

10 “May the Force Be with You”: Ukrainian War Humor as a Sign of Resilience

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Recent armed conflicts (Russian full-scale aggression in Ukraine, the Israel– Hamas war) have signalled an increased proliferation of image-based testimonies that are shared widely via social media (Rodley 2016; Góra/Moczoł 2023; Rakityanskaya 2023). Memes and cartoons produced and shared during armed conflicts and political campaigns can be treated as *visual testimony* of these events, but also as a way to attack an opponent (enemy), and to assert one’s *identity*, either individual or collective. These two functions of memes (attack and assert) can be described as *imagefare*. This concept refers to the use of images (memes, photos, cartoons, videos) to create public world views and influence the audience’s perceptions and image of political actors, including how they present themselves in the international arena (Yarchi 2022).

The rise of social media and social networking websites in the 21st century has dramatically transformed the communication landscape. According to Mills (2012), social media enables the transformation of communication from broadcasting (one to many) into social dialogues (many to many) through the networks of active users. Therefore, the emergence of social media turned the role of users from content consumers to content producers. In the digital era, online social media and communication have evolved into a broader collective dimension, which transcends different platforms, reaching new authors and audiences. The boundaries between several actors in the social network are blurred; the difference between professional/amateur and bottom-up/top-down is not as clear as in the past (Shifman 2013).

At the same time, the Internet impacted our sense of humor in various ways. As Attardo put it, “to what extent humor-on-the-internet is different from humor-before-the-internet?” (Attardo 2023:18). First, the Internet has democratized humor and blurred the line between amateur and professional comedians. Second, the boundaries of socially acceptable humor have been pushed. Humor became more transgressive. Transgression is a critical concept in querying contemporary media culture (Gerlofs 2022). Third, audiences are now more informed and fragmented, thanks to the abundance of online content and niche communities. This setting

necessitates content producers to constantly innovate and tailor their material to diverse audiences.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine led to the appearance of a huge number of memes and cartoons in Ukraine spread through the Internet and social media. In the first months of the war, these memes and cartoons provided moral support for Ukrainians, serving as a sign of solidarity and a clear distinction from the enemy ('we' and 'they'). The discursive dimension of the Russian-Ukrainian War within the broader concept of the mediatization of armed conflict and weaponization of humor has been analyzed in previous publications (Semotiuk 2021a; 2021b; 2022; 2023).

As a continuation of the preceding research, this chapter aims to analyze the image of the then Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine General Zaluzhnyi (2021–2024) in Ukrainian humorous discourse. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to: 1) define the analytical framework; 2) analyze the interplay of visual and textual elements, and the use of humor techniques; and 3) address the research questions: 1) *How do the target and focus of political satire influence its setting?* 2) *Is the nature of the event or person depicted in the cartoon/meme interdependent with the choice of a particular humor technique?*

The chapter begins with a description of the theoretical foundations of witnessing and testimony, their social context, and the growing role of visuality in contemporary practices of communication and testimony. The next section analyzes the concepts of political humor and political satire, outlines the differences and similarities between memes and cartoons as basic units of humorous discourse, and describes their main functions and recent tendencies in meme studies.

Visual Testimony: Witnessing with and through Images

Social media and digital communication networks are integral parts of our current visual culture, characterized by the ubiquity of digital photography and imaging technologies (Hand 2012). This shift from the verbal to the visual, from text to image, has led to numerous studies exploring how people engage with visual technologies and environments to seek information, meaning, and pleasure (Kress 2003; Mitchell 2018). Witnessing and testimony have been theorized within a broad framework of epistemological, philosophical, ethical, and media-theoretical perspectives in both journalism and communication studies. An influential body of literature on testimony has been developed concerning the Holocaust (Wieviorka 2006) and 9/11 (Stadlbauer 2012). In this context, it is worth noting that visuality and vision, image, and imaging technologies have shaped theories of testimony. In discourses of witnessing, seeing has been assigned a privileged role, compared with other senses of perception (Zelizer 2007). Building on John Ellis' idea of second-hand witnessing (2000), which assumes that distant viewers "are drawn into the

position of being witnesses" themselves (Ellis 2000:10), the term "media witnessing" has been introduced. This shift from the eye-witness to "witnessing as receptivity" (Frosh/Pinchevski 2009) necessitates a focus on the witnessing text itself. In light of the current primacy of the visual, it becomes obvious that the "witnessing text" today is predominantly image-based.

This new dominance of the visual and visuality has significantly transformed practices of witnessing and, therefore, calls for a new theoretical approach to testimony, such as image testimony. This concept is based on the two terms under question: image and testimony. Testimony includes language-based as well as image-based exemplars and their modulations oscillate between the registers of the verbal and the visual. Language-based testimonies, on the one hand, refer to scripted speech acts that were originally associated with either religious or legal contexts. Image-based testimonies, on the other hand, show a less concise genealogy, though they have precursors in discursive practices that evolved in journalism as well as early visual anthropology using photographic images as an analytical tool and as evidence (Schankweiler et al. 2018).

Testimonies have been recorded and transmitted in different media, embracing the media landscape as it developed. They have been communicated as spoken or written accounts, as literary text illustrations, photographs, or moving images. The social practice of testifying, regardless of the modality, includes the following parameters: a subject who acts as a testifier, an event (or certain facts of this event) that forms the content of the testimony, the testimony itself, as well as an audience to which the testimony is addressed, and, last but not least, a media infrastructure in which the testimony is articulated and circulated. However, these parameters are not fixed entities but are constantly transformed and contested. Through the proliferation of digital image technologies, growing transnational media connectivity, and the increasing number of images fluxing and refluxing around the globe, the human experience has become much more visual (and visualized) than ever before. As a response, scholars in the 1990s made visual culture a new field of inquiry. They examined how individuals use visual technologies and environments to pursue information, significance, and enjoyment (Mirzoeff 2023). Although images have often been addressed as if they were texts composed of discrete entities (e.g. signs, symbols), unfolding in a narrative plane, there are good reasons for trying to overcome such a textual bias. Mitchell (1986: 9) has stressed the agency of images that can make them grow into "actors on the historical stage", but he has also pointed to the difficulties of drawing neat demarcation lines between images and texts as they more often than not intermingle and interact. According to Mitchell (1994: 5), the "differences" between images and language are not merely formal matters; they are, in practice, linked to things like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing, between "hearsay" and "eye-witness" testimony; between words (heard, quoted and inscribed) and objects, actions (seen, de-

picted and described); between sensory channels, traditions of representation and modes of experience.

Conflicts, Political Humor and Political Satire

Every military or political conflict has both discursive and cultural dimensions. Recently the attention of conflict researchers has shifted from the “classical” topics towards “soft/smart power”: culture, identity, and values (Nye 2008; Rugh 2009). This shift was facilitated by the “cultural turn” and post-structuralist and constructivist approaches to conflict and security (Bachmann-Medick 2006). Culture in general, and media culture in particular, form a certain background of meanings, emphasizing the importance of some events and downplaying others, thus significantly affecting the political sphere.

The rapid development of social media has led to the emergence of new forms of media culture, political humor, and social engagement. Political humor can be defined as a communicative resource for spotting, highlighting, and attacking incongruities originating in political discourse and action (Mpofu 2021). Within that broad category, political satire occupies a specific role as “a pre-generic form of political discourse containing multiple humor elements that are utilized to attack and judge the flawed nature of human political activities” (Holbert 2014: 28). Political satire as a unique type of political discourse (Day 2011; Jones 2010) has three main functions: 1) to acclaim, 2) to attack, and 3) to defend (Benoit et al. 2002).

More recently, scholars have started to investigate what recipients themselves make out of political humor, namely how they interpret and evaluate these messages. At the core of this turn lies the crucial role of context in decisively shaping both its formation and comprehension. The cognitive contribution made by the recipient depends on their political knowledge, political beliefs or ideology, as well as psychological characteristics and viewing motivations (Young 2017). Most political humor genres are produced and/or disseminated via social media (political jokes, memes and cartoons, satirical shows and webpages, and political advertisements).

Publications on political cartoons as traditional forms of political humor perform communicative (El Refaie 2010) and constructive functions (Tehseem 2015). We define the political cartoon as a basic unit of Humorous Political Discourse that is multimodal, transtextual, topical, critical, and partial. These features support its main functions: identificational, ideological, communicative, cognitive, emotive, constitutive, and epistemological (Semotiuk 2021:161). Political cartoons as a multifaceted phenomenon have five main characteristics: topicality, criticism, partiality, alienation, and satirical stance (Knieper 2002). These characteristics are transdisciplinarily accepted and connected with multimodal interaction of the verbal and

nonverbal elements of the cartoon. The multimodal interaction of these elements enables the humorous effect, which is provided by joke techniques.

Contrary to traditional and institutionalized forms of political humor, Internet memes could be classified as unconventional political humor, since individuals are the main creators and participants in such genres, while state or media control is relatively more limited. Memes became more than just jokes or amusing images; they began to serve as a medium for social commentary and social criticism (Purwanigrum/Sudana 2020). The connection between 'humorous' and 'political' in Internet memes is defined as playfulness. This feature describes the ability to animatedly draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them' in the political discourse, promoting integration or increasing polarization (Mortensen/Neumayer 2021). The initial idea of memes as replication of information pieces spreading through Internet users' communication (Dawkins 1976) can be traced in later definitions of Internet memes that include the following aspects: a) digital units with common characteristics of content, form, communicative stance, and meme-landscape awareness, circulated by Internet users (Nissenbaum/Shifman 2017; Shifman 2013; Shifman 2014); b) artifacts on the Internet that form derivatives using imitation, remix and diffusion in the Internet communication (Dyrel 2016); 3) popular intertextual combination of image and text that is disseminated by Internet users (Laineste/Voolaid 2017). The functional characteristics of memes can be allocated to three main domains: *political participation* (Shifman 2014; Uzuegbunam 2020; Vasilyeva 2021); *knowledge creation and transfer* (Dennett 2001; Harbo 2022) and *users' identity* (Yus 2018).

Recent publications propose to approach Internet memes as a phenomenon related to the field of *information research* and technical collections of content (Tulloch 2023; Rogers et al. 2024). These studies conceptualize memes as documents that undermine popular assumptions about people's engagement with information. In particular, Internet memes are conceptual tools through which people can negotiate different representations of reality and the logic that underlies them. Memes serve as a medium for Internet users to record and evaluate their values compared to others, enabling them to investigate various potential responses to the situations they face. Memetic communication emerges as an important new information literacy practice that has critical implications for the following research areas: education, freedom of expression, ethics and policy, and the preservation of cultural heritage. This last aspect of scholarship on Internet memes is linked with two topics: a) discursive practices of witnessing in times of the new dominance of the visibility (digital testimony); b) establishing, values and methodologies of Web archives (Shenker 2020, Martinez/Karner 2023, Vlassenroot et al. 2019).

Methodology

Drawing on the contributions from the Epistemology of Testimony and Multimodality Theory, this research suggests that acquiring knowledge through testimony does not seem to live up to the standards of knowledge. There are two approaches to this problem: reductivism, which seeks to ‘reduce’ or redescribe our behavior such that it is not at odds with the traditional view of knowledge, and anti-reductivism, which seeks to fit our behavior in a different concept of knowledge. The latter approach was shaped by modern technologies and the digitalization of mass culture including different genres of visual testimony: photography, film posters, cartoons and memes, comics, etc. (Coady 1992; Gelfert 2014).

The political potential of humor can be discovered with multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). The theoretical background of the multimodality studies is formed by (1) systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 2006), (2) social semiotics (Hodge/Kress 1988; van Leeuwen 2005), and (3) conversation analysis (Sacks 1995; Schegloff 2007). This method focuses on the interaction of different modes, which are studied not individually but, in their interdependence, as their interaction constructs new semiotic meanings.

Regardless of the significant differences between political cartoons and memes, these genres of political humor have common parameters by which they can be described. These parameters are: a) *goal*, b) *frame of reference*, and c) *means*. Similarly, they correspond with elements of political satire: target, focus, social acceptability, and presentation (Paletz 1990). *Goal/target* refers to the politician and/or institution depicted in the cartoon; *frame of reference* (focus) describes the particular aspect of the political reality/activity; and *means* (presentation) refers to verbal/nonverbal elements, metaphors, and symbols used in cartoons/memes. These interrelated parameters form the analytical framework for this study. Accordingly, the interaction of the visual modus, textual modus of memes and cartoons, and joke techniques is analyzed in line with the analytical framework of the chapter. We use the classification that includes 10 techniques based on different cognitive operations: association, transposition, transformation, contradiction, exaggeration, parody, punning, disguise, narration, and appropriation (Roukes 1997). The research corpus contains 8 Ukrainian cartoons and memes as part of the research project “Laughter during the war: Russian aggression in Ukraine in political cartoons and memes” based on the corpus of 3780 political cartoons and 3840 memes from 80 countries. The memes and cartoons depicting General Zaluzhnyi have two thematic cores: 1) the tactical and strategic skills of the Commander-in-Chief and 2) the Russian casualties.

Research Results

This section contains the results of MDA of memes and cartoons focusing on General Zaluzhnyi's activities and his military skills as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (July 2021-February 2024). These activities form the social context of the study. The data set was analyzed within the parameters "goal-target", "frame of reference-focus", and "means-setting" (joke techniques).

Figure 1a shows General Zaluzhnyi (*target*) with a map of Ukraine in the background. The textual element (the inscription in Ukrainian *котли*= boilers) and telephone numbers in interaction with the non-verbal element actualize the humor technique of parody (advertisements for boilers). However, another meaning of the word *котел* is a 'cauldron' (a situation when a force or target is isolated and surrounded by enemy forces). This polysemantic interaction of the verbal element with the image of Valeriy Zaluzhnyi (*setting*) activates the joke technique 'punning' and emphasizes the strategic skills of the Commander-in-Chief (*focus*).

Figure 1: Zaluzhnyi as a military strategist



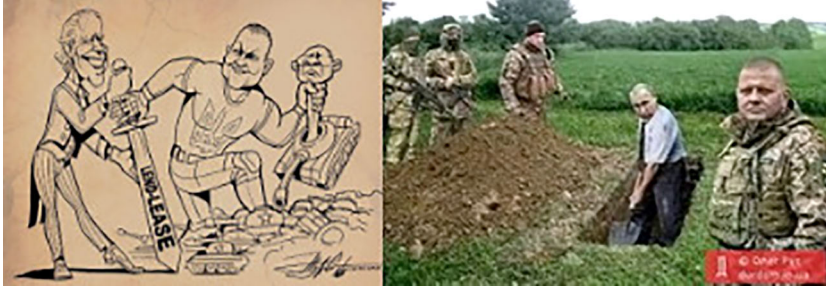
Source: <https://t.me/gonimem>. Public domain.

The dialogue (verbal element) between the most prominent hetmans of Ukraine – Bohdan Khmelnytsky and General Zaluzhnyi (*target*) interacts with the images of both military leaders (*setting*) and activates the joke technique 'association' using historical parallels. This meme conveys the message about General Zaluzhnyi as a successor of Ukrainian military traditions (*focus*).

The main semantic load in Figure 1c is carried by the verbal element "Film director *Chornobayivka. Episode 8 of season 1*", which interacts with the image of Valeriy Zaluzhnyi (*setting*). This interplay conveys the multimodal metaphor "Zaluzhnyi = film director" emphasizing the role of the Commander-in-Chief in the successful military operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the village of Chornobaivka near

Kherson, where Russian troops suffered several significant defeats at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

Figure 2: Zaluzhnyi as Putin's mortician



Sources: (2a) <https://www.facebook.com/Zhuravelll> (with permission of the artist); (2b) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/655806642139792> Public domain.

Another popular metaphor in cartoons and memes about General Zaluzhnyi is “Zaluzhnyi = Putin’s mortician”. *Figure 2a* depicts ex-US President Biden handing a sword to Zaluzhnyi (*target*). The interaction of the inscription on the sword (lend-lease) and the image of the General strangling little Putin with his strong hand (setting) actualize this metaphor. At the same time, *Figure 2a* emphasizes the importance of US military assistance to Ukraine in its fight against the Russian aggressor. *Figure 2b* also contains the visual metaphor “Zaluzhnyi = Putin’s mortician”, but its setting is only pictorial.

Intertextuality is an important element of political cartoons and memes. It involves borrowing certain visual or verbal texts or their elements from other texts, placed in a new context, while the “original” remains recognizable. This element is employed in the humor techniques of parody and appropriation. One of the most popular sources for memes about General Zaluzhnyi is the “Star Wars” series (*Figure 3*).

Figure 3: Zaluzhnyi as Guardian of Justice



Source: https://t.me/polit_gumor. Public domain.

Figure 3a is a multimodal meme, created with the technique of appropriation. The setting combines non-verbal elements (the Jedi and Baby Yoda with the burning Kremlin in the background) and verbal ones (“This is the Way”). This multimodal interplay actualizes the metaphor “Zaluzhnyi= guardian of justice” (*target*) and conveys the message: “As the custom says, Moscow must be punished for its war crimes against Ukraine and be burned” (*focus*). Another example of intertextuality is Figure 3b. The slightly modified text “May the *iodized* Force be with you” (another “quote” from Star Wars, which has become a popular catchphrase) interacts with the image of Zaluzhnyi (*target* and *setting*), and activates the humorous techniques of appropriation and punning. At the same time, the modification of the original quote (*iodized* force) evokes allusions to Baby Yoda (wordplay in Ukrainian and patch on the General’s uniform) and, on the other hand, to salt packaging (iodized salt in Figure 3c). In both memes (3 b and 3c), the source text is the same (“Star Wars” series), but they contain different “quotes” with different semantics.

Discussion

New technologies have enabled individuals to record, upload, and share images directly via mobile devices, which makes nearly everyone a potential witness at any given time. Modern image practices and social media platforms have significantly intensified the affective economies of image testimonies circulating in “real-time”. This indicates the assumed privileged role of social media and visuality in modern armed conflicts. The complex structure of memes and their contributing components broadly impact their uptake, spread, meaning, and reception. Given this, describing and defining their parts is essential to the accuracy and scholarship of their reception and significance. We suggest viewing Internet memes as an expressive repertoire, collectively authored and developed as a means of communication. Since

memes both represent and construct social perceptions and, technologically at least, their cross-border dissemination has become more seamless than ever, they may facilitate the creation of *global digital cultures*. Memes may be also used to construct *local digital cultures*, highlighting and maintaining attributes specific to a certain cultural setting.

At the same time, researchers in digital visual culture, conflict studies, and political discourse face two challenges: a) the *short lifespan* of memes as visual testimonies, and b) their *dispersion* across various social networks and web platforms. These features make it difficult to find research materials, which is also time-consuming.

Another methodological challenge in meme studies is an apparent divide between *in-depth qualitative* visual and/or linguistic analysis of targeted examples of particular meme templates or memes tied to a particular topic, and *computer science-based quantitative* analysis of larger patterns of spread. First, they do not take into account that meme texts and visuals are constantly being mixed and remixed into new, blended meme templates. Second, current technical approaches cannot analyze the complex, differential, and multi-layered cultural meanings that might have the same visual and textual key features in different contexts. Therefore, we believe that a computational social scientific approach is needed, in which in-depth interpretative, hermeneutic analysis is integrated with automated image processing techniques. This approach will help to identify and describe memes as primary sources in web archives.

Conclusions

Political humor as a relevant part of modern culture has an impact on politics, especially in times of war. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 led to the proliferation of new memes and cartoons across the Internet and social media, serving as a symbol of solidarity and resistance against the aggressor. These genres of political satire provided moral support to Ukrainians and served as a compelling visual testimony of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The two functions of political satire (to attack opponents and to assert one's identity) are related to the concepts of *imagefare* and *weaponization*. These concepts are important research topics because they shape public perceptions, significantly impact the image of conflict parties, address sensitive issues and influence audience opinions.

In this chapter, we conducted an MDA of 8 Ukrainian cartoons and memes portraying General Zaluzhnyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (2021–2024). These multimodal entities represent a fragment of the discursive dimension of the Russian-Ukrainian War. Despite the significant differences between political cartoons and memes, these genres of political humor discourse

can be described by the common parameters *goals*, *frame of reference*, and *means* related to the main elements of political satire (*target*, *focus*, and *setting*).

Responding to the RQ₁ (*How do the target and focus of political satire influence its setting?*), we can state that the setting is determined by both target and focus. It can have different forms (pictorial or multimodal), but its main goal is to make the focus most salient and expressive. The strategic skills of General Zaluzhnyi (*focus* and *target*) are often depicted in cartoons and memes using the metaphor "film director" and portraying him as the successor of Ukrainian military traditions. Another focus is Russia's unjust war, personified by Putin, and Ukraine, symbolized by Zaluzhnyi. The fair punishment of Putin and Russia for their crimes against Ukraine in these memes is represented by the Commander-in-Chief using the metaphors "Putin's mortician" and "guardian of justice". The last metaphor is implemented using intertextuality.

Answering RQ₂ (*Is the nature of the event or person depicted in the cartoon/meme interdependent with the particular humor technique?*), we assume that the choice of the particular humor technique is affected by the essence of the person/event in the cartoon (*target*). The most frequent humor techniques in the data set are disguise, punning, appropriation, and parody. They are used in combination to enhance the humorous effect.

Several repeated defeats of Russian troops in Chornobayivka near Kherson were reflected via techniques of punning (interplay of text and image) and disguise (usage of symbols and metaphors, e.g. several repeated defeats = several film episodes = "film director"). The strategic skills of the General (to organize cauldrons) are portrayed using the techniques of punning (in Ukrainian, the words *cauldron* and *boiler* have one equivalent *komeλ*) and parody (an advertisement of boilers with the image of Zaluzhnyi).

Memes justifying the fair punishment of Russia (and Putin) for the aggression use the techniques of disguise, punning, and appropriation with intertextual references to "Star Wars" (the characters Jedi and Baby Yoda and the blessing "May the Force be with you"). The interplay of these techniques in memes depicting General Zaluzhnyi expresses hope that injustice will be properly punished.

The methodological framework suggested in this chapter facilitated the thorough analysis of the research corpus helping to identify the main features of General Zaluzhnyi's image in Ukrainian cartoons and memes and its discursive reflection in social media.

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