

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Visual Analysis and the Contentious Politics of the Radical Right

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## ABSTRACT

Although images are very important for political actors and social movements, including the radical right (RR), empirical studies still rarely integrate visual material as relevant data for understanding radical right politics. This article outlines this new and growing field of research (i.e., visuality and the RR), critically reviewing existing studies from the perspective of both visual studies of social movements and contentious politics, which are rarely applied to the RR, and the methodology of working with images, offering empirical case studies (European and beyond) to illustrate the argument. The findings reveal the main functions of the use of visuals for the radical right, as well as the benefits (but also the challenges) of studying radical right politics through the lens of visual analysis. A conceptual framework is proposed to capture this dominant visual politics of the radical right. As shown, two dimensions emerge as the most theoretically relevant for the radical right: The discursive meaning of images (the story itself, telling the story, eliciting the story) and the communicative function of images (visual expression by the movement or others, visibility), which combine agency and addressee.

## 1 | Introduction

Although images are important for political actors and social movements, including radical right ones<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Milman and Doerr 2021; Curini, Moffitt, and Zulianello 2024), empirical studies still rarely factor in visual materials as relevant data of social inquiry (Mattoni and Teune 2014). Despite the growing literature on online political communication by radical right organisations (e.g., Kakavand 2023, Heft et al. 2023; Albertazzi and Bonansinga 2023; Hohner, Kakavand, and Rothut 2024), that of visual political communication remains underrepresented (Liebhart 2016; Moffitt 2022). Qualitative research relies heavily on written or spoken language, with questionnaires, interviews and focus groups dominating most scholars' assumptions on research methods (and results).<sup>2</sup>

Yet the 'culture wars' through images are increasingly becoming crucial for radical right organisations (Nagle 2017). In 2017, German far-right activists of the group Reconquista Germanica widely circulated a 'manual for media guerillas' that offered advice about how to effectively engage in online activism 'that would challenge the real world'. In just a few weeks several thousand members answered to the appeal, ready to attack opponents, influence public discourse and polarize online interactions. The main central weapons are internet memes, namely graphics of visual and textual remixes shared and widely distributed in online spaces (Bogerts and Fielitz 2020). Like other collective actors, the radical right might use visual material, primarily to fulfil many important aspects of political activism, among which is the formation of collective identities—through the internal and external communication of their symbolic

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construction of the social and political reality (Caiani 2023); mobilization and recruitment; political campaigns; and the diffusion of political information and propaganda.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, images are effective in eliciting emotions and right-wing populism has been characterized as having a communicative strategy with 'a strong emotional appeal' and dramatized language (Tuomola and Wahl-Jorgensen 2023). In addition, radical right actors' electoral success has been linked to their communicative skills, often based on powerful images for their self-representation (Awad, Doerr, and Nissen 2022; on the aestheticization of fascism, Benjamin 2002). Finally, visual material can carry actors' messages to a wider audience, facilitating cross-cultural communication and trans-nationalization (e.g., Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2014, on Euromayday). Visual analysis serves to address and empirically examine these issues.

To explore the role of images in radical right politics, this article deals with the method and approach of visual analysis, critically assessing its application and functions in social research on contentious politics and in particular in the study of radical right parties and movements, and proposing an analytical framework for future research.

Highly regarded studies contributed to the development of the scholarly debate and methodological systematization of the use of visual material in qualitative research on collective action<sup>4</sup> (see recently Milman and Doerr 2023, but also Howell 2012; Lim 2013; Lofalian 2013; Morrison and Isaac 2012; Phillips 2012; Streeby 2013; Weiner 2012), however this is scarcely applied to the RR,<sup>5</sup> which is mostly addressed within party politics and elections (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012) (for exceptions, see below; among others, Richardson and Wodak 2009; Forchtner and Kølvrå 2017).

There are few attempts at integrating visual analyses within broader theoretical frameworks addressing important research questions on RR political mobilization and contentious politics.

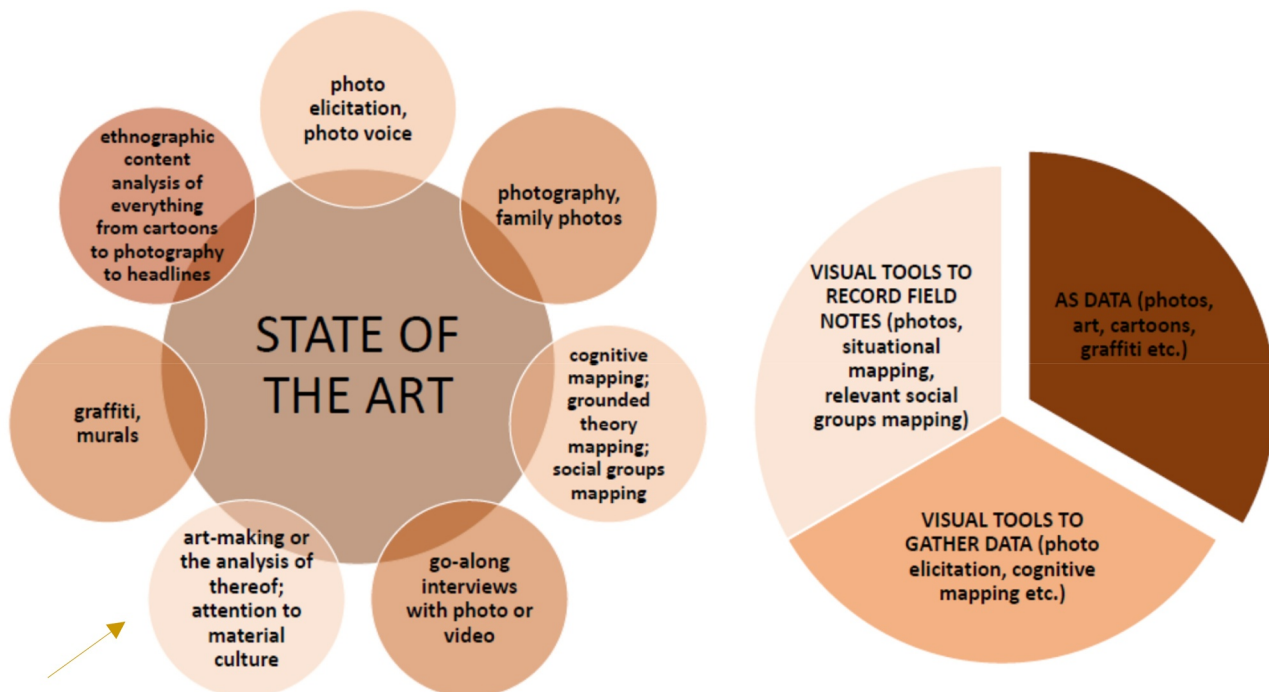
Given this background, this article makes the case for studying the visual politics of the radical right, with a particular attention to the method of visual analysis. It outlines this increasing research field. It critically shows the varieties of the methods of visual analysis and its necessary methodological steps (Sections 2 and 3), underlining its potential for the study of various aspects of radical right politics (including both parties and movements) and illustrating empirical cases to demonstrate the argument (Sections 4, 5, 6). In the conclusion it suggests promising research directions. The contribution is twofold: empirically, by analysing the nexus between visuality and the radical right from the perspective of visual analysis of social movements (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2014; Doerr 2017), it highlights the specific functions of (the use of) images for several aspects related to right wing political activism; methodologically, it points out some neglected research areas of the application of the method on radical right mobilization (such as the impact of images, as well as the process of their production, reception and usage in social research), which could enhance our understanding (and investigation) of right-wing politics in the 21st century.

## 2 | Visual Analysis and the Radical Right: What Is It and When Is It Used?

Why should we care about the visual politics of the radical right? But also, when it is used and to explain what? Visual methodologies are a collection of methods used to understand and interpret images. They explore physical, representational, and public visibility elements that exist in collective actors. However, 'what is an image'? And 'how' we should approach them? Visual analysts, often with a background in art history and visual media analysis, identify images in a narrow sense: that is, photographs, documents, posters, or other visual material found in print, online or in other non-print media or elsewhere (Doerr and Milman 2014). Sociolinguistics and discourse analysts take a broader approach, even including mentally constructed images that are expressed in different discursive forms (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006), as well as, performances.

We can thus interpret working with images in social research in at least three different ways (Figure 1). Images can be conceptualized and studied as (Hunter 2021), (i) *the story itself*: namely, a content analysis on visual materials that already exists out there. Art (or artistic re-appropriation in urban spaces, Demirsu 2022), photographs, and other visual representations or imagery that constitute the material, cultural residue of people and groups; (ii) *to elicit a story*: with photo elicitation, cognitive mapping, and many other forms where the participant is either exposed to visuals, creating data through their responses, or the participant creates visuals for the researcher (on right-wing populism see Caiani and Padoan 2023). (iii) Finally, visual material can be used (by the researcher and the political actors themselves) *to tell a story*: in essence, the dissemination of results/opinions with pictures, diagrams, videos, and imagery (van den Scott 2018).

When looking at the scholarship on the field, there are many roles image can play. Studies on activism and political participation have witnessed increasing interest in the *relationship between images and political activism* (e.g., Halfmann and Young 2010; Corrigan-Brown and Wilkes 2014). Visual productions made by political actors such as photos, posters, leaflets and memes are considered important for their power to convey messages via a *logic of symbolic association*, as opposed to texts which mainly tend to rely on the logic of rational argumentation (Müller and Özcan 2007). Analysing visuals enables the observer to address the link between *emotions and the cognitive aspects* of political participation, while visuals can favour emotions (Joffe 2008), which are important in shaping political views and behaviour (Gross 2008). Moreover, the task of visual analysis is not merely descriptive, but is designed to emphasize the role of agency in the formation of collective identity and mobilisations (Adami 2020), even bringing (agencies and) ambivalences to the fore (Stocchetti and Kukkonen 2011). Visual theorists in media studies and art history assert that images are associated with a complex stock of *cultural knowledge* and experiences, *frames* and identifications, and that they are used, interpreted, and re-framed by political actors (Milman and Doerr 2021). These aspects are paramount in understanding radical right politics too.



E.g. Demirsu, I. (2022) "The 'Anti-gender' City of Verona and Grassroots Spatial Resistance: An Interspatial Analysis of Contentious Politics"

**FIGURE 1** | How to study the visual politics of the radical right? *Source:* Author's elaboration from Hunter (2021).

Against this background, one can identify *three main areas* in visual research on social movements and contentious politics can be identified (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2014), in essence, three features of social movement dynamics that visual analysis is generally applied to:

- (1) the *visual expressions of social movements* through images and other visual artefacts: namely the visual manifestations, as a class of expressions, produced in social movement.
- (2) the *visual representation* of social movements by actors external to social movements (e.g., the media), namely, the representation of social movements in images disseminated in mediation processes;
- (3) the more general aspect of *social movements' visibility* in larger societal contexts. That is, why certain groups have visibility and claims while others remain invisible?

Furthermore, methodologically, one can analytically break down group the analysis of images (and radical right politics) into three parts: (1) the production of images; (2) the content of images; and finally, (3) the reception or impact of the images (Moffitt 2022).

To sum up, if we intersect the three main areas in visual research on social movements and contentious politics as aforementioned ((i) the visual expressions of social movements through images; (ii) the visual representation of social movements by others; and (iii) the more general aspect of social movements' visibility in context) with the three dimensions or meanings of working with images in social research ((a) the story itself; (b) eliciting a story, and (c) telling a story), we obtain

a useful analytical grid to locate and interpret the existing studies on visual analysis and the radical right, as well as being able to reflect on unexplored research areas with regards to right wing politics (Table 1).

In the following Sections 4–6, after presenting visual analysis steps applied (Section 3), case studies for each identified cell of Table 1 will be presented in details to illustrate the argument.

### 3 | How Does It Work? Key Concepts of Applied Visual Analysis

There are three main approaches of visual analysis: firstly, *critical visual analysis* (Stocchetti and Kukkonen 2011) which perceives images as processes, rather than as meaningful objects and focuses on 'images in use' and the social and political purposes underpinning their use. Secondly, the *visual grammar approach* (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006) which is based on the assumption that visual semiotics is culture-specific and focuses on (Western) conventional elements in the forms of visual productions that can be considered useful tools to carry out the analysis. Third, *multimodal discourse analysis*, which integrates textual and visual forms of communication (Svatoňová 2020; Doerr and Milman 2014; Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2014; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). There is also a fourth approach, that we can define as 'qualitative visual analysis' (Venizelos 2023), and which argues that the boundaries between 'visual' and 'verbal' are thin (Fahmy 2004), and images are not independent of discourse, but are, rather, mediated by it. Finally (though at a different level; as it is more thematically based), the *visual analysis and social movement contribution* (Doerr and Milman 2014), which provides a set

**TABLE 1** | Possible applications of visual analysis to the study of the radical right.

Main areas in visual research on social movements	Working with images in social research		
	The story itself	To tell a story	To elicit a story
Visual expression of social movements	xx		
Visual representation of social movements (by others)		xx	
Visibility and context (visual framing, effects of images on political activism)			x

Note: The aim of this table is to introduce an analytical grid for categorizing various studies that deal with the use of visual analysis and the radical right. ++ (existing studies on the topic = 'enough/many'); + (existing studies on the topic = 'rare/none').

of useful concepts and hypotheses for the analysis of collective action, including, as we argue here, on the radical right.

Methodologically, there are three main steps when applying visual analysis (Doerr and Milman 2014, but see also the seminal work of Panofski). The first is: (1) visual content analysis (or thick description). Here, the images (e.g., posters, leaflets) are described in detail and important elements (i.e., logos, colours) are analysed independently (see Supporting Information S1: Table A). The second step implies a (2) deeper iconographic analysis (i.e., the symbols evoked). The goal is to single out older or familiar cultural symbols and their internal and external resonance. For example, if we use iconological interpretation to explain why a particular poster produced by an activist group was diffused so widely across different countries, we may implicitly impose our own interpretation of the image on our attempts at neutral, scientific analysis. 'Political iconography is a comparative method, designed to disclose the meaning of visuals in a specific context at a specific time' (Müller and Özcan 2007, 287). Here the researcher should reflect on his/her positionality (never socially and culturally neutral) which influences the analysis and the research. Thirdly (3), triangulation should be implemented, alluding to the polyvalence of the visual linked to the context. In this step, the researcher collects and analyses data on the visual material in order to contextualize images both socially and politically. This means that visual analysis is often used within discourse and frame analysis, participant observation and interviews. In addition, an historical-discursive analysis might be used, combining qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g., 'hierarchical clustering on principal components'), to follow the process of the impact of images among recipients (see Bast 2021) or visual multimodal analyses. In fact, a growing research field is the development of mixed methods, qualitative and quantitative digital analysis studying the radical right (Doerr and Milman 2014; Awad, Doerr, and Nissen 2022; Segev 2020). For example by combining qualitative visual analysis and computational methods, Doerr and Svatoňová (2023) have developed an inductive definition of radical right gendered political cultures.<sup>6</sup>

To this, we can add that the visual material (i.e., sources), also on the radical right, can be online and offline (see Supporting Information S1: Table B).

### 3.1 | An Application to the Radical Right

In her case study of visual analysis applied to the political communication of some radical right Italian organizations and

anti-gender conservative groups, Adami (2020), examines the posters published by these organizations to advertise two events—a neo-Nazi rock concert in memory of Jan Palach (a Czechoslovakian student who set himself on fire in the aftermath of the Prague Spring in 1969) and the World Congress of Families (WCF)—both organized in Verona in 2019, within a few months of each other (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>7</sup> By conducting the three methodological steps illustrated above: the context (i.e., how the poster is contextually framed—the event, relevant related documents and newspaper articles); the analysis of the elements in isolation (i.e., the main visual and linguistic elements such as the logos, etc.); and the compositional patterns (i.e., the ways in which different elements are combined and produce meaning), the study unveils the potential of visual analysis in providing important insights on the communication strategy of the radical right.

Firstly, given that ambiguity and ambivalence are fundamental characteristics of visual communication, the analysis begins with the appreciation of the specific social and political context in which these visual materials are produced and disseminated. In this sense, it is noteworthy that Verona is characterized by a historic and powerful radical right tradition, within both institutional settings and sub-cultural ones, to the point that it has often been referred to as a 'laboratory' of the radical right. Second, by *isolating the elements* of the image we can observe that: (1) the logo depicts eight stylized arches reminiscent of the Arena, the historical symbol of the city, with two of them filled with two stylized people—in blue and pink—which acknowledges only heterosexual love (while the other arches are empty and grey); (2) in terms of *compositional patterns*, the poster depicts a dreamy atmosphere, which is communicated through the choice of pale pastel colours, the brightness and the main subject itself, with the presence of a vector (the arm of the little girl); (3) The poster suggests a causal and temporal relationship between the two sides, one that implies that the Congress (left), will make children happy and allow them play (the right), therefore offering a 'narrative pattern'; finally, (4) the title ('the wind of change') resonates with the Five Star Movement-League government (the self-proclaimed 'government of change'), with the organizers intention to align themselves with the government and to address it as an institution to lobby.

If we look at the second poster (Figure 3)<sup>8</sup> and considering various elements of the image (colour, forms, etc.) in isolation, we observe that: (1) on the whole, the communicative effect (composition) does not evoke a typical (Nazi) rock concert, but, rather, a formal event (e.g., the main image in brown-grey shade); (2) the message is transmitted in a moderate and neutral way, with the subject depicted according to a 'conceptual pattern' of visuals (ibid.), like

## World Congress of Families poster

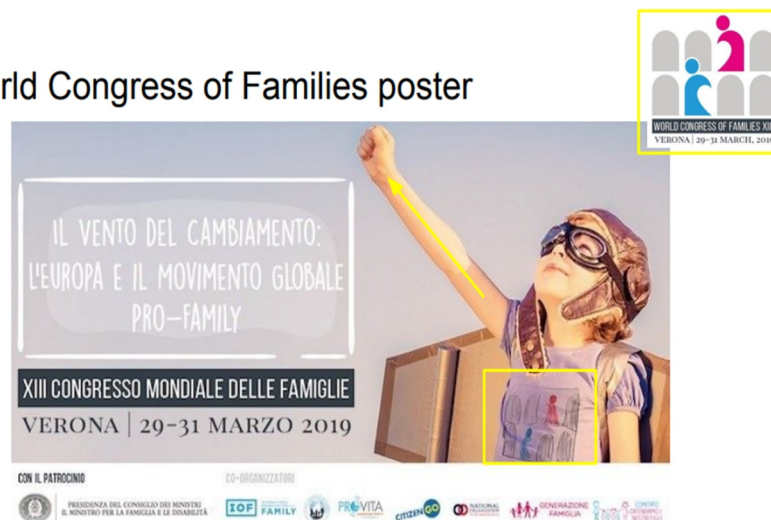


FIGURE 2 | The World Congress of Families 2019 (Italy): poster. Source: Adami (2020).



FIGURE 3 | The Nazi rock concert in memory of Jan Palach: poster. Source: Adami (2020).

a 'saint' or 'hero'; (3) the title of the event is an example of appropriation of left-wing symbols ('Land and Freedom' referring to the famous 'Tierra y Libertad!' of the Zapatista guerrillas and widely taken up by the anarchist left); and, finally, (4) in the lower part of the poster the 'good' cause of the event is reported (i.e., support to local families, according to the welfare chauvinist appeal typical of the right-wing populist parties at the local and national level). To sum up, in both cases, the visual analysis brings the 'agent' and the ambivalences to the fore and unveiling the communicative *camouflage* of these organizations that effectively spread, through images, radical right-wing messages (traditionally marked by highly recognizable characteristics and symbols) toward the mainstream.

All these methodological steps of analysis are usually taken into account in studies dealing with images and the RR, as we will see in the sections below, although often not in an explicit way.

## 4 | Visual Expression of (Radical Right) Social Movements

Having presented visual analysis steps applied, in the following sections case studies for each identified cell of Table 1 will be presented. In the imagining of dissent, visual symbols play a central role. Indeed, visual markers make it easy for fellow activists to *identify* the orientation of a group and thus to define them as allies, competitors or *enemies*. Visual materials are repositories of shared—and sometimes contested—activist identities and cultures that are able to link different generations of protesters and different waves of contention (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2014). Social movements, including the radical right, have been found to use visual language abundantly so as to tap into the shared visual *knowledge of the society* they are rooted in: they use and re-interpret a pre-existing imaginary to voice critique and to form a collective actor. For example, in a study on the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), one of the most successful European right-wing populist parties, Wodak and Forchtner (2014) show<sup>9</sup> tendencies to fictionalize politics through the dissemination of anti-Turkish narratives: visuals facilitate the interplay of collective memories (e.g., the Christian coalition victory over Ottoman forces in Vienna in 1683) and the conveying of meanings blurring past and present, fiction and reality (see also the visual expression of right-wing populism leaders on social media, in particular prime minister Viktor Orban on Instagram, Szebeni and Salojärvi (2022).

Images are also used by radical right social movements as a powerful form of *mobilization*, for instance, foetal images used by the pro-life movement to condemn abortion. The radical right organization 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) diffuses its anti-gender propaganda by appropriating images of feminist and LGBT+ groups (Doerr 2021; Lorenzetti 2020).<sup>10</sup> The British far-right group 'Britain First' depends on visual strategies a lot after its Facebook ban in 2018 (Nouri, Lorenzo-Dus, and Watkin 2020): this implies a shift toward the promotion of the group's inner core members and expanding 'othering' practices, chiefly to Islam.

*Emotions* elicited by online images are used to promote RR activism, as shown in the study on the radical group the ‘Soldiers of Odin’ (Nikunen, Hokka, and Nelimarkka 2021), which demonstrated that images and their reactions (‘emoticons’) diffused on the group’s Facebook pages, contribute in the creation of a ‘visual affective practice’<sup>11</sup> designed to disseminate and reinforce a nationalist, extremist and racist common sense (ethos) of the group. Images are in this sense used to fortify moral claims, create exclusionary solidarity and promote white nationalist masculinity which legitimizes the racist practices of ‘soldiering’ (ibidem). Similarly, Tuomola and Wahl-Jorgensen (2023), examining the Finnish right-wing populists’ online communication on the alternative media MV-lehti<sup>12</sup> find that the radical right uses negative emotions via images—such as fear, disgust, hate and distrust—to construct various ‘others’ serving as a scapegoat for the ‘distress of ordinary people’. Comparative studies (e.g., Freistein, Frank, and Christine 2022), focused on right-wing populist parties in various European countries, reinforce this finding stressing that through ‘visual narratives’<sup>13</sup> and seemingly inoffensive modes of presentation, emotional responses—such as fear or humiliation, but also indignation, compassion, and schadenfreude—are promoted in order to stimulate uninterested/apathetic audiences (voters). The ‘affective economy’ of national-populist actors is thus spread through images that catalyse and mobilize affects such as fear, anger and resentment (Hokka and Nelimarkka 2020).

Images are also used by right-wing political organisations in combination with symbols, through the appropriation of symbols, styles and repertoires of action of contemporary youth cultures (including the left), which are considered markers of a *rich collective knowledge and complex frames* (or cognitive schemas). This offers these actors a (re)negotiation of current political identities, potentially revitalizing the far right (Forchtner and Kølvrå 2017). On salient issues such as gender, large N studies on images indicated that radical right organisations and actors are able to construct various forms of ‘images of femininity’ in digital ecosystems (e.g., Telegram), politicizing gender through a complex interplay among symbols, frames and cultural heritages (Doerr and Svatoňová 2023).<sup>14</sup> In particular, right-wing populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Poland) tend to use images and typical symbols of national public cultures (such as Catholic and nationalist discourses) in order to consciously broaden their own so-called ‘discursive opportunity structures’ (Kotwas and Kubic (2019), studying visual performances and displays of these actors).

Finally, images are employed by radical right collective actors to help protesters mark their affiliation and *identify* their position in political conflicts (i.e., *ingroup/outgroup*), as shown in the case of the Danish people’s party and its images on Facebook<sup>15</sup> which have been found in a longitudinal study to favour the promotion of distinct groups of ‘otherness’ (Awad, Doerr, and Nissen 2022). Digital images visually communicate across time the party’s slogan of ‘safety and trust’ (i.e., the need for protection from threatening ‘others’).

In fact, *tradition* and *continuity* in RR social movements is often produced in elements of graphic design and the use of colour, beyond narratives and concepts, especially ‘Pop’ colour to exude a more friendly and popular appeal for the (successful)

mainstreamization aims of the RR in Sweden (Schiller 2024). Continuity and change, via images and visual propaganda, are largely present in anti-immigrant right-wing discourses, as shown in the case of the Italian Lega (Richardson and Colombo 2013),<sup>16</sup> which despite having anti-immigrant policies, have shifted in their communication strategies over time towards ethnopluralism.

Regarding the recipients of images, radical right actors have been found by visual analysis studies to be acutely aware that the(ir) visual production does *not only address protest participants* and potential supporters, but also journalists, bystanders and police officers. Policing routines, for instance, have been shown to be linked to protesters’ appearance. The anti-gender, (anti-)Islam and nativist propaganda in the posters of various European radical right-wing populist movements shows that the visual communication strategies of these groups tend not to feature heterosexual ‘native’ men on their posters, in order to convey to the public the idea of a position of power they hold in the imagination of right-wing groups (Sayan-Cengiz and Tekin 2022).<sup>17</sup> They are the intended recipients and viewers of visual communication materials, rather than the objects of representation (see also Feighery (2015), on right-wing visual rhetoric in Switzerland). Moreover, Doerr (2021) (for the case of the AfD) show different ways of radicalization in far right parties through third actors such as commercial digital media players, as well as transnationalist specialists in advertising.

## 5 | Visual Representation of Radical Right Social Movements (by Others)

The second analytical strand identified in the (dispersed) literature on visual analysis and radical right politics begins with the assumption that the mass and social media are the main mediating element between collective actors and their audiences and target groups, also if applied to radical right organizations. However, we have to take into account that even if protest groups have a limited influence on the images they are linked to, they are not entirely at the mercy of journalists: first, viewers are not passive audiences and may decode protest images in news coverage in many different ways (Gamson et al. 1992). Second, social movements frequently use *powerful images* to attract journalists and make the news (Delicath and DeLuca 2003); third, commercial and public mass media no longer hold the monopoly over the visual representation of protest and the movements themselves. This is also true for the radical right. Nowadays, pictures and videos of demonstrations are uploaded in real time by those who participate in protests, imparting rich visual narratives of protests. In this sense, not only activists, but also their sympathetic audiences become visual producers, through practices of the remediation and remixing of visual materials on protests (see Supporting Information S1: Figure A).<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Instagram, TikTok and social media more generally, have brought even further changes to this.

*Media-savvy image creation* has been recognized as part of a larger trend toward professionalization in society at large and in the organization of radical right protest. For example, Doerr (2017), has shown that far-right sympathizers in Italy and Germany were

inspired by the Swiss People's Party<sup>19</sup> (and its controversial 'black sheep' electoral campaign), creating in turn their own 'black sheep' cartoons and promoting in this way a shared ethno-nationalist bond of solidarity across multilingual and transnational networks and publics. Images produced by right-wing actors themselves or by other actors on their behalf can favour the trans-nationalization of frames and narratives (as well as identities and practices) in various countries and therefore, the diffusion of mobilization.<sup>20</sup> One example is the studies examining the protest waves in reaction to COVID containment measures which underline the transcontinental circulation of the visual symbol of the QAnon conspiracists from the US Right to European anti-vaxxers.

The *memes* are widely circulated on radical right websites and social media and can be considered strong and powerful images used by these political actors to attract other actors' attention (e.g., the media, sympathizers) (Miller-Idriss 2019; McSwiney et al. 2021; on strong images and their 'popularizing' effects, see Schober 2019). This is the case for the memes of the right-wing extremist project *Reconquista Germanica*, launched in 2017 (Bogerts and Fielitz 2020). While on the face of it, these memes appear to be harmless instances of everyday visual culture and mere irony, they are in fact conveying key ideological narratives of hate and bigotry (Dafaure 2020).<sup>21</sup> Radical right media strategists are aware of the dual nature of memes and have turned ambivalence into a mode of contestation in the digital space, as can be seen in the case of various far right groups in Finland, where persuasion and mobilization are used together with dark humour in Internet Memes (Hakoköngäs, Halmesvaara, and Sakki 2021). Askanius (2021), drawing on a visual content analysis of right-wing memes in Sweden highlights that humour, irony and ambiguity as well as ideas, symbols and various meanings travel back and forth online through memes among the country's alt-right and neo-Nazi groups.

Finally, social movement activists use their *bodies* to expose and embody a deviant mentality, and the media and public are captured by these images: the body is the medium through which politics is performed. In their study of elite male bodies, Lamerichs et al. (2018), tracked the circulation of Alt-right<sup>22</sup> memes in the US, assessing the impact in terms of the framing of politicians (e.g., in the Trump electoral campaign), and the recipient communities, adhering to a masculine iconography. Drawing on different texts and images, such as games and historical portraits, Trump is glorified by his supporters as the saviour. In its representation of patriarchy, sexism, racism and even racial purity emerge as a heroic and caricatural narrative: the alt-Right thus makes (body) images part of a powerful male story and seeks to influence political participation through that (on memes, see Supporting Information S1: Figure B1,2). In sum, the visual aesthetics and functionality of memes as a form of communication are used strategically by the radical right to condense complex and radical ideologies into an attractive image and appealing format (e.g., the famous Pepe the Frog), which can be disseminated effectively on the web reaching a broader audience (Bogerts and Fielitz 2020).

Moreover, the radical right appears from various studies to be aware of the importance of the so-called '*managing of the*

*images' function* (Bast 2021),<sup>23</sup> as part of their visual communication strategies. The creation of a professional image, beyond showing closeness to citizens is interpreted as a means to influence how they are perceived and represented by others (e.g., the journalists relying on their news from their social media).

In a recent study on right-wing populism in power and the discursive construction of collective identity (of the leader, the people, the enemies, etc.), which examined the case of Donald Trump (2016–2020), a detailed analysis of various types of images (over 70), combined with interviews (roughly 30) with activists and sympathizers of the party, as well as ordinary citizens, showed that, on the whole, Trump's followers believe that their leader is 'authentic', like the images that portrayed him (Venizelos 2023). Moreover, the rhetorical strategy (made up of 'colloquial expressions and slang', which make Trump's speech sound like everyone else), and the visual strategy of the leader convey a message including 'images', 'gestures' and 'body postures', focused on the positive re-presentation of himself. This representation as a charismatic leader close to the people (in the populist continuum high vs. low), where Trump is fully embedded in the cultural and social milieu he wants to represent, as well as, working, on the other hand, on the delegitimization of his opponents (i.e., mainstream politicians and bureaucracy). Images and speeches that underline a (voluntary) ignorance of the institutions thus become an indicator that reinforces Donald Trump's extraneousness to mainstream politics. For a similar study on Poland, see Kosman (2022).<sup>24</sup>

## 6 | Visibility of (RR) Images and the Context

Why and under which conditions are some social movements and claims more visible and successful? We can divide this field of visual research into two subgroups, one that is interested in *the effects of images on political activism*, and the other that looks at *visual framing*. Indeed, the role of images for social movements, also on the radical right, may change according to different media-historic constellations and contexts (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2014). Protesters, also on the regressive side (della Porta 2023), not dissimilar to left libertarian movements, act in a public context that is structured by dominant viewing habits which reflect and perpetuate hierarchical power relations ('cultural stock'). Protesters who articulate their goals without using imagery that is familiar, expected and compatible with the mainstream experience are likely to be marginalized.

The research question of many of these studies is under what conditions images are important for *political participation*. In fact, if images are assumed to have an impact on those who see them, influencing opinions and knowledge, mobilizing motivations, it is a causal relationship rarely documented. This is particularly true for the radical right (Arpan et al. 2006, see Callahan 2020 on IR, Farkan and Bene 2021). For example, studies in the field of political communication show the role of photographs in the moral shock (arguably related to political activation) induced by images, and in creating 'backfire' effects. But there is an absence of systematic knowledge on the impact of right-wing images.

If we look at the (relatively few) existing studies that we can group into this analytical lens, we see that some studies stress that visuals *enhance the circulation* of radical right ‘frames’ (namely, the cognitive schemes through which the social and political reality can be interpreted) and *influence* the electoral campaigns, as in the case of the ‘framing of politicians’ and Donald Trump during the US presidential elections (Lamerichs et al. 2018); or in the case of the political storytelling through ‘fantasmatic’ appeals by the British and German radical right (Freistein and Gadinger 2020); or of the populist propaganda in Brazil (Rodarte, Hyunsik Kim, and Lukito 2023). As a result of the increasing prominence of social networking services, political communication has undergone a paradigm shift. To communicate with web users, politicians, candidates, and political organizations have created fan pages. Initially, they provided text-only material on their pages; later, to increase engagement, they included photos, images, and videos.

Other studies suggest that visual narratives, especially those diffused online, are useful for radical right ideology *transnational spread* (Askanius 2021; Hokka and Nelimarkka 2020; McSwiney et al. 2021; Stoencheva 2023).

Furthermore, images can conceivably aid the *normalization* of hateful and anti-democratic messages. Recent studies (e.g., Askanius 2021; McSwiney et al. 2021) have demonstrated how memes (including those espousing hateful, anti-democratic messages) with all their viral potential can freely move from overtly extreme online milieus into open-access platforms reaching wider audiences and entering the mainstream in various national contexts (see Supporting Information S1: Figure D). As aforementioned, memes are specifically produced to be shared and are one effective way to spread extremist narratives (Bogerts and Fielitz 2020). It has been suggested too that using humour and irony to obfuscate extremist narratives helps ‘lower the barrier for participation in extreme ideologies’, especially among younger audiences, as in the case of neo-organization memes (Askanius 2021, 161; similarly Wodak (2015), showed how far right parties use irony and humour, stressing that the critical discourse approach of visual rhetoric can be a useful tool of analysis to study irony in images vs. texts). Similarly, offline spaces such as urban environments, graffiti, posters and stickers with extremist or hand-drawn messages inside public toilets or flyers are examples of public spaces being claimed as a place of struggle and political contestation by the radical right (Stoencheva 2023). Through these visual expressions, radical right actors can comment with ease on highly controversial and emotive topics, such as socio-economic or gender-related issues, influencing the political debate with their ideology. Finally, another impact of radical right images can be the starting of movement/counter-movement dynamics. As was evident when looking at the increase in far-right content on YouTube following the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016, content creators began posting videos that aimed to refute the misinformation of the radical right.

In the second subfield of research on visibility and the context (and effects of images), the power of *visual framing* is investigated (e.g., on anti-sexism memes, see Rodriguez and Dimitrova 2011).<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the theme is how, through images, a

certain symbolic construction of the social and political reality is created and transmitted. Indeed, visual framing works by directing the viewer’s attention to certain aspects of a situation or event and by shaping the way they are understood. In a study based on the investigation of ‘misleading memes’ and the effects of deceptive visuals of the radical right British National Party,<sup>26</sup> Klein (2020) shows that over half of the misinformation (170 of 333 images) is transmitted through ‘fallacious (misleading)’ contents: in essence, though the information was not entirely false in nature, it applies a misleading use of information or contains an aspect of deception. Another relevant segment (30 images) is ‘funny satirical information’, effectively without intention to cause harm, but with the potential to deceive. Some other images are totally ‘fabricated (hoax)’—an alarming fact for an institutional party with MPs in Parliament—transmitting entirely false information designed to deceive and do harm (see Supporting Information S1: Figure C).<sup>27</sup> The results reveal several forms of fallacious and misleading content transmitted through images produced by the radical right.

Studies have confirmed the strong effects of visual framing on several dependent variables, such as people’s anti-immigrant attitudes. For example, Schmuck and Matthes (2017) show that visual arguments espoused by right-wing groups on immigration policies emerge as more powerful than textual ones, evoking more anti-immigrant sentiment in the interviewed citizens.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, ongoing comparative studies<sup>29</sup> focusing on the diffusion of extremism in Bulgaria and Sweden show how images help extremist narratives circulate in and pass between different places and spaces, such as the online and offline spheres, the mainstream and niche communication arenas, local and global audiences, etc. Through these images, messages are transmitted about the ‘us’ (i.e., those who are part of the group) and the ‘them’ (those who are not) and how those in the in-group should interact with the out-group (see Supporting Information S1: Figures B1,2 and D). It has been ascertained that to understand extremist ideology, it is necessary to consider it as a place of cultural and subcultural involvement, and the analysis of images—among other things of course—permits this.

Nonetheless, it has been observed that, *visuality* can also deradicalize right-wing extremists, as in the case of the Hungarian far-right Jobbik party (Hyttinen 2022), which, in order to broaden its constituency, started a process of de-radicalization of the party mainly using the symbolic and ritual sphere. Another example of the radical right’s use of images to evoke a specific narrative and symbolic construction of reality is the visual representations of martyrdom in right-wing organizations (Miotto 2022). These groups spread images online depicting terrorists and right-wing extremists who have carried out deadly attacks as saints and martyrs. Communications studies could help this third line of research about radical right visibility and the context, as well as (not necessarily on contentious politics) studies on how the press selects images.

In summary, from the analysis of studies on *visuality* and the radical right, and using our analytical grid as a point of reference, we can conclude that while the research area of ‘visual expressions’ of political actors is significantly—and increasingly—populated by empirical studies which use images to approach the

radical right, the other two areas, namely the ‘visual representation’ of right-wing actors by other actors (such as the media, other movements, etc.) and the analysis of the ‘visibility’ of RR images in context, are scarcely studied in comparison. There are few empirical studies applying visual analysis to the radical right from these perspectives, which may however be auspicious avenues for future research on the phenomenon (see Table 1).

## 7 | Conclusion

In this paper we took account of the visual politics of the radical right, asking the ‘how’ and ‘why’ we should do it. We argued indeed that this important aspect has remained relatively more neglected in the enormous amount of research that has been produced on the topic of radical right in the last 2 decades: the visual and aesthetic aspects of RR politics and its performativity (Moffitt 2022). Yet, some of the most salient cases of radical right mobilization in recent years have used the visual as core aspect of their appeal (e.g., the protests in reaction to COVID-19 containment measures, Caiani, Susaszky, and Saridakis 2024).

In doing so, the study relied on a critical and systematic review of the existing studies (of the last 15–20 years) applying visual methodologies to the understanding of radical right politics, including both political parties and not-party organizations—adopting concepts and methodological guidelines from social movement studies and from the broader field of visuality in social research. The argument is that this could be mutually beneficial for both, the literature (in political sociology, but also comparative politics and media studies) on the radical right—which could further integrate visual materials and approaches within broader theoretical framework addressing important questions on the radical right in the 21st century; and for social movement studies which could ‘test’ the heuristic validity of assumptions and hypotheses mainly born having in mind as empirical referent the progressive libertarian Left.

The findings indeed pointed out that as in the case of other collective actors, images, beyond texts and speeches, are strongly used by the radical right to fulfil main important aspects of its political activism (collective identities development, mobilization and recruitment, the organization of political campaigns and the diffusion of (political) information and propaganda). Two dimensions emerged as particularly important for the RR: the discursive meaning and the communicative functions of images, which can combine the agent and the addressee. The relation between images, emotions, and RR politics has also emerged, as images have real-world implications for questions of political identity. However, studies—as shown in this article—primarily address the visual expression of images in processes of RR mobilization or how the radical right is represented in the media and few deal with the more general social context and effects of the visual presence of the Radical Right in politics. As seen, radical right organizations can have an influence on the images to which they are connected, also becoming, with the help of the Internet and the diffusion of online images, themselves as ‘visual producers’ (e.g., with the creation of strong and captivating images as in the case of memes), however, we still do not know much about why and under what

conditions some radical right organizations and demands are more visible or, on the contrary, less successful. The causal relationship between images and context (e.g., Milman and Doerr (2023) and images and how they affect political activism, is a promising avenue for future research.

Furthermore, from a methodological point of view, if it is useful to analytically distinguish the analysis of images into three steps (such as production, content, and reception, Moffitt 2022), which can be easily coupled with the main roles of images in social research, the scholarship on visuality and the RR has focused so far mostly on the aspect of the *content* of images, according to a more traditional discourse analysis and semiotic approach (who is represented? How?). While on the contrary other two aspects, namely the production of images and its process (who created the image? What is the purpose?) and the reception or impact of the images (with e.g., interviews, surveys, participant observation, posing questions such as ‘who is the intended audience of the image?’ or ‘how has the image been circulated, interpreted, and signified?’) seem less investigated.

More empirical studies, on different types of radical right organizations and countries, are needed in the future to approach these neglected applications of visual analysis to the study of RR collective action, as well as to identify if and what distinguishes the use of visual tools by these types of groups compared to other social movements and contention. Nowadays, pictures and videos are uploaded in real time by those who participate in political mobilizations della Porta (2023), also on the radical right, offering rich visual narratives of protests. On this regards, more research is desirable in the future on the interplay between more grassroots parts of radical right movements, and the more professionalized elites of radical right parties (e.g., *how radical right political parties and ‘movement-parties’ radicalize through cross-fertilization in their visual politics?*).

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The article uses the concept of radical right to refer both to extreme and radical right populist organizations sharing nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2019) and encompassing political parties and social movement organizations. For right wing populism, see also Caiani and Graziano (2019).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in seeking to understand the successful mobilisation of (populist) radical right actors, the literature tends to focus on their policy offerings or political discourse, disregarding visuality.

- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2019/09/18/manifesto-memes-the-radical-rights-new-dangerous-visual-rhetorics/>.
- <sup>4</sup> As for the 'state of the art' on visual analysis of contentious politics, we must admit that the scholarship is huge and increasing, with some milestones marking the field, such as: (1) 'Classic' works: Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune (2014); (2) 'Newer' works: Askanius (2021); Hokka and Nelimarkka (2020); Awad, Doerr, and Nissen (2022); (3) Comparative studies of contentious visual analysis (across the political spectrum and EU countries), Doerr (2017); and, finally, (4) works which use qualitative and quantitative visual methods (e.g., Doerr and Milman 2014).
- <sup>5</sup> For instance, there is a growing literature in the field of international relations (i.e., on the role of images in international security, such as in the case of the Muhammad cartoon crisis in Denmark, Moffitt 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> The study is based on the combination of speech and image analysis on large numbers (1600 randomly selected images from 200 US ultra-right Telegram groups from June 2020 to April 2021).
- <sup>7</sup> The first is Nomos—Terra e Identità (Nomos—Land and Identity), a local cultural organization closely related to the institutional as well as to the sub-cultural radical right milieu in the city (FB page: <https://www.facebook.com/Nomos-Terra-e-Identit%C3%A0-2207567869485990/>). The second is a network of cultural and lobbying organizations, headed by the International Organization for the Family (website: <https://wcfverona.org/it/>).
- <sup>8</sup> In terms of the *context* it is worth noting that the event was organized with the patronage of local institutions and received public support from many Italian radical right organizations.
- <sup>9</sup> By combining multimodal analysis with (historical) critical discourse analysis on various organisational documents.
- <sup>10</sup> This multimodal critical discourse analysis was based on 80 posts from the social media pages of right-wing populist leaders Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini in 2018–2019.
- <sup>11</sup> Affective practice refers to a particular sensibility of political discourse, shaped by social formations and digital technologies—the contexts in which political groups or communities gather, discuss and act.
- <sup>12</sup> They focus on three news stories in the publication's immigration coverage from 2015 to 2017.
- <sup>13</sup> The corpus covers visual content from around 2015 until 2021 and (based on our linguistic and contextual knowledge) includes material from Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.
- <sup>14</sup> Similarly, Svatoňová (2020), by analysing the FB pages of the Czech female organisation Angry Mothers (in combination with critical discourse analysis), referenced the construction of gender—and the manosphere—in the online communication by right-wing women.
- <sup>15</sup> It is a multimodal visual analysis of 1120 images posted by the party from 2012 to 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> The article analyses posters from political campaigns between 2001 and 2008 noting similarities and differences over time.
- <sup>17</sup> Focusing on the campaign posters for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, the Rassemblement National (RN) in France, and the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) in the Netherlands using a social semiotic approach.
- <sup>18</sup> On a different topic (i.e., immigration) see generally Alencar (2020) on the relationship between mobile communication practices and refugee lives.
- <sup>19</sup> This study is based on the visual and discursive analysis of nationalist symbols and cartoons in various countries.
- <sup>20</sup> For instance, Doerr (2017) showed how images have been used for scale shift by far right parties in Italy, Switzerland and Germany to transnationalize and network across countries.
- <sup>21</sup> This study focuses on several 'enemy' right-wing memes.
- <sup>22</sup> A US extreme right-wing community, particularly influential during the 2016 Trump presidential campaign, that communicates through online image boards like 4chan and social news sites like Reddit.
- <sup>23</sup> This study has explored more than 800 images of leading RR politicians in eight European countries on Instagram.
- <sup>24</sup> In the study, three election spots are analysed adopting a Discourse-Historical Approach and multimodal artefacts.
- <sup>25</sup> These studies in general come from disciplines different than political science.
- <sup>26</sup> The study involves the analysis of 333 images posted in the FB official account of the party between August 2017 and August 2018. The information representation is initially manually coded based on seven analytical types of mis- and disinformation: satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection and context and manipulated context.
- <sup>27</sup> As Supporting Information S1: Figure C shows, (1) evidence can be misled by omitting some context, (2) it can be framed to fit partisan views, (3) content can be sensationalized, (4) exaggerated, and (5) truthful content can be shared in a false context.
- <sup>28</sup> The survey includes a sample of 417 participants.
- <sup>29</sup> EU-HORIZON CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01-05 'OppAttune—Countering Oppositional Political Extremism through Attuned Dialogue: Track, Attune, Limit', Principal Investigator: Tina Askanius (<https://mau.se/en/research/projects/countering-oppositional-political-extremism-through-attuned-dialogue-track-attune-limit/>).

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.