by the grassroots disinformation employed by what was the Alt-right in 2017: the belief that the Great Meme War employed by 4chan played not a significant role, but the main one - with anons often declaring that they've memed Trumped into the White House, in the outcome

of the 2017 elections (see Figure 11).

Rid (2020 b) describes how one of the most common yet unpopular aspects of disinformation campaigns is that “disinformation works against itself, and again in unexpected ways” and that disinformation actors, at government level or otherwise, are again and again, affected by their own constructions. Kate Starbird (as quoted in Rid, 2020 b) emphasizes that “measuring the actual impact of trolling and online influence campaigns is probably impossible” but that the “difficulty of measuring impact doesn’t mean that there isn’t meaningful impact.”. However, unlike in the case of Russian led disinformation campaigns, discussed in depth in Rid's book, the Alt-right, 4chan, or whatever the 2017 far-right cyber movement might wish to call itself, did not operate with metrics. As far as current knowledge goes, this grassroots movements, due to its horizontal nature, centralized no efforts and attempted to collect no results besides its own convictions that the Great Meme War was an effective and successful campaign.

The movement's belief in its own disinformation is again emphasized in 4chan thread from 2018, just as the EU Parliament voted on the controversial article 13 regarding copyright in the Digital Single Market. Accompanied by breaking news style meme which showed Augusto Pinochet Pepe and the message "Kekistan declares war on EU", one anon wrote the following:

Fellow Kekistanis we thought it wont come to this, but im here dreadhtfully reporting to you that article 13 has passed. We need you to fight against the very ones that wish to undermine our existence. This meme war is not fought for a political cause or any form of gain but we are fighting this one for our very survival. The Kekistani Meme Forces are calling on all abled vounteers to come forward and fight against this threat. Our foe is relentless and wont stop at nothing till all our memes are deleted and all memers captured. Fellow Kekistanis outside the EU your bretheren need your help to fight against this oppressor that wishes to destroy us. Veterans of the first great meme war are called in to serve in this one, lets not let the EU delete our memes, i know you are exhausted from the first great meme war but this one is for our very survival. Rise against the this oppression of meme and free speech. This decision of the EU parliament has shown to us that people of the EU have no influence in the decisions that will affect their lives, we must not allow these bureaucrats to go



Figure 11. WW2 era-like mobilization propaganda Pepe poster made by 4chan in 2016.

unpunished for this catastrophic decision, let us meme them into history, we cannot allow them to destroy our memes. May Kek guide us through these dire times into a better, brighter future for all memes

Other such threads popped up for a while, but they quickly faded away. There was no meme war waged against the EU or the European Parliament.

A year later, in 2019, other threads, attempting to prepare anons for the 2020 US presidential elections, started surfacing. These too fell on either deaf or disenchanted ears. One such thread started in the same military call to action manner:

Red pills, Kek's etc, My fellow citizens we face an enormous task. The second meme wars is nearly upon us. We desperately require funds to enlarge our army. The forces of Npcstan, Cuckstan and Normiestan are assembling their troops as we speak. I'm requesting that all fellow Kek's donate to this worthy cause. Long Live Kek! Hail Pepe! May the God Emperor live forever!

It quickly becomes clear that what had once been thought of by the community as a cleverly engineered process - an effective one at that, had eventually proved as impossible to reproduce.

What is noticeable as the New Right 2.0 struggled to exist as something more than a movement whose only common goal was to get Trump elected in 2017 is the loss of some of the cultural artefacts that seemed to have aided its efforts. Pepe, even though still a beloved symbol of the far-right and the 4chan & 8chan community, now seems to be circulated as nothing more than a meme. And even though Pepe still serves as an artefact that politically mobilizes like-minded peers and recruits outsiders, its potential as an artefact used to employ grassroots disinformation seems to have wavered. It seems to be of somewhat common agreement in the far-right cyberspace that the reason for this is that there is no more element of surprise. This, of course, circles back to what I have discussed above; that through the very fact that the Alt-right attracted so much attention and was the subject of breaking news for more than a year,



Figure 12. Anime poster that alleges that the Roma minority commits the most crimes in the country.

its use of Pepe inevitably placed the artefact into the mainstream and by extent in the realm of popular culture at large - albeit as a symbol representative of hate movements, and not a mere comic book character.

What seems however to work in favor of this decentralized process of grassroots disinformation is the use of artefacts with a moderate and at times temporary frequency. The example of *Lord of The Rings* (LOTR), discussed in the previous chapter, certainly can serve as a vehicle for grassroots disinformation as well. Grassroots intermediaries, who are closer to the mainstream audience and do not wish to alienate newcomers by using strong far-right discourse and terminology, rely on this artefact's quality as empty signifier to evade labels of extremism. Extremist interpretations of LOTR can too be defended by pointing towards the fact that other fandoms interpret it in different ways. One other significant example that represents a stable pattern within the movement, is that of Japanese anime. For instance, a rogue poster (see Figure 12) appeared in a bust stop in Budapest, Hungary, in 2019 with the following message: “Did you know that while gypsies are 9% of the population, that they commit more than two-thirds of all crime?” This was in line with the government's stance towards EU's refugee quotas and its overarching populist and far-right rhetoric. What is striking however, is that the message is relayed to the viewer by a Japanese anime character.

In the following chapter, I discuss to what extent other such artefacts can employ radicalization.

5.3 Function III: Radicalization

*Fuck it, turn it up, the beat in my headphones / Just a little bit,
yeah, just a little bit, yeah/ Fuck it, white boy summer*

Chet Hanks - White Boy Summer

So far, I have shown how political mobilization and grassroots disinformation are employed by claiming and appropriating both mainstream and fringe cultural artefacts. Now, I will elaborate on how the same process is operationalized and can function as an entry point into the user's radicalization and indoctrination. Thus, I test hypothesis 3: if the emptiness of an artefact is established by its appropriators, then radicalization and indoctrination can occur.

My third and final case study is White Boy Summer (WBS), a meme which started off as a song by rapper Chet Hanks and its marketing gimmick before getting picked up as a catchphrase by the New Right 2.0. Because of this, the phrase "White Boy Summer" has quickly become synonymous with the movement that hijacked it. Due to its level of obscurity (Hanks' song wasn't extremely popular with the mainstream audiences) it also became an effective far-right dog whistle and it easily migrated from spaces like 4chan and Terrorgram to Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Spotify, and YouTube. A 2021 Bellingcat investigation (Evans & Davis, 2021) into how this meme circulated throughout the far-right cyberspace observed that on mainstream platforms extremist White Boy Summer content can be found along more generally lite content, completely unrelated to Neo-Nazi themes.

The meme versions of WBS are diverse in what they express and how they do it. For example, in this chapter I will bring up videos and images that emphasize racial superiority and inferiority, images that use the Fashwave and Terrorwave aesthetics⁹ to glorify white men, videos that piece together different pieces of pop culture references in an order that conveys extremist discussion points and establish an emotional connections with their viewers, and comments and articles that showcase how extremists purposefully take control of an artefact and push out its initial encoding as well as its author. I will again bring up examples from 4chan, Counter-Currents, a few Terrorgram channels, as well as a variety of BitChute videos.

What this chapter will show is how an artefact can become colonized by an extremist community and its interpretations to the extent that its author is completely removed from equation. Ultimately, the rhetorical emptiness of the artefact gets established by its appropriators. This chapter also provides an insight into how those who engage with this community can become radicalized. I argue that participatory culture plays a major role into how all those involved in the process of politically appropriating and circulating cultural artefact can enter these communities.

In broad strokes, radicalization refers to the gradual social process into extremism characterized by changes in ideas (cognitive) and behavior (behavioral). Bjørgo and Horgan (2009, p.3) propose a clarification between the two concepts (cognitive radicalization and behavioral radicalization) as they point out that cognitive radicalization will not always lead to behavioral radicalization, and nor is the distinction as clear cut as it may seem. The relationship between beliefs and behavior is key to understanding the radicalization process, but as the authors point out, this link is far more complex. For example, Bjørgo and Horgan (2009, p.3) have pointed out that

"individuals do not necessarily join extremist groups because they hold extremist views; they sometimes acquire extremist views because they have joined such a group for other reasons". This is in line with the findings of the PST (2021) report I have cited in the opening of this thesis, where two of the key takeaways were first that those who engage with extreme right digital networks "are not necessarily violent, but people who are initially attracted to the extreme and groundbreaking content in the networks", and second, that extremism disguised as humor helps to spread extremist propaganda and that extremist expressions, serious acts of violence and terrorism are normalized by being woven together with expressions from popular culture. This also connects to scholarship on the relationship between the use of Internet and the process and outcomes of radicalization. As Archetti (2015) has extensively argued, "the phenomenon of violent extremism takes place in a social world that is constituted by overlapping networks of relationships" and that what ultimately determines any individual to join "an extremist group depends on the compatibility between the individual's own narrative and the one of the group" (ibid.). There is then enough evidence, supported by scholarship, to argue that individuals can go online and enter extremist communities via entrypoints from popular culture where they can ultimately develop extremist beliefs as a consequence of being exposed to these communities. Furthermore, through the vehicle of popular culture and fandom a degree of compatibility can be established between individual beliefs and those of the group.

This is the case especially with 4chan, where the community has long maintained a somewhat unified stance that what has drawn them to the platform has always been its fringe character. Furthermore, the platform maintains this reputation due to its circulation of obscure and extreme content and its group advocacy for an idea of free speech defined by a religious-like belief that the most extreme things should be said and shown to the public just because one has the right to do so. Even so, as scholars point out, radicalization is a dynamic and nonlinear process and more than often, those who become radicalized do not go on to commit acts of violence, but they can engage in non-violent roles. As this chapter will show, these roles can be as small as creating extremist White Boy Summer memes.

It must be stressed that radicalization is not to be used as an absolute concept as the meaning of the term can vary from context to context. Since the focus of this thesis is participatory culture and the politically extreme instrumentation of cultural artefacts, I argue that I am dealing with a

process of radicalization that has to do primarily with the creation and distribution of extreme content in this case. My analysis does not cover violent outcomes of this process.

In the following pages I will show what the appropriation of White Boy Summer as a far-right meme adds to the current discussion in terms of the qualities of the community that appropriates it, how is it interpreted, and what effects and implications this process might entail.

5.3.1 Community and agenda: The White Boy Summer Olympics

In July 2021, Norwegian athlete Karsten Warholm won the gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics for the 400-meter hurdles. In the aftermath of his victory, short videos of Warholm started circulating on BitChute, 4chan, 8chan, and Terrorgram channels. All of these videos capture the moment Warholm approached the finish line and ran over it, ripping his running top open with his hands at the realization that he had won the race (see Figure 13). One such video appeared on the *PEGIDA - das Original* Telegram channel, accompanied by the message-title "Can't stop the white boy summer.". On a thread that appeared and survived on /pol/ for a short while before it was deleted by moderators, one anon reacted to the very same video simply saying "revenge for 36. white boy summer long overdue".

Warholm came in first, in front of his competitor, Rai Benjamin, who is a person of color. As the White Boy Summer meme was spreading across the far-right cyberspace, Warholm happened to be the perfect protagonist for a version of the meme that dealt in many ways with the movement's representation complex and its bitterness over what it claims is a glorification of black culture, supposedly in the detriment of a white one. The 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics is often discussed by bringing up the name of African American athlete Jesse Owens and how the Nazis suffered an early cultural defeat on their own soil. What the above-mentioned comment means to say then, is that Warholm's victory is a revenge for the events in 1936. Furthermore, it is implied that Warholm winning the race was a sign that, finally, white people will finally have a summer to celebrate themselves.

In another corner of the New Right 2.0, American white nationalist Warren Balog, leader of the National Justice Party (formed out of the Alt-right organization the The Right Stuff), posted on his official Telegram channel a video of a white man beating up a black man in what seemed like an organized street fight. The "White boy summer shit!!!" message accompanied it. One other Telegram channel, called The Legion (taking its name and its logo from the Romanian's inter-war fascist movement, The Legion of Archangel Michael or, in short, The Iron Guard) forwarded a video of a group of men training in mixed martial arts somewhere on a beach, accompanied by the message "white boy summer style". The video was forwarded from a Neo-Nazi channel called Activism, Athletics, Identity, where the ideation of superior white male bodies is merged with other extremist talking points. Then, on the Telegram channel dedicated for 4chan's /pol/, anons who want to discuss specific threads further (the purpose of the channel is not openly stated anywhere, but the topics and threads that are further discussed here never about anything else than far-right-talking points and propaganda) a simple meme appeared of a group of WW2 German soldiers gathered around an ice cream truck, tasting the goods and smiling; "RISE AND SHINE, IT'S THE WHITE BOY SUMMER", reads the description.

As I have explained in the previous two chapters, this agenda defined by representation manifests itself as an obsession. This is naturally linked to its central conspiracy theories that serve as justification for its extreme beliefs and advocacy for violence. These conspiracy theories, like The Great Replacement Theory or that of a Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG), in the case of American white supremacists, are all meant to set up an artificial identity crisis which has been left unchecked for too long and now, in the final hour, only radical action can make a difference. These conspiracies also position the white and predominantly Christian demographic they are addressing in a role of forced inferiority. The only resolve is for the white man to rise again to his former glory by bettering his mind, his spirit, and his body. Whoever looks to achieve this is urged to pursue athletic performance, temperance



Figure 13. Still from a BitChute video accompanied by comments.

(consumption of narcotics, alcohol as well as porn and masturbation are discouraged), and resilience towards what is seen as a generally degenerate society. All of these ideas can be found in White Boy Summer memes throughout the far-right cyberspace. Furthermore, these memes seem to address everyone on the far-right spectrum as White Boy Summer doesn't seem to be preferred by one group while being rejected by others.

The issue of representation again comes to the front, as those who engage in the circulation of White Boy Summer talk about it as a chance for the movement to counter some of the central issues it sees in society, like the BLM protests. As Hampton (2021) writes on Counter Currents:

Despite the condemnations, white boy summer lives on. Should we be happy with it? For the meme value alone, yes. White boy summer is a mainstream hashtag we can appropriate for our own uses. We don't need to affect black mannerisms or styles to participate. Another hot summer of race riots and Black Lives Matter evangelism awaits us. It's good to have a ready-made hashtag to counter all the negativity we'll see and trigger our enemies with the truth that it's our summer.

In response, one commenter points out that white people have nothing to gain by attempting to be a part of Hip-Hop, which is emphasized as representing black culture, on the contrary:

Seriously though, as a young boy growing up in a racially diverse part of Omaha, I fell into the idea that if I have something in common with them, i.e. Hip Hop music, the black kids would accept me and treat me like a friend. While a few instances like that occurred, I learned rather quickly that most of them don't want to be my friend and will exploit my naivety and friendliness to either take from me or threaten me. The sooner dorks like this guy realize they're not one of the "cool white dudes" the better off they'll be.

Another commenter goes even further and explains how white people, who in his view are descendants of Greek gods, should tap into their own heritage and, much like the case study of the first chapter, reclaim a long lost glorious past:

I would encourage our young people to eschew the 'moronic inferno' of pop culture and especially the toxic badlands of 'hip hop'. Let them exchange the fools' gold of 'the cool' for the proper manly and womanly virtues of our ancestors. It is time to leave Black culture to the originators who are so proud of it. Let us Whites, who are the sons and daughters of Apollo and Athene, embrace again our sublime High Culture that all once shared and that used to be inculcated into our schoolchildren! (...) Let us take up our abandoned heritage, which only our people can create and nourish: the vomitus of the thug and the ignoramus we gladly leave to the merchants to peddle to those who can rise no higher.

The fact that White Boy Summer is tainted by a so called "shit culture" [the echo ((())) placed around the word culture means to say that it is a Jewish controlled culture] is emphasized again, by another commenter, who makes similar points to Midjord (2020), and advocates for whites to cultivate what he seems to hold as inherently white values:

The best way to be white today – to be truly countercultural – is not to proclaim or advertise the fact, but simply to be exactly what the shit (((culture))) does not want us to be: conventional in appearance (not striving after any presentational effect, whether wigger or Cary Grant); self-disciplined in intellect, speech and behavior; capable in action; widely skilled in useful ways, especially those related to survival in all its aspects;

well-read; and thoroughly undeceived about biological and political reality. Aristotle said something to the effect that excellence is a habit. We should cultivate such habits. There is nothing more threatening to the alien occupationist regime than a strong, skilled, knowledgeable, self-confident, “cisgender”, and proud white man.

A type of negotiation starts to occur where this community of far-right extremists, defined by an American white supremacist worldview, first points out to everything that, in its view, is wrong about the nature and the format of the *White Boy Summer* as a rap song by Chet Hanks. Then, after discussing what is to be done if one wants to leave behind the culture that produced such an artefact, some start advocating a purification of the artefact. The author of the initial article writes the following: "Sensible white people need to avoid the black masculinity trap. Chet Hanks, from his substance abuse to his miscegenation, doesn't provide an example for white people to follow. That's why we need to make white boy summer our own." (Hampton, 2021).

It can then be observed how this community, driven by a clear agenda of seeking representation for what it believes to be its own white culture, performs what could only be called memetic surgery. Through a process of collective negotiation, it completely removes the pieces that do not align with its worldview and keeps just those who do.

5.3.2 Interpretation: Removing the Author

Reduced to the condition of poachers whose feedback, due to its politically extreme implications, does not matter for the entertainment producers, these political actors will aggressively take control over the meaning of an artefact. This happens because they deem it to be representative of their agenda. In the case of *White Boy Summer* this culminates with an attempt to completely remove Chet Hanks as its creator. Since Hanks is not a well-established artist with corporate and fanbase power behind him (even less than in the case of Matt Furie and Pepe, who at least had a grassroots movement on his side determined to save Pepe from the far-right) he can barely make his voice heard about how his song is politically appropriated. The few statements Hanks has made about WBS did not help the way his song and concept were picked up by these political actors either.

In an Instagram video, where Hanks announced his *White Boy Summer* project, he said that “I just got this feeling, man, that this summer is about to be a white boy summer. Take it how you want. I'm not talking about Trump, NASCAR-type white. I'm talking about me, Jon B, Jack Harlow-type white boys.” (Chan, 2021). What Hanks probably meant to do is clearly state that he wasn't coming out with a with a supremacist anthem. This also means that he was aware of the


implications of such a slogan. Yet, in being so specific about what kind of white boys he represented, drawing a clear demarcation between “Trump, NASCAR-type white” and young men like him and the rapper Jack Harlow, he seems to have managed to stir the anger of former group.

The general agreement seems to be that Hank's music is bad. Some argue that the reason it is bad is that a white man is trying to imitate black culture, which is not his own since he is not black. However, not all those who engage with WBS hold this belief. For example, on 4chan, quite a few users point out that they listen to Rap and Hip-Hop and do not have an issue with these genres being a part of black culture, but with the way other white people glorify black bodies instead of white ones. As the same Counter Currents author points out:

Even though the meme promotes a black-drenched and politically correct white masculinity, it's still too threatening for our guardians of culture. Our society cannot tolerate any celebration of white men as white men, much less a whole season dedicated to white men. (Hampton, 2021)

This claim that our society can barely tolerate any celebration of white men, let alone a summer dedicated to white men, again stresses the issue of representation and the artificial crisis this movement is constantly maintaining. Then, in many comments, especially on 4chan and Terrorgram, this is directly linked back to Hanks himself, who is seen as the very proof that white people, especially men, have fallen from their once mighty place and are now but mumbling rappers attempting to imitate a foreign culture. This opinion comes up constantly and is maintained even by users who don't seem to reject Hip-Hop or black culture as a whole.

However, Hanks is credited with creating the meme, but this is more or less said in a way that implies he is no longer needed for anything else and that they, the so-called white patriots and nationalists, will take it from here, just like they did so many times before:

Credit where it's due to the wigger for creating the meme. Unfortunately for him, I suspect he's about to find out that appropriating memes is a specialty of the online dissident right. Think of cartoonist Matt Furie or the Canadian synth-pop duo Brave Shores. If Derek Chauvin walks, it would be metapolitical negligence not to take advantage of this meme. If executed right #WhiteBoySummer will be successfully co-opted and join the pantheon of reliable and never stale memes like 'It's Okay To Be White' and the OK  gesture. Perhaps it will be honored by and earn a spot on the ADL website. I for one plan on doing my part.

It is highly unlikely that anyone is going to remember in the future that White Boy Summer started off as Chet Hank's song. In a nutshell, this case showcases that the weaker the control of the author the more defenseless an artefact is in the case that it gets singled out by such a movement.

Furthermore, this vulnerability ties in with how these appropriators seem to regulate the artefact's emptiness. There was nothing remotely racist or white supremacist in Hank's song lyrics, but this didn't stop the imagination and creativity of a movement of political extremists to go to work and spark an entire wave of memes from what is ultimately three simple words in the title but which can say so much.

As a result of this, hundreds of versions of White Boy Summer now circulate throughout the far-right cyber space, but not limited to. These versions bring together every textual and visual distinctive element of the online far-right of the past six years. From videos that take footage from 1980s action movies and imitate 1980s aesthetics, in the now recognizable Fashwave style, popularized by the Alt-right and by The Daily Stormer, to Terrorwave mashups of armed men accompanied by the Sonnenrad Nazi symbol, all fit neatly under the White Boy Summer catchphrase. What this swath of visually and textually extreme content seems to say is that a summer dedicate to white men would include everything from a celebration of mass shooters, to 1980s action movies and taking revenge, at least at a declarative level, for all the times when black bodies and culture have supposedly been prioritized over white ones.

This then starts to become a very particular case where discussions about fandom take a different turn than in the previous two chapters. It cannot be said that these political appropriators are fans of Chet Hanks' song and that they use it to communicate their agenda to other like-minded fans of the same artefact. This is more the case of fans, here understood as literal fanatics, of white supremacist and neo-fascist ideology who cynically take control of a cultural artefact since it seems to be compatible with their agenda. This is unlike the case of Pepe the Frog where there was a very strong emotional connection between the initial 4chan fandom and the artefact that persisted throughout the Alt-right and the online communities that followed it. What also seems to have played a central role on how White Boy Summer got singled out is Chet Hank's privileged status and the fact that he considers himself to be above the “Trump, NASCAR-type white”. Chet is the son of the Hollywood actor Tom Hanks, whom most far-right appropriators of the meme see as a part of the so-called problem they have to deal with – the ‘Jewish controlled’ Hollywood. It seems that the artefact is then taken over out of spite just as much as it is due to its potential for becoming a viral meme.

Again, the appropriators operate with the Convergence Culture mentality, but with an artefact that has no other pole of power opposing them - like other fandoms with opposing world-

views or media producers, and that is not a part of popular culture. Instead of using widely circulated artefact, like LOTR, to address their perceived lack of representation in the media, here, appropriators hijack an obscure artefact and instrumentalize it to perform the same function of communicating their agenda. However, the fact that WBS is an obscure artefact limits how it can be spread and the level of emotional connection it can establish with other Internet users. This is because the function of artefacts like WBS is to perform a more low-key form of political mobilization, which is concerned with indoctrinating those who already are a part of the movement and attract new recruits who are already embedded at some level in extremist Internet culture. Therefore, White Boy Summer is not necessarily an artefact meant for complete outsiders. But considering the evolution of Pepe the Frog, it would be unwise to consider that White Boy Summer does not have the same potential.

5.3.3 Effects and Implications: Everything White

Throughout 2021, WBS became popular with the same internet subculture that has pushed both Pepe into the mainstream and the Alt-right as a movement. This is largely known as the 4chan community, but this doesn't mean its exploits are confined to the 4chan space. The same type of edgy, tongue-in-cheek, radical humor can be traced to mainstream platforms. For example, I have come across a WBS themed playlist on Spotify as well as a brit-pop-style indie artist called Deepblu, that composed their own version of White Boy Summer¹⁰ which it then uploaded on Soundcloud, YouTube, and Bandcamp.



Figure 14. Meme of WBS using *Better Call Saul* visual reference used as thumbnail of Spotify playlist.

These examples showcase how WBS gradually enters the mainstream. Its more extreme connotations, prevalent in spaces like Terrorgram, are removed and only a few subtextual references are left. From here on, it is up to the viewers knowledge of the radical online milieu to decode the message.

The Spotify playlist, which I discovered while monitoring a thread on 4chan unrelated to WBS, is called "WHITE BOY SUMMER (EPIC!)". Its description reads as follows: "THE DEFINITIVE WBS playlist filled with Caucasian music to chill and goof off too! The most liked WBS playlist on Spotify is BACK!". The thumbnail of the Spotify playlist is a WBS Fashwave meme (see Figure 14) that appropriates the protagonist of the TV show *Better Call Saul*¹¹ (2015).



Figure 15. Flashwave meme that positions Mark McCloskey as WBS and anti-BLM symbol (McCloskey himself has not expressed such political affinities).

And just as the description states, all of the artists featured in the playlist are white. It includes names like Whitesnake, Daft Punk, Tame Impala, The Beach Boys, Billy Idol, and many others. None of the artists featured in the playlist make specifically far-right music. The only way this playlist can be identified as being part of the same trend of far-right memes is by having enough knowledge about the specific far-right context of WBS and understanding

that the description does not mention "Caucasian music" as a joke. Just like the overtly extremist versions of WBS, this playlist builds and promote a white identity for the whites. What seems to define this white identity is the consumption of only white artists and culture.

On similar under the radar note, WBS Flashwave meme of Mark McCloskey¹² (see Figure 15), who became popular with the far-right during the BLM 2020 protests, opens a Reddit thread called "White Boy Summer vibes...". While some users call out the obviously far-right connotation of the meme and the attempt to rally like-minded individuals on the thread, the other commenters remain somewhat clueless and they respond by sharing images that have a similar aesthetic feeling to the original post, like cyberpunk fan art, probably responding to the "vibes" part of the title than anything else.

Going back to my Theory chapter again, where I discussed a mode of interpretation proposed in 1967 by Umberto Eco, I argue that in the case of the more obscure artefacts that the NR 2.0 highjacks, to which it has no strong positive and pre-existing emotional attachment to, a form of jamming takes place. The political appropriators seem to be fully aware of the initial textual and visual connotations of the encoding, yet they actively reject these. Unlike in Hall's (2001) oppositional code, in this case this is performed as a conscious act of political dissidence. This practice can be called memetic jamming, as it uses memetics to intentionally misinterpret an artefact for political reasons. It is an attractive practice in its use of both mainstream and fringe artefacts as well as radical humor and irony, that can attract individuals with some knowledge of radical ideologies into these extreme online communities where they will be further indoctrinated.

The above-mentioned WBS version by Deepblu is an example of how an emotional connection is also operationalized. In the description of the song posted on Soundcloud¹³, the creator writes the following: "Who knew Tom hanks had given the world such an amazing creation that has now I given us a summer just for the boys". The lyrics of the song speak about how it is finally time for white boys and men to have a summer for themselves, after everybody else, especially hot girls, have had the same. They read as follows:

I always wishes I had a season just for me / it's always everybody else no fair ya see / but sorry hot girls were in last year / there's a new star here haven't you heard / everybody tries to make us look all bad / well those people bout to get real fuckin mad / cos there's a new trend on the beach today / it looks good and it's gonna stay cos it's a / white boy summer / the real stars back in town / if she got a problem dump her / this one's no girls allowed / whats the point of hot girl summer anyway / you wear a swimsuit on Instagram every day / you know who rarely gets to be the big show off / I'll tell you now cos it's better off when it's a / white boy summer / we worked out just for this / now we're gonna get some numbers / this one couldn't miss (Deepblu, 2021)

The video for the song¹⁴ opens up with the Alt-right Wojack meme working out at the gym and then putting on Hawaiian shirt. Then the visuals switch to Fashwave aesthetics. The three different versions of Wojack, along with Yes Chad (also known as Nordic Gamer) who is holding an assault rifle, are driving together in a convertible, with the license plate "YTE-BOI" (white boy), over an arcade game-like neon 1980s inspired landscape (see Figure 16).

Some of the other images and clips pieced together in the video are as follows. There are some shots of the comedian Sam Hyde, a beloved figure of the Alt-right, driving in a car, flexing his muscles at the gym in a way that parodies body builders, slapping a girl's ass at a party with a cricket bat and getting a drink thrown in his face for it. Then there is a clip from the 1980s of Arnold Schwarzenegger training at the gym. There is also an anonymous man performing an awkward planking exercise. We can also see a teenager in a tuxedo pouring a can of Monster

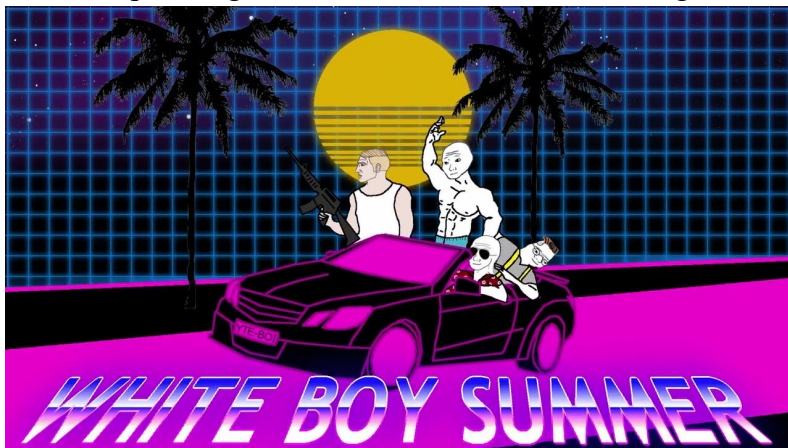


Figure 16. Still from the *White Boy Summer* video, the Deepblu versio, showing a Fashwave meme of the Wojacks and Yes Chad riding together.

energy drink in a high stem wine glass. There is a clip from a video stream belonging to the Swedish gamer, and beloved Alt-right figure, PewDiePie with a big beard and his hair combed to the side making him the visual embodiment of the Nordic Gamer. Then there is a man surfing while cosplaying the Joker villain

played by Cesar Romero in the 1966 Batman movie. We also have a clip of the Driver character (Ryan Gosling) from the 2011 movie with the same name, driving in sunny LA with the girl he is courting and her son, in what is one of the character's brief moments of happiness in the story. There are two separate clips from the Martin Scorsese's 2014 *The Wolf of Wallstreet*, with Jordan Belfort (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) dancing at a party while wearing a black tuxedo and then in another scene yelling in a microphone at one of his lavish pool parties while everyone watches him in awe. Then there is a clip from a 2018 amateur boxing match between prominent YouTuber and American youth icon Logan Paul, who is white, and British YouTuber KSI, who is a person of color (the clip seems to be carefully selected from a moment when Paul delivers what appears to be devastating blows to KSI – leaving out the fact that the match was a draw). Then there is a clip taken from the 2019 *Joker* movie that shows the now iconic steps dance scene of the protagonist in his full Joker outfit. The last clip is of Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale), the protagonist of Mary Harron's 2000 *American Psycho*, walking with a frowning look on his face and his headphones on.

This entire collection of visuals does far more than to set the mood for the music. It also functions as a set of visual parallels that tell a specific story. For example, the clip of Sam Hyde mocking body builders (one can interpret that this is a type of mocking also accompanied by an aspiration to actually be like the mocked subject) is a parallel to the Schwarzenegger clip. The clip of Hyde thinking he is the king of the party, only to find out he is not, is a parallel to the one that presents a fictionalized version of Jordan Belfort (one can interpret that Belfort was the king of the party to such an extent that he ended up immortalized in a Scorsese movie) crazily entertaining his party guests. The clip of the teenager in a tuxedo pouring Monster in a wine glass is a parallel to the scene from *The Wolf of Wallstreet* where a rich and successful Belfort dances wearing a tuxedo. The video of Hyde driving in a car, with a somewhat melancholic look on his face, is a parallel to the scene from *Drive*. All of this forms a powerful story of who these white men want to be versus who they actually are. The subtext of the video as a whole is as widely open to interpretation as it gets, yet confined to the far-right rhetoric that white men are owed representation and celebration. One can interpret the video as a story of what these men could be if they only tried harder, and only if 'certain' forces wouldn't stand in their way. One can also interpret the video as a story of what white men once had and were, since most of the video refers to the 1980s, and what they are now: clumsy and ironic attempts of being classy, looking powerful, and acting dominant.

What this last case study shows is how the process of politically appropriating an obscure cultural artefact can contribute to the strengthening of a pull factor of the radicalization process. According to Vergani, Iqbal, Ilbahar and Barton (2018), in most scholarship, pull factors “capture the aspects that make extremist groups and lifestyles appealing to some people, and include, for example, ideology, group belonging, group mechanisms, and other incentives”. Pull factors are closely related to the other two broad categories: push factors and personal factors. The push factors are tied to the structural root causes that drive people to commit political violence and can include poverty, state repression, social injustice and many others. The personal factors are related to the individual characteristics that make certain individuals more predisposed to radicalization than others and can include psychological disorders, personality traits, and traumatic life experiences.

What my thesis captures is in line with what the authors define as pull factors. More specifically, my White Boy Summer case study is relevant in terms of propaganda and group dynamics (Archetti, 2015), both of which are among the most cited pull factors in the terrorism studies scholarship (Vergani, Iqbal, Ilbahar & Barton, 2018).

As I have shown, White Boy Summer functions as a one-size-fits-all far-right meme, and it can carry with it into the mainstream extreme ideas of political violence and white supremacist conspiracy theories. Through the discussed artefact, far-right political actors are able to establish a strong connection between the potential recruits and their personal beliefs and views and the far-right brand of white culture and philosophy. In terms of group dynamics, the last example in the chapter, that of the WBS indie song, showcases how the same artefact is used to affect an emotional bond with supposedly like-minded people, tapping into a part of the NR 2.0 that promises white men the fulfillment of belonging by painting the picture of a culture (defined by racial boundaries) that is their own.

Since this process is concerned with the active of creating these extreme versions of the original artefact, the current discussion is then concerned with the convergence point between the cognitive and behavioral concepts related to the radicalization process. What I have shown in this chapter can then be judged as an example of how a cultural artefact is politically instrumentalized to affect a process of radicalization whose end goal is the further production of such materials, and not necessarily (but not excluded either) to inspire violent acts.

This concludes my analysis. In the following chapter, I will discuss my findings and elaborate on how the three functions are interrelated, what are some of their most important

qualities, and how they ultimately contribute to the shaping of cultural production and reception.

6. Discussion

I began this thesis by looking to answer whether the cultural artefacts circulated by the New Right 2.0 have specific operational functions, which are some of these functions, and if and how do they work towards achieving a right-wing political agenda. To this end, I have shown how the New Right 2.0, as an ideologically loosely defined community of right-wing political radicals and extremists, use the affordances of the participatory internet to their own advantage and spread extreme content across a various number of social media platforms, both mainstream and fringe. I have also shown how, following the logic of participatory culture different users, united by common pop-cultural and political affinities, work together to create effective and alternative interpretations of mainstream and fringe cultural artefacts. These artefacts then work at different levels to achieve specific functions. These functions are often thought of in advance, so there is a degree of intent behind them.

Various radical and extreme right-wing factions come together under the umbrella of the New Right 2.0 as it is a movement defined by its use of technological affordance and its political appropriation of cultural artefacts. What also seems to be a common denominator of this community is its political agenda, which comes to fore from the way it politically appropriates cultural artefacts. This agenda is defined by the issue of representation. In the radical and extreme right mentality, extreme political action is justified through the creation of a crisis which always positions white people and what the movement sees as their white culture under imminent threat from outsiders and traitors from within. Fighting for representation by politically appropriating cultural artefacts and forcing one's own political interpretations on them then becomes one of the solutions to this perceived crisis. If the perceived opponent controls culture, then they must fight to take that control back.

This process is possible due to the fact that cultural artefacts in general do not have one inherent meaning, so they are open to a multitude of interpretations. Specifically, we are dealing with a rhetoric emptiness that can allow for the nesting of philosophical and political concepts

which the movement can then use as proxies for validating its argument. Another element that is of utmost importance in the facilitation of this process is the authorial control over the meaning of the artefact. This control is not exclusively related to the author or creator (or the team behind it) of the artefact, or to the media and entertainment conglomerates that might own the copyrights to it. How much other fandoms, with opposing political interpretations and affinities, have invested in that same artefact seems to influence to what extent far-right political actors can claim artefacts as their own. As I have shown with my first case study, opposing political interpretations of Tolkien's legendarium have existed for nearly as long as the author's work itself. In this specific case, this seems to matter only to the extent that *Lord of The Rings* is not thought of in our mainstream mental collective as an inherently far-right artefact. It does not, however, put a protective barrier around the artefact meant to keep far-right appropriators away. As my last case study has shown, when an artefact is obscure enough and hasn't been claimed by other fandoms (in fact, it doesn't have a fandom at all), the appropriation of the artefact turns into a complete colonization of its meaning. As a result, in this case, *White Boy Summer*, is presently associated in the mainstream with the far-right.

In line with scholarly discussions surrounding the circulation of extremist content and the radicalization of individuals in online spaces, my thesis shows that the appeal of popular culture and common interests for trolling and radical humor can function as entry points into extreme communities and groups. Users enter these spaces, unaware of where this process can lead to, for other reasons than to spread extremist content. However, in the process of contributing to the creation of this type of content emotional bonds with other users are established, strengthened and exploited. A sense of community is created and users become deeply embedded in the extreme culture they are now helping to advance. In many ways, as Archetti (2013 & 2015) has argued, this course of radicalization cannot be seen as inherently characteristic to the Internet. However, the process of politically appropriating mainstream and fringe cultural artefacts is related to a form of radicalization whose desired outcome is the active participation in this process by as many users as possible. Indeed, agency cannot be attributed to popular culture and the Web 2.0. But the pivotal role these aspects play in how the far-right can conduct its operations online, without any necessity to transfer these actions into the offline world, cannot be ignored either.

Since the stated goal of the political appropriation and circulation of cultural artefacts is the furthering of this process until a form of right-wing cultural dominance can be achieved, it is worth

mentioning that the functions identified in this thesis are interrelated and often overlap. The appropriation of any artefact employs, at some level, a form of “pop cultural mobilization” (Milkoreit, 2017). As I have shown, *White Boy Summer* puts in simpler terms, meant for a more mainstream audience, the issue of representation as seen and espoused by white supremacists and Neo-Nazis. At the same time, artefacts where the rhetorical emptiness is used to create confusion and disinformation can function as entrypoints into extreme communities where newcomers can become radicalized to various degrees. The functions operate at once on multiple levels.

One other aspect that must be brought to the front is that no matter how much some appropriators might try make this appear as a well-thought-out strategy, it is rather not. In fact, it seems to be the case that a lot of users are aware of some of the same literature and scholarship as the researchers who study them. It became obvious, quite a few times during my research, that the communities I was studying were circulating a worrisome amount of literature on how to take control of official media narratives, what are good PR techniques, and how to design effective psychological warfare operations. Yet in the absence of a state apparatus behind them and the resources that come with such an entity, the presence of this literature and knowledge does little more than to establish a degree of intent. Even though this doesn't mean that, if given the proper tools and funding, these far-right political actors will not wage, at some point, the memetic warfare they envision, it does speak of what actually works in their favor and why are some of their exploits successful. The power of numbers, the absence of geographical limitations, and the affordances of the Web 2.0 seem to be the factors that, in the absence of anything else, contribute to how these appropriated artefacts employ political mobilization, grassroots disinformation, and radicalization. Rather than a well-thought-out process, it is rather a matter of trial and error. The movement affords to do this as it suffers no real costs. The appropriation happens in real time, at every moment of any given day, as users from different time zones are present on chatrooms and platforms. The number of appropriated artefacts is in the hundreds. Every now and then, something will work and memes like Orcposting, Pepe, or White Boy Summer will break into the mainstream and bring notoriety to the movement. Various groups of the New Right 2.0 will even claim responsibility. This is not more than a ruse. In reality, the process of politically appropriating an artefact so that the final result can achieve a specific purpose cannot be replicated so easily. If it were the case, it stands to reason that it would be employed more often.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Summary

To answer my research question, I began by conceptualizing the community I am studying. In the Background chapter I have presented a few historical considerations that traced back the far-right's appropriation of cultural artefact to achieve a political goal before the emergence of the Internet era. I have done this to strengthen my position, which is not technologically deterministic, and show how this process has been operationalized in the past, albeit to a lesser effect than in the present. Therefore, I have created the term New Right 2.0 and used it to refer to the far-right's concern with achieving cultural dominance.

In the Theory chapter I have presented the complementary theoretical perspectives pertaining to my thesis as well as the analytic tool I have built to analyze my material. I have begun by identifying Bourdieu's (1993) circuit of cultural production, circulation, and reception as the foundation of my theoretical model, and I have discussed it in the context of the current era of participatory Internet and culture. I then presented Henry Jenkins' (2006) Convergence Culture model and have explained how the two poles of power (media producers and fans) are related to the process of politically appropriating cultural artefacts. To contextualize the act of interpretation and appropriation I have then transitioned to the relevant modes of interpretations that take into consideration the agency of the viewer and media consumer. Here, I have briefly presented Umberto Eco's (1986) proposal of jamming the broadcasted message, Stuart Hall's (2001) Encoding/Decoding theoretical framework, and Henry Jenkin's (2009) concept of textual poaching. In the last part of this chapter, I have discussed which artefacts can be considered a part of popular culture and which can be seen as marginal or fringe. I have followed this part with my final theoretical considerations on Memetics (Prosser, 2006; Finkelstein, 2011; Giese, 2015) and "pop cultural mobilization" (Milkoreit, 2017). Lastly, I elaborated on my three-level analytic tool. At Level 1, I have looked to identify and analyze the community and its agenda. At Level 2, I have established the particularities of the interpretations process. At Level 3, I have looked at some of the effects and implications of each of the three case studies.

I have carried out a hermeneutical analysis of my material, which I have collected through the method of online ethnography. During the collection process, I have gradually identified the

examples of *Lord of The Rings* (and Tolkien's work as a whole); and of Pepe the Frog and White Boy Summer as the most dominant and telling of all the ones that I have observed. Simultaneously, I have formulated the hypotheses meant to prove each of the three functions. For the first function, that of political mobilization, I have tested Hypothesis 1: if the encoding of an artefact is vague, then political mobilization can occur. For the second function, that of grassroots disinformation, I have tested Hypothesis 2: if the emptiness of an artefact is signaled as a means of discourse, grassroots disinformation can occur. For the third function, that of radicalization, I have tested Hypothesis 3: If the emptiness of an artefact is established by its appropriators, then radicalization and indoctrination can occur.

7.2 Findings

In my analysis I have looked at how both mainstream and fringe cultural artefacts are picked up by the New Right 2.0 and appropriated to communicate a political agenda defined by issue of representation. In the case of some artefacts, their history with the far-right seems to be of importance, as the community's shared feeling of attachment to the artefact is stronger and informs more elaborate and convincing appropriations of the artefact. This is conditioned by the popularity of the artefact with the mainstream or with other fandoms with different interpretations of it. However, this only informs the way the mainstream perceives the artefact and not the effectiveness of the process itself or its overall occurrence. If more fandoms with different political affinities have had a claim over the artefact in time, then the artefact doesn't seem to be perceived as belonging to the far-right. This prompts a strong reaction from the far-right and, as I have shown in my first analysis chapter, the struggle over opposing interpretations are stronger. At the same time, it is easier for the New Right 2.0 to appropriate and claim more obscure artefacts.

I have also found that the New Right 2.0, as an international community defined by participatory culture, is pushed back to the condition of the textual poachers from the pre-Internet era, as their feedback is not taken into consideration by media producers and creators. It is not that the New Right 2.0 operates with outdated tools or from an outdated stance, but that this disregard from media producers towards its interpretations of cultural artefacts (albeit justified) further fuels and validates the movement's persecution concepts and its representation agenda.

One other important observation is the fact that these political appropriators seem to be aware of the rhetorical emptiness they are exploiting. Conversations between users have shown me

time and time again, that these political actors are fully aware of the effects their memes can have with some even discussing how the desired outcome is not guaranteed. This then represent a form of activism through Memetics that must be taken into account when discussing not only radicalization and deradicalization, but when establishing as what counts as political violence and what does not. Meme trends like #Orcposting contribute to the way the mainstream thinks of vulnerable groups like refugees, especially since they travel under the guise of apolitical and humorous artefacts. At the same time, as it was with the example of Pepe the Frog, it can be observed how other interpretations of the same artefact are actively used to further conceal the intent to further a radical agenda via a now known cultural artefact.

Lastly, the New Right 2.0 attempts to bridge two separate cultures: one that it has built over decades, defined by its own specific and extreme worldviews (the far-right fringe), and one that is the mainstream culture that we all know and experience. Its grander aspirations, as I have explained previously, is that their culture will one day come to colonize the mainstream. What must be noted about these cultures is also that one, the mainstream one, contains and feeds the fringe one. The fringe culture is not an outside culture, as it is built from the same artefacts that circulate in the mainstream. I have found that the bridge between these two cultures appears to be stronger now than it has ever been due to the movement's evasive tactics of using mainstream social media platforms and escaping strict content moderation coupled with the practice of politically instrumentalizing culture. These are factors that greatly contributes to the mainstreaming of the extreme right.

7.3 Contributions to existing scholarship

My study has empirically contributed to bringing insights into the far-right's often overlooked appropriation and instrumentalization of culture. In this regard, my thesis contributes to a better understanding of the process of pop cultural mobilization developed by Manjana Milkoreit (2017) and how it can be put to work for hateful and reactionary purposes, unlike it was the case of her study of the GOT fandom and the climate issue.

At the same time, my thesis comes in continuation to the study done by Marwick and Lewis (2017) on media manipulation and disinformation, and it offers empirical knowledge into what facilitates this phenomenon. Here, I have solely covered the elements pertaining to popular and fringe culture.

To the scholarship regarding fandom studies and popular culture, represented in this thesis by the work of Henry Jenkins (2006 & 2009) my thesis adds specific understanding that a fandom's struggle against to the corporate pole of power, defined by media producers and creators, can be politicized. Radical and extreme ideas can be segued through this pre-existing relationship of fandoms with the producers of the artefact they share an interest in. As my *Lord of the Rings* example has shown, the media producers, or the entertainment industry, can be easily worked into Antisemitic conspiracy theories which can further deepen the indoctrination issue.

Lastly, to scholarly understanding of what attracts individuals to politically extreme groups and what facilitates this process (Schuurman, 2020; Archetti 2013; Archetti; 2015; Bjørge & Horgan, 2009) my findings contribute by exhibiting how edgy and tabu content and practices can function as entrypoints into various extreme topics. Furthermore, it provides specific insights into the instrumentalization of culture as well as social media as a tool of propaganda and recruitment.

7.4 Suggestions for further research

The New Right 2.0 as I have contextualized it represents a relatively new phenomenon. Historical clarifications of how the far-right has produced and spread propaganda and radical or extreme content through newspapers, newsletters, zines, and 1980s bulletin boards are much needed. This movement's instrumentalization of popular and fringe culture as well as social media platforms could be better understood alongside a rich background picture that would capture the decades long cooperation between the various factions of the global far-right.

Keeping in mind that this is a movement defined by participatory culture, further research is warranted in regards to the already intensively discussed issue of deplatforming. It remains to be seen that if breaking up the movement's meeting sites would in any significant way change the way it operates and not just delay its next propaganda and disinformation campaign.

What might also be of interest is to what extent the process I have discussed so far could be used as a tool of counter terrorism disinformation. I have already stated that there is no clear blueprint for how an appropriated cultural artefact can successfully reach and convince its audience of its message. However, this uncertainty in regards to the effectiveness might differ when it comes to a smaller and more targeted audience group.

Finally, further in-depth research is needed to establish the role media coverage plays in how successful some of these far-right politically appropriated cultural artefacts have been with their mainstream audience.

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Notes

¹ The 'Hate Bus' was a VW combi van which Rockwell's group of Neo-Nazis used in 1961 to campaign against desegregation. The bus actually had the words 'Hate Bus' painted on its sides, but with the word hate between quotations marks, as to imply that it wasn't that. At the same time, one of the equally messages painted on the bus was "WE HATE RACE-MIXING", no quotation marks around the word 'hate'.

² James Mason is one of the most prominent figures of the American Neo-Nazi milieu. As a teenager, he enrolled in George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party. Later, he would go on to edit and publish *Siege*, one of the most extreme Neo-Nazi newsletters. The writings from that newsletter have been collected by Neo-Nazis in book format and they now circulate in both digital and print form throughout the far-right milieu.

³ Midgård is a largely online Neo-Nazi shop that sells extremist literature, white power music, various clothing items, and, among many others, baseball bats branded with racist messages marketed as 'hobby' items.

⁴ The Kali Yuga is a philosophical concept borrowed by Julius Evola from Hinduism to explain the current degenerate age (from a neo-fascist point of view, the term "current" was as current then as it is now) our world is in and argue for racial superiority and inferiority respectively. On his BitChute channel as well as on his website, Midjord has an entire series of vlogs called *Kali Yuga Logbook*. In these videos, he shares his thoughts on the current degenerate state of the world.

⁵ Some of Midjord most notable discussion partners have been the infamous American white nationalist Jarred Taylor, with whom Midjord discussed the ideas of honor and revenge in Japanese Tradition by looking at Masaki Kobayashi's 1962 movie, *Harakiri*. Another notable guest was the Russian political scientist and founder of National-Bolshevism, Aleksandr Dugin, with whom Midjord discussed the phenomenology of the Black Lodge in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). And then there is Greg Johnson himself, who is a regular guest on Midjord's podcast (just as Midjord is a regular contributor to Counter Currents) and with whom Midjord discussed the work of the Japanese nationalist poet Yukio Mishima (Mishima is a very popular figure in the intellectual circles of the far-right primarily for his espousing of the warrior ethos), the movie *Network* (1976), *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) and Nietzsche's Historical Vitalism.

⁶ Climate change represents a burning issue for certain factions of the far-right and in some cases, it informs the group's agenda, like in the case of the Eco-fascist Telegram groups, where one of the main solutions to countering the current climate crisis is found in the violent extermination of refugees.

⁷ What is also conveyed through this specific trend of memes is the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which has its roots in French far-right nationalism, and alleges that the that native white Europeans are being replaced in their countries by non-white immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, and the end result will be the extinction of the white race.

⁸ One but needs to walk out of the IMK building (where this thesis was written) in Oslo, cross the road over to Gaustadalléen 23 B, stop in front of the Escape bar and have a look at their door, which is painted to look like the Doors of Durin. The aesthetic style of the door is taken from Jackson's 2001 adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

⁹ Fashwave is a late 2010s Alt-right trend of extreme memes which appropriates the Vaporwave style of 1980s nostalgia and applies it to memes which promote Antisemitism, xenophobia, racism, racial purity, and all the other far-right discussion points. Similarly, Terrorwave borrows and appropriates the same aesthetics but specifically applies to images of armed conflict, as if to say that the nostalgia is for the 1980s and 1990s, but focused on the Yugoslav conflict, The Troubles, and others.

¹⁰ Listen to the full audio version of the song here <https://soundcloud.com/deepblumusic/white-boy-summer>

¹¹ In the show, Saul Goodman (played by Bob Odenkirk) is a talented lawyer who fights tooth and nail to overcome his past as a criminal and establish himself as a by-the-book lawyer. However, despite his best intentions, his brother, one of the most respected and celebrated attorneys in the business, constantly stops him from achieving this. The reason is that his brother considers that a man with a past like Saul's is destined for jobs

suitable for him, like sorting mail. The choice to use this character in the meme is far from random, as this movement is defined by its persecution complex.

¹² Mark McCloskey has gained notoriety with the far-right (it is unclear if he shares their political views) after in 2020 he appeared brandishing an assault rifle along with his wife, who was brandishing a handgun, at BLM protesters who were passing by their property.

¹³ After one listens to the Deepblu version of White Boy Summer, one of the songs recommended by the Soundcloud algorithms is another indie creation called “Don't Bring a Skateboard To a Gunfight”, which is about Kyle Rittenhouse shooting and killing two people in Kenosha in 2020, one of whom swung a skateboard at him.

¹⁴ See a full version of the YouTube video here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMk86dn6YsM&ab_channel=CowboyJoker