Visual Dogwhistles in Social Media Narratives
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How well do we understand the semantics behind the content we see and share on social media? How can we ensure that the trends we follow aren't being subtly co-opted by far-right agendas that embed themselves in mainstream pop culture? And finally, how has the instability of truth on platforms like TikTok contributed to the spread of new far-right movements?

My research examines *visual dogwhistles*—a combination of images and phrases understood by specific audiences while remaining undetected by others. I am particularly interested in how these visual cues emerge, evolve, and circulate across different audiences and trends. While linguistic dogwhistles have been studied extensively, social media as a predominantly visual environment enables new applications of similar mechanisms. These messages are communicated through visual means such as emojis, typographic symbols, montage, framing, body language, effects, or memes.

Bertolt Brecht's 1932 text *Radio as an Apparatus of Communication*[1] proposed that radio should enable audiences to both send and receive information ("Jeder Mensch ein Sender" or "Every person a broadcaster"), rather than serve as a one-way channel for the powerful. Brecht envisioned an engaged, active audience, and this idea aligns well with contemporary social media, where users can produce, share, and interact with content. TikTok CEO Shou Chew similarly frames the platform as a "window to discover," a "canvas to create," and a "bridge for people to connect."[2] In practice, however, scandals involving misinformation, algorithmic biases, shadow banning, and data exploitation have gradually eroded trust in these democratic ideals, a situation compounded by the rise of generative AI. Despite this, users often perceive the content they share as truthful, unknowingly amplifying far-right narratives.

Analysing the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland, American history professor Dagmar Herzog introduces the term *postmodern fascism*—postmodern in that it thrives on ambiguity, manipulates meaning, and destabilises truth. And fascist, among other things, due to its "narcissistic longing for greatness." Unlike classical fascism, which promoted a coherent ideology, postmodern fascism exploits uncertainty and self-reflexivity, making extremist ideas harder to identify and easier to normalise. And fascist, among other things, due to its "narcissistic longing for greatness."[3]

Historically, fascism arose from postwar social upheaval and class struggles. Today, however, fascist ideologies on "social" media[4] emerge from what can be described as

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[1] " Bertolt Brecht, "Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat," *Bitter des Hessischen Landestheaters Darmstadt*, no. 16 (July 1932).
[2] "TikTok CEO Shou Chew on Its Future—and What Makes Its Algorithm Different | Live at TED2023," YouTube video, 39:18, posted by TED, April 21, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zC8-06198g.
[3] Dagmar Herzog, *The New Fascist Body* (Wirklichkeit Books, 2025), 6.
[4] Joshua Citarella and Yancey Strickler, What's a Dark Forest?, podcast audio, produced by Metalabel, Nov 18, https://metalabel.substack.com/p/whats-a-dark-forest.

fascist capitalism—a product of marketisation, privatisation, and individualisation of everyday life.[5] In this context, distrust, attention economies, and the commodification of uncertainty create fertile ground for far-right messaging to circulate widely and profitably.

Dogwhistles play a key role in subversively spreading these ideologies. Their ambiguity and plausible deniability allow them to pass largely unnoticed by automated moderation systems and to be shared without an understanding of their ideological background. This enables subtle rhetorical infiltration of everyday communication, particularly affecting young people during identity formation processes.

My research builds on the work of Jennifer Mather Saul, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield and the University of Waterloo, Ruth Wodak, Professor and Chair in Discourse Studies at Lancaster University and Professor of Linguistics at the University of Vienna, and Nicole Doerr, Professor of Sociology at the University of Siegen. Saul examines the manipulative use of language and how linguistic dogwhistles contribute to the normalization of subtle racism;[6] Wodak demonstrates how far-right actors deliberately exploit ambiguity;[7] and Doerr shows how images and text combine to produce professionally designed, strategically ambiguous visuals that resonate beyond explicitly extremist audiences.[8] Drawing on these perspectives, my thesis investigates how visual dogwhistles circulate, evolve, and influence audiences in image-driven social media networks, focusing particularly on teenagers, young adults, and users outside formal political structures.

I have systematically collected TikTok visuals shared by far-right accounts and related communities over the past five years, building an archive of more than 50,000 videos and images. TikTok is a particularly relevant platform for this research due to its recommendation algorithm and the *private* nature of content consumption (in contrast to, e.g., the performative nature of Instagram likes). In my analysis, I look for recurring visual motifs, aesthetic strategies, semantic ambiguity, and platform-specific formal traits. My goal is to understand how emojis, typefaces, editing style, audio, body language, and other elements are utilised to emotionally appeal to young users, and how coded messages move from niche subcultures into mainstream political discourse. This approach enables me to trace how visual dogwhistles operate as multimodal, context-dependent signals, rather than as isolated images.

For example, video compilations known as “Defend Europe” blur the line between patriotism and nationalism, showing rapid sequences of European landmarks such as Neuschwanstein Castle, Versailles, Nordic fjords and other natural landscapes, to evoke a sense of a superior ‘(Northern) European homeland’. These visuals are sometimes paired with overtly racist slogans, such as “Mohamed spawn rate 0%,” gamifying anti-immigrant sentiment. By appropriating positively connoted imagery

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[5] Herzog, *The New Fascist Body*, 82.

[6] Jennifer Mather Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[7] Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015).

[8] Nicole Doerr, “The Reach Out to New Voters: Visual Politics of the Alternative for Germany (AfD): Anti-Islam, Ethno-Nationalism, and Gendered Images,” *Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2021): 20, https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010020

such as natural landscapes, far-right actors normalise extremist ideas without overtly stating them. Central to this process are ambiguity, aesthetic appeal, and cultural familiarity, which facilitate unnoticed circulation.

Returning to Brecht's vision of participatory media, my research poses the need for visual literacy as a form of resistance. Following the first wave of negative effects experienced by social media users, European countries are seeking to develop new policies, largely leaning toward moderation and restrictions, while the inclusion of visual literacy in schools is lagging behind. Thus, understanding visual dogwhistles as relational, evolving systems, rather than fixed symbols, will offer scholars, educators, and cultural institutions tools to intervene through visual literacy education. Finally, Developing the ability to interpret images and videos critically makes it harder for manipulative messaging to gain influence, and in Walter Benjamin's terms, helps make the world "completely useless for the purposes of fascism."[9]

Keywords:
Visual dogwhistles, far-right extremism, radicalisation, social media, visual literacy

[9] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)," in *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 102.