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ARTICLE

Limbless Warriors and Foaming Liberals

The Allure of Post-Heroism in Far-Right Memes

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Abstract: *In light of the so-called Great Meme War, a meme-based propaganda campaign waged in favor of Donald Trump's 2016 candidacy, this article identifies a type of disembodied far-right "meme warrior" that ironically denies longings for heroism. This ambivalent stance toward heroic masculine ideals, which characterizes the meme warriors' (self-)portraits, stands in stark contrast to more serious traditional far-right heroic imaginaries. This phenomenon is discussed in relation to the notion of the post-heroic, a concept used in military studies to describe the shrinking willingness and (perceived) need to sacrifice one's life in combat. The second part of the article explores the construction of a ludic collective heroism in the alt-right's responses to Shia LaBeouf's "He Will Not Divide Us" (HWNDU) project, which was conceived as a participatory video work in public space inviting people to repeat those words while gazing into a camera. The article employs a psychoanalytic depth-hermeneutic method; it asks how "post-heroic" identities created collectively online by the far right might be found alluring on a wider scale.*

Keywords: meme war, meme warrior, alt-right, post-heroism, masculinity, far-right irony, Donald Trump

Introduction: A New Genre of (Ironic) Meme Warriors

Nazi and neo-Nazi propaganda is commonly associated with an unambiguously serious approach to heroism that leaves no room for doubt about the fascist man's own steadfast heroic-masculine qualities. Femininity, and anything related to it, is perceived as an existential threat to the fantasy of a steely body and unyielding "soldierly masculinity," which Klaus Theweleit (2019) famously identified as the sexual and psychological prerequisite for Nazism. The feminine is, thus, warded off aggressively and projected onto others: Jews, homosexuals, trans- and gender-nonconforming people, and the Sinti and Romani, among others, who were—and still are—hatefully caricatured as "effeminate" by both online and offline strands of the far right. Drawing on Theweleit's work, Jacob Johanssen (2022) has argued that in the orbit of the manosphere the

invocation of fascism continues to be deeply intertwined with a yearning for the soldier's body. Further, by using denigrating battle cries such as "cuckservatives" (A'Lee Frost 2015) or "liberal crybabies and snowflakes" (McIntosh 2020), white nationalists and the alt-right have tried to claim a superior manliness as compared with their political opponents, whom they brand as weak and "unmanly."[1]

However, as I will show in this article, the contemporary far right does not solely conjure up the fantasy of an impermeable soldierly body, nor does it only ascribe heroic insufficiencies to others. Far-right "meme warriors" express a much more ambivalent relationship to their own soldierly and heroic (body) fantasies. As "fighters" in the so-called Great Meme War, a propaganda campaign in favor of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential candidacy, these users evinced a partly (self-)ironic relationship to their own (unfulfilled) longings for heroism. This may seem surprising because irony and humor, as Ulrich Bröckling (2020, 51) notes, are usually considered "poison for heroic emotionalism."[2] The meme warriors' (self-)portraits oscillate between an acknowledgement of (unsatisfied) heroic desires on the one hand and an ironic denial thereof on the other, often playfully exhibiting the contrast between deadly "real wars" and hazard-free disembodied "online warfare."

In this article, I conceptualize the ambivalent figure of the "meme warrior," which serves to contain longings for heroic excitement without requiring any bodily risk, as a cultural manifestation of a more general "post-heroic" sentiment. I extend my earlier reflections on this phenomenon (Schmidt 2021b, 2022) by shifting the focus to the meme warriors' often surprisingly emasculated, disembodied physical guise. The notion of the "post-heroic" was first used in military studies in order to describe the shrinking willingness to sacrifice one's own life (Ignatieff 2001, 177) or that of one's children (Luttwak 1995, 115) for the purposes of war in Western societies of the post–Cold War era. More recently it has been associated with automated war technologies such as "unmanned" drones (Enemark 2014, 20), which tend to render superfluous the sacrifice of the (male) warrior body, given that their operation does not entail any physical risk. In memetic warfare—which is considered a means of psychological warfare (Finkelstein 2011)—the image of the "warrior" moves even further away from the brutal reality of combat, touching it only on a representational level. Memes often half-jokingly appropriate references to historical or fictional wars (taken from films, TV series, video games, and so forth) in order to picturize virtual battles. Yet, rather than being mere illustrations of online warfare, those memes possess a dual character in that they are marked by an intrinsic tension between representational and self-referential qualities on the one hand, and their performative efficacy on the other, "serving both as a weapon and as the linguistic or pictorial vehicle for commentating on the warfare itself" (see

1 For a critique of the term "alt-right," see Maureen Kosse's contribution to this issue.

2 All translations from German sources are by the author.

figure 1) (Peacock 2022, 85). In this, they speak to what Constantine Nakassis (2023, 5) has termed the "ontological politics of the image," where memetic battle opens up the "heterogeneous possibilities of the image, a struggle about what an image is."

Figure 1. These memetic portraits can be seen as both representations of agitators, warriors, and veterans of the Great Meme War, and as weapons in memetic warfare.[3]

In what follows, I will first describe the context from which the ambivalent figure of the meme warrior emerged, before briefly situating my work in the existing research landscape. I then introduce the two qualitative methods I use in this project—visual segment analysis (Breckner 2010) and depth-hermeneutics (Lorenzer 1968, 2016)—and present my reading of two relevant memes. Wearing accessories referencing the Vietnam War while sitting in front of his computer screens, the warrior (self-)portrait of the "War never changes" meme serves as a good starting point for further reflections on the post-heroic body fantasy. The second meme references Shia LaBeouf's participatory video installation "He Will Not Divide Us," which was hijacked repeatedly by trolls and neo-Nazis both on- and offline. This meme displays the geeky and ludic heroism of a collective of anons (anonymous users of 4chan) who set in motion the project of ridiculing the author of the work even as he was trying to stop the memetic capturing of his message.

A Meme for President: The Emergence of the "Meme Warrior" during the 2016 US Elections

During the 2016 presidential election in the US, the political significance of internet meme culture became strikingly evident when users of online platforms associated with the alt-right, such as 4chan and Reddit,[4] instigated a massive meme-based campaign for Donald Trump (Woods and Hahner 2019, 2). The "anons" of these sites flooded the web with memes glorifying Trump or ridiculing Hillary Clinton and other

3 Sources for all memes in this article are available under the figure number in references.

4 A substantial part of this organizing happened on the subreddit r/The_Donald/ and the 4chan forum /pol/.

liberal democratic figures and representatives of the political left (Merrin 2019, 208; Lamerichs et al. 2018, 185). This meme-based propaganda battle was referred to as "the Great Meme War" by internet-savvy supporters of the idiosyncratic Republican candidate. Participants identified themselves as "meme warriors" seeking to "meme Trump into office."[5] Memes have been defined as "a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance . . . that were created *with awareness of each other* . . . [and] circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*" (Shifman 2014, 7–8, original emphasis). Interestingly enough, the self-declared digital army rallying for Trump produced not only memes about their preferred candidate or his political opponents, but also a significant number of memetic portrayals and merchandise products in honor of the "veterans" of these online "brigades" (Schmidt 2021b, 2; figure 2). One could say that the figure of the meme warrior became a meme in itself.

Figure 2. Two memes and a faux military badge, which half-ironically honor meme warriors/veterans and those that have "fallen" during the Great Meme War.

There was a distinctive character to the relationship between the decentralized horde of meme warriors on one side and Trump with his official campaign on the other side. As Merrin (2019, 207) stresses, there is evidence that the support Trump enjoyed on 4chan, where he was nicknamed "the Donald" and "God Emperor Trump" (figure 3), initially had an ironic undertone, resting on the trollish "idea of trying to get a joke candidate elected president." When Trump—to the surprise of many—in fact made it into the White House, a significant number of his "loyal foot soldiers or cultural warriors" (Tuters 2019, 37) claimed to have contributed to his electoral success "through their skillful deployment of 'meme magic,'" implying that their memes had transcended the online sphere and produced a real-world outcome (for "meme magic," see Knowyourmeme 2020a).[6] As an omnipresent, eccentric media figure, Trump himself had morphed into

5 For an example of this often-used phrase, see the comment (from April 4, 2016) by one anon in this archived thread on the 4chan forum /pol/: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/69950405/.

6 Although memes might have played some role in the election, Trump's success was surely based not only on the votes of 4chan users but also in large part on those of mostly older, white supporters

a meme by the time he ran for president, representing a kind of "grotesque postmodern simulacrum of himself" (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022, 113), given that it remained largely obscure what aspects of his appearance were authentic and which parodic. In other words, the anons on 4chan sensed something troll-like in him and his politics (Merrin 2019, 211)—something they could identify with. Nevertheless, Merrin (208) suggests that, while "it remains difficult to determine motivations in the hall-of-mirrors of troll-politics," for the majority of meme warriors, the support for Trump's politics did not seem to be entirely a joke. In fact, his rhetoric and policies were pretty much in accordance with the outsider culture, opposition to political correctness, misogyny, racism, and post-truth sentiment of "shitposters" on 4chan and Reddit (208). It is important to note that 4chan's troll culture had already begun to shift toward the right in the years preceding the election. This transformation became manifest, firstly, with the establishment of the 4chan forum /pol/ (politically incorrect) in 2011, which served as a safe haven for white-supremacist, racist, antisemitic, misogynist, and transphobic content. And it was apparent, secondly, with Gamergate in 2014, which unleashed shocking and unironic antifeminist agitation and harassment directed against women in the gaming industry. By the time of the election, 4chan and the affiliated troll scene had attracted and merged with the online alt-right; regardless of their sometimes more, sometimes less serious political intent, they joined forces in order to achieve the goal of seeing Trump as president of the United States (Merrin 2019, 205–6). Trump's official campaign, on the other hand, is considered the first "social media candidacy that fully adopted meme wars as a campaign messaging strategy" (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022, 21), with his staff keeping close ties to internet trolls like Charles Johnson, who served as a self-titled meme war "general" (Schreckinger 2017).

Figure 3. The meme "God Emperor Trump" references the "God-Emperor of Mankind" from the popular miniature wargame Warhammer 40K.

(Pew Research Center 2018), the majority of whom were presumably completely unaware of the meme warriors' activities.

The Existing Research Landscape

Besides more general studies on the Great Meme War (Woods and Hahner 2019; Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022) that give insight into the broader context, a number of scholars have examined how the presidential candidates were represented during this propaganda battle (Martynyuk and Meleshchenko 2022; Tran 2022; Way 2021; Denisova 2019; Moody-Ramirez and Church 2019; Lamerichs et al. 2018). What has been missing so far, however, is scholarship on memetic (self-)representations of far-right meme warriors—a gap that I seek to close with this article, building on my previous research on the matter (Schmidt 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

While a whole range of scholars have attended to fascist and misogynist masculinities in online spaces (Burnett 2022; Johanssen 2022; DeCook 2021, 2018; Kracher 2020; Krüger 2021; Vandiver 2020; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Blodgett and Salter 2018; Van Valkenburgh 2021; Ging 2017), as well as to the online far right's uses of irony (Dafaure 2020; McIntosh 2020; Bogerts and Fielitz 2019; Greene 2019; Merrin 2019; Tuters 2019; Dogru 2021; Topinka 2018; Schwarzenegger and Wagner 2018; Lamerichs et al. 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Neiwert 2017), few have pointed to the intertwining of ironic stances and fantasies of masculinity within far-right meme culture. As indicated earlier, studies concerned with far-right masculine identities have shown how the alt-right paints its (male) enemies from across the spectrum—progressives, liberals, and moderate conservatives—as effeminate and infantile (McIntosh 2020; Nagle 2017). In contrast, the alt-right "presents itself . . . as a defender of a threatened western civilization and culture" (Dafaure 2020, 2). In fascist circles most prone to violence, this paranoid view savagely culminates in "calls for brave and heroic soldiers willing to fight and possibly to die for a greater purpose" (18). In other words, the invocation of soldierly masculinity (Theweleit 2019), which promises defense against anything female (including femininity within the men themselves) and has long been associated with fascism, is also at work in today's manosphere (Johanssen 2022, 42–44). However, Simon Strick identifies a new type of fascist whose performance of emotionalized masculinity does not seem to have much in common with the soldierly man's body armor. Strick references Christopher Cantwell, a white supremacist who came to be known as "the Crying Nazi" after publishing a video that showed him weep about his feeling of being "under attack as a racial group" (quoted in Strick 2021, 176–78). In this article, I shift the attention to another odd contemporary expression of fascist and proto-fascist masculinity: the self-ironizing, post-heroic meme warrior.

As mentioned above, ironic approaches to the far right's own masculine fantasies have rarely been addressed. Lamerichs et al. (2018, 185) describe glorifications of Trump in alt-right memes that reference fictional emperors as "exaggerated, almost comical," while also adhering to an iconographic tradition worshipping strong male leaders. Nilan (2021) reads the post-ironic cult of Kek—where a Pepe-the-Frog-faced god who rules over "Kekistan" is worshipped (see also Neiwert 2017)—as a search for re-enchantment against the backdrop of more extreme far-right warrior fantasies.

And Dafaure (2020, 4–5) suggests that Crusades-themed memes, often captioned with *Deus Vult* ("God wills it" in Latin), are shared ironically "in the same way that ironic Nazism has become a trend in recent years." An in-depth study examining the novel phenomenon of ironic approaches to ideals of soldierly/heroic masculinity from within the far-right online sphere is, however, still missing. I hope to contribute to the discussion of this curious connection by delineating what I consider to be the meme warriors' semi-ironic, post-heroic body fantasy from a psychoanalytic and psychosocial perspective. As yet, psychoanalytic approaches are the exception rather than the rule in the study of far-right and misogynist masculinities (Johanssen 2022; DeCook 2021; Krüger 2021) and of far-right uses of ironic language and symbolism (Dogru 2020). With regard to the latter, scholars have mostly focused on the (strategic) role irony plays on a discursive level (e.g., in hiding earnest white supremacist ideology, in aggressively ridiculing others, in playful practices of trolling, and in the creation of privy ingroups and outgroups unfamiliar with the metatexts of their cryptic jokes). The conceptualization of a subconscious dimension of communication and the Freudian argument that, initially, human beings relate to the very same object with conflicting feelings such as love and hatred (Winter 2013, 355) can, in my opinion, be particularly instructive for a study of the (online) far right. Such a study would illuminate the conflictual core of ambivalent affective states such as disgust (Krüger 2021), "dis/inhibition" (Johanssen 2022), or—as in the case of the first meme example I present in this article—simultaneous feelings of heroic-masculine "inadequacy" and the ironic denial thereof. Dogru (2021, 31) has convincingly outlined one subconscious dimension of far-right humor, which he locates in the collective disinhibition that allows for an aggressive projective denigration of—often vulnerable—others, by means of which the "fragile" construct of masculinity might be stabilized in crooked ways. Yet, as I will expound in more detail in what follows, another stabilizing function seems to lie precisely in the meme warriors' ironic approach to their own longings for heroic-masculine fantasies.

Methods

Meme Sample and Example Cases

Since 2018, I have collected around 430 memes that display the online far right's multifarious relationship to heroism. They mostly derive from the context of the US-based meme wars, but also from spin-off European meme wars, as well as far-right meme responses to the 2021 storming of the US Capitol, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and to far-right terrorist attacks—such as those in Christchurch, New Zealand, and Halle, Germany—that horrifically bring to light the most literal and deadly interpretations of far-right "heroism." I found some of the memes by searching relevant forums on 4chan and Reddit; once I had an idea of commonly used captions and motifs, I also used Google keyword and reverse image search. For the most part, I selected image macros (memes consisting of image-text combinations), but also a few

videos, photos of merchandise, and chat protocols. The two main themes defining the memes in my sample can be classified as, first, soldierly or heroic (self-)representations (including images of meme warriors, virtual battle scenes, and glorifications of far-right idols or, in the most extreme cases, far-right terrorists). The second group contains memes illustrating the "heroic" defeat of the far right's enemies (such as feminists, CNN, Muslims, and liberal democracy). Wanting to move beyond the established wisdom that associates heroism with the far right, I was most interested in the countless seemingly half-ironic (self-)portrayals of meme warriors. Except for a few contrasting examples, the majority of the fourteen memes that I selected for an in-depth qualitative study belong to that category, providing insight into the meme warriors' self-images, the ideals they "fight" for, and their relationship to women. The two cases that I present here reveal two different facets of what post-heroic identification has to offer.[7]

Visual Segment Analysis and Depth-Hermeneutics

I conducted the analyses of the two meme examples with the help of Roswitha Breckner's (2010) visual segment analysis as well as Alfred Lorenzer's (1986, 2016) psychoanalytic social-psychological depth-hermeneutic method.[8] Together these approaches allow for an exploration not only of manifest but also latent levels of meaning that are communicated through cultural artifacts. Breckner's (2010) method, which is inspired by interpretive sociology as well as art history, offers an analytic structure for reconstructing how individual segments of an image, in their semantic interplay, produce an overall composition and, in this way, bring forth specific thematizations. Lorenzer's method allows me to uncover latent meanings that are suppressed in light of collectively shared norms, but which are still communicated subconsciously beyond the symbolic guise of the material (Lorenzer 1986, 26–29; König 2019, 29). In other words, whereas the manifest layer of meaning responds to life scripts that are socially accepted in a specific milieu and can be grasped discursively, we gain access to the latent level of meaning that is associated with life scripts that are deemed unacceptable according to a particular life practice but might nevertheless reappear "behind the back of consciousness" through "affective understanding" (König 2019, 31, 37).

In far-right meme culture, where the lines between ironic parody and serious political intention are often blurred (Nagle 2017, 9), a psychoanalytic perspective that destabilizes the very concept of intent in the face of the unconscious can prove valuable. It aids analysis of how specific discursive figurations enable the denial of conflictual experiences that are, thereby, kept unconscious (Winter 2013, 22). It is in this sense that depth-hermeneutics differs from the approaches that are most commonly used for

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7 As is characteristic of memes, following Shifman's definition quoted above, both of the examples have inspired the creation of several modified/remixed versions.

8 For an English-language introduction, see Bereswill, Morgenroth, and Redman (2010).

the study of memes in media and communication studies, cultural studies, linguistics, and related disciplines. Scholars of those disciplines have identified recurring themes in large samples of memes through content analysis (e.g., Harvey et al. 2019; Ging and Garvey 2018). They have defined processes of discursive meaning-production with discourse analysis (e.g., Hakokoöngäs, Halmesvaara, and Sakki 2020; Al Zidjaly 2017). They have examined uses of signs and symbols in memes with the help of semiotics (e.g., Calimbo 2016; Cannizzaro 2016). Or they have inquired into visual aspects of memes by means of algorithm-based and/or qualitative visual analysis methods (e.g., Dondero 2019). Scholars employing depth-hermeneutics, by contrast, study a specific symbolic system, first by how it affects their own experience and then by trying to share any affects and fantasies the material provokes in them without censoring with regard to social desirability. The interpretation is conducted in groups, which allows for a reciprocal review of the—potentially contradictory—reactions and readings (Lorenzer 1986, 87). In order to avoid potential confusion with the concept of a focus group, it is important to emphasize that the participants' reflection on their own irritations, blind spots, and taboos during their discussion serves as an analytic tool for excavating latent meanings communicated through the material (König et al. 2019, 5).

Interpretation Group

I conducted the depth-hermeneutic part of this study with the help of an interpretation group (IG) consisting of six (for meme 1) and seven (meme 2) early career researchers from the Else Frenkel-Brunswik Institute for Democracy Research in Saxony, who were trained in sociology, psychology, or politics, and acquainted with depth-hermeneutics to varying degrees. Though involved in studying authoritarianism in Germany, they did not have specific prior knowledge about far-right meme culture or the alt-right. For the IG discussion of the second meme, an external researcher joined the group, one who had studied far-right online culture before. In the case of this IG, I shared beforehand some contextual information about LaBeouf's project that seemed vital for an understanding of the meme's manifest level of meaning. I will now present very condensed summaries of both parts of the analyses of the two memes, "War never changes" and "He Will Not Divide Us," and link them with broader socio-theoretical perspectives.

Meme Analysis: War Never Changes

Segment Analysis

The meme (figure 4) shows "Pepe the Frog"—a memetic character that had not been political before being appropriated by the online far right, as well as by Trump himself, thus becoming an icon of right-wing politics from around 2015 (Nowotny and Reidy 2022, 140–41). In this version, Pepe is wearing a helmet with the phrase "BORN TO MEME," a variation on "BORN TO KILL," a slogan that became widely associated with

the Vietnam War after it appeared as an inscription on the helmet of Private "Joker" in Stanley Kubrick's 1987 war drama *Full Metal Jacket*. The ace of spades playing card was attached to their helmets by US troops in Vietnam as a means of psychological warfare, as it was thought to be a symbol of death for the Viet Cong (Brown 2023). Wearing black warpaint on his face, Pepe is smiling smugly—a version known as "smug Pepe" (Knowyourmeme 2018)—gazing at the viewer backward over his shoulder. While the interior's ochre-brown color scheme can be associated with design conventions of the 1970s, the six computer flatscreens on the desk in front of Pepe locate him in the digital present. Some of the screens show Pepe figures wearing Trump's signature hairstyle, memes that were circulating around the time of Trump's campaign, and reference his far-right policies. The top right screen shows his official Facebook page, and the one below is 4chan.

Figure 4. The "War never changes" meme.

In spite of the ever-evolving technologies of warfare—from ancient war chariots and medieval lances to guns, bombs, and armed drones—the meme's caption, which derives from the postapocalyptic role-playing video game series "Fallout" (Knowyourmeme 2020b), states that "[w]ar never changes." Its pathos is ironically twisted in view of the meme's imagery, which shows a scene that contradicts the horrific visuals usually associated with war. We see Pepe in the role of a meme warrior sitting in front of his screens, safe and sound. The meme plays with the continuities between physical wars and disembodied online wars like the Great Meme War by referencing historical means of psychological warfare, such as the abovementioned ace of spades and war paint. The meme thereby hints at aspects of "traditional" war that persist in memetic warfare, itself considered a type of psychological warfare (Finkelstein 2011). At the same time, the viewer's attention is directed to the discontinuities between conventional and digital warfare as the portrayed "warrior" is cosplaying a Vietnam soldier while involving himself in memetic operations via the internet and not risking his life in combat.

What strikes me is that none of Pepe's limbs are visible—neither his arms nor legs, nor in fact his keyboard or computer mouse. Realistically speaking, he would not be able to produce memes like this, regardless of the fact that the memes on his screens are opened in Microsoft Paint. Since no other parts of his body are visible except for his head, it almost looks as if his office chair could be replacing his body, and the fact that the chair lacks wheels adds to the impression that Pepe is not particularly agile in his seat. Thus, to my mind, the image transmits a sense of physical impairment, amputation, and immobility, and, consequently, of a lack of agency, while at the same time conveying the impression of bizarre, nonhuman limblessness or even disembodiment on the part of the meme warrior Pepe. Rather than as a physical hero, he seems to (self-ironically) portray himself as an intellectual hero, mainly consisting of an enormous frog's brain. I define self-irony (*Selbstironie*) here as a humorous, distanced approach toward oneself and one's own actions, which does not necessarily or exclusively rest on deprecation. Disembodiment is further referenced through the boundlessly reproducible digital bodies of Pepe-as-Trump or Trump-as-Pepe in the screens. I find it revealing that both the meme warrior and the Trump-as-Pepes are depicted as belonging to the same "species." Their sameness could suggest that either the maker of this (self-)portrayal identifies with Trump in admiration or, alternatively, he could narcissistically project his own image onto Trump, suggesting that Trump only served as a front man who was created and steered by a horde of meme warriors. The obscure nature of this connection stands in contrast to the impression (or illusion?) of transparency transmitted in the image: the fact that Pepe is depicted slightly from above adds to the feeling that the viewer is able to observe all his online activities. Yet, as his body is not visible, something opaque about him remains. This mode of playfully blurring the fine line between overtly exposed and opaque features, which renders superfluous the need to conceal at all any questionable aspects of oneself, is evocative of the abovementioned "simulacrum" figure of Trump (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022, 113), who as a billionaire pretended to be close to the man-in-the-street. Trump's meme-like qualities are what appealed to trolls on 4chan.

Depth-Hermeneutics

In their first affective responses to the meme, the participants of the IG oscillated mainly between a sense of uneasiness caused by the meme-warrior's smug grin, which many participants perceived as being aggressive, and the notion that his existence is pathetic. The former impression, that there seems to be something "malicious" and "scary" about Pepe, even evoked an annihilation fantasy in one participant, who suggested that it would be "great if [Pepe] could set his place on fire with his cigarette butt right now." Another participant ascribed supernatural powers to Pepe, who she imagined was able to "direct streams of images straight from his brain into the screens" and "replicate them ad infinitum." The latter, more sympathetic impression came up in another participant's fantasy about the pictured meme warrior, which he imagined as a "dressed up, disabled

boy, who wants to be strong but is taken for a ride as part of the electoral campaign, doing unpaid labor for a power politician while being told 'you are a soldier, a real, strong soldier.'" Moreover, Pepe's office chair evoked fecal associations in some participants, who playfully referred to it as the "poop chair" or "shit chair."[9] Emotional responses ranging from disgust and pity to uneasiness and awe reveal a perceived contradiction between the "idiotic/cringy/self-ironic" (self-)portrayal of the meme warrior as a "poor little sausage" (as some participants called him, using a German idiom meaning "poor wretch") and the uncanny potential of memes as impalpable yet powerful propaganda tools.

The latter reading kept the IG occupied for some time. One part of the group, reading the meme warrior as a self-portrait or at least a figure the meme's author identifies with, tried to understand why he might voluntarily take on what they interpreted as to some degree a condescending view of himself by depicting the figure as a "little sausage." One (male) participant construed Pepe's "casual warrior-like disguise" as an indication of a self-ironic perspective on the meme maker's own masculinity. He imagined him to be aware of the fact that, in contrast to "real" soldiers, the meme warrior does not put his body at risk. Hence the soldierly costume would serve the purpose of connecting him, and the scene he seems to address, with an—otherwise lost—male tradition, helping such meme warriors come to terms with the "pettiness of their own existence." On a related note, another participant assumed that the meme's author might be making fun of his own delusions of grandeur in the depicted scene. Emphasizing what they perceived as Pepe's smug/mad/self-elevating gaze, however, three other participants brought their less sympathetic reading into play again: "Pepe might let you look over his shoulders only to then show his true colors—'actually we *are* dangerous soldiers, not little nerds.'"

I interpret the two conflicting readings that surfaced in the IG—a reading that ascribed to the meme warrior conviction about the seriousness of his soldiership, and a reading that attributed to him consciousness of his rather unheroic existence—as an indication of the ironic *denial* of the longing for a form of heroism that remains bound to the suffering and sacrifice of "real" bodies. Sigmund Freud sees denial as a form of defense by means of which the recognition of a reality that is experienced as traumatizing is disavowed (Laplanche and Pontalis 2019, 595–98). He uses the term primarily in connection with fetishism, which he associates with the simultaneous recognition and denial of woman's penislessness (596). In other words: the fetishist denies a physical lack (Decker 2019, 6). Drawing on the concept of denial, I understand the fact that in this meme—as well as in many others I have studied from the Great Meme War (Schmidt 2021b, forthcoming)—the authors' own longing for the heroic seems to be exhibited but at the same time denied by means of irony, as a defense against latent

9 Interestingly, this association seems to resonate with Krüger's (2021, 244) account of the obsession with "dirt and excrement in online male subcultures."

feelings of insecurity, narcissistic injury, and powerlessness caused by the loss, in post-heroic societies, of meaning derived from traditional body-bound heroisms. Against this backdrop, I read the creation of the figure of the meme warrior—who ironically references the aesthetics of the war hero (the depicted Pepe is still wearing soldierly gear such as a combat helmet), but whose body remains unscathed in virtual battles—as an expression of the desire to immunize the *image* of the (male) warrior body against its feared superfluity and powerlessness in times of increasingly automated warfare. In the online sphere, the image of the (meme) warrior circulates in abundance, appearing virtually immortal: as a meme, it could be infinitely reproduced and modified. As Strick (2021, 200, original emphasis) aptly points out in contrast to Theweleit, "the body politics of reflexive fascism [focus] also and always on a *digital* and *late capitalist* body that seeks its salvation in other *embodiments* (the network, avatar, meme, anonymity, dissimulation, shitpost, disruptive action) [rather] than in soldierly armor." In my view, the figure of the far-right meme warrior outlined here demonstrates how "soldierly armor" is both abolished and preserved *pictorially* in such new "embodiments." Ironically denied is the fact that the need for physical sacrifices in the struggle for higher ideals, "lost" in the context of the meme war, renders redundant a core meaning traditionally ascribed to the heroic (Münkler 2006, 310).

In the meme example, the meme warrior's figure is reduced to his head, that is, he is depicted without arms and legs, and the office chair seems to replace his body entirely. I read this as a form of preemptive self-amputation or castration. Rather than conforming to the ideal of a physically strong warrior, the meme-warrior Pepe appears to be identified with his intellectual prowess—a feature Kendall (2011) has associated with "geek masculinity." I interpret this voluntary identification with a nerdy and flabby or even bodiless "little sausage" that nevertheless overtly exposes its unfulfilled desire to be a "real" soldier as an attempt to preserve a degree of control (or at least the illusion of control) over the meme warrior's own image. Instead of having to fear that the desire for an unbroken heroic ideal of masculinity is curtailed by others (for example by feminists, who are experienced as a threat) or called into doubt by automated war technologies, the (presumably male) producer of the meme might subconsciously have attempted preemptively to contain any feelings of inadequacy regarding his heroic potency. By presenting himself, ahead of any external evaluation with respect to his heroic qualities, in an ironic relation to them, the meme warrior at the very least remains the master of his own likeness.

I believe this thesis about the meme warriors' ironic denial of the longing for a body-bound form of heroism and the wish to remain master of the (semi-ironic) image of the heroic soldier in the post-heroic online sphere holds true for many of the memes of the Great Meme War, which portray the figure of the meme warrior by referencing "real" wars and soldiers. Yet, with regard to the "War never changes" meme, I wonder to what extent this analysis itself rests on a reverse form of denial. Overall, our IG gave more space to the discussion of the meme warrior's overtly displayed, unfulfilled longing to be a "real" soldier, as well as to his "disgusting" and "impotent" (self-)depiction, than

to the actual threat his activities might pose to democracy. Even though it took place after the IG session, one might think that the 2021 US Capitol insurrection was at least indirectly influenced by the online subculture that brought forth the figure of the meme warrior. The fact that we paid more attention to the confusing display of the meme-warrior's self-ironic yet nostalgic soldierly cosplay could be due to a defense on our side against the scary implications of the far-right meme warrior's disembodied potency—the efficacy of memes as they are used as weapons in psychological warfare that can have real-world consequences. Thus, the question remains open as to how far meme-warrior Pepe's smug smile rests on a delusion of grandeur of this "poor little sausage." Or is he, knowingly, one step ahead of us in coming to terms with—and strategically appropriating—the detachment of heroic fantasies from the material basis of the mortal human body? In either case, the figure of the far-right meme warrior seems to add yet another, more unsettling dimension to the debate on the controversial notion of the post-heroic. In Bröckling's view (2020, 11):

> The decrease and intensification of heroic energies march in parallel. Traditional fields of trial fade, while new heroes romp about in formerly hero-free zones. The appellative power of heroic narratives may be diminishing, but their entertainment value seems unimpaired. What we can no longer tolerate as a binding role model, we seek all the more passionately in the spheres of the imagination.

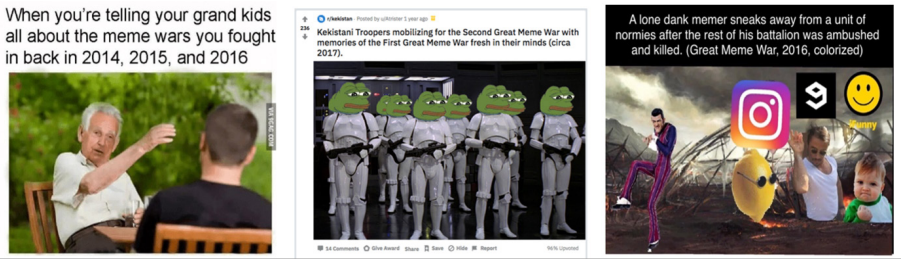

Figure 5. Other examples of partly ironic (self-)portrayals of meme warriors.

I interpret the changing guises of heroic fantasies and symbolizations in the Great Meme War as a historically specific response to what Rolf Pohl (2019) calls the male "dependency-autonomy-dilemma"—a dilemma he locates at the heart of any constructs of masculinity in male-dominated societies (Pohl 2010, 17, 21). Pohl is highly skeptical of rushed and all-too-time-based diagnoses of a "crisis of masculinity," arguing that in societies that are based on hierarchical gender relations, the culturally and psychosocially produced construct of a dominant, autonomous masculinity constitutes a state of crisis in and of itself on a structural level. The fact that the male demand for autonomy is perceived to be threatened by women and femininity (and by female sexuality in particular) leads to the development of a paranoid (and often violent) defense against

everything associated with femininity, which, on an unconscious level, is marked by the coexistence of anxiety, lust, and hatred (18). In "times of outer and inner crises," the "fragile" construct of masculinity has to be "repaired or recreated over and over again" (Pohl 2019, 427). Traditionally, the military and war itself served as "institutions for the 'fabrication of masculinity.'" Thus, rather than interpreting the creation of the figure of the ambivalent meme warrior as an expression of a narrowly conceived temporary crisis of a lost, threatened, "dispossessed" white masculinity (Rosenthal 2020; Kimmel 2017; Hochschild 2016), I understand the stabilizing function it offers by immunizing the image of a male warrior body as a "solution" to the abiding dependency-autonomy dilemma. Rather than merely expressing either the "wishful identification with or strategic disavowal of the alpha male ideal" (Ging 2017, 16) on the level of ("hybrid") hegemonic-male discourse, the meme warrior's ironic denial of heroic-masculine ideals also serves the psychological purpose of rendering subconscious anxieties rooted in the "dilemma of masculinity" (Pohl 2019, 19).

He Will Not Divide Us (HWNDU): The Appeal of an Impish Collective Geek-Heroism

As I have argued, the context of the meme war offers self-identified meme warriors a post-heroic playground for (self-ironically) imagining themselves as part of a larger far-right project based on online heroism, while not requiring them to take physical risks—an identification that primarily provoked puzzlement and discomfort in our depth-hermeneutic study group. Of all the memes we discussed, our depth-hermeneutic IG was most positively disposed toward a meme that illustrates the far-right's geeky and persistent disruption of a work of art entitled "He Will Not Divide Us," created by an artistic trio made up of Shia LaBeouf, Nastja Rönkkö, and Luke Turner (Knowyourmeme 2020c). As part of their project, the artists installed a camera outside of the Museum of the Moving Image in New York underneath the statement "He Will Not Divide Us" (figure 6). They invited the public to position themselves in front of the camera to take a stand against Trump by repeating the mantra "He Will Not Divide Us" (Völzke 2018). The participatory online performance, which could either be witnessed on site or as a livestream, was initiated in 2017 as a response to Trump's election and was supposed to run for the duration of his presidency. It did not take long, however, before anons from /pol/, MAGA (Make America Great Again) influencers, and "celebrities" from various factions of the far right began to use the platform to provoke their liberal opponents with far-right slurs and to share their ironic in-jokes from the time of the Great Meme War (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022, 174–75). On January 26, 2017, one of the artists, the famous Hollywood actor Shia LaBeouf, who had "lost control by day three" (176) of the project, supposedly attacked in front of the museum a man who had insulted him on the livestream, and was arrested by the police on the basis of a formal complaint (179). As a result, the museum ended the collaboration with the artists. The work was initially reinstalled outside the El Rey Theatre in Albuquerque, but after gun

shots were heard on the livestream it was stopped again—this time by the artists. On March 8, 2017, the livestream was moved to an "unknown location," where a flag with the words "He Will Not Divide Us" (figure 7) was displayed (Knowyourmeme 2020c).

Figure 6. Shia LaBeouf in front of his video installation at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York City.

Figure 7. The HWNDU-flag installed in an "unknown location" as documented on the livestream.

According to a /pol/-friendly YouTuber, it only took thirty-eight hours for /pol/ users to locate the flag in Greenville, Tennessee, via a geeky collective undertaking that made use of light conditions, plane contrails and noises, a mathematical triangulation method, and astronomical navigation. The meme below (figure 8) portrays the anon(s) who stole the flag and replaced it with a MAGA-cap and T-shirt (Internet Historian 2017). As a consequence of this intervention the artistic trio transferred their work to Liverpool, in the United Kingdom, but removed it again after a masked man appeared on the roof of a house in the livestream (Knowyourmeme 2020c). Given that the video was interrupted shortly afterward, users of 4chan and 8chan speculated that this man, too, would have stolen the flag. After a short stopover in Lodz, Poland, the project was finally installed in the cultural center Le Lieu Unique in Nantes, France, where it stayed until the project officially ended in January 2021 (HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US 2021).

Figure 8. Meme referencing the capture of the "HWNDU" flag

Segment Analysis

The meme shows three Pepe-the-Frog figures in a remote nocturnal landscape, one of which is carrying the abovementioned "He Will Not Divide Us" flag, and they seem to be running away from another popular meme figure with a raised fist, the angry "Crying Wojak" (Knowyourmeme 2022). The latter represents Shia LaBeouf—the outfit of the figure is in line with photographs of clothes the artist was wearing at one of his appearances at the site of the video installation in New York. LaBeouf's raised fist could be read as an expression of fury, or as a leftist salute symbolizing resistance and group solidarity (Political Symbols 2021). The "Crying Wojak" face is "driven to tears and clenching his teeth" (Knowyourmeme 2022) to express frustration and sadness; on 4chan, it often appears in combination with the line "IT'S NOT FAAAAAIIIIIIR." Initially, the Crying Wojak mostly appeared in conjunction with "Smug Pepe" in so-called "Pepe x Wojak" memes that depicted hostile encounters between the two memetic characters in which Wojak would usually be defeated by Smug Pepe (Knowyourmeme 2022). In this meme, accordingly, three Pepes are sprinting away from LaBeouf-Wojak, who stands no chance of catching them. Two of them are crying tears of spiteful joy. In the purple night sky above them, we see a constellation in the shape of a Smug Pepe and the words "Praise Kek." This ironic online cult was based on the veneration of the ancient Egyptian god of darkness, Kek, which, in its male form, was depicted with a frog's head. On 4chan, Pepe the Frog is regarded as a "modern avatar of the deity, who uses ancient Egyptian meme magic to influence the world" (Knowyourmeme 2020d).

The meme illustrates the successful culmination, in capturing the flag, of the anons' endeavor to capture the artists' work. Given that there are three Pepes stealing the flag, the single Wojak figure does not seem to stand any chance of recapturing it. He seems to have lost control over the message that is printed on it. As mentioned above, the phrase "He Will Not Divide Us" refers to Trump's presidency and evokes the (ancient) strategy of "divide and rule," which implies the creation or strengthening of divisions among subjects as a means for expanding or maintaining power. Emphasizing the

importance of unity in resistance to divisive policies, the words on the flag stand in contrast to the illustrated scene, which is defined by the obvious disunity between the triumphant Pepes and the pranked, outraged, inferior Wojak. Yet, since one of the Pepes is holding the "He Will Not Divide Us" flag, the meaning of the sentence shifts and it can also be read to mean that Shia LaBeouf is, in fact, dividing them and they are in heroic resistance against a form of tyranny (i.e., the "establishment") that he stands for in their eyes.

The spectator's seeming closeness to one of the Pepes makes them appear not only winning but also more approachable in comparison with the small figure of LaBeouf running after them in the background. This imbalance is further underlined by the smug smile of the Pepe constellation in the sky, which seems to charge the environment with a far-right blessing, perhaps representing "meme magic." Even the stars, which provided the anons with helpful hints in their search for the "unknown location" of the flag, seem to have formed an alliance with the Pepes. This religious association also appears in the triangular composition of the three Pepes, with the one in the middle carrying the flag in a manner evocative of religious parades in which a holy object is ritually carried by an altar boy. This might add to the impression that this object is very important to them, perhaps as a kind of relic or trophy. I do, however, assume that the Pepes' mischievous pleasure is related more to Shia LaBeouf's fury than the actual possession of the flag. In other words, their relationship to the flag and its message seems to be mediated through their opponent, who gives the impression of being extremely invested in the values the flag stands for.

Depth-Hermeneutic Interpretation

Interestingly, the participants of the IG were initially polarized about the figures depicted in the meme: while half of them identified with LaBeouf/Wojak, felt sorry for him, and perceived the mercilessness of the trolls as "cruel," the other half of the group identified with the rebellious-triumphant schadenfreude of the three Pepe figures. The Pepes evoked associations with naughty schoolboys, scouts, and fraternity fellows, but also with antifa activists who stole German flags from gardens during the 2014 soccer World Cup.[10] Based on his outfit, LaBeouf/Wojak was believed to signify a vanilla hipster, a leftist intellectual, or a "Berkeley student." Among those sympathetic to LaBeouf/Wojak, one participant shared her fantasy that he was like a helpless elderly man, humiliated by "adolescent potheads that piss or puke in his front yard." In the unsympathetic group, the scene reminded one participant of a game of capture-the-flag she'd recently played, and the joyful rush of adrenalin she had felt. In the participant's

10 During the 2014 World Cup in Germany, when the German team won, many Germans displayed German flags as a symbol of renewed national pride, placing them on their cars or in their allotment gardens. This was met with opposition by antifascists, who took the flags down (see Kapitelmann 2016).

words: "it was so wicked to steal this flag!" Another participant highlighted how LaBeouf's furious reactions to the trolls and his repeated attempts to bring the project to safe places invited mockery of the "pretentiousness" of the artist, who embodied a self-important liberal elite with institutional power. He had initiated a large-scale performance in public space only to make a "huge scene" when it did not work out according to his plans.

While the initial identifications were split, most participants' affective attachments shifted a couple of times in the course of the discussion. This was especially marked among those who initially felt sorry for LaBeouf/Wojak but came to relate to the schadenfreude of the Pepes. All participants rated LaBeouf's angry reactions to the anons' interference as a complete failure. Inviting the public to be part of a participatory performance directed against the far right during a culture war without anticipating that trolls or Nazis might join in seemed utterly naive to everyone. The sense of powerlessness and the fragility of the artist caused vicarious embarrassment, regret, and anger among participants, which prompted some of them to suggest ways LaBeouf could have handled the situation better. One participant proposed that he could have stopped the livestream and stated publicly that there seemed to be no space for the HWNDU flag in the contemporary US. Another suggested that Trump's opponents could have reproduced the flag and set it up everywhere in the country, rendering capture impossible. The group suspected that LaBeouf had been too invested in controlling the message he had authored and, as a part of an "elitist art bubble," too out of touch with society and therefore unable to originate a broader movement beyond the infrastructure of large institutions. Some participants did, however, feel moved to protect LaBeouf from the group's harsh criticism by emphasizing his Jewish family background as a possible explanation for his thin-skinned reaction to Nazi slurs. They also suggested that it is generally harder to produce the "right" kind of art in times of political polarization, which might drive artists to become more explicit and less multilayered in their works.

Finally, the group attended to the "He Will Not Divide Us" message itself, raising the question of who is actually included in "us": Did it address the part of US society that had not voted for Trump as a kind of "internal call for perseverance"? Did it presume a fictional liberal "we" that had supposedly only recently been divided by hate and harassment, rather than by the deeper tensions of an already antagonistic society? The IG observed that the phrase is formulated negatively, in response to, and hence in some way dependent on, Trump, without suggesting any direction of its own. One participant shared the feeling that the image seemed completely "nailed shut" (i.e., closed) to him, as he could not relate to the hatred of either side. As a communist, he claimed he was able to identify with the three Pepes' rebellious impulse against the liberal establishment and their culture wars, which he, too, regards as elitist. "Running with LaBeouf/Wojak" seemed like a complete "waste of energy" to him, but he would not want to take the others' side either. He tried to think of alternative ways of "entering the image," for instance by stealing the flag from the Pepes while running diagonally through the picture, or by running across with a different (perhaps a red) flag—but neither of these

alternatives were particularly satisfying to him as they seemed somewhat detached from the existing conflict captured in the image.

The "Wound" of Liberal Democracy

I believe the fact that the geeky anons' disruption of Shia LaBeouf's work attracted relatively high levels of sympathy in our group of leftist scholars points to an aspect of far-right meme culture that seems to have broader appeal, and which should not be underestimated: sometimes, right-wing memes lay bare the inner contradictions and sore points of the liberal status quo. The unfulfilled promise of equality, and the spiritless, corny language this is cloaked in, invite ridicule from people across the political spectrum. In the case of "He Will Not Divide Us," it seemed to be the very invocation of an undivided American people ("us") allegedly rent asunder by an external entity ("him"/Trump), as articulated by an artistic elite, that antagonized not only an amorphous and anonymous horde of trolls but also part of our group of left-leaning researchers. Inspired by Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995, 212), one might argue that the claim or hope expressed in "He Will Not Divide Us" points directly to the weak spot of modern democracies, "where the civic community unites extremes of social inequality and conflicting interests" and, hence, "the 'common good' shared by citizens must be a much more tenuously abstract notion." As she demonstrates, the Founding Fathers of the United States defined "the people" as a "disaggregated collection of private individuals whose public aspect was represented by a distant central state" (219), rather than as an active citizen community whose rule would have had social implications ensuring the "balance of power between the rich and the poor" (204). Capitalism has furthered this reduction of democracy to liberalism (234): in capitalist democracy, political equality not only exists in juxtaposition to socioeconomic inequality but "leaves it fundamentally intact" (213). Against this backdrop, the appeal in "He Will Not Divide Us" to an overarching but at the same time empty and conflict-free "us"—a unity that is supposed to be sustained in the face of an external threat—appears to be completely blind to the divergent class interests within.

Considering the ideological roots of the US democratic system might help explain why our IG of left-leaning scholars was, to some extent, sympathetic to the anons' ludically heroic interference with LaBeouf's work. What resonated with them was the fact that the anons seemed to question the liberal self-understanding of an overarching, yet empty, "democratic civic community," one which appears to externalize antagonistic forces rather than recognizing them as an immanent structure and blind spot of liberal-capitalist democracy. For the anons' part, however, I read their acts of trolling as an instance of "libertarian authoritarianism," as Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022) conceptualize it, rather than as a *conscious* critique of the contradictions inherent in liberal-capitalist democracy. They understand the aggressive demonstration of the individual's independence as a symptom of late modern individualization as much as a protest against it (181). While individuals are, more than ever, addressed as self-

determined subjects, they are not in control of the societal conditions on the grounds of which they are supposed to develop competitive autonomy (174). Hence, whenever society does not fulfil the wished-for promise of unrestrained self-expression, it causes a wound in the subject (182). In my opinion, the anons' stubborn attempts to expose the limits of the artists' invitation to the public to participate in the work—or, in more general terms, their attempts to "defend" free speech by transgressing its socially acceptable boundaries—can be understood precisely in this way: as a rebellion "against late modern society but *in the name of* its core norms: self-determination and self-realization" (174, original emphasis). Curiously enough, the limbless Pepe warrior from the first meme, which appeared to be glued to his office chair, "doing unpaid labor for a power politician while being told 'you are a soldier, a real, strong soldier,'" did not give the impression of being particularly autonomous and free.

Conclusion

With reference to these two memes from the Great Meme War, I have tried to shed light on two different (post-)heroic identification offers, which, in my view, help us better understand the appeal far-right memetic warfare holds to both an "ingroup" of meme warriors and sympathizers ("War never changes") and to a more general audience, an "outgroup" that does not share this political orientation from the start ("He Will Not Divide Us"). This is achieved, firstly, through offering an indestructible disembodied type of post-heroic hero, who does not need to take any physical risks and ironically denies his longing for heroism while immunizing heroic fantasies against the shrinking relevance of the male warrior body. And, secondly, it is achieved through the malicious and playful collective geek-heroism that finds its target in the well-intentioned but naive liberal hope for a unity that ignores diverging class interests. It was my intention to critically reflect on the affective allure of the identification offers and ironic stances inherent in those memes, especially in light of the sociopolitical and technological/material conditions that structure today's Western societies.

In view of the first meme discussed, I interpreted the psychic functions of ironic representations of far-right heroism as an attempt to ward off heroism's perceived loss of meaning—at a time when increasingly automated warfare diminishes the relevance of the (male) warrior body—and the narcissistic mortification that accompanies this loss. In this context, I understand the overt identification with unheroic qualities (like flabbiness, limblessness, a nerdy couch-potato lifestyle, etc.) as an attempt to ironically express feelings of heroic inadequacy ahead of time, as a kind of preemptive self-castration, in order to gain some control over them. The question remains how far we ought to fear the disembodied potency the meme warriors might, in fact, possess beyond their nostalgic-ironic soldierly cosplay. This post-heroic identification offer seemed rather repellent and/or frightening to the participants of the left-leaning depth-hermeneutic interpretation group and would perhaps be more alluring to self-identified meme warriors. The second part of this article, however, sought to demonstrate the

potential of far-right meme culture to attract people from other political backgrounds too. In light of the meme that provoked the most positive reactions in our interpretation group, a memetic illustration of the anons' ludically heroic, collective capture of the work "He Will Not Divide Us," I argued that these reactions revealed the "wounds" of liberal society. What aroused sympathy in parts of our left-leaning IG was the troll's malicious flaying of liberal self-understanding, which appeared to be implied in the slogan "He Will Not Divide Us." I tried to get to the root of the participants' identification with the trolls' disruptive impulse by drawing on Meiksins Wood's (1995) Marxist analysis of the inclusive but socially barren concept of "the people" inherent in the liberal-capitalist democratic system of the United States. However, rather than as a conscious critique of liberal-capitalist democracy, I read the actions of the libertarian and fascist pranksters that disrupted LaBeouf's work as a symptom of late modern individualization, with recourse to Amlinger and Nachtwey's (2022) concept of "offended freedom."

In this article, I have brought together literature from Anglophone and German-speaking discourses on constructs of (far-right) online and offline masculinities. Pohl's work (2019, 2010), in particular, inspired me to conceptualize the genesis of the ambivalent figure of the far-right meme warrior as a context-specific response to the "state of crisis" that lies at the core of "all constructs of masculinity in male dominated societies," rather than associating this figure with a temporary crisis of angry white men "dispossessed" by the financial crisis, globalization, or the rise of feminism (Rosenthal 2020; Kimmel 2017; Hochschild 2016). I have tried to demonstrate that a psychoanalytic social-psychological perspective (Lorenzer 1986, 2016) can be enriching for the study of the (online) far right's ideals of masculinity and uses of memetic irony: it offers a deeper understanding not only of the cultural artifacts as objects of study but also of the material and psycho-social structures they emerge from—structures at work in both the subjects whose symbolic interactions we study and in us as we affectively respond to them. The close study of the different reactions of members of our depth-hermeneutic interpretation group to the two memes led me to interpret those artifacts as responses to two narcissistic injuries that touch on the "fragile" construct of a potent and autonomous—and thus dependency-fearing (Pohl 2010, 2019)—masculinity. The first wound is caused by the growing superfluousness of the heroic sacrifice tied to the male warrior's body. The second relates to the false promises of capitalism, which invoke fantasies of self-determination while, in fact, obstructing subjects from being in control of the societal conditions on the grounds of which they are to perform competitive autonomy. In this connection, the use of memetic (self-)irony might serve as a sort of "filling/plug" the way Fritz Morgenthaler (1974, 1081–82) described it—as a creative way of "prosthetically" and "perversely" patching the void caused by those narcissistic wounds—rather than enabling a more profound (and potentially emancipatory) exploration of what caused them.

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Memes

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