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The degenerative aesthetics of the dankest meme lords: far-right satire in the twenty-first century

Andrew Benjamin Bricker
Ghent University, Belgium
andrew.bricker@ugent.be

Abstract

Drawing on historical and theoretical accounts that treat satire as a mobile mode rather than a fixed genre, I argue that satire's political orientation cannot be predetermined: satire habitually oscillates between restraint and license, enforcing norms and violating them—often at once. Reframing satire in modal terms makes visible a neglected but consequential body of visual-verbal texts: far-right memes. The analysis proceeds in four moves. First, it dismantles liberal-essentialist narratives by recovering satire's historical doubleness. Second, it devises a modal framework adequate to satire's cross-media circulation. Third, it situates far-right meme cultures as affective engines that create "communities of amusement" for insiders while alienating opponents, leveraging ambiguity ("lulz") for plausible deniability and for the strategic provocation of outrage. Finally, it identifies a recurrent visual-rhetorical programme—what I term degenerative aesthetics*—comprising pixel bleed, clashing fonts, crude cropping, typos, and conspicuous copy-paste traces. Far from mere amateurism, these formal choices perform a studied unseriousness that complements ironic distancing: their very look and feel, one of manifest shoddiness, in turn functions as a prophylactic against accountability ("just joking"), even as it enables the normalisation and circulation of exclusionary or extremist claims. Attending to this concatenation of affect and form clarifies how far-right satire recruits, polices boundaries, and coordinates attention. I thus redirect the debate from "what counts as satire" to "what satire does" under contemporary technological conditions, linking internet aesthetics to their political affordances, and argue that understanding far-right memes as satiric objects—rather than as mere propaganda or noise—illuminates both their theoretical intractability and their social danger.*

Keywords: satire, memes, far right, degenerative aesthetics, affect and emotions.

1. Introduction

For a brief stretch of the early twenty-first century, scholars seemed unusually certain about satire's political status. Looking out across a landscape dominated by parodic news programmes—from prominent U.S. instantiations, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, to their many international cousins—commentators inferred a general rule from a small

sample: satire was essentially liberal, corrective, and good for democracy (see, e.g., Boler & Turpin, 2008, pp. 384–385; and McClennen & Maisel, 2014, p. 7). Hindsight, however, makes that consensus look both parochial and fragile. As newly emboldened far-right movements spread across mainstream channels and digital networks during the 2010s, they cultivated an abundance of comedic forms—mock newscasts, parody newspapers, "paleocomedy," and far-right trolling (Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022)—that unsettled the easy alignment of satire with liberal democracy. The earlier liberal-essentialist and even celebratory narrative had failed, understandably, to predict such a dystopic future, but above all it had neglected the historical plasticity of satire itself: its capacity both to enforce social norms in one gesture and to violate them in another.

Such a historically informed understanding of satire, as a force capable of both "*restraint* and *license,*" as Jonathan Greenberg (2018, pp. 23-24) puts it, following a long line of scholars (e.g., Paulson, 1967, p. 18; Griffin, 1994, pp. 149-150), also offers a clearer understanding of our own twenty-first century moment. Importantly, far-right satire, like all satire, has the capacity to serve these opposing functions—of restraint and of licence—simultaneously. For example, much far-right satire is preoccupied with policing, or restraining, the supposedly giddy excesses of a woke left; at the same time, and sometimes even within the same object, far-right satire attempts to license contentious and even excessive far-right views. That licensing is not merely for the superficial fun of it, but also to shift the so-called "Overton window" (Daniels, 2018, p. 64) by, to some degree, normalising once increasingly out-of-bound topics (such as Holocaust denial, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and so on), and rendering them incrementally and, at the very least, legitimate topics of fun and/or serious discussion.

This article proceeds from the fundamental recognition that satire can simultaneously serve many masters. Rather than rehearse a misguided binary—satire is inherently conservative or inherently progressive—I begin from a more durable premise following a long line of literary scholars who have abandoned the grand theorising that had once shaped approaches to satire more generally (Griffin, 1994; Phiddian, 2013; Caron, 2016). In the first place, satire is most often best understood as a mode, or as "satiric," not as a fixed genre (or as "satire"). Second, as a mode, the satiric can travel across media (see, e.g., Bricker, 2022b; Bullard, 2019; Greenberg, 2018; Griffin, 1994; Phiddian, 2013) and does not on its own possess stable, necessary, or sufficient features (Condren, 2012, p. 375; Hume, 2007, p. 303) that fix its politics in advance.

Such a reframing of satire matters, because scholars have tended to exclude far-right humour online from broader discussions of satire itself, as if the category of "satire" or the "satiric" were commendatory rather than merely descriptive. But if satire has always toggled between restraint and license, then far-right memes are not a category error; they are simply a contemporary instantiation of satiric practices with deep histories. In pushing past unproductive debates about satire's politics, and in recognising that far-right memes are a type of satire, we can thus arrive at much more pressing questions: What, exactly, are the far-right's meme lords hoping to accomplish with these, the dankest of their satiric memes? Who are they for? And what, precisely, are they supposed to be doing?

In the first place, affect plays a central role. Scholars such as Raúl Pérez (2022) have shown how racist humour can produce an "amused racial contempt" that binds certain bodies together and devalues others (Pérez, 2022, p. 11). Far-right memes operate in similar ways: they generate, precisely through shared humour, "communities of amusement" (Cohen, 1999, p. 29) in sympathetic audiences while also alienating opponents. In this sense, humour is not incidental but constitutive of far-right digital politics, insofar as it both expresses and organises a structure of feeling. On the far-right especially, this guiding affect operates via a cultivated ambiguity—or "lulz"—which provides both plausible deniability ("just joking") and a mechanism of boundary enforcement. Outrage, in fact, is part of the point: one way to "own a lib" is to provoke their earnest condemnation of something framed as laughably unserious.

To understand these dynamics, we need to look not only at affect but also at form. Scholars have attended to memes through various critical lenses (e.g., Barclay & Downing, 2023; Kien 2019; Lankshear & Knobel, 2019; Lovink & Tuters, 2018; Lyons, 2022; Shifman, 2014) with a particular attention in recent years to their role in and their intersections with far-right and alt-right discourses both online and off (e.g., Albrecht et al., 2018; Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021). Although this latter group of scholars has attended to the role of humour and its ambivalences in far-right culture, most researchers have treated far-right memes themselves as unambiguous, blunt objects, funny to some, perhaps, and deeply alienating to more than a few. As a result, there has been greater interest in understanding the effects or afterlives of these objects—their circulation online, their role in misinformation campaigns, and their consequences for real-world political action and (anti)democratic participation—than in studying their formal, rhetorical, and visual operations (Kien, 2019; Lyons, 2022; Schafer & Pailler, 2024).

I argue that their recurrent visual grammar—what I call their *degenerative aesthetics*—does crucial rhetorical work. Grainy screenshots, clashing fonts, sloppy crops, pixel bleed, typos, and conspicuous copy-paste marks all perform a kind of amateur off-handedness, even when such memes have been carefully and laboriously produced. Such aesthetic qualities dovetail with the "just-joking" defence: the meme, at a visual and formal level, insists that it should not be taken too seriously. The semblance of unseriousness not only enables the circulation of extreme content but also formalises the far-right's recourse to plausible deniability.

This article, then, advances four linked claims. I begin by dismantling the celebratory orthodoxy that equated satire with liberal virtue, recovering instead satire's historical doubleness (section 2). I then develop a modal framework for satire, which should permit us to analyse contemporary digital humour without recourse to a liberal essentialism (section 3). I then apply this framework to far-right memes while emphasising the roles of affect, ambiguity, and lulz as engines of recruitment and boundary work (section 4), before drilling down into their degenerative aesthetics as a complementary form of unseriousness that nonetheless permits serious ideological labour (section 5).

If we were to treat far-right memes as satire, as I conclude, then we might come to a more precise understanding of the functions of these humorous objects. As Nicholas Holm has argued, humour's aesthetic dimensions are intrinsically political, and we ought to pay attention to how humour shapes our world and the way we perceive it. As Holm (2017, p. 12) writes, "the aesthetic aspect of a text—its form, style, palette, rhythm, narrative, [and] structure—can do political work [and] can intercede in the negotiation, contestation and distribution of power." That is precisely what I propose in this essay, by studying far-right memes as a type of satire that generally employs specific formal, visual, and rhetorical strategies to a variety of political and affective ends, whether it is the recruitment of sympathetic onlookers or the politically susceptible, on the one hand, or the alienation or "triggering" of "snowflakes" of the left, on the other. In short, such a formal analysis of far-right memes as satiric objects has important consequences for our understanding of how such memes work—why, in short, they have been so effective—and why they have proven both theoretically unwieldy and socially dangerous.

2. What do we talk about when we talk about satire?

One of the perverse consequences of the rise of mainstream, parodic news programmes across the 1990s and the early 2000s—and most notably *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* in the U.S., but also *CNNNN* and *Frontline* (Australia), *De Ideale Wereld* (Belgium), *This Hour has 22 Minutes* and *The Rick Mercer Report* (Canada), *31 minutos* (Chile), *Al-Bernameg* (Egypt), the *Heute-show* (Germany), *The Week That Wasn't* (India), *Zondag met Lubach* (the Netherlands), *Eating Media Lunch* (New Zealand), *Svenska Nyheter* (Sweden), *The Day Today*

and *Brass Eye* (UK), and on and on—was a bizarre close-mindedness, naiveté, and ahistoricism among scholars interested in the relationship between satire and politics. Many of the researchers who studied such parodic news programmes inductively derived a peculiar theory of satire from a small clutch of highly successful but also historically recent TV programmes, claiming that satire was, fundamentally, a left-wing and liberal force for good in the twenty-first century.

For many U.S.-based scholars, Jon Stewart's 2004 appearance on *Crossfire*, CNN's talking-heads show, was the high-water mark, demonstrating the profound efficacy of satire to expose the troubling erosion of political discourse in the U.S. in the wake of both George W. Bush's first presidential administration and the divisive us-vs.-them evil-axis language that had succeeded the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In 2008, for instance, a couple of scholars called Stewart's *Crossfire* appearance a "watershed moment" (Boler & Turpin, 2008, p. 384) and referred to *The Daily Show* host as a "court jester [who] represents the contemporary form of political satire that speaks 'truth to power'" (Boler & Turpin, 2008, p. 385).

From *The Daily Show* and its various international and national predecessors, successors, and spinoffs, it was but a small leap for many scholars to make even broader claims about the peculiar political efficacy of satire in the 2010s. As two scholars asked in 2014: "Is satire saving our nation?" Their resounding and purposefully provocative answer was largely a foregone conclusion: Yes, they argued, noting that "satire has played a central role in shaping public debates and fostering productive engagement with democracy" (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, p. 7), while too hastily concluding that satire always worked from the left of the political spectrum. This, of course, was just two years before the first Trump administration and all that would follow, including newly emboldened far-right movements and rejuvenated ethno-nationalist parties across the globe, and scholars working in the early 2010s could be forgiven for lacking the gift of prophecy. Nonetheless, generalisations like this—that satire had the capacity to "save" the U.S., predicated on a belief in satire's endemic liberal politics—were at the time symptomatic of broader academic trends around the 2010s, when one group of scholars routinely concluded that satire was the special preserve of the liberal minded.

At the same time, and alongside this liberal-triumphalist celebration of satire, was an emerging curiosity about the supposed absence of right-leaning satire. "Why are there so few conservative political humourists?", Alison Dagnes asked in 2012. Her answer was predicated on a revealing conception of satire, one that privileged the uninterrogated presupposition that satire was a weapon used by bottom-up warriors against their supercilious and close-minded conservative overlords. Satire, she wrote,

> tends toward the liberal because this type of criticism is rooted in an antiestablishmentarianism that is inherently freethinking. Conversely, the nature of conservatism does not meet the conditions necessary for political satire to flourish: conservatism is harmonised and slow to criticise people in power, and it originates from a place that repudiates humour because [conservatism] is absolute. […] the philosophy of conservatism is incompatible with political humour but liberalism suits it quite nicely. Conservatism supports institutions and satire aims to knock these institutions down.
>
> (Dagnes, 2012, pp. 1, 5-6)

In 2025, such claims are hard to swallow. Over the last decade and a half, conservatives have produced a steady stream of humorous media, making greater and greater use of the same formal-parodic structures supposedly favoured by the left, including *Daily Show*-style news programme parodies and *Onion*-style newspaper parodies (Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022; Skalicky et al., 2025). Scholars, so incessantly focused on one form (parodic news) in, mostly, one context (the U.S.) and during one period (the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century), have largely been stymied by this rightward swing of the humour pendulum, both online and even in

mainstream media. An important corrective was issued in 2022 by Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, who documented and studied emerging right-wing comedic forms, including Fox News' comedy programming, libertarian podcasting, what they call "paleocomedy" and "religio-rational satire," and, more importantly for this article, far-right internet trolling (Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022).

However, any view of satire's political orientation requires a broader understanding of the form's evolution over not merely the last 25 years, but centuries if not millennia. Again, the scholars of the 2010s who presumed the essentially liberal tendencies of satire cannot be blamed for failing to predict the future, but they can be held to account for what amounted to a blinkered presentism and routine ahistoricism. The idea that satire has some in-built political predisposition hardly aligns with two millennia's worth of facts on the ground, and scholar after scholar of satire, studying earlier periods, whether ancient or early modern, from the eighteenth century or twentieth, have generally resisted similar forms of political reductionism (see e.g. Griffin, 1994, pp. 149-50; Paulson, 1967, p. 18). Jonathan Greenberg (2018, pp. 23-24) productively lays out the polarities of the debate around satire's political orientation:

> The canonical model holds that satire is inherently conservative, since it directs its ridicule against those who deviate from traditional, communal norms. But the transgressive, anti-authoritarian impulses of satire can just as easily make it appear a progressive force that criticises the powerful and fosters rebellion against the status quo. [...] It would in fact be reductive to claim satire for a single political stance. There are satires directed against both left and right, new and old, authorities and dissidents. They attack women and men, elites and the populace, the rich, the poor, and the bourgeoisie. Rather than viewing satire as simply conservative or liberal then, it might be better to note a tension within satire between enforcing norms and violating them, between *restraint* and *license*.

Restraint and license—the notion that satire both enforces *and* violates norms—might be the most accurate manner in which to categorise satire's legislative function, one that also permits us to move beyond binaristic, historically contingent, and even vague discussions of satire's political orientation to understand the disciplinary function of satire, without recourse to dubious claims about a revolutionary left and an inflexibly law-and-order right.

One might also argue that the general left-leaning protectionism around satire in media studies in particular was a larger hangover of broader tendencies in humour studies during this same period. As Billig wrote (2005, pp. 177-178) in a similar attempt to temper another form of protectionism,

> humour is not the preserve of the 'positive' or the good-hearted [...] [A]nalysts should try to avoid becoming prescriptive in their definitions of humour, by claiming what they find funny to be 'genuine humour' and what they find unfunny to be not properly humorous. The theoretical danger is that analysts would deny that they find certain forms of ridicule to be funny. Then, ridicule and mockery can easily slip through the definitional net. The end-result becomes cosy and comforting. Humour is something good and those with a sense of humour are good people.

That such precautions, which have become commonplace in humour studies over especially the last decade (see e.g. Adriaensen et al., 2023; Dickie, 2011; Holm, 2017; Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022; Pérez, 2022), needed to be mounted at all is perhaps surprising, but such was the state of humour studies in 2005. The point to be drawn out here is that a similar rearguard action is needed in studies of right-wing humour and memes, alongside the worthwhile reminder that satire is and never has been the preserve of the good-hearted, ethical, and didactic, let alone left-wing social-justice warriors intent, one parodic news story at a time, on overturning everything wrong with the right.

3. Dilating the satiric lens

For good or bad, satiric theory has for decades, if not centuries, been the preserve of literary theorists (both *après* and *avant la lettre*). Early modern "practitioner" definitions—produced by satirists themselves—often took a defensive turn (Elkin, 1973), especially during the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, an era once known in English literary history as the "Golden" or "Great" age of satire, when there was a particular concern among writers to elevate satire as a legitimate and valuable literary form after a long history of disrepute (Bricker, 2017).

Among the many definitions of satire that began to emerge during the early modern period, which defined its formal qualities, origins, etymology, purpose, and functions, none was quite as influential among practitioners and theorists as John Dryden's lengthy "Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1974), first published in 1693 (see Griffin, 1994, pp. 14-15). Dryden in many ways legitimated satire, disaggregating it conceptually from the period's manuscript lampoons, screeds, and libels (Bricker, 2022a, pp. 54-56). A measure of Dryden's success in this project is the extent to which literary theorists of the twentieth century fell back on his and his successors' formulations of (and justifications for) satire while reiterating his claims about the supposedly moral and didactic functions of the satirist (Griffin, 1994, p. 28).

The most influential and enduring theories of satire were codified in the twentieth century among literary scholars. Between the 1930s and 1960s, as Clare Bucknell (2019) has written, literary critics thought about satire in largely literary terms, defining it as a kind of verbal art. Rejecting the "strongly biographical" (Bucknell, 2019, p. 697) approaches of earlier scholars, critics of the 1930s installed "a new critical language, in which the art of satire, rather than the feelings that might have inspired it, sat at the centre of debate" (Bucknell, 2019, p. 699). This approach was expanded between the 1940s and 1960s, as scholars increasingly reflected on the "rhetorical conventions" (Bucknell, 2019, p. 701) of satire while focusing additional attention on "careful formal analysis" (Bucknell, 2019, p. 702). By the 1960s, that focus had shifted in part to "historical particulars," alongside sometimes overzealous attempts to codify satire as a coherent genre (Griffin, 1994, pp. 30-31). Soon, though, even literary critics were backing away from large-scale theoretical claims about satire (Griffin, 1994, p. 31) and, by the 1970s, the grand heyday of satiric theory had lapsed (Phiddian, 2013, p. 44).

Today, in fact, no literary scholar subscribes to some wholesale theory of what satire is and how it works in literary works, let alone in general, and seemingly no one in decades has clung to some unreformed generic theory of satire (see e.g. Knight, 1992 on the manifold problems of genre). The literary scholar James E. Caron's summary (2016) in many ways represents the view still standard today: "a basic assumption of scholars in several disciplines investigating satire in all media and with various methodologies" is that "thinking of satire as a literary genre has outlived whatever usefulness it might have once had" (Caron, 2016, p. 155).

Most scholars have followed the broader tendency to understand satire within a theory of modes, which are, in Frow's (2005) terms, "qualifications or modifications of particular genres ([such as] *gothic* thriller, *pastoral* elegy, *satirical* sitcom)" (p. 65, emphasis in the original). Others have adopted comparable but less literary-centred linguistic definitions in understanding satire as "a complexly interdiscursive mode of communication" (Simpson, 2003, p. 51). The result is that, rather than viewing satire as a genre or form with set structural qualities (Phiddian, 2013, p. 44), most scholars now favour an adjectival formulation. To follow Condren (2002), such works are not satires but "satiric." It is worth noting, moreover, that this tendency has obtained even among scholars of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary works from which much of the twentieth century's satiric theorising first emerged. As Paddy Bullard (2019, p. 7) has recently written in his introduction to those very eighteenth-century works, satire "resists definition and description" and works more like a "cultural virus, a 'mental position' that infects different sorts of art and literature, different kinds of speech and action, in many

different ways" and that takes "an extraordinary variety of shapes and manifestations, spilling out across the media."

This backtracking around genre has also been accompanied by larger trends. As the literary scholar Robert Phiddian has written, the end of grand satiric theorising coincided with changes to satire itself: "from the sixties onwards, satire quickly became visibly multicultural and multimedia [...]. Through performance, radio, television, film, comics, and (eventually) digital media, a much wider range of satirical voices entered an ever broadening public sphere" (Phiddian, 2013, p. 48). Suddenly, large-scale theories had to deal with their own quaintness: the tendency, that is, to prioritise a very small canon of white and male-authored works in a somewhat rarefied body of media.

The result of this general resistance and reorientation among more recent literary theorists, who have tended to reject generic and Platonic theories of satire and how to identify it, has consequently vexed researchers in other disciplines looking for pocketable definitions. As one scholar of communication and rhetoric has complained, "[d]espite its prominence in contemporary research, satire as a concept has no unifying, interdisciplinary definition" (Park-Ozee, 2019, p. 585). That criticism is fair enough, and already well known among critics of all stripes and from all disciplines, literary studies included. Condren (2002), for one, has spent the better part of the last two decades showing that satire lacks coherence as a theoretical, philosophical, or historical category.

In recent years, media theorists have therefore attempted to redress the obvious medial gaps that verbal-art definitions of satire so clearly present, drawing the obvious and correct conclusion that satire, in its virality, can appear in and colonise any genre, form, or medium. As we have already seen, such a conclusion is hardly heresy today: few literary scholars of the last three-plus decades would deny the claim that satire is a genre-, medium-, and form-transcending, defying, and occupying mode (see, e.g., Bricker, 2022b; Bullard, 2019; Greenberg, 2018; Griffin, 1994; Phiddian, 2013). Even still, media theorists have been correct to dilate the medial lens through which we conceptualise satire, not least because satire in the twenty-first century has come to operate in somewhat new ways in even newer media, and especially in the user-generated forms that typify Web 2.0. Despite such broadening, media scholars have been strangely hesitant to identify far-right humour online as satire or satiric, and a lurking protectionism continues to wall off satire from these sometimes extreme and often distasteful digital objects. In a revealing formulation, two scholars have called the purposefully "transgressive humour" of "far-right extremists" merely "(supposed) satire" (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021, p. 6), as if the category of satire were not descriptive but commendatory.

Whether we call such objects satire or satiric, moreover, we are unlikely to uncover some single, fixed definition, given satire's lack of a universally applicable set of necessary and sufficient conditions, its virality and fluidity, and its various manifestations in different media and forms across millennia, a problem further exacerbated by satire's status as a loanword whose precise meaning, despite a staggering amount of etymological and literary digging, has vexed theorists and satirists for centuries, Dryden (1974) included. Rather, the meaning of the word "satire" or "satiric" might best be understood from overlapping similarities across different instances of use. In this regard, I follow Kathryn Hume (2007), who has invoked Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances (*Familienähnlichkeit*) to suggest "that we conceptualise satire and the satiric as a family defined by a bundle of features. No single feature need be present, just a substantial number of them" (Hume, 2007, p. 303; see also Condren, 2012, p. 375). As Wittgenstein wrote in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), definitions themselves are not fixed but fluid and highly dependent on how language is used in various contexts. In rejecting any view of a fixed core of meaning at the heart of any definition, Wittgenstein proposed the notion of "family resemblances" to explain the various uses of a given word, or the "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein,

1953, para. 66).

Such an approach to defining satire, situated at the level of use, permits us to list various qualities of satiric works, none of which is on its own entirely sufficient or necessary for something to be considered satiric. A satiric object might then be itself or appear in various other genres and forms; satire is generally purposeful, seeking to criticise various people, institutions, or issues (even if the purpose of such a critique is difficult to discern); it can selectively use various literary and rhetorical techniques, which themselves might be manifested visually, including parody, allegory, sarcasm, irony, absurdity, distortion, reversal, and reduction; and it often employs humorous contrasts (which only some recipients will find funny) via incongruity, by activating partially overlapping semantic "scripts" (see Raskin, 1985; and, expanded to the "General Theory of Verbal Humour," Attardo & Raskin, 1991).[1]

Using such a basic definition permits one to identify the satiric aspects of many far-right memes as formally shapeshifting; implicitly critical; selectively multi- and intermedial, employing various visual (e.g., juxtaposition) and rhetorical tools (e.g., above all irony and parody); and structurally humorous (if not always and for all funny). Such a satiric identification and designation is, however, less than half the job, I would argue. What I am interested in here is to some degree less sophisticated than these old questions of satiric theory. That is, when discussing far-right memes, we might spend less time either describing what satire *is* or in arbitrarily deciding what might be deemed *satiric* than in analysing and in trying to understand what these works of satire *do* circumstantially. Such an approach ties into a broader, emerging sense in humour studies writ large, one that works from the salutary reminder that we need to attend to humorous objects at a more local level, resisting the longstanding tendency in the field to (over)generalise from particulars (Adriaensen et al., 2023; Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022; Pérez, 2022). Viewed from this perspective—which is less concerned with policing satire's borders and politics—there can be little doubt that far-right memes *are* satiric: they serve discursive ends through ridicule with the goal of shaping audience views. But that is hardly the real question. The real question is what these far-right memes are attempting to do and how they are attempting to do it.

4. Far-right feelings

In this section, I turn to the far-right's "dankest meme lords": the largely pseudonymous and anonymous group of humorous meme makers, distributors, collectors, aggregators, and promoters who stalk the internet, from social media and blogging sites to mainstream chatrooms and dark-web message boards (see Godioli, 2025, p. 44; Nilan, 2021, p. 4).

In short order, memes and humour have become a critical, networked site of far-right activism. Various researchers have already examined the connection between the far right and humour (e.g., Pérez, 2022), particularly online over the last decade (e.g., Albrecht et al., 2018; Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021), but early commentators too quickly dismissed such burgeoning forms of humour as merely scattered or disparate types of online activity (see e.g. Bennett, 2012; Köhler, 2014), downplaying the extent to which the technology of Web 2.0 had enabled pan-national networks to emerge (Margetts et al., 2016), often through those most circulatory and

[1] This definition is in part adapted and derived from the one drawn from various scholars across numerous disciplines by Dakota Park-Ozee (2019, p. 601). However, Park-Ozee still arrives at the notion that satire is a "genre," using an idiosyncratic definition of genre as "landscape" derived from a rarely cited article by Wells (2014). While I agree that this spatialised conception of genre works in the specific instance of satire, which lacks set formal or generic characteristics, the definition of genre as landscape works less well for other literary forms (e.g., sonnets, epic poetry, comedy and tragedy, detective fiction, fabliaux), which possess generally consistent formal features and therefore conform with the broadly accepted definition of genre.

viral forms, humorous memes (Lovink & Tuters, 2018). Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2019, p. 43) have argued, for instance, that a "second wave" of online memes emerged in 2012, which were "intensely politicised and increasingly used for socially divisive and, often, cruel purposes," and that have been employed "as weapons in personal, political, and social-cultural wars." Memes in turn have become one of the most prevalent methods for spreading far-right content and have frequently leveraged a cynical or ironic stance on current events to attract new sympathisers and make their messages more appealing (Albrecht et al., 2018, p. 12; Miller-Idriss, 2018). At the centre of such memes is humour, as Maik Fielitz and Reem Ahmed (2021, p. 6) have made amply clear:

> Recent generations of far-right extremists have chosen transgressive humour and (supposed) satire as central weapons in the fight against liberal democracy and its 'political correctness', which is depicted as prudish and patronising. Praising a 'politically incorrect' attitude, humour has been weaponised as a form of resistance against a political culture that is supposedly curtailing free speech. Especially culturally sensitive language has been taunted with vulgar expressions that affect widespread resentments with humorous elements.

Various far-right memes often exhibit a toxic combination of inequality, supremacy, and authoritarianism, but the difficulty in positioning them precisely on some simple left-to-right political spectrum is only exacerbated by the nature of both "folkloric" internet culture, more generally, and satire, in particular. As Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner (2017) have shown, it is frequently impossible to discern the intentions of or the meaning behind various user-generated internet content: "[o]nline, what something 'really' is, what it 'really' means," they write, "are often the first certainties to go" (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 56). Such epistemological and intentional vagary extends from a broader understanding of meaning production online, known as Poe's Law, where it is often impossible to distinguish between extremist views and parodies of extremist views (Aikin, 2012, p. 301; see also Wiggins, 2019: p. 64). Such a rejection of any naively positivistic search for stable meanings and, above all, crisp and easily documented intentionality aligns well with broader tendencies within literary studies, which has long resisted the so-called "intentional fallacy": that is, misguided hunts for what an author supposedly meant (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946). This difficulty in discerning intentionality is further complicated by some of the tendencies of literary theory, particularly in regard to satire, itself a highly intentional form. As Phiddian (2013, p. 51) has written,

> [a]s satire is a mode or attitude rather than a genre or identifiable set of textual practices, the removal of recourse to arguments about a deliberate intent to persuade an audience (of the beastliness of Domitian's Rome, of Walpole's duplicity, of Thatcherism's brutality, etc.) makes it close to untheorisable.

Moreover, situating such far-right memes is no easy task. As Albrecht et al. wrote as early as 2018, "[t]he categorisation of these actor positions on a spectrum running from the socially accepted and legally protected 'radical right' to an anti-constitutional and violent 'extreme right' is now obsolete" (p. 8). In an effort to avoid "exhausting debates about terminological essentialism" (Albrecht et al. 2018, p. 8)—a problem peculiar not simply to the right but also to satire itself, as we have seen—we might follow Albrecht et al. (2018) in understanding "the far right" as an "umbrella idea" (p. 8), expanding on Fielitz & Laloire (2016, pp. 17-18), who write that the far right is a "political space whose actors base their ideology and action on the notion of inequality among human beings, combining the supremacy of a particular nation, 'race' or 'civilisation' with ambitions for an authoritarian transformation of values and styles of government."

The affective stance of such memes—a kind of winking, distant indifference—likewise complicates any straightforward interpretation. In this instance, however, we might think of the tone and posture of such memes as constitutive of the rhetoric and efficacy of far-right humour online. That such an affect saturates far-right humour became manifestly obvious in 2017, when the complete 17-page style guide of the neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer* site, authored by Andrew Anglin, was leaked to Ashley Feinberg (2017) of *HuffPost*. In it, Anglin says all of the quiet things out loud:

> While racial slurs are allowed/recommended, not every reference to non-white should not [sic] be a slur and their use should be based on the tone of the article. Generally, when using racial slurs, it should come across as half-joking [...]. It should not come across as genuine raging vitriol. That is a turnoff to the overwhelming majority of people (p. 9).

A subsequent section of the style guide, explicitly subheaded "Lulz," expanded on the point:

> The tone of the site should be light. Most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, non-ironic hatred. The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not. There should also be a conscious awareness of mocking stereotypes of hateful racists. I usually think of this as self-deprecating humor – I am a racist making fun of stereotype [sic] of racists, because I don't take myself super-seriously. This is obviously a ploy and I actually do want to gas kikes. But that's neither here nor there (p. 11).

In all of this, Anglin, and the far right more generally online, is seeking to destabilise questions of intentionality and earnestness through a supposedly ironical posture (Neiwert, 2017). This recourse to "lulz" is especially important, I would argue, for it serves as a prophylactic defence against accusations of overt racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, etc., and because it conditions responses to far-right humour online. This winking, arm's-length distancing is, I would argue, the rhetorical dimension of the far-right's degenerative aesthetics: one way to own a lib, or to troll a snowflake, or exclude a normie, is to generate their outrage over something that is supposedly just a joke. The logic is familiar: just as a tasteless Holocaust joke is defended as unserious and therefore beyond critique, so too is the image disavowed as mere play. This debasement provides an in-built trivialisation and defence and yet one we should take seriously as constitutive of the formal politics, or of the politics of form, in far-right satire.

More generally, scholars have unearthed the important affiliative and oppositional work such affects have come to serve in humour. Perhaps most notably in recent years, Pérez (2022) has drawn attention to the affective dimensions of racist humour, showing how racist jokes permeate different social structures in the U.S., whether the old far right or more recent alt-right, including the political arena and law enforcement. Focusing on the concept of "amused racial contempt," he has built on Sara Ahmed's work (2004) on the affective economy of emotions to explain how racist jokes end up manipulating emotions to "*align* and *bind* some bodies against others," giving "certain bodies greater or lesser social value" (Pérez, 2022, p. 11, emphasis in the original). In this regard, Pérez extends Holm's earlier claim that humour plays an active role in the production of cultural commonalities and carries within it sets of embedded ideological assumptions. It not only plays this role in the "transmission and construction of socially shared systems of interpretation," but also needs to be understood "within the context of a particular 'structure of feeling'" (Holm, 2017, p. 8).

Even still, the extent to which far-right memes help and have helped to produce "emotional communities" (Barclay & Downing, 2023, p. 62) remains an under-researched area, and limited work has been done on the precise intersection of emotions and meme culture. Katie Barclay and Leanne Downing write, "[little] attention has been devoted to understanding how emotions in and of themselves are understood, (re)produced, and refracted across digital media

landscapes," noting that "a sustained consideration of how emotions are inevitably relational, situational, and socially produced is lacking" (Barclay & Downing, 2023, p. 8). Understanding the affective work of memes is to make sense of their very operation, particularly on the far right. Memes are central to the Internet's *participatory culture*, Limor Shifman wrote in 2014—early on in the days of such research—arguing that "we live in an era driven by a *hypermemetic* logic, in which almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes" (Shifman, 2014, p. 4, emphasis in the original). In this regard, far-right memes are productive of not simply an us-versus-them antipathy but are the means by which various audiences reconcile themselves to the very emotional politics of the moment. As Lisa Ellen Silvestri (2018, p. 3998) has written, "[w]ithin the communities that circulate them, memes reflect an attempt to manage the present. [...] Memes help audiences digest and gain critical distance from unfolding events, often providing an affective comic blanket for those still suffering in the present."

Despite this flurry of research over the last decade, what has been missing from this conversation, I would argue, is a greater attention to the concatenation of formal, visual, and rhetorical dimensions of such far-right memes, which serve to complement, supplement, and even produce the real-world effects of such humour in concert with their content-level politics. From this vantage point, the far right's ironic rhetorical approach works hand in glove with the dynamics of memetic discourse more generally; one of the most important effects of this coupling of far-right rhetoric with the affective affordances of memetic discourse has been a broader societal shift in the range of the acceptable ideas to discuss, known as moving the "Overton window" (Daniels, 2018, p. 64).

5. The degenerative aesthetics of the dankest meme lords

In this final section, my goal is not to provide an exhaustive taxonomy of all memes and meme types and topoi, but to point to something that unites many memes across various sites, from the innocuously mainstream and seemingly apolitical to the radical fringes of political discourse online: the peculiar "text-image problematic" of these intermedial (Mitchell, 1994, p. 7) "macro memes" (i.e., an image with text superimposed) that I term their "degenerative aesthetics." Most generally speaking, the term degenerative aesthetics designates the peculiar lingua franca and formal composition of meme design, which includes typically and inter alia shaky line work, heavy pixelation, grainy imagery, clumsy compositions, conspicuous cut-and-paste, sloppy framing, clashing colour schemes, unfashionable fonts, grammatical mistakes, punctuation errors, and so on—an entire mess of faux-amateurish design choices that serve, as I outline below, a complementary visual function, reinforcing far-right meme lords' intentional air of rhetorical off-handedness.

In taking up the formal, visual, and rhetorical features of these memes, I expand upon earlier research into affect, memes, and the far right. We can easily identify two countervailing but interrelated functions, which unite the aesthetic, emotional, and political aspects of such right-wing memes, which produce both *affiliation/alignment* among creators and amenable recipients, by creating communities of amusement; and, conversely, *alienation/distance*, by excluding targets and critics from that same virtuous (or vicious) circle of communal laughter.

More specifically, and importantly, I would argue, this collision between humour and politics is not merely responsive (those who laugh versus those who do not) but also imbricated with the aesthetics of these memes, which possess, mirror, and model affective dispositions and orientations themselves towards the nature and production of such far-right humour. I fully concede, and would even argue, that the degenerative aesthetics of memes transcend simple political boundaries. Even still, this same aesthetic ethic and visual grammar serve a variety of important and peculiar functions. Put slightly differently, many memes, across all political and

apolitical orientations, employ degenerative aesthetics, but only the far-right uses such aesthetics functionally as an affective meta-disposition towards the production of extreme humour—the in-built it's-just-a-joke prophylactic, which Salvatore Attardo (2023, p. 219) has called "the retractability of humor ('I was just kidding')"—that rhetorically pre-empts any criticism that such humour is racist, homophobic, dangerous, etc. This, I would argue, is the subversive slipperiness of far-right humour itself. In positioning such memes as merely tossed-off jokes not to be taken seriously—something mirrored in their superficially amateurish and thrown-together aesthetic—the dankest meme lords are able both to produce some of the most extreme humour online while also simultaneously claiming that none of this should be taken seriously.

In any case, *intentions* matter less with far-right memes than the *nature, functions*, and *effects* of the formal, visual, and verbal qualities of these degenerative aesthetics. In short, we now live in a digital world increasingly saturated by *seemingly* offhand memes. To take a specific, omnipresent, and even (by the standards of internet studies in 2025) over-analysed example, we might turn to that most polyvalent of memes: Pepe the Frog. At this point, most scholars know the broadest strokes of his story. Pepe first appeared in 2005 in the online and then print cartoon *Boy's Club* by Matt Furie. Importantly, Pepe did not originally have racist or antisemitic connotations. The cartoon instead focused largely on Pepe and his crew of friends, who smoked weed, played video games, and ate pizza. Internet users eventually appropriated the character and turned him into a meme. Over the past two decades, Pepe has morphed into a million Pepes—from the original "Feels Good Man" Pepe to sad, angry, and smug Pepes alongside apolitical Pepes and far-right Pepes beclad in *Schutzstaffel* and runes—and the memetic internet today might be best understood as Pepes all the way down (interspersed among many, many cats; see White, 2020). In 2016, the Anti-Defamation League deemed Pepe a potential hate symbol, particularly the subset of Pepes "centred on racist, anti-Semitic, or other bigoted themes," even though, as the ADL also acknowledged, the "majority of online Pepes are, and continue to be, non-bigoted" (Anti-Defamation League, 2016).

For almost two decades now, Pepe has been a cipher for certain online communities, symbolically hijacked by so-called "normies," and policed and deployed by far-right communities online, in a version of symbolic boundary work (see Gordon, 2023 on Pepe's malleability). His anarchic semantic history has itself become part of internet lore, with various commentators seeking to document his metamorphosis (Fig. 1), stabilise his political import (Fig. 2), reclaim him as a symbol of both the right *and* the left (Fig. 3), and protect him from the "normies" (Fig. 4).

Figure 1. "The Pepe Timeline" [ca. 2017?]. Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1183165-nazi-pepe-controversy

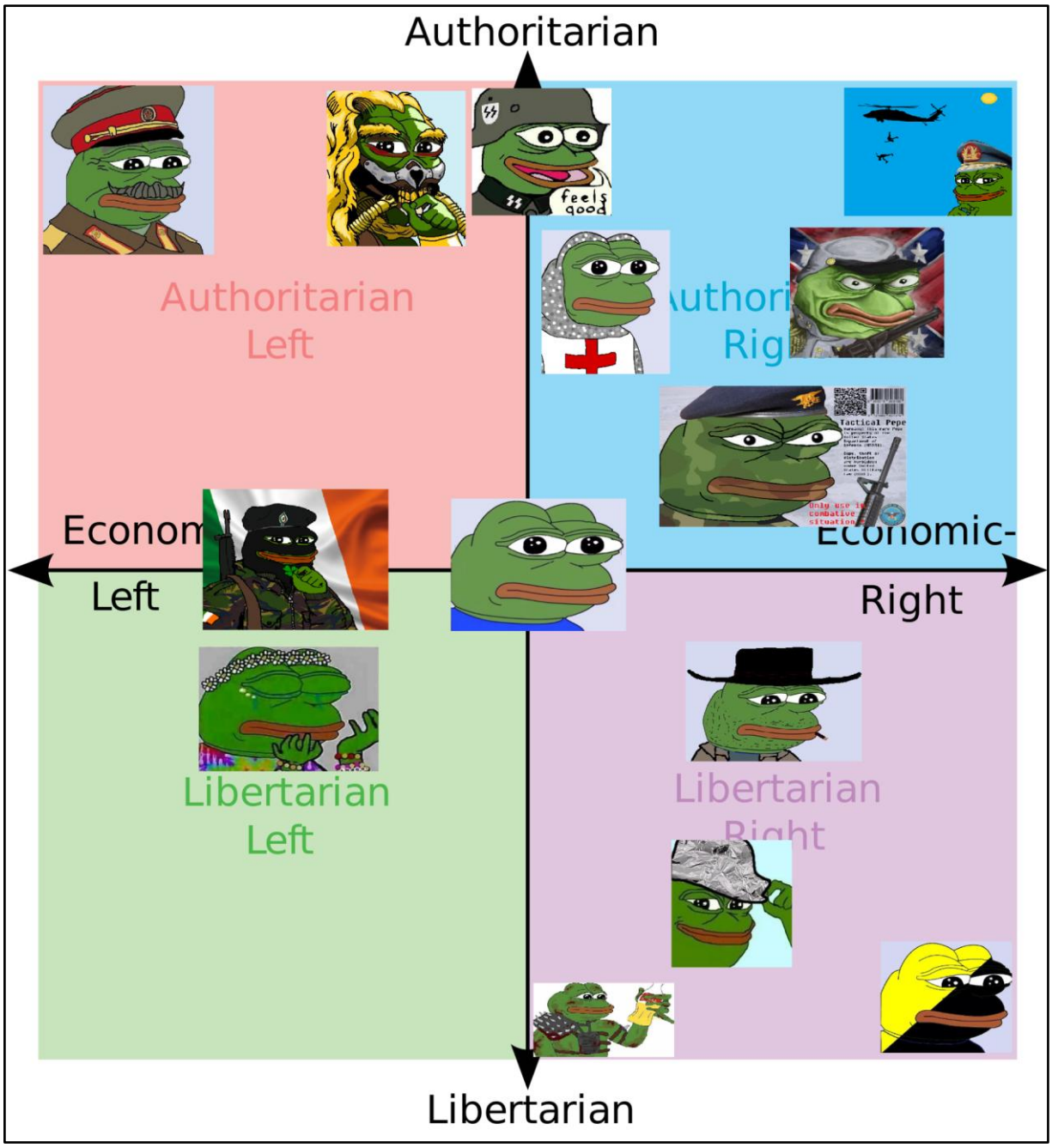

Figure 2. "Pepe politcal [sic] compass 2" [ca. 2017?]. Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1197067-political-compass

Figure 3. "Red Pepe Uprising" [ca. 2017?]. Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1176371-nazi-pepe-controversy

Figure 4. "REEEEEEEEEE" [ca. 2015?]. Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/948124-pepe-the-frog

My goal here is not to stabilise the meaning of or politics tied to Pepe memes, but to analyse the qualities of their degenerative aesthetics and how they operate. As a result, I will not share the most racist and antisemitic Pepes; in some ways, the *content* of these memes is less important for this aspect of my analysis than their *formal* qualities. Instead, I want to point to what makes

Pepe so interesting and so representative of online humour and how the far right has mobilised such humour in intricate campaigns of alignment and alienation through these purposefully cultivated visual qualities.

Take, for instance, the Pepe meme "The original has become the rarest" (Fig. 5), created and posted sometime around 2015 by the user gwlk on FunnyJunk, a content aggregator website. The visual frame for the meme is a series of screenshots from a scene in the film *X Men: First Class* (2011), in which the shapeshifting mutant Mystique/Raven Darkhölme (played by Jennifer Lawrence) attempts to seduce Magneto/Erik Magnus Lehnsherr (played by Michael Fassbender), appearing first as a beautiful blonde woman (in the form of Rebecca Romijn). Magneto responds, "I prefer the real Raven," at which point she morphs into the human form she usually presents to others. Magneto repeats, "I said the *real* Raven," at which point she appears in her natural blue form, to which Magneto replies, "Perfection." Today known as "Magneto's 'Perfection,'" the template typically follows a pattern of substitution, with "the *real* X" often serving as the punchline to the joke (Know Your Meme, 2024).

Figure 5. "The original has become the rarest" [ca. 2015?]. Source: gwlk. https://funnyjunk.com/The+original+has+become+the+rarest/funny-pictures/5545499/

"The original has become the rarest" follows this same pattern. Magneto asks for "the real Pepe," and gwlk overlays a succession of Pepes atop Mystique's face: a "rare" Picasso Pepe; a "rare" anime Pepe; and a "feels sad man" Pepe. This meme offers a cogent representation of degenerative aesthetics: the grainy and pixelated screenshot; the cramped composition; the near-

miss, attention-grabbing mix of fonts; the haphazard cut-and-paste Pepe heads; and even the heads' clumsy half-concealment of Mystique below. This is a faux-naive do-it-yourself aesthetic that screams "I don't know how to do it," and in this regard memes might be best understood as "hypermedial" objects, whose very formal qualities draw attention to the nature of their mediation rather than to the message contained therein (Bolter & Grusin, 1998, p. 5).

But such fashion also serves a function. This degenerative aesthetic mode gives a distinct impression of off-handedness, as if the meme itself were assembled quickly with very little foresight or vision. Importantly, though, this is merely an impression—a kind of in-built memetic expressionism—where the very aesthetic of the work occludes the labour, effort, and time that went into its creation. As its creator gwlk explicitly and jokingly noted when posting the meme to FunnyJunk, "This took me longer than I care to admit." Like the many Pepes featured above, and especially "REEEEEEEEEE" (Fig. 4), such images possess a near-materiality: they are images sourced from other images, which degrade over time just as they gain intertextual meaning through their palimpsestic repetition. For both the left and the right, this degradation provides a kind of disavowal of both aesthetic labour and of seriousness itself: the very poorness of their quality, even if designed and constructed over hours, is symptomatic of an affective posture, an unwillingness, that is, to present an image that seems too carefully constructed, too serious in purpose, and too earnest—a fear, in short, to appear, as the kids say, "too thirsty."

We might take this superficial indifference as the *modus operandi* and dominant affect of the dankest meme lords. For them, all memes, and especially the most racist, sexist, homophobic, and antisemitic, are just "lulz," as noted above. As Rob May and Matthew Feldman (2018, p. 26) have written,

> the Alt-Right's [...] identifying feature and way of displaying its beliefs [...] has typically been the defence of mere 'lulz'. A distortion of 'LOL', or 'Laugh out Loud', lulz are a sharper form of offensive humour directed by online activists. Exemplified by Pepe the Frog avatars and targeted 'humour' about ethnic and religious minorities in Europe and North America, lulz provide ironic distance where necessary. In this way, the public response of 'just joking' is used as a 'frontstage' mechanism; or better, a shield to protect against charges of racism and their potential consequences, like falling foul in Europe of anti-racist legislation, including Holocaust denial.

I fully agree with May and Feldman's analysis, but I also think such an observation—that lulz provide an in-built rhetorical front to fend off scrutiny—can be taken further. In the first place, it is precisely these degenerative aesthetics that intimate and support such protective messaging especially for the far right and its purposefully cultivated affective disposition. As Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2018, p. 127) has written,

> Pepe's popularity with the far right was not only due to the iconographic representation of the frog with Nazi and far-right symbols but also because of the way the frog symbolised a kind of superior nonchalance toward others, helping to normalise hostile attitudes toward minorities and political opponents.

In this regard, Pepe is not only an appropriated symbol for the far right but also an entire affective posture toward the far-right's humour online.

This might be a larger element of the right's own capacity for self-reflexive humour, broadly understood through the affective posture of "teh internet is serious business" (de Zeeuw & Tuters, 2020). As Marc Tuters (2018) has written, the phrase itself—which possesses, like these memes, a clumsy indifference in its purposefully misspelled *the/teh*—models a tonal disposition to such humour: "which is to say that the internet is not serious business, and anyone who thinks otherwise should be corrected and is, essentially, undeserving of pity" (p. 38). Importantly, we might actually understand this as one of satire's most enduring postures, one

theorised by such early practitioner-theorists as Dryden and that came increasingly to permeate satire across the eighteenth century. Satire is most effective not when it brutally lambasts its object, but when it expresses itself with seeming disinterest (Bricker, 2022a, p. 54)

Such degenerative aesthetics, therefore, help to perform the double affective work of both affiliation and alienation, consolidating the rhetorical or political work of normalising far-right discourses precisely through their trivialisation. Far-right satire, I would thus argue, is primarily an *affective* medium. Its goal is to elicit particular emotional responses—or, more precisely, audience-*contingent* affective responses that track along broadly political directions. For viewers on the right, or those who remain open to far-right messaging, such memes fulfil what Ted Cohen has called a "community of amusement" (1999, p. 29) between the teller and the listener in a successful joke exchange, while also leaving open the window of just-joking plausible deniability.

6. Conclusion

Such an analysis of the degenerative aesthetics of far-right memes should remind us why satire in the twenty-first century must be approached through a broad and largely depoliticised lens. Satire, as I noted earlier, simply lacks a "single political stance" and might be best understood through its double capacity for "enforcing norms and violating them, between *restraint* and *license*" (Greenberg, 2018, pp. 23–24, emphasis in the original). The point is not to redeem satire as liberal or condemn it as conservative, but to recognise its profound plasticity. I have offered one preliminary perspective that attempts to knit together research from satire studies, humour studies, meme studies, and analyses of the far right, showing the extent to which far-right memes perform important affiliative and alienating functions simultaneously, and how they achieve this not only rhetorically but through their peculiar aesthetic features.

The degenerative aesthetics of these objects—their grainy images, garish fonts, and clumsy cut-and-paste—do not simply mark such memes as amateurish. Instead, these visual and formal choices perform a blithe indifference that reinforces the far right's rhetorical reliance on irony, plausible deniability, and "lulz." This affective posture in turn allows creators to claim their content should not be taken seriously at all, while still spreading hostile, racist, or antidemocratic messages. The apparent shoddiness of such memes thus becomes a visual analogue to the ever-present "just-joking" defence, a prophylactic shield that both attracts sympathetic audiences and antagonises opponents. The result is a satiric practice that is as much about the look and feel of unseriousness as about the content of the jokes.

Nonetheless, work still needs to be done to understand how this collision of forces—of satiric form, affectivity, and technological infrastructure—produces the ideological divisions at the core of far-right humour. One aspect, as noted earlier, is the role of emotions and their intersection with humour. As Barclay and Downing have (2023, p. 17) argued, "Part of what enables the efficacy of the contemporary meme in the digital sphere is humour, an emotional experience that has long been associated with both the subversion and consolidation of power," though much less attention has been devoted to how emotions themselves are understood, (re)produced, and refracted across digital media landscapes (Barclay & Downing, 2023, p. 8). Future studies of far-right memes would benefit from the insights of affect and emotion scholarship, which has repeatedly shown how emotions are historically and socially contextualised, received, and reproduced (Boddice, 2018; Plamper, 2015). To take the humorous nature of memes seriously is also to take seriously the affective communities they generate—communities of amusement for insiders, and communities of outrage for those beyond their charmed circle.

A second, related aspect requiring further investigation is the technological infrastructure

of meme circulation itself. Degenerative aesthetics do not emerge in a vacuum; they are shaped by the technological affordances and vernaculars of particular platforms. As Gibbs et al. (2015, p. 256) note, "communication practices emerge within particular [social networking sites] to congeal as genres." Each platform develops its own "styles, grammars, and logics," which together constitute a "platform vernacular" (Gibbs et al., p. 257). The pixelation of a meme, the layout of a macro, or the typography of a caption is not only a formal choice but also the product of a platform's architecture and the practices that users have sedimented into loosely platform-specific generic conventions. To understand far-right memes, then, is also to understand the technologies, platforms, and communities that shape their forms and circulation—those digital ecosystems in which degenerative aesthetics both arise and thrive.

Ultimately, what far-right memes reveal is less the essence of satire than the adaptability of the satiric mode itself. Satire in this context is not a liberal antidote to authoritarianism, nor is it reducible to a conservative weapon of cultural reaction. It is a flexible, mobile discursive practice (cf. Simpson, 2003, p. 86)—sometimes enforcing norms, sometimes violating them, and often doing both at once. Far-right memes exemplify this doubleness in especially vivid ways: they ridicule and exclude while simultaneously building emotional communities; they normalise extreme views while insisting on their own triviality. Understanding this requires resisting the urge to stabilise satire's definition or politics. Instead, we must attend to how satire travels, mutates, and does its work—through affect, through aesthetics, and through the humour that the far right has leveraged in sophisticated if deeply troubling ways.

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