The hyperreality of the Alt Right: how meme magic works to create a space for far right politics.

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Introduction

During the run up to the 2016 US presidential election a new political movement began coming to media attention. The “Alt Right” kicked against the conservative right wing norms of contemporary politics, seeming to draw a broad coalition of internet based movements into a single umbrella. Looking first at a key political base for the Alt Right, 4Chan¹, I intend to show how the Alt Right have taken on an ironic and irreverent mode of communication in a way that aligns with their movements political ambitions in order to build a base of support. I do this through two key frameworks: the notion of hyperreality and simulation put forwards by Baudrillard², that I use to understand the internet culture that the Alt Right have sprung from and it’s disconnection from reality; and Bourdieu's habitus³, that I contend can be applied to nihilistic memes to understand how hyperreal modes of internet humour can overflow to form our political compass.

Who are the Alt Right?

Being a relatively new phenomenon it can be hard to pin down exactly who the Alt Right are; it's certainly a movement in flux, and the boundaries of what is and isn't Alt Right are a regular point of contention. There's been a common argument that the Alt Right is little more than a re-branded neonazi movement, and that using the term 'Alt Right' simply helps the movement normalise itself. However, there are important distinctions between the Alt Right and the far right movements of the past; while white nationalism certainly seems to be the core of the movement, as Lyons argues, many others in the movement are "focused on reasserting male dominance or other forms of elitism rather than race."⁴

1 Matthew N. Lyons, ‘Ctrl-Alt-Delete: The Origins and Ideology of the Alternative Right’ (Somerville, MA: Political Research Associates, 20 January 2017), <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/01/20/ctrl-alt-delete-report-on-the-alternative-right/>.

2 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Reprinted (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008).

4 Lyons, ‘Ctrl-Alt-Delete’, 2.

Lyon's goes on to make the point that the Alt Right are, as a rule, not anti-Semites⁵; even, at times, working alongside Jewish writers such as Milo Yiannopoulos, a past editor for Breitbart news, who self describes as a "gay Jew"⁶ - certainly someone who would not be at home in neonazi movements. However, it would be unwise to ignore the strong undercurrent of anti-Semitism that does run through the Alt Right: The Daily Stormer, who claim the Alt Right as "our burgeoning movement", make the case that "if we were to identify a singular core principle of the Alt-Right, it would be anti-Semitism".⁷ This highlights some of the disparities and internal conflicts within the movement today, to highlight that this is not a homogeneous singular movement, but rather "a loosely organised far-right movement"⁸ that includes many different forms of elitism. If there is one uniting aspect to the Alt Right it is probably the background in certain forms of internet culture, Bokhari describes them as being "a movement born out of the youthful, subversive, underground edges of the internet"⁹ centred on sites such as 4chan and 8chan.¹⁰ This shared background has set a particular tone of communication for the Alt Right, one that I argue below has allowed it to build an ideological base on a doctrine that would otherwise have been confined to the far limits of acceptable discourse.

The hyperreality of the meme

In order to understand how the Alt Right have built such a broad platform we first need to look at the culture that has, by and large, formed the base of the movement. Lyons places the centre of the growing post-2015 Alt Right as being found on "4chan and 8chan, various Reddit sub-communities,

5 Ibid., 7.

6 'Milo Yiannopoulos: Who Is the Alt-Right Writer and Provocateur?', *BBC News*, 21 February 2017, sec. US & Canada, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39026870>.

7 Andrew Anglin, 'Can't Kike the Alt-Right (With Questions for Milo Yiannopoulos)', *Daily Stormer*, accessed 26 March 2017, <http://www.dailystormer.com/cant-kike-the-alt-right-with-questions-for-milo-yiannopoulos/>.

8 Lyons, 'Ctrl-Alt-Delete', 2.

9 Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, 'An Establishment Conservative's Guide To The Alt-Right', *Breitbart*, 29 March 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>.

10 Lyons, 'Ctrl-Alt-Delete', 4; Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, 'An Establishment Conservative's Guide To The Alt-Right'.

and The Right Stuff blog and podcasts”¹¹ while Bokhari focuses primarily on 4chan and 8chan¹², and Armistead lists “4chan (especially the /pol/ board), 8chan, My Posting Career, and The Right Stuff”¹³ We can see that the most common thread seems to be centering on 4chan, the anarchic ‘image board’ that has been credited with fostering a range of cultural phenomenon, from the hacker group Anonymous, to mass shootings in the US¹⁴. McKelvey describes the content of 4chan as “ironic, sarcastic, non-sensical and subversive”¹⁵, and Milner explains how the combination of anonymity, and content that soon disappears, “has developed an ‘anything goes’ reputation”¹⁶ “that favours distanced irony and critique”¹⁷. Underneath this ironic, distanced, and ‘anything goes’ mode of communication is a deeply nihilistic view of the world which encourages posters to mass shootings; offering advice, and celebrating the actualisation of what could otherwise be read as violent fantasy.¹⁸

This violent fantasy, that blurs the line with actuality, is something that I’d like to dig into a little further by looking at reactions to Richard Spencer, the unofficial spokesperson of the Alt Right, getting punched on camera during the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2017.¹⁹ The event was captured on video by ABC broadcasting, and soon spread throughout the internet. There were lots of memes created in response to the event, mostly remixing the punch video itself in various ways. For

11 Lyons, ‘Ctrl-Alt-Delete’, 4.

12 Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, ‘An Establishment Conservative’s Guide To The Alt-Right’.

13 Josephine Armistead, *The Silicon Ideology*, 2016, 10, <http://archive.org/details/the-silicon-ideology>.

14 Angela Nagle, ‘The New Man of 4chan’, *The Baffler*, 8 March 2016, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/new-man-4chan-nagle>.

15 Fenwick McKelvey, Matthew Tiessen, and Luke Simcoe, ‘A Consensual Hallucination No More? The Internet as Simulation Machine’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4–5 (1 August 2015): 588, doi:10.1177/1367549415584856.

16 Ryan M. Milner, ‘Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz’, *The Fibreculture Journal* 22 (1 December 2013): 69.

17 Ibid., 62.

18 Nagle, ‘The New Man of 4chan’.

19 Jesse Ferreras, ‘Richard Spencer, Activist Who Said “Hail Trump,” Punched during TV Interview’, *Global News*, 20 January 2017, <http://globalnews.ca/news/3196061/richard-spencer-punched/>.

my purposes now though I want to look at a comic that Spencer himself tweeted in the aftermath (see figure 1).²⁰

Figure 1: Redpanels comic reacting to Spencer being punched.

By posting this comic Spencer is playing on being called a Nazi, and holding up the comic as a joke that seeks to nullify the claims themselves. Baudrillard talks about Disneyland as being “presented as imaginary in order to make use believe that the rest is real”²¹, similarly here we see Spencer is holding up an outlandish imaginary of his ideals in order to make us believe that the reality is not the same. By using such incredibly potent symbols as the swastika and concentration camp he completely divorces the image from any reality, it becomes a simulacrum, “it has no relation to any reality whatsoever”²² except to contain the signs of a past horror. But these signs (the swastika and the

20 Richard Spencer, ‘Pic.Twitter.Com/RPqkRhQ28q’, microblog, @RichardBSpencer, (2 February 2017), <https://twitter.com/RichardBSpencer/status/827239243214827520>; ‘Redpanels: The Alternative Webcomic’, accessed 23 March 2017, <http://redpanels.com/354/>.

21 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 10.

22 Ibid., 6.

concentration camp) are so powerful as to be “exchanged for meaning”;²³ they no longer directly represent the greater reality of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but come to exist in and of themselves as pure simulacrum. Spencer is surely not unaware of this; by playing with this symbology he throws people into a maelstrom of definition-stagnation, as they spend so much time trying to decide if he is in fact a Nazi or not they fail to engage with the actuality of his ideology. To paraphrase Baudrillard, “Is the simulator [nazi] or not, given that he produces ‘true’ symptoms?”²⁴ So Spencer himself, by giving every impression of performing the “true symptoms” of Nazism in such a way as to intimate that it may just be a simulation, becomes himself folded into the hyperreality of his memes.

In a podcast discussing 4chan’s influence on the 2016 US election Nagle discusses how “all of this stuff is so steeped in irony, this kind of really detached ironic tone, it’s very hard to know what anyone actually means”.²⁵ The irony that Nagle discusses “is a kind of defence mechanism”²⁶, a way to hide behind multiple layers of irony and make oneself hard to interpret. This sounds remarkably similar to Baudrillard: “He who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning”.²⁷ So, hidden behind these layers of irony, Spencer is free to strike without meaning, or at least with refracted and opaque meaning, and thus shield himself from being “killed by meaning”, or the exposure of a clear picture of his true ideology.

This denial of reality serves a further purpose, especially when it is a shared denial. I argue that much of the extreme looking humour employed by the Alt Right exists within this acceptance of the denial of reality; it’s actors often employ the humour not because it hides their true ideology – as with Spencer – but because it reflects their true lack of ideology. They embrace the hyperreal because it

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 4.

25 Angela Nagle, *From 4Chan to the White House*, Zero Squared, accessed 20 February 2017, <http://zero-books.net/blogs/zero/zero-squared-90-from-4chan-to-the-white-house/>.

26 Ibid.

27 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 103.

represents their experience of existence. But, I contest that this embracing of the falsehood of ideology leaves the door open for dark actualised realities to take hold. It is this process of actualising of the hyperreal that I analyse below.

When humour becomes a habitus

In an anonymous article published in the Guardian the author tells the story of how they, a “lifelong liberal”, began watching months of Alt Right YouTube videos.²⁸ They discuss how they continually kept a separation between themselves and the content by never sharing it and just passively consuming “because, deep down, I knew I was ashamed of what I was doing”.²⁹ Yet, despite this distancing from the content they were consuming, they found themselves expressing Islamophobic sentiment in terms cribbed directly from Alt Right modes of talking; modes of talking that are presented as “innocuous criticism from people claiming to be liberals themselves”.³⁰ Much like the irony of 4chan humour, the careful presentation of Islamophobic content that the author was watching is presented in a disarming way; rather than humour, here it is the veneer of co-opted left and liberal modes of conversation that bridge the watcher into the content. By spending so much time, even passively, living among the ideas that form the basis of these videos, the author comes to pick up “a predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination”³¹ towards the mental frameworks that underlie them. In other words, the author developed a habitus from the field of the Alt Right, that came to be applied in their life outside that. Julien puts this very nicely when discussing the impact of ‘current event’ memes:

28 Anonymous, “‘Alt-Right’ Online Poison Nearly Turned Me into a Racist”, *The Guardian*, 28 November 2016, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/28/alt-right-online-poison-racist-bigot-sam-harris-milo-yiannopoulos-islamophobia>.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Michael Grenfell, ed., *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, Key Concepts (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 51.

“this habitus structures the judgements of agents and their perceptions of the world in such a way that on these occasions agents interpret current events through memes and through the use of distinctive phrases”³²

This ties us back quite nicely to the discussion of memes among 4chan and the Alt Right, here the constant usage of white supremacist, misogynist, and other elitist modes in meme form goes towards creating a habitus that “structures the judgements of agents and their perceptions of the world”³³ so that they begin to see the world outside 4chan with the same judgements. Grenfell talks of habitus as “helping to transform our ways of seeing the social world”³⁴, and here we can see how the habitus of 4chan begins to influence the actors who partake in it’s meme humour (even passively as our author above) to transform their way of seeing the social world in-line with the attitudes displayed in their humour. This impact is not something that is lost on the denizens of 4chan, although they would describe this less in terms of habitus and more in terms of meme magic, wrought by “Kek, the ‘God’ of memes, via which /pol/ ‘believes’ they influence reality”³⁵ - perhaps a good example of the embracing of the hyperreal by the 4chan internet.

This is not to suggest that the memes of 4chan are all a conscious conspiracy by the Alt Right, the Alt Right are as much shaped by the memes of 4chan as they shape them. To put it in the language of practice theory: the portions of the internet where the Alt Right operate represent a field, within which capital (largely social) can be constructed through the generation of memes³⁶, these memes are shaped by, and shape, the habitus of the field, and as we have shown the habitus can

32 Chris Julien, ‘Bourdieu, Social Capital and Online Interaction’, *Sociology* 49, no. 2 (1 April 2015): 369, doi:10.1177/0038038514535862.

33 Ibid.

34 Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 50.

35 Gabriel Emile Hine et al., ‘Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan’s Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web’, *ArXiv:1610.03452 [Physics]*, 11 October 2016, 2, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1610.03452>.

36 Julien, ‘Bourdieu, Social Capital and Online Interaction’, 366–67.

“structure the judgements of agents”³⁷ within the field to be in-line with Alt Right ideology³⁸. As such, they thrive on maintaining ambiguity about their real position, and by continuing to exist within the hyperreal they give space for the meme developed habitus of their followers to feed into their political agenda, without ever having to confront the stark reality of that agenda. In an interview between Richard Spencer and Gavin McInnes we get a glimpse of this veil of irony dropping briefly³⁹; towards the end, after joking together about Social Justice Warriors and the alleged supremacy of Euro-Western culture, Spencer begins to talk about an explicitly White Nationalist vision for America where African-Americans are “asked to leave”. At this point we see McInnes show the first clear emotion of the entire interview, as he looks visibly shocked. The interview had started with McInnes aping common denouncements of Spencer, trading in irony that clearly hid a presumed agreement with Spencer; however, when he does the same technique at the end of the interview we’re no longer sure if this is a simulation, and in this ambiguity it tips over into hyperreality.

There’s another incident where we see Spencer drop the irony which I’d like to draw back to here briefly. Directly after he was punched he posted a video to Periscope discussing what had happened, and how that would influence his behaviour.⁴⁰ The video is quite straightforward, not ironic, and seemingly lacking in humour. He talks straight to the camera, and seems shaken by the events. But crucially he talks primarily about the anti-fascists who had attacked him here, and not his own beliefs. He casts his opponents here as direct, real, and dangerous and denies them the ambiguity of position in which he thrives.

37 Ibid., 369.

38 Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

39 Snafu Matthew, *Richard Spencer Interview on the Gavin McInnes Show*, accessed 23 March 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1775&v=trYignWHQjM.

40 Richard Spencer, ‘The Assault on Me’, <https://www.periscope.tv/w/A1E0uzQ3Njc3OTR8MVlwSmtxUW9WRXdLavoZx0H4atEejgRJ0aCHZ0TQcyVF> FUGoVtIxUMJFNMSK ...’, microblog, @RichardBSpencer, (20 January 2017), <https://twitter.com/RichardBSpencer/status/822571322819641344>.

Summary

Using memes for political aims is certainly not exclusive to the Alt Right. Anderson discusses the way that Hillary Clinton used meta-meming to co-opt memes in the name of political power when launching her Twitter account⁴¹; here Clinton was attempting to bind the hyperreality of meme power to the actuality of political power. For Clinton there was a clear distinction between reality and hyperreality, between power and meme. However, for the Alt Right there isn't this distinction, instead they squash the distinction between meme and power and run headlong into hyperreality. The Alt Right swim in the seas of hyperreality, but through it they build a habitus of hate that allows them to set a beachhead on the shore of actuality. It is the very rejection of meaning that opens the space for their ideology to flourish, and gradually to shape the field in which it operates until the simulation in fact becomes reality.

41 Karrin Vasby Anderson and Kristina Horn Sheeler, 'Texts (and Tweets) from Hillary: Meta-Meming and Postfeminist Political Culture', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1 June 2014): 224–43, doi:10.1111/psq.12111.

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