

Johannes von Moltke

University of Michigan and German Studies Association



The Meme is the Message

Alt-Right/Neue Rechte and
the Political Affordances of Social Media

Thursday | July 4, 2019 | 6–8 pm | Freie Universität Berlin
John F. Kennedy Institute | Lansstr. 7–9 | Room 340 | 14195 Berlin



Berlin Program GSA Distinguished Lecture July 4, 2019

Johannes von Moltke

**The Meme is the Message:
Alt-Right/Neue Rechte and the Political Affordances of Social Media**

“Politics is downstream from culture,” claimed Andrew Breitbart, founder of the influential right-wing media outlet Breitbart News. Like “trickle-down economics,” Breitbart’s metaphor appeals to the self-evidence of gravity and natural flows to suggest that cultural shifts eventually but inevitably beget political change. Taking its cue from Breitbart, the populist right has made an emphasis on culture central to its “metapolitical” project. By the same token, any political critique of that project must develop a cultural critique as well. Adopting a trans-Atlantic perspective, this talk devotes itself to such a critique by addressing the cultural formations, and in particular the media cultures of the American alt-right and the new right in Europe. The lecture will take as the key example the right-wing conspiracy theory of “Cultural Marxism,” asking how this notion is mobilized online as a meme, a rallying cry, and a marker of cultural identity, and what it can tell us about the affordances of social media for a right-wing populist politics. The cultural logics, the rhetorical strategies and the visual forms through which these politics have been promulgated appeal ultimately to Fascist politics, propaganda, and aesthetics. Given that these were precisely the issues that so urgently concerned the thinkers branded “cultural Marxist” by today’s alt-right, the talk ultimately seeks to turn the conspiracy theory from its head back onto its feet again by asking what Critical Theory can tell us about the authoritarianism, the propaganda, and the media aesthetics of alt-right cultural formations.

Johannes von Moltke is Professor of German and Film, Media and Television at the University of Michigan. His research and teaching focus on film and German cultural history of the 20th and 21st centuries. Professor von Moltke studied in Germany, France, and the US, and has previously taught at the University of Hildesheim in Germany. He is the author of *The Curious Humanist: Siegfried Kracauer in America* (2015) and *No Place Like Home: Locations of Heimat in German Cinema* (2005). Combining his interests in German, Film, and Cultural Studies, he has published articles in *New German Critique*, *October*, *Screen*, *Cultural Critique*, *Cinema Journal*, *Germanic Review* and other journals, as well as in numerous edited volumes in the U.S. and Germany. Together with Gerd Gemünden Johannes is the series editor for *Screen Cultures: German Film and the Visual* at Camden House.

Professor von Moltke is President of the German Studies Association (www.thegsa.org)—the largest organization of scholars, professionals, and students who focus on the study of German speaking Europe from all periods of history and all relevant disciplines. The GSA is the Berlin Program’s North American cooperation partner. A Berlin Program Alumnus of 2000/2001, he presently is a Senior Fellow at the FRIAS Institute for Advanced Studies at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, where he is working on a project tentatively entitled “Critical Theory for ‘Post-Critical’ Times.”

The lecture will be followed by a commentary by Simon Strick. The event will be moderated by Berlin Program Committee Chair, Harald Wenzel. Both scholars teach at Freie Universität’s John F. Kennedy Institute. Welcome greetings will be extended by the Director of International Affairs, Herbert Grieshop.

TIME: July 4, 2019, 18-20 h (c.t.) followed by a reception 20-21 h
 LOCATION: John F. Kennedy Institute Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin
 Room 340 (second floor), Lansstr. 7-9, 14195 Berlin
 LANGUAGE: The lecture will be held in English. The discussion will run in both English and German.
 REGISTRATION: Not required; participation is free of charge.
 GETTING THERE: U-Bahn: U3 Dahlem-Dorf, Bus: M11 and X83 Dahlem-Dorf