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Visual Testimony of the Russian–Ukrainian War: General Zaluzhnyi in Ukrainian Memes and Cartoons

Abstract

This paper explores the strategic use of multimodal genres of humorous discourse (memes and cartoons) as "visual testimony" and tools of "imagefare" during recent armed conflicts, focusing on the Russian–Ukrainian War. It analyses how social media has transformed communication, democratised humour, and blurred the lines between content creators. The study outlines the interconnected concepts of visual propaganda, imagefare, and memetic warfare, emphasizing their unique features and hierarchical influence on public perceptions. It also examines the dual role of images as both visual testimony and "weaponised humour" in conflicts. Using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and drawing from the Epistemology of Testimony, the paper studies Ukrainian memes and cartoons featuring General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The analysis highlights how these visual artifacts use specific joke techniques and multimodal interactions to shape narratives, mock opponents, and build collective identity, especially regarding Zaluzhnyi's tactical skills and Russian losses.
Keywords: visual testimony; imagefare; memetic warfare; political humour; political cartoons; internet memes; Russian–Ukrainian war; multimodal discourse analysis

1 Introduction

Recent armed conflicts (Russian full-scale aggression in Ukraine, Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip) have signalled an increased proliferation of image testimonies that are shared widely via social media (Góra & Moczoł, 2023; Rakityanskaya, 2023; Rodley, 2016). 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 own identity (individual or collective). These two functions of memes (attack and assert) can be described as imagefare. This concept describes 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 the way they present themselves in the international arena (Yarchi, 2025).

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 communication transformation 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 producers. In the digital era, online social media and communication have developed into a more expansive collective dimension that spans various platforms and connects new authors with diverse audiences. The distinctions between different participants in the social network have become less clear. The lines separating professionals from amateurs and bottom-up initiatives from top-down approaches are no longer as defined as they once were (Shifman, 2013).

At the same time, the internet has influenced our sense of humour in multiple ways. As Attardo noted, "To what extent humour-on-the-internet is different from humour-before-the-internet?" (Attardo, 2023,

p. 18). First, the internet has democratised humour and blurred the line between amateur and professional comedians. Second, the boundaries of socially acceptable humour have been pushed, making humour more transgressive. Transgression is a key idea in analysing contemporary media culture (Gerlofs, 2022). Third, audiences are now more informed and fragmented due to the abundance of online content and the growth of niche communities. This requires content creators to constantly innovate and customise their material for diverse audiences.

2 Imagefare, Visual Propaganda, Memetic Warfare

The interrelated concepts of "imagefare", "visual propaganda", and "memetic warfare" collectively encompass the strategic utilisation of visual elements to influence public perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). Despite their shared foundational aspects, each term delineates distinct characteristics.

Visual propaganda represents the broadest category among these concepts, defined as any form of communication employing visual elements – such as images, symbols, and colours – to promote specific political causes, ideologies, or viewpoints. Its primary objective is to persuade and mobilise audiences by appealing to their emotions, values, and pre-existing biases. Historically, visual propaganda has manifested in various forms, including posters, caricatures, films, and monumental art. The main characteristics of visual propaganda are: intentionality (visual propaganda is inherently deliberate, aiming to achieve specific persuasive outcomes), clear and direct messaging, and emotional appeal (evocation of strong emotional responses, such as fear, patriotism, anger, or hope; Drucker, 2010; Taylor, 1995).

Imagefare can be conceptualised as a contemporary and dynamic iteration of visual propaganda, particularly pertinent in the context of the digital age and information warfare (Thomas, 2006). It highlights the rapid dissemination and manipulation of images to achieve strategic objectives, often in real time. Imagefare features virality (Shifman, 2014), perceived or fabricated authenticity (images as authentic documentation, even when manipulated or extracted from their original context, thereby enhancing their persuasive efficacy, decentralised creation/dissemination (state actors may engage in imagefare, but it can also emanate from NGOs, individuals, or informal networks), and emotional resonance.

Similar to traditional propaganda, it seeks to provoke intense emotional reactions to circumvent critical cognitive processes (Betz, 2012; Paul & Matthews, 2014; Yarchi, 2025).

Memetic warfare represents a specialised subset of imagefare, focusing explicitly on the creation, dissemination, and manipulation of memes for strategic ends (Singer & Brooking, 2018; Tsuriel, 2017).The objectives of memetic warfare include: narrative control (memes possess the capacity to rapidly establish or alter narratives on events, individuals, or ideologies (Chłopicki, 2017)), targeted influence, subversion and disruption (memes may be employed to mock, delegitimise, or create discord, frequently utilizing irony and absurdity as mechanisms (Tretyakova, 2018)), rapid evolution (the nature of memes allows for constant evolution and adaptation, complicating tracking and counter-strategies), bottom-up and top-down dynamics (as a subset of imagefare, memes can be developed and disseminated by both state and non-state actors for strategic purposes (Schneier, 2013)).

The three concepts are interrelated, forming a hierarchical structure: visual propaganda serves as the overarching framework, with both imagefare and memetic warfare functioning as modern adaptations and tactics within this broader domain. Imagefare is characterised as a subset of visual propaganda, emphasizing the dynamic and often real time deployment of images within digital ecosystems. In turn, memetic warfare is recognised as a highly specific subset of imagefare, prioritizing the unique characteristics and virality of internet memes as its primary methodological tool.

3 Visual Testimony vs. Weaponisation: Witnessing and Fighting via Images

Social media and digital communication networks are essential components of our current visual culture, marked by the widespread use of digital photography and imaging (Hand, 2012). This shift from verbal to visual, from text to image, has led to many publications exploring how people seek information, meaning,

and pleasure through visual technologies and environments (Kress, 2003; Mitchell, 2018). Witnessing and testimony have been examined within a broad framework encompassing epistemological, philosophical, ethical, and media-theoretical perspectives, as well as in journalism and communication studies. A significant body of literature on testimony has been developed around events like the Holocaust (Wieviorka, 2006) and 9/11 (Stadlbauer, 2012). In this context, it is important to note that visuality, vision, images, and imaging technologies have influenced theories of testimony. In witnessing discourses, seeing has been given a privileged role over other senses of perception (Zelizer, 2007). Building on John Ellis' idea of second-hand witnessing, which suggests that distant viewers "are drawn into the position of being witnesses" themselves (Ellis, 2000), the term "media witnessing" has been introduced. This shift from the traditional eyewitness to "witnessing as receptivity" (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009) emphasizes the importance of the witnessing text itself. Given the current dominance of the visual, it is clear that today's "witnessing text" is primarily 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 as image testimony. This concept revolves around two key terms: image and testimony. Testimony encompasses both language-based and image-based examples, with their expressions moving between verbal and visual forms. Language-based testimonies typically refer to scripted speech acts that originated in religious or legal contexts. In contrast, image-based testimonies have a less defined history; however, they can trace their roots to discursive practices found in journalism and early visual anthropology, where photographic images were employed as analytical tools and evidence (Schankweiler et al., 2018). The notion of image testimonies draws from a variety of theoretical positions that crystallise around the two terms under question: image and testimony. Combining the two into a compound term underscores the fact that testimony includes language-based as well as image-based exemplars and that 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 (such as giving a fervent expression of faith or making a solemn declaration in court). Image-based testimonies, on the other hand, exhibit a less straightforward genealogy. They have roots in various discursive practices that evolved in journalism (Zelizer, 2007), as well as in early visual anthropology, where photographic images were used both as analytical tools and as evidence. Testimonies have historically been recorded and shared through a variety of media, adapting to the changing media landscape. They have been communicated as spoken or written accounts, literary texts, illustrations, photographs, or moving images. Regardless of modality, the social practice of testifying, in a basic understanding, includes the following parameters: a) a subject who acts as a testifier, b) an event (or certain facts of this event) that form the content of the testimony, c) the testimony itself, as well as d) an audience to which the testimony is addressed, and, last but not least, e) a media infrastructure in which the testimony is articulated and circulated. These parameters are dynamic and constantly evolving, not fixed entities. The surge of digital image technologies, growing transnational media connectivity, and the vast number of images circulating globally have fundamentally transformed the human experience. Today, our lives are more visual and vividly represented than ever before.

In the 1990s, scholars established visual culture as a new field of study. They shifted their focus from verbal communication to visual elements, moving from text to images. This change allowed them to explore how individuals seek information, meaning, and enjoyment through their interactions with visual technologies and environments (Mirzoeff, 2023). Although images have thereby often been addressed as if they were texts, made up of discrete entities (signs, symbols), unfolding in a narrative plane, there are good reasons for trying to overcome such a textual bias. W.J.T. Mitchell (1986, p. 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, p. 5), the differences between images and language are not just formal; they are practically connected to various aspects. These include the distinction between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other, the difference between telling and showing, and the contrast between "hearsay" and "eyewitness" testimony. Additionally, these differences involve the relationship between words (whether heard, quoted, or inscribed) and objects or actions (which can be seen, depicted, or described). They also relate to different sensory channels, representation traditions, and modes of experience.

While epistemic functions of political cartoons and memes are described by the concept of visual testimonies, their affective and persuasive functions are related more to the "weaponisation" of humour. The weaponisation of humour in conflicts, especially in wartime, has several mechanisms. These mechanisms and corresponding publications are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Mechanisms of humour weaponisation.

Mechanism	Short description	Reference(s)
Delegitimisation & Demoralisation	Humour mocks and discredits opponents, weakening their authority and supporting morale.	Tretyakova (2018) Karpinska-Krakowiak & Pierzgalski (2025)
Narrative Shaping and Control	Humour condenses and spreads complex narratives in memorable ways. It makes messages more shareable and frames the opponent	Chłopicki (2017) Milner (2018) Patterson (2018)
Recruitment & Mobilisation	Shared humour (e.g., memes) fosters in-group identity and activates political participation.	Kutz-Flamenbaum (2014) Papapicco & Mininni (2020) Sampietro (2023) Dynel (2018)
Bypassing Critical Thinking	Humour triggers emotional responses, allowing biased messages to bypass rational scrutiny.	Tabatabaei & Ivanova (2021) Sampietro (2023)

4 Conflicts, Political Humour and Political Satire

Every military or political conflict has a discursive and cultural dimension. Recently, conflict researchers have shifted their focus from traditional topics to "soft" or "smart" power, which includes culture, identity, and values (Nye, 2008; Rugh, 2009). This shift has been supported by the "cultural turn" in academia and by post-structuralist and constructivist approaches to conflict and security (Bachmann-Medick, 2006). Culture creates a "background of meanings" that highlights certain events while downplaying others, significantly influencing the political sphere. The emergence of social media has transformed media culture, political humour, and social engagement in unprecedented ways.

Political humour serves as a valuable communicative tool that identifies, highlights, and critiques incongruities present in political discourse and actions. Within this overarching framework, political satire plays a significant role. It functions as a valuable means of articulating criticism by employing the "language of the street" to challenge politicians (Dinç, 2012). This form of expression operates outside traditional political discourse, often engaging audiences who may feel alienated from formal avenues of dissent. By doing so, political satire creates an alternative space where established hierarchies and official protocols are temporarily set aside, allowing for a more open dialogue on political issues. Political satire, as a distinctive form of political discourse (Day, 2011; Jones, 2010), serves three primary functions: 1) to acclaim, (2) to attack, and (3) to defend (Benoit, 2007). Most of the genres belonging to political humour are produced and/or disseminated via social media (political jokes, memes and cartoons, satirical shows and webpages, political advertisements).

Publications on political cartoons as traditional forms of political humour cover: a) communicative functions (El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010); and b) constructive functions (Tehseem & Bokhari, 2015). We define the political cartoon as "a basic unit of Humorous Political Discourse which is multimodal, transtextual, topical, critical and partial. These features support its main functions: identificational, ideological, communicative, cognitive, emotive, constitutive, and epistemological" (Semotiuk, 2021, p. 161). Political cartoons as a multifaceted phenomenon have five main characteristics: topicality, criticism, partiality, alienation, and satirical stance (Knieper, 2002). These characteristics are transdisciplinary and 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. In this paper, we use a classification that includes 10 techniques based on different cognitive operations: association, transposition, transformation, contradiction, exaggeration, parody, punning, disguise, narration, and appropriation (Roukes, 1997).

Contrary to traditional and institutionalised forms of political humour, internet memes could be classified as unconventional political humour. Memes have begun to serve as a medium for social commentary and social criticism (Purwaningrum & Sudana, 2020). The connection between the humorous and the political in internet memes is defined as playfulness. This feature describes the ability to animatedly draw boundaries between "us" and "them" in the political, promoting integration or increasing polarisation (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). The concept of memes as a replication of information that spreads through communication among internet users, first introduced by Dawkins in 1976, is reflected in later definitions of internet memes, which encompass 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, 2014); b) artifacts on the internet that form derivatives using imitation, remix and diffusion in internet communication (Dynel, 2018; Dynel & Messerli, 2020); c) 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, 1999; Harbo, 2022), and users' identity (Yus, 2018).

Recent publications propose to: 1) apply cognitive and narrative approaches in meme research (Ostanina-Olszewska & Majdzińska-Koczorowicz, 2019; Pidkuĭmukha & Kiss, 2020); 2) treat internet memes as a phenomenon related to the field of information research and technical collections of content (Rogers & Giorgi, 2024; Tulloch, 2023). These publications conceptualise 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 cognitive models that underlie them. Memes are a means through which internet users document and test their values against those of others, thereby allowing them to explore the different courses of action associated with situations they encounter. Memetic communication is thus presented 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 visuality (digital testimony); and b) establishing values and methodologies of Web archives.

5 Methodology

This paper combines contributions from the Epistemology of Testimony and Multimodality Theory. The Epistemology of Testimony points out 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 re-describe our behaviour such that it is not at odds with the traditional view of knowledge, and anti-reductivism, which seeks to fit our behaviour in with a different concept of knowledge. This different concept of knowledge was shaped by modern technologies and the digitalisation of mass culture and includes different genres of visual testimony: photography, film posters, cartoons and memes, comic books etc. (Coady, 1992; Gelfert, 2014). This political potential of humour can be discovered with multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). The theoretical foundation of this approach lies in three key areas: (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 examines the interaction between different modes, analysing them not in isolation but in terms of their interdependence. This interaction plays a crucial role in constructing semiotic meaning.

Political cartoons and memes, while distinct in their formats, share key characteristics that can be clearly defined through specific parameters. These parameters are goal, frame of reference, and means; they align with essential elements of political satire: target, focus, social acceptability, and presentation (Paletz, 1990). The goal (target) identifies the politician or institution portrayed in the cartoon. The frame of reference (focus) highlights a particular aspect of political reality or activity. Means encompasses the verbal and nonverbal elements, metaphors, and symbols employed in cartoons and memes.

Together, these interconnected parameters form the analytical framework for this study. As such, the interaction between visual and textual elements in memes and cartoons will be examined alongside various joke techniques, adhering to this structured analytical approach.

6 Research Results

This section contains the results of MDA of memes and cartoons focusing on General Zaluzhnyi's activities as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (July 2021 – February 2024). These activities form the social context of the study. The analysis units are the mentioned parameters: goal–target, frame of reference–focus, and means–setting (joke techniques). The research corpus contains 10 Ukrainian cartoons and memes as a part of the research project *Laughter During the War: Russian Aggression in Ukraine in Political Cartoons and Memes* based on the corpus of 3,780 political cartoons and 3,840 memes from 65 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 losses of Russians in manpower.

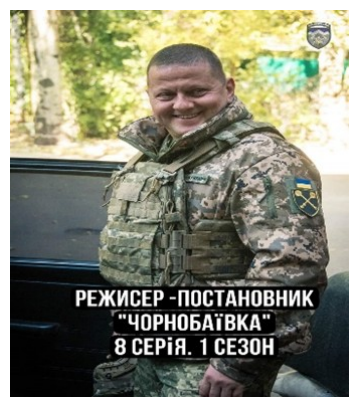
Figure 1a depicts Valerii Zaluzhnyi (target), the former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with a map of Ukraine in the background. His image immediately lends authority and familiarity to the meme, as he was and remains a widely recognised and respected military leader in Ukraine. This image is supported by interacting verbal elements in Ukrainian (setting). The first textual element (the inscription in Ukrainian котли = boilers) and telephone numbers in interaction with the nonverbal element actualise the humorous technique of parody (advertisements for boilers). However, another meaning of the word котел is "cauldron" (a situation when a force or target is isolated and surrounded by enemy forces). This polysemantic interaction activates the joke technique "punning" and emphasizes the strategic skills of the Commander-in-Chief (focus). Another textual element in Ukrainian "ФОП ЗАЛУЖНИЙ В.Ф." is a Ukrainian abbreviation for "Individual Entrepreneur". This element is a clear example of Ukrainian humour and satire, which often incorporates irony and wordplay, even in serious contexts. This incongruity is an ironic way of framing Zaluzhnyi's actions, as if he's "managing" or "producing" these "cauldrons". Additionally, the phone number at the bottom "(044) 454-45-73" is a common feature in Ukrainian advertisements, which people post on the walls of buildings to advertise their services or goods for sale. The (044) prefix is the area code for Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. Ukrainian memetic space is highly responsive to current events. It reflects a deep engagement with the ongoing conflict and aims to resonate with an audience that is acutely aware of the military situation.



(a) Boilers and cauldrons.



(b) Are you winning?



(c) Film director.

Figure 1

Figure 1b depicts one of Ukraine's most prominent hetmans, Bohdan Khmelnytsky, and below him is General Zaluzhnyi (target). The dialogue between them, "Are you winning, son? – Yes, dad, I am" (verbal element), in interaction with the nonverbal (images of both military leaders) (setting), activates the joke technique "association" using historical parallels. This meme conveys the message about the continuity of Ukrainian military traditions and General Zaluzhnyi as the successor of these traditions (focus).

The main semantic load in Figure 1c is carried by the verbal element "Film director Chornobayivka. Episode 8 of season 1". This text, in interaction with the nonverbal one (the image of Valeriy Zaluzhnyi – setting), actualizes the multimodal metaphor ZALUZHNYI = FILM DIRECTOR. This metaphor emphasizes 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.



(a) Lend-lease (by Yuri Zhuravel).



(b) Putin's undertaker.

Figure 2

Another popular metaphor in cartoons and memes about General Zaluzhnyi is ZALUZHNYI = PUTIN'S UNDERTAKER. Figure 2a (is a work by Ukrainian cartoonist Yuri Zhuravel depicting 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) actualise this metaphor. At the same time, Figure 2a emphasizes the importance of American military assistance to Ukraine fighting against the Russian aggressor.

Figure 2b is a pictorial meme showing Putin with a shovel in a half-excavated grave and General Zaluzhnyi in the foreground. This meme also contains the visual metaphor "ZALUZHNYI = PUTIN'S UNDERTAKER", but it is only actualised nonverbally.

The superhero discourse (as a part of visual discourse on the Russian–Ukrainian War) reflects our inherent human nature, making us perpetually drawn to the idea of powerful figures ("elders"), a tendency that persists despite our experiences. This reliance on superior power is seen as a way to escape feelings of helplessness (Kiss et al., 2024). Given this perspective, the embrace of superheroes or a singular "elder" is a powerful motivational strategy in wartime, when people face immense stress, uncertainty, and a pervasive sense of vulnerability. The narrative of an invincible force or a guiding figure with extraordinary capabilities can serve as a potent psychological balm. This strategy effectively channels the human desire for protection and decisive leadership, offering a tangible (even if symbolic) focal point for hope and resilience. By projecting an image of overwhelming strength and unwavering purpose, such a "superhero" narrative can galvanise public support, boost morale among combatants, and foster a collective belief in eventual triumph, thereby transforming widespread powerlessness into a shared sense of determined resolve. The Ukrainian memetic space features an intense use of intertextuality. This concept involves the borrowing of certain visual or verbal texts or their elements by other texts, placed in a new context. However, the "original" remains recognizable. This element is present in the joke techniques of parody and appropriation. One of the most popular sources for memes about General Zaluzhnyi is the *Star Wars* series (Figures 3b–5a). The emergence of numerous memes using this series as a source was preceded by an

event in June 2023. The Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine appeared at a General Staff meeting wearing a uniform adorned with a patch featuring Baby Yoda. (Figure 3a)



(a) https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=306661648469658



(b) Commander.

Figure 3

This eye-catching detail quickly drew public attention. The patch, depicting the beloved *Star Wars* character Grogu (popularly known as Baby Yoda), offered a glimpse of humour. Such pop culture references are not uncommon in military circles, often serving as morale boosters or personal symbols of resilience. In this case, Baby Yoda, known for his quiet strength and unexpected powers, may have been chosen as a light-hearted symbol of Ukrainian perseverance.

Figure 3b blends the image of General Zaluzhnyi wearing a Ukrainian Flag Patch, holding a small figure of Baby Yoda. The way Zaluzhnyi cradles Grogu suggests care and protection, and even a symbolic representation of Ukrainians. The verbal element "Ukraine Wars" explicitly links the image to the ongoing war in Ukraine. It also plays on the famous series title, immediately drawing a parallel to it. Another text, "THE COMMANDER", directly identifies Zaluzhnyi's role and reinforces his leadership status. The font choice for "THE COMMANDER" is bold and modern, similar to movie poster typography, further enhancing the cinematic feel. This meme functions as a piece of modern wartime propaganda that aims to boost morale and frame the Russian–Ukrainian war as a righteous and epic struggle through the accessible and emotionally resonant lens of popular culture.

Figure 4a shows the Jedi (powerful guardian of order and justice) and Baby Yoda against the backdrop of the burning Kremlin. This nonverbal element interacts with the verbal one (another "quote" from the *Star Wars* universe: "This is the Way". This interaction (setting) 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 burned" (focus). In Figure 4b, there is also a "quote" from *Star Wars*. The verbal element is the slightly modified text "May the iodised Force be with you" which has become a popular catchphrase. This text, combined with the image of Zaluzhnyi (target and setting), activates the humorous technique of appropriation. At the same time, the modification of the original quote (iodised force) evokes allusions to Baby Yoda (wordplay in Ukrainian) and, on the other hand, to salt packaging (iodised salt that strengthens the body, Figure 4c). In both memes, the source text is the same, but they contain different "quotes" that carry different semantic loads.

Similarly, another Ukrainian verbal meme plays on a significant shift in public concern over two specific years, using a very subtle yet powerful change in one letter (Figure 5a). The meme consists of two main lines of text, comparing two different years. The first line reads June 2022: ВСІ ЙДЕМО ЗА ЙОДОМ = Everyone goes for iodine. This verbal element refers to the widespread public concern in Ukraine about the



(a) This is the way.

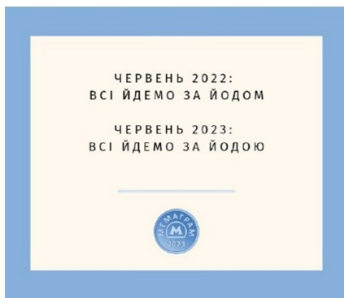


(b) May the Force be with you



(c) Iodised salt.

Figure 4



(a)



(b) 100 thousand.



(c) “Holidays” Are Coming.

Figure 5

possibility of a nuclear disaster. This fear was largely fuelled by actions around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, which was occupied by Russian forces. Reports of shelling and concerns about the plant’s safety led to a rush among the Ukrainian population to acquire potassium iodide tablets. These tablets are used as protection from radioactive iodine in the event of a nuclear accident. The second line is June 2023: ВСІ ЙДЕМО ЗА ЙОДОЮ (Everyone goes for Ioda/Yoda). The second line contains the crucial change from “ЙОДО**М**” (iodine) to “ЙОДО**Ю**” (Ioda/Yoda). The word “ЙОДОЮ” is a pun on “Йода” (Yoda), highlighting a psychological and societal shift in Ukraine over one year of the full-scale war: from immediate, tangible fear to a search for guidance and resilience in the face of protracted armed conflict.

Other examples of intertextuality in memes and cartoons are Figure 5b and Figure 5c. Both depict Russian casualties in the war against Ukraine. Figure 5b shows a festively decorated truck, known from the Coca-Cola commercial “Holidays Are Coming”. The image of General Zaluzhnyi and the insert 100 000 on the truck’s side interact with the image of the car (setting). This interaction reveals the focus of the meme – the significant losses of Russians in manpower. At the same time, this interaction actualizes the multimodal metaphor RUSSIAN CASUALTIES = HOLIDAYS. Figure 5c is another cartoon by Yuri Zhuravel. Its verbal element (сто тисяч = one hundred thousand) is the title of a play by the Ukrainian playwright Ivan Karpenko-Karyi. The nonverbal element, General Zaluzhnyi as Santa Claus with a sack (target) in interaction with other verbal elements of the cartoon (свято наближається = the holiday is coming) reveals the focus of the cartoon – the number of Russian losses. On the other hand, this interplay between text and image (reference to the Coca-Cola commercial) conveys multimodal metaphors RUSSIAN CASUALTIES = GIFT and RUSSIAN CASUALTIES = HOLIDAYS.

7 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that political humour, particularly in the form of internet memes and political cartoons, plays a significant role in the symbolic landscape of contemporary armed conflict. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has not only intensified the militarised confrontation but has also catalysed a prolific wave of humorous visual content, used as a symbolic weapon. The weaponisation of humour significantly affects the image of the sides of the conflict and is a relevant research topic.

Recent armed conflicts (Russian full-scale aggression in Ukraine, Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip) have signalled an increased proliferation of image testimony via social media. During armed conflicts and political campaigns, memes and cartoons can be seen as visual evidence of these events, using the interaction of language-based and image-based elements. They can also be used to attack an opponent and assert one's own identity. These two functions of memes and cartoons as genres of political satire (attack and assert) can be described as imagefare. This concept encompasses the use of images (memes, photos, cartoons, videos) to create public world views and to influence the audience's perceptions and image of political actors. This concept is interconnected with similar notions of visual propaganda and memetic warfare. Visual propaganda establishes the foundational framework for utilizing images to exert influence, while imagefare adapts these principles to the rapidity and ubiquity of digital media. Memetic warfare then further refines these tactics, focusing on the culturally resonant, rapidly replicating, and frequently subversive nature of internet memes. Collectively, these approaches aim to mold perceptions and behaviours through visual means, albeit differing in their methods, speed of deployment, and specific units of visual influence.

Despite the significant differences between political cartoons and memes, they have common parameters by which they can be described. These parameters include goal, frame of reference, and means. They match the goal, focus, social acceptance, and style of political satire. The analysis of discursive reflection of General Zaluzhnyi in cartoons and memes was based on MDA supported by an analytical framework of the interrelated parameters goal/target, frame of reference/focus, and means (presentation) of political cartoons and memes. By analysing memes and cartoons that depict General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, this research has shown how visual artifacts operate as forms of image-based testimony. These testimonies are not neutral representations; rather, they are rhetorically charged, multimodal texts that oscillate between critique and affirmation. Two thematic cores emerged from the analysis: (1) the representation of Zaluzhnyi's strategic and tactical military competence, and (2) the depiction of Russian losses in manpower. The setting of political cartoons and memes analysed in the paper is determined by these thematic scores. Intertextuality as an important feature of cartoons and memes can be realised in different ways. These genres often use "quotes" from different text types (visual, textual, fictional, advertorial, etc.), enhancing the humorous effect, articulated through complex interplays of verbal and visual elements. The paper has demonstrated the growing relevance of the concept of imagefare, which describes the strategic deployment of visual media to influence public perception, construct political identities, and contest dominant narratives.

Image Sources

Cartoon Movement https://cartoonmovement.com/
Political Humour https://t.me/polit_gumor
Go Memes https://t.me/gonimems
Ukrainian Meme Squad Club https://www.facebook.com/groups/655806642139792

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